

ROCK GOD



Jay Rose

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PART ONE

ONE

Sweet and smoky from bongos and BBQs, the night air summoned legions of shadowy figures from all four corners of Alabama. Dressed in their best black leather, and adorned with chains, piercings, and satanic tattoos, they weaved across the blacktop through a maze of parked cars and party vans, singing and rapping as they made pilgrimage to see their God of the underworld-- a God who knew neither their names, nor the number of hairs on their heads... nor cared about either.

Up ahead, above the entrance to the Birmingham Amphitheater, shimmering lights on the marquee proudly displayed:

SCRATCH HATCHET
THE ROCK GOD
November 3rd
8 PM
SOLD OUT

Wearing skinny jeans and a blue and white striped sweater, 30 year-old Deanna Kidwell looked out-of-place as she walked alongside her friend Angie, who sported the full-out Goth look. In her lacey, black-gloved hands, Angie clutched a poster with a simple but heartfelt message: "I LOVE YOU SCRATCH." With pink and red hearts dotting the corners, it looked like the work of a love-struck 16 year-old excited to see her teen idol, not a 27 year-old entering a satanic, mega-death Goth concert.

As they squeezed into the swelling line leading to the amphitheater entrance, Deanna looked around in wide-eyed wonderment. Two thoughts quickly surfaced: one, she felt like she'd been dropped into the middle of some new subterranean world of darkness, mystery, and bizarreness; and two, between the costumes, makeup, jewelry, and other accessories, the lifestyle on this new world looked rather expensive. What kinds of jobs did these strange inhabitants hold?

Something else puzzled Deanna, too. She turned to Angie. "I thought your hair was supposed to be black, too."

"Nope," Angie replied with a quick shake of her blonde hair, "Victorians and Perkys can be blonde."

"Victorians and Perkys?"

“Un-huh. There’s a whole Goth sub-culture,” Angie explained. “There’s Pagans, Hippies, Witches, Vamps, Medievals, Victorians, Perkys, Glams--“

“What exactly is a Perky?” Deanna asked, cutting her off. Indeed, from Angie’s never-ending cadence, it sounded likely there might be more Goth groups than Bubba Gump shrimp recipes.

“I’m a Perky,” Angie announced, well, *perkily*. “We’re the happy, playful Goths.” She smiled and raised her arms in the air, as if at a revival, jiggling the poster above her head. “... the cheery yin to the gloomy yang in the Goth world.” Her voice rose with ‘cheery yin’ and fell with ‘gloomy yang.’

Interesting. Deanna was quickly learning there was more to the Goth underworld than just leather and chains and black mascara. Before she could ask a follow-up, Angie blurted out, “I still can’t believe you knew Scratch growing up. That’s so crazy...”

“...said the Perky Goth kindergarten teacher,” Deanna tacked on with a sardonic grin. A funny thought popped into her mind. “So tell me truthfully, how *was* meet the teacher night? Did you scare all those poor kindergarten moms with your leather and chains and black lipstick?” She winked.

“Ha ha. Very funny, Dee. For your information, I keep my private Goth world separate from my public teaching world. And for the record, I wore a plain khaki skirt and a frumpy, old lady sweater... kind of like yours there.” Angie’s smirk had turned triumphant. “So there. Burn *beeeyotch*.” Angie really *did* seem like a 16 year-old.

“Well, for the sake of all those innocent kindergarteners,” Deanna replied, “I hope your two worlds never collide.”

As the line crept forward, Deanna became quickly spellbound by a tall, Maleficent-horned, twentysomething dressed in a skimpy black velvet corset, fishnet stockings, and 6-inch stiletto heels. In one hand she held an ornate silver wand, like something out of Harry Potter’s world. In the other was a black leather whip. Evidently, Deanna concluded, that long list of Goth groups must have included witch-whore escorts. *That* probably paid well. But then again, she could very well have been a database manager at a cloud computing company.

“Sooo... you think he remembers you?” Angie asked.

Deanna stopped thinking about careers for Maleficent. “Who? Scratch?”

“Un-huh.”

“He should. I *did* give him his first kiss.”

“Shut up... you did not.” Angie pushed Deanna playfully as she said it, almost causing her to bump into a vamp couple behind her. Their canines looked sharp-- blood bank workers, perhaps. But more than likely-- dental hygienists.

“Cool your jets, Perky,” Deanna shot back. “It was kind of stupid actually. His best friend dared him... with a Hires root beer of all things.” She rolled her eyes as she shook her head. *Boys*.

The idea that her sorority Big had given planet earth’s biggest rock star his first kiss was almost more than the Perky Goth Kindergarten Teacher could fathom. In her juvenile mind that made Deanna a de facto celebrity, and impulsively Angie leaned in and planted a big, wet kiss on Deanna’s lips.

“I kissed you and you kissed Scratch! That means I kissed Scratch.” Angie screamed it like a giddy schoolgirl who’d finally mastered math’s transitive property.

Wiping the taste of Jäger and black lip gloss from her lips, Deanna was certain of one thing: the shots in the parking lot had fully kicked in.

“Sooo,” Angie asked eagerly, “how was it?”

“How was what? Your kiss? Or Scratch’s?”

”Scratch’s. Duuuuuh. I *know* mine was awesome.”

“Let’s see,” Deanna answered. “It started out wet, then it got sloppy, and it ended up totally awkward... which was very similar to yours... especially the awkward part.” Deanna winked, then added, “Oh, and yours had a Jägermeister taste to it, too, so you might want to think about mouthwash before class tomorrow morning. I’d hate to see your two worlds collide and have one of your five year-olds get a buzz when you read them *The Velveteen Rabbit*.” Deanna chuckled at her creativity. *Burn perky!*

“That’s it?” This wasn’t the drama and excitement that Angie, the drama major, wanted. She wanted to hear about a kiss with a real story.

Deanna decided to play along. Perhaps 16 would be fun the second time around.

“Okay, I can’t lie,” she sighed melodramatically. “It was the single most memorable moment of my life. When his velvety smooth, rabbit lips touched mine, I knew he was destined to become... a, a great Goth rock star. I, uh, I”-- she started swaying, then dancing in place, and broke out into song-- “I felt the earth move under my feet, I felt the sky tumbling down, a tumbling down...”

In the line ahead, an older gentleman in a baroque white wig and an 18th Century gentleman’s jacket-- perhaps an AARP Goth? -- clapped approvingly. “Ladies and

Gentlemen,” he announced formally, “it appears Miss Carole King is in the house and will be opening up for the Rock God.”

Deanna smiled sheepishly and bowed to a smattering of applause from the few souls in line who actually knew who Carole King was. Much to her surprise, she was having fun with the Goths in the underworld. Perhaps she was a closet Goth... if there were such a thing on that long list.

“Well, you answered one question,” Angie responded, “your singing *hasn’t* improved since college. And, those dance moves were a bit scary, even with the aid of Jäger.”

Deanna rolled her eyes.

“So really,” Angie continued, “what was Scratch like? Did you hang out with him and stuff?”

“You mean Jeremiah... because back then he wasn’t Scratch Hatchet or the *Rock God*.” Deanna rolled her eyes and made air quotes as she said ‘Rock God.’ “He was 10, with buck teeth and a buzz cut. And he was the preacher’s kid, so pretty much everyone made fun of him... except me, of course.” Deanna paused as she thought back 20 years. “So, no, we never hung out. In fact, after I heard about the dare, I told him off. A month later my Dad’s job got transferred and we moved and I never saw him again.”

As innocuous as that sounded, Deanna’s far-away look made it seem there was more to that kiss. “It *is* weird though,” she added, “As awkward as it was, I can still feel the way my heart was beating when we kissed. For real.”

The two friends had their tickets scanned, made their way through metal detectors, and entered the open-air amphitheater. Angie stopped at a merchandise table, took out black lipstick, and wrote, “SCRATCH’S FIRST KISS” on the backside of her poster board. She drew a big dark arrow pointing down.

“Oh come on, Ang, don’t do that.”

“Lighten up, Dee. Have some fun.”

“Whee!” Deanna sang out sarcastically as she twirled her finger in the air. She stared at the poster. “You sure you don’t want to put some hearts in the corners?”

“Oh damn, I don’t think I have any red or pink lipstick left.”

“I was joking.”

“Oh. Okay.”

They pushed their way toward the stage.

“I wish you were more excited to see Scratch,” Angie said. “He puts on an awesome show.”

“I told you, I don’t like his music or his message. And supposedly he’s a real jerk.” Deanna’s return to 16 had been short-lived. And she was pretty sure she wasn’t a closet Goth, either.

“So why’d you come then?”

“And miss the chance to spend an evening with Goth Magazine’s Teacher of the Year?” Deanna laughed. “Never. But don’t you even think about kissing me again, you perky little freak!”

TWO

Dressed in tight black leather pants, an open black silver-studded vest, and his trademark Oakley sunglasses, Scratch Hatchet bounced on stage, a mic in one hand and a bottle of Jack Daniels in the other. Around his neck, his trademark multi-million dollar gold and diamond encrusted “ROCK GOD” necklace whipped around with ever bounce.

At 6 foot 6, he was larger than life-- every bit the rock star-- with a commanding presence that captivated and captured every eye in the crowd. Seemingly every guy wanted to be him and seemingly every girl wanted to be with him-- not too shabby for the son of a humble, God-fearing preacher-man from nearby Tillman’s Corner, Alabama.

His famed long curly black hair-- insured by Lloyds of London-- dripped with sweat as he strutted and gyrated and commanded the stage. With the blaring, driving bass setting the pace, he shrieked the chorus to his signature anthem, ‘Rock Me Rock God’:

And my baby screamed,
Rock me, Rock God,
Rock me hard,
Rock me like a wrecking ball.

He rapped:

I lay you down and kiss your bod,
I butter you up, I am your God.
You scream, you shout, you cry for more,
I push you down onto the floor.
You see the prize, you know the drill,
Gobble it up, you nasty girl.

And shrieked again:

And my baby screamed,
Rock me, Rock God,
Rock me hard,
Rock me like a wrecking ball.

In the mosh pit, Angie pulsed the poster proudly above Deanna’s head. Scratch saw it, pointed in her general direction, and flipped one of those patented, arrogant rock star nods. The song ended with some major drum banging, a final screech from Scratch, and

predictable shouts and screams and applause from the audience. Then the stage went black.

“Did you see that?” Angie shouted at Deanna over the cheering. “He saw me. He pointed and nodded! Isn’t he frickin’ awesome?”

“Frickin’ awful,” Deanna mumbled back. The concert couldn’t end soon for her. It was just loud noise, meaningless lyrics, and annoying, pulsing lights that made her head pound like a drum. Perhaps worse, the mosh pit smelled like pot atop rotten sweaty flesh, and she was sure she’d never wear the sweater or jeans again. Topping it off, two middle-aged Goths behind her were engaged in grab-ass dares... with her ass. Perhaps there was a Goth group known as the ‘ass grabbers.’ *Most likely they were just men that never grew up. Boys...*

Scratch trotted offstage, wobbling towards his manager, grabbing his head. “Jesus, Dill. Everything’s spinning. I swear I’m gonna pass out.”

“Hold it together, Scratch. Just one more song.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Scratch took a long pull on the Jack and let out a big exhale. “Hey, third row, left center-- the Perky blonde and the dweeb brunette in the blue and white top.”

Dill nodded knowingly-- so, it would be Neapolitan tonight. “I’m on it.”

With the crowd chanting-- “Rock God! Rock God!”-- beckoning the obligatory encore, Scratch jogged back onto the darkened stage and positioned himself behind the drummer. In a flash, the upside down crosses behind the stage lit up and swirled, flood lights pulsed the main stage, and the crowd let loose a deafening roar as Scratch jumped out and launched into the song they’d been waiting for: ‘The Devil and Me.’

He rapped:

The Devil and me go way, way back.
He got my soul,
He got my back.
God don’t care,
God ain’t around,
That tired ol’ fool just can’t be found.
So live like hell,
Don’t reap and sow,
‘Cause God’s a fool,
I got the dough.
Yeah, God’s a fool,
Scratch got the dough.

Scratch sauntered to the front of the stage, grabbed wads of dollar bills from strategically located buckets, and ‘made it rain’ in the first few rows. He continued, now screeching, the veins popping from his neck:

I say sell your soul,
and don’t look back,
lickety lickety,
lickety splat.
Yeaaaaaaaaaaaah.

Near the end of the song Scratch spied a security guard ushering Deanna and Angie backstage. They looked delectable. *Ummmm. Lickety splat... indeed.*

He finished the song:

Oh, yeaaaah,
um, um,
uh huh,
um, um,
I say the Devil and me,
um, um,
I say the Devil and me...
We go way, waaaay baaaaaaaaaack.

Amidst thunderous applause, Scratch signed off with a final shout, “Goodnight Birmingham. Satan rules, so you stay cool.” As the stage went dark, Scratch wobbled into the arms of Dill.

“Awesome show, Scratch.”

“Man, Dill, this fuckin’ vertigo’s getting worse. I swear, my head’s gonna explode.” He took a long last pull on the Jack.

“You’re gonna be okay, Scratch,” Dill assured him, knowing that if anything exploded, it would be Scratch’s liver. “Plus, I’ve got three lovely ladies here who can probably help ease your pain.”

Scratch raised the Oakley’s and fought through his pain, smiling hungrily as he took in the three girls-- Angie the blonde, Deanna the brunette, and a fiery redhead with a naughty grin and a devil’s pitchfork.

Dill grinned ear-to-ear as he watched Scratch survey the night’s haul. No doubt, he knew how to handle his meal ticket. “Here’s your order, Rock God. Vanilla,” Dill announced, pointing to Angie; “chocolate”-- pointing to Deanna; “and strawberry”-- pointing to the redhead. “You want some fries with that?”

Scratch was impressed. The three actually looked better up close, which was a rarity in the Goth world. He especially liked the dweeb brunette in the blue and white striped sweater-- such a nice looking girl. *Ummmmmm*. For him, the nicer the girl, the more satisfying the conquest.

Using the pre-formulated rhymes he'd conjured up for this very moment, he mused happily aloud, "Ummm, ummm, ummm, sweet home *Alabama*, Scratch sees himself three fine lookin' Rammer *Jammers*."

He chuckled at his creativity. Somehow he was sure he could rhyme 'do me' with 'orange.'

"So ladies," he continued, "raise your hands... who wants to join the Rock *God's* love *squad*?"

Everyone but Deanna raised their hand. This confused Scratch and he studied the dweeb. Was she deaf? Or blind? Because she sure as hell didn't look happy to be there. 'Little dweeb bitch,' he thought to himself, 'I'll make you smile.'

"Smile, little *sis*," Scratch said, "if you want Scratch to give you that first big *kiss*." He extended his tongue and wiggled it at her. All the girls liked that.

"I'm not your little *sis*," Deanna replied with an unimpressed smirk. She didn't like his arrogance. "And for the record, it would be the second kiss. Thanks, but no thanks... *Jeremiah*." She said his name with unmistakable disdain.

Scratch was quickly pissed. "Yo *sista*, it's Rock God to you. Who the fuck are you anyways?"

Ass God. She answered, "Deanna Kidwell. We were in 4th grade together... Huddleston Elementary."

Living in a wasted state for the better part of the past seven years, elementary school memories from twenty years earlier were just a foggy haze, and Scratch's face went blank. *Whatever*.

"The root beer kiss?" she added, as if that might help repair the long-dead brain cells.

"Long time ago, *baby*... at best it's a *maybe*."

She was tired of his arrogant, self-importance. "Can you stop with the rhymes already, Dr. Seuss?"

"Yo *Dill*," Scratch called out, "this little dweeb here needs a *chill pill*." He eyed Deanne with rock star contempt. "Look, *baby*, I don't know your *deal*... but you're talkin' to the Rock God... for *real*." He thrust his necklace at her as testament, nearly

hitting her in the mouth. He didn't need this twat. After all, it wasn't like he was going to marry her someday.

Scratch returned his attention to Angie and the redhead. "Let's go, you *two*. Time for that *rendezvous*."

"Come on Ang," Deanna injected. "This guy's a jerk. Plus, I have a long drive back to Memphis in the morning."

Angie hesitated as she considered whether to go with Deanna or stay with the Rock God. "I think I'm gonna stay."

Deanna wasn't surprised. The pink and red hearts on the poster board, coupled with the shots of Jäger, had given that one away. Plus, she *was* a Perky.

"Suit yourself," Deanna replied. "Just don't be late to kindergarten in the morn." She flashed a final smirk at Scratch. "Bye, *Jeremiah*."

Scratch flipped Deanna off, turned, and walked away, his hand firmly riding on Angie's perky bootie, leaving Deanna shaking her head in wonderment. She hoped Angie's kindergarten syllabus didn't include music appreciation or good judgement--otherwise, those 5-year olds wouldn't be learning *everything they needed to know about life*.

And, had she known Scratch Hatchet would be dead the next time she saw him, she might have felt a bit sorry for the Ass God.

THREE

Less than 12 hours later, Scratch was in the back of his private Learjet, spread out like human butter on a leather couch. “Hell no, Dill,” he said into his cell, “after the show tomorrow, I’ll be *chillin’* like *Dylan* on *Ritalin*. You tell the suits whatever you want about the next album and next tour. See you in South Beach. Chow, baby.”

Scratch clicked the phone off, sauntered to the cockpit like he owned the jet-- which, of course, he did -- and peeked in through the doorway. “How we doing, boys?”

“Just passed Tampa a bit ago. Should be touching down in about 25 minutes.” As usual, the co-pilot sounded a bit bored.

“Cool. Scratch is gonna catch some *zzzz’s*.”

Scratch walked back to the couch, plopped down, exhaled a deep anxious breath, and closed his eyes. In truth, he wasn’t looking forward to the break from recording and touring. Without all that he’d have free time, and that meant his mind would be free to wander amidst the mountainous fears and lonely valleys that defined his private life. It also meant restless quiet, where the loud lies of life would no longer drown out the silent truths deep within his troubled heart.

Beneath the facade, his life was just a mix of fears, loneliness, and lies... and he hated it. Adding to the tumult, he hated that he hated.

He’d been created, it seemed, to feel things deeper than most. So much for chillin’ like Dylan...

Seven years earlier, in an attempt to free himself from his past, he’d changed his name and claimed Satan as his own. ‘Free at last,’ he remembered thinking at the time. That was futile, he now knew. Indeed, none of that changed the memories, or who he was, or to whom he knew he truly belonged. In fact, as the years passed, the unconvincing denials and lies seemed to cause only greater angst. Worse yet, his fears and loneliness seemed to be increasing in proportion to the increased distance between his public persona and his private self.

And so, to outsiders who thought he was ‘living the dream,’ only Scratch-- and God above-- knew it was really just a lonely, unhappy nightmare.

He took a final swig of Black Jack and somehow, amidst these turbulent thoughts, began to doze off, oblivious to the plane’s first quiver in the smooth Florida air.

In the cockpit, that quiver didn't feel right and the co-pilot glanced curiously at the pilot. "You feel that?"

"Uh-huh." The pilot eased the yoke back to check for a response. A loud pop sent out a sudden shock, jerking the plane down violently.

Some response.

"What the hell was that?!" the co-pilot reacted.

"I'm getting nothing!" the pilot yelled as he pulled hard on the yoke and looked down at his display panel. "Holy shit, I've got zero hydraulic pressure. And the indicator for the starboard elevator looks like it's gone!"

"Miami Tower, Miami Tower, this is Sierra Hotel 666, declaring an emergency. I repeat, this is Sierra Hotel 666 declaring an emergency." Panic saturated the pilot's voice.

Tossed from the couch by the violent jerk, the angle down sent Scratch rolling toward the cockpit. Luckily, he missed the doorway, as that surely would have sent him past the pilots and into the windshield. Instead, he hit the cockpit partition with 220 pounds of Rock God thud.

Groggy and confused, he opened his eyes to the sound of an anxious voice calling out in the cockpit. "Altitude 2-1-0..... 2-0-0..... 1-9er-0."

Wedged against the partition by the downward angle of the now out-of-control jet, Scratch grabbed the frame of the cockpit door and pulled himself toward the opening. From the floor, he saw the pilot wrestling with the control stick. Beyond the front windshield, the world was a twisting, screaming blur of blue sky and green earth.

"What the hell's going on?" Scratch called out more in anger than fear, as if perhaps the former FedEx pilots had forgotten the Rock God was onboard instead of a load of Amazon packages.

"We lost hydraulics... and the starboard elevator," the co-pilot yelled back over his shoulder. The boredom in his voice was gone.

"Yeah? So? What's that mean?"

"It means we might not be able to control the angle of the plane." The plane jerked down further as if to punctuate his explanation.

"Hold on!" the pilot screamed out. Without hydraulics, he was trying to control the port elevator manually, but it wasn't working and the plane continued the whirling freefall.

“Altitude 1-2-0... 1-1-0... 1-0-0,” the co-pilot called out, the intervals shortening with each callout.

As the angle of the plane increased further, they accelerated toward the ground amidst a chaos of cockpit alarms and a calm computer-generated voice: “Air speed alert, air speed alert.” Approaching the speed of sound now, both pilots knew there was a chance the plane could break-up before reaching the unforgiving earth.

Comprehending the reality now, Scratch’s mind raced at the speed of fear. This couldn’t be happening-- not to him-- he was the friggin’ Rock God, for God’s sake.

“Jesus Christ, do something!” he yelled at the pilots, as if the Rock God’s command could save a death-spiraling plane.

Unfortunately, this required a *real* God. And a God who didn’t save innocent kids like Scratch’s brother from cancer wouldn’t save a Goth rapper who devoted his life to publicly trashing the Almighty... would he?

Too scared to watch the cockpit drama, Scratch scrunched himself into a tight 3-foot diameter ball, his knees against his chest, his back pressed hard against the partition. It was all happening too quickly, yet in sickening slow motion, and with every beat of his thundering heart, he sensed the four valves opening and closing as blood pulsed through every vein and artery.

He’d always known he would die young. The question was how-- quietly in the night without knowing, or in a drunken drugged stupor, or violently with full consciousness. Jesus! And now, it seemed, he would know-- it was going to be the latter, the worst way.

Hyperventilating now, he squeezed his eyes shut and envisioned his whiskey-saturated body screaming toward earth at 600 miles an hour before exploding like a drunken water balloon against a huge spinning rock.

Ker splat!

Out of nowhere, a bizarre rhyme sequence popped into his mind:

‘Yo Yo!
Where did the Rock God go?
Get away ya stupid *crow*.
That’s the man’s *elbow*.’

There would be no survivors, he knew.

It wasn’t until Scratch reopened his eyes that he realized how very wrong he was about that one. There, staring back at him with metal horse bit eyes, were... *his boots*...

his beautiful \$2,500 Saint Laurent Wyatt Leather Black Harness Boots. A torrent of quirky last thoughts flooded his mind:

*My boots will survive.
Shoes always survived horrific plane crashes-- they were
always scattered about the wreckage unscathed.
Stupid God.
He should have made humans like shoes.
Scratch would have been those high-end Saint
Laurent Wyatt Leather Black Harness Boots.*

The weirdness continued.

*That's right, Scratch.
And don't forget about the black box.
Stupid name-- black box. It's orange.
'Orange' ya glad I didn't say 'do me'?
What the hell rhymed with orange?
Nothing.
The orange black box would survive, too.
Stupid plane makers.
Why the fuck didn't they make the entire plane
out of the same material as the black box?
The plane should be the black box.*

It was one amazing revelation after another, and in those last few seconds Scratch had redesigned humans and airplanes to survive just about anything. Maybe he really was a God?

Damn... if only he had more time... the problems he could have solved...

And then it hit him... he wasn't just conscious. No. He... had... just... achieved... total... consciousness. It had to be. Right?

In a flash, the image of Caddyshack Bill Murray filled his mind, and quickly Scratch heard himself speaking in perfect unison with Carl the groundskeeper, "So I got that goin' for me, which is nice."

"Fifteen hundred feet," the co-pilot called out frantically.

And just like that, the total consciousness was gone and Scratch was back to 1,500 feet of fragile life. Although he wasn't very good at math, judging by the frantic altitude callouts from the cockpit, he was sure he didn't have long to contemplate the mysteries of life or the uncertainties of the after-life.

Scratch closed his eyes again, this time hoping it would soften the impact, as if pain didn't hurt what didn't see it. Clearly, he'd forgotten how much it hurt to be blindsided.

In the darkness, he saw his 30-year life in distinct flashes, with picture after picture forming and blurring and melding and melting in his mind's eye:

First came his mom, rocking him as a baby and singing sweetly to him, "How much is that doggie in the window, the one with the waggly tail..."

Then he saw himself in Batman jammies on the living room floor with his arm around his little brother Josh, who was dressed as Robin. The dynamic duo were watching t.v. and singing the Barney song to each other: "I love you, you love me, we're a happy family."

Next he was leaning in with a pounding heart, giving Deanna that sloppy, first kiss on the school playground.

Then he was standing solemnly at his dying brother's Godless hospital bed and cold gravesite.

At 17, he was yelling at his parents from the window of his truck, "Screw you and this crappy town. I hate this place and I hate you both. Oh, and by the way, there is no God." Dust and his mom's tears flew as he drove away. His dog Sparky sat clueless in the driveway.

Lastly, he saw Scratch Hatchet-- the Rock God-- on stage in all his miserable glory, rapping out his lies, "God don't care, God ain't a-round, That tired ol' fool just can't be found."

"900 feet! 800 feet!"

"We're going down!" the pilot shouted desperately.

"It is finished," Scratch whispered aloud, as he took what he thought would be his final breath. Bracing himself for the fiery end, he closed his eyes tighter...

...and in that lonely darkness, he saw Jesus... staked to the cross, about to take his final breath. A sponge atop a stalk of hyssop was lifted to his mouth, and as Jesus received the sour vinegary wine, He bowed his head and softly whispered, "It is finished." And then the entire earth shook.

Sons of God, both, on the same earth, breathing the same air, and uttering the same final words; yet lives that could not have been more different-- the savior and the sinner. One shook the entire earth, and the other was about to vibrate the Florida ground.

Seeing the sponge soaked with wine made Scratch yearn for one last swig of Black Jack. He opened his eyes and frantically looked for the bottle...

...and in that dying plane he saw his Dad... at the pulpit, reading those same words: "It is finished". It was Josh's funeral service and it was the last time Scratch had seen his Dad cry, the last time Scratch had cried. Not surprisingly, it was also the last time he'd prayed to God above. And that prayer had been nothing but a short good riddance to a ghost that never really existed.

Why God? Why?

Was this really it? Was this to be the end of this miserable experience known as life? Wasn't there supposed to be more?

"600 feet!"

In those last seconds, he wanted to scream out-- in his angriest voice-- a loud and clear 'Fuck You' at the God who'd taken his brother and subsequently set in motion that miserable experience.

When his mouth moved, however, the loud expletive was displaced by a whispered, frantic, solemn plea: "Dear God, please save me. Please. I'll do anything. I swear. I'll praise you all the days of my life."

"400 feet!"

Scratch balled up even tighter against the partition. Death, he somehow knew in the depths of his heart and soul, was going to suck for him. He was sure he was going to hell.

The pilot gave one last mighty pull on the stick and Scratch heard him scream out, "Come on, dammit. Come on!" But even the pilot knew it *was* finished.

And then, as inexplicable as the origin of God perhaps, the pilot felt a response.

"Hang on!" he yelled, "I'm getting something!" He pulled back hard on the stick with all his might.

On the floor, Scratch squeezed his eyes shut, clenched his teeth, and braced for the explosive ending. He felt an immense force and was quickly disoriented.

Was it over? Was this death? Was he zooming up to heaven now? Or down to hell?

Opening his eyes fearfully, he expected to see either an angry, disappointed God or a proud, smiling devil. Instead, he saw the bottle of Black Jack rolling on the floor toward the back of the plane.

What? He was still alive?

He held his hands up and wiggled his fingers in disbelief. Then he pinched his forearm and felt pain. And, when his eyes locked onto the horse bit eyes of his Saint Laurent Wyatt Leather Black Harness Boots, he heard voices in the cockpit.

“Holy shit,” the co-pilot uttered in exhaustion as the plane climbed higher into the heavens.

The pilot was breathing heavily. “Holy shit is right. Five more seconds and we were toast.” A ghostly silence followed.

“Everything feel normal?” the co-pilot asked finally, almost fearful to hear the answer.

“Yeah... it’s weird,” the pilot responded. “It feels fine. Hydraulic pressure’s still indicating zero, but all the surfaces are responding as if we got juice. I’m gonna climb to 5,000.”

“Miami Tower, Miami Tower, this is Sierra Hotel 666, we’ve regained control of our flight surfaces. Climbing to 5,000 feet on VFR. I’m still declaring an emergency and requesting all runways be made available for immediate landing.”

Ten minutes later, they were safely on the ground and the pilots were standing behind the tail, looking at the emptiness that normally housed the starboard elevator.

“Wow. It’s gone... completely gone... like someone just pulled the linkage pin,” the pilot said incredulously.

“Yeah,” his co-pilot responded, “And I just checked... the hydraulic reservoir *is* completely empty. I still don’t understand how you regained control.”

“All I know is I was pulling with all my might and praying my ass off.”

“Me too, brother, me too.”

“Hey, after I shower and change out of these soiled shorts, I’m gonna find a church, light a candle, and say a couple prayers.”

“I’m with ya. Maybe hit a strip club after that?”

“You read my mind, Dirk. You read my mind.”

FOUR

Hours later, Scratch sat with Dill on a leather couch inside the penthouse suite of the South Beach Ritz, a drink in his still-trembling hand. Their eyes were focused on the big t.v. across the room where a female reporter stood on an airport tarmac. Behind her was Scratch's plane, roped off with police tape and protected by a lone security guard.

"One thing is certain," she reported, "It was a wild ride for the self-proclaimed *Rock God*."

The camera zoomed in on the plane and the reporter continued, "Behind me is Scratch Hatchet's private Learjet, intact after plunging nearly 25,000 feet and almost plowing into the Florida Everglades this afternoon. Air traffic control data shows the plane dove at an angle of 45 degrees before the pilots were able to regain control, just 100 feet before crashing."

On the t.v., a computer animated graphic recreated the roller coaster path of the plane. As the plane plunged, Scratch's heart pounded, his stomach churned, and he sucked air as he re-lived the terror from hours earlier. When the plane pulled out of the dive, he felt the forces from the violent ride once again, and without warning, his stomach convulsed and a forceful stream of Black Jack and deviled eggs filled his esophagus. He lurched forward, his mouth gaped open, and a guttural grunt emerged.

Dill turned in time to see the explosion from Scratch's mouth onto the glass coffee table and the plate of remaining deviled eggs.

"Holy shit!" Dill cried out. He jumped up and ran for towels from the bathroom. "Here," he said, tossing one to Scratch. He threw another atop the chunky liquid mess blanketing the table. It covered the mess but couldn't contain the vile smell that filled the air.

"Jesus, Scratch. Why do you have to eat deviled eggs every day? They're disgusting."

As Scratch wiped his mouth, the reporter continued in the background. "The National Transportation Safety Administration is on-site and is actively gathering data. At this time, they are only confirming that the plane developed a problem with the linkage for the starboard elevator and lost all hydraulic pressure. They haven't ruled out terrorism or foul play. And so, the big questions for NTSB investigators are what caused that linkage to fail and how this plane, and the three lucky men aboard, miraculously survived."

The t.v. lit up with file footage of Scratch on the red carpet at last year's Grammy's. "As for Scratch Hatchet," the reporter continued, "his manager says he's resting comfortably in a Miami hotel tonight, and the final show of his U.S. tour will go on as scheduled tomorrow night. One very lucky man indeed."

Scratch clicked the t.v. off. "Resting comfortably, my ass," he scoffed. "Do I look comfortable?" He stormed over to the wet bar and rinsed his mouth. "Deviled eggs are a Southern thing, Dill," he called out after spitting. "And they're not disgusting." He rinsed again.

"They sure as hell are after they come back up." Dill changed the subject. "Hey, you sure you still want to do the show tomorrow?"

Scratch almost choked on the water. "Holy shit," he called out, "now I know I must be fucking dead."

Dill eyed him from across the room. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The day you care what I want is the day I must have died." Scratch walked back over to Dill.

"Seriously, Scratch? Come on, you know I only want what's best for you, right? You're like a son to me."

"Yeah, right. And I suppose you'd charge your son a twenty percent management fee?"

Dill smiled and attempted to lighten the mood. "I said *like a son*." He thought for a moment and then sang out, "I love you... you love me... we're a happy family." It was the Barney the Dinosaur song.

"Don't quit your day job Dill."

"Yeah, well don't die and I won't have to." Dill extended his hand to shake. "Okay?"

Scratch shook. "Riiiiight."

Before releasing, Dill looked into Scratch's eyes deeply. "You know, sometimes I wonder if you *really did* sell your soul to the devil."

"Really, Dill? Do you?" Scratch freed his hand. "You think I'd be sitting here, *resting comfortably with you*, if I did?"

Dill smirked. “Hey, all I know is someone wanted you to live today. And I’m betting it wasn’t God.”

“Newsflash, Dill-- there is no God. But if there was, I bet He’d love to hang out with the Scratch-man.”

Dill held up his wrist with the Rolex as if saving it. “It’s getting deep in here now,” he said with a chuckle. “Look, you go get some rest. You’ve got the Z104 interview at 9 tomorrow and then you’re clear until the concert tomorrow night.” He hesitated. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Awesome, Dill. Just fuckin’ awesome. Disneyworld should have a ride like the one I took today. Fun time... no wonder I’m resting so goddamn comfortably. Should be a relaxing night, too...”

Scratch remembered something else. “Oh, and you need to get my yacht here pronto... ‘cause it’s gonna be a long time before this MoFo sets foot on a plane again... not ‘til they start making ‘em out of that goddamn black box material...”

“Already working on the yacht,” Dill replied. “Look, just try and get some sleep, okay? The limo will be here to pick you up at 8. Oh, and try and be nice on the radio tomorrow. It’s the last interview for a while.”

Dill had no idea just how true those last words would be. It would be the Rock God’s last interview ever.

FIVE

Scratch tossed and turned restlessly in the big comfy bed at the Ritz, obsessing over the day's freaky events. That stupid plea to God hadn't saved him, right? That was just a weird coincidence. Right? There was no God. Absolutely, positively, no way.

Hell, even if there was, if He hadn't cared about Josh, He sure as hell didn't care about Scratch. Right? And what was all that crap about terrorism and foul play? Who could want him dead? He was the Rock God.

And everybody loved the Rock God. Right?

He thought of the groupies over seven years of touring.

Yeah, well maybe not everybody loved the Rock God... maybe there's one or two... or fifty boyfriends... maybe he hadn't played fair with their girlfriends...

Fuck 'em all. Nobody's trying to kill me.

Of course Scratch couldn't fathom that someone was trying to save him.

Front and center among the swirling thoughts were Dill's words: 'sometimes I wonder if you really did sell your soul to the devil.' They filled the air and echoed in Scratch's mind over and over and over, and Scratch was certain the night would be filled with sweat and tears and dread. And with this backdrop, Scratch fell into restless sleep and his dangerous subconscious took over...

...Seven year-old Jeremiah and his 5 year-old brother, Josh, were sitting next to their mother in the front pew of a small church packed with God-fearing souls. As his father preached to the congregation, Jeremiah turned around and snickered with a friend in the pew behind.

"Pay attention to your father, Jeremiah," his mother scolded. "This is important."

From the pulpit, his father read from the bible. "Satan took Jesus to the top of a mountain where they could see the entire world. Satan said, I will give you all these things if you fall down and worship to me. And Jesus replied, Get away, Satan! It is written: The Lord, your God, shall you worship and Him alone shall you serve."

His father looked out over his flock, and Jeremiah felt that God-fearing stare directly. "My brothers and sisters, unlike the devil, God tempts no one. For light, truth, and love

need no temptation. Never forget: you are God's child and your soul belongs to Him and Him alone. God made you because He loves you. He wants to help you. Surrender to Him and let Him do His work. And one day you will walk with Him in his heavenly kingdom, where every wrong will be made right, and every question will be answered. And then you will know God's greatness."

The second dream was not a childhood memory, but rather a modern day omen.

...Thirty year-old Scratch was steering a sailboat on calm, crystal blue water. Above him, the sky was a soothing swirl of blues and purples and pinks, with birds of every size, shape, and color flying in a strange and beautiful synchronicity. It looked like a mighty creator had painted the sky and was conducting the movements. When he looked down, over the edge of the boat, Scratch could see hundreds, maybe even thousands of feet into the water. Every sea creature imaginable-- dolphins, orcas, rays, and huge schools of brightly-colored fish—was swimming with that same harmonious synchronicity. It was the most beautiful, perfect scene Scratch had ever seen, and he felt complete peace. Wherever he was, it was perfect. It felt like home.

Unfortunately, the peaceful feeling was short-lived.

As he sailed onward, the sky quickly turned into a foreboding mix of billowing black and grey clouds illuminating by pulsing, cracking thunderclaps from within. And the calm blue water was now a bubbling, boiling red cesspool, with blackened veins creeping across the surface. Thick and murky, it looked as if it had been created by the blood and ashes of millions, perhaps billions, of creatures over all of time.

No creature could live in that, Scratch thought.

As if cued, a bony human hand poked out through the thick bloody mess and reached out for him. Scared to the bone, Scratch pulled back instinctively. This wasn't home anymore.

Then he heard the footsteps.

Scratch startled and turned toward them, and through the fog, a shadowy figure poked up from the boat's stairwell. With a snap of a bony finger, the shadowy figure illuminated itself into a bright red, with horns, and fanged black teeth. The devil! It glided effortlessly toward Scratch with a delightfully evil grin. In its bony hands it cradled a stainless steel box with the words "Scratch's Soul" etched onto the top.

"No, please, get away," Scratch shouted out in terror as the devil closed in. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Help me, God! God?" With the devil just a step away, he screamed as loudly as he could, "Help!"

With the scream still reverberating in the darkness, Scratch startled awake.

Jesus! He gulped air.

“Holy shit,” he mustered as his heart slowed and he sat up to take in his surroundings. Clicking on the light, he confirmed he was still ‘sittin’ in the Ritz.’

“Fuck me,” he groaned aloud. Not only was life getting more difficult by the minute, somehow he knew the next three months were going to be the most difficult of his life... *and the greatest, too.*

Needing something to take his mind off the hellish nightmare, Scratch looked around for the t.v. remote. When he couldn’t find it, he shouted out angrily, “Where’s the goddamn remote?”

Finally, he opened the drawer of the nightstand and saw it... atop a bible. Scratch grabbed the remote and closed the drawer, not noticing that his name-- Jeremiah Willy Fisher-- was engraved in silky gold thread onto the cover of the bible.

Strange.

Too scared to sleep again, Scratch propped himself up in bed and searched the X-rated choices, provided a running commentary aloud.

“Seen it.”

“Don’t wanna see it.”

“Mutant call girls from the planet Zebulon-- stupid.”

“Skanks.”

“Ugh, terrible plot.”

Having exhausted the X-rated selections, he continued surfing through the other channels until he came upon Tom Hanks stranded on the beach in ‘Castaway.’

“I don’t know what I did, God,” Hanks cried out with desperate tears, “but whatever it was, I am really, really sorry. You hear me? Really sorry.”

“Idiot,” Scratch scoffed at the bearded Hanks. “There is no God. And even if there was, he’s not gonna save you. Quit crying, ya big wuss, and build a raft... dumb shit.” He’d seen enough of this wussy.

‘Waterworld’ and Kevin Costner were on the next channel. Scratch liked Kevin Costner, especially with the long hair.

“You're a fool to believe in something you've never seen before,” Costner called out with confidence.

“That’s right,” Scratch agreed as Waterworld went to commercial. “Like chasing the wind.” God was like that, too-- nothing more than a dream, a figment of man’s weak mind... akin to Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Scratch would believe there was a God if he saw Him and touched Him and God raised something from the dead. Nothing less.

Scratch continued channel surfing and found the little boy petting the killer whale in ‘Free Willy.’

“Oh, Jesus Christ... what a stupid fuckin’ movie. No killer whale’s gonna let you pet it like that. Would have been a lot better if the whale had bit the kid’s arm off,” he scoffed, as if critiquing the movie for Goth Magazine. He hit the channel up button.

He settled on VH1, which was playing the music video for the Styx song, “Come Sail Away.” It was a song Scratch had always loved as a kid, and without thinking he began to sing along.

“A gathering of angels appeared above my head; they sang to me this song of hope, and this is what they said; they said come sail away, come sail away--”

--Sail away...

...Scratch stopped singing abruptly as his mind re-conjured the devilish nightmare on the sailboat. ‘Oh God,’ he thought, and quickly he changed the channel.

Not surprisingly it landed on ‘Oh God,’ with George Burns’ Godly mug filling the screen. Scratch remembered watching the movie with his family on one of their Friday night pizza and movie nights... when Josh was still alive... when he was Jeremiah and still believed in a God who cared. “You know, I’m, I’m liable to lose my job,” Jerry Landers said nervously as he eyed George Burns. God replied, “Lose a job, save a world. Not a bad deal.”

Jesus Fuckin’ Christ. More God. Why the fuck does God need glasses, anyways? And why the hell would God look all wrinkled and frumpy like George Burns? Johnny Depp would be a much cooler looking God. Stupid movie. Scratch changed the channel.

But no matter how much he tried, Scratch just couldn’t escape God. He landed on a fiery black Baptist preacher spewing words from a pulpit in machine-gun fashion.

“...and if your eye causes you to stumble,” the preacher implored, “gouge it out and throw it away. It is far, far better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fires of hell.”

Fires and hell... absolutely the last things Scratch wanted to hear. Scratch hastily pushed the channel up button again, but the remote seemed unresponsive now.

“And if a dumb-ass preacher-man screams his *lies*,” Scratch rapped out mockingly, “turn the t.v. off and say *good-bye*. Click.”

Scratch clicked the power button on the remote and the t.v. turned off. It was short-lived, however, as the t.v. turned back on inexplicably.

“God knows we all stumble and fall,” the black preacher said, now calm and compassionate.

Scratch clicked the power button again and the t.v. clicked off once again. A split-second later, it turned back on, as if possessed.

“What God wants for each of us is redemption,” the preacher explained.

“Shut up already,” Scratch shouted angrily as he clicked the remote again. No response.

His blood boiling, Scratch raged, reared back, and let the remote fly. It hit the t.v. directly, shattering the screen. And yet, with only shards of glass left, it continued to play.

“Nothing... absolutely nothing... is more powerful than redemption,” the preacher sang out.

Scratch got out of bed, pulled the plug, and the shattered screen finally went dark. “Redeem that, asshole.”

SIX

Sitting in the sound room across from the two morning Deejays, Scratch looked like a man who'd been through hell and seen the devil. Indeed, with dark circles under bloodshot eyes, it was either that, or he was an offshoot of a raccoon species with genetic conjunctivitis. His appearance didn't go unnoticed.

"You okay there, Scratch?" one of the DJ's asked.

Scratch nodded but mumbled, "No."

The station engineer poked his head in the booth. "Coming out of commercial in 30 seconds, fellas," he announced. He took a seat on the other side of the glass partition.

The other DJ chimed in. "Okay Scratch, you know the drill. We'll open with some small talk, hit our normal rapid fire questions, and then we've got some canned, taped questions from callers. All standard stuff— when's the next album coming out, where do you get your inspiration for your songs, yadda yadda yadda."

Scratch managed another nod. "Yup," he grunted as the red 'on air' light blinked and then went solid. The station engineer gave them a point through the glass partition and they were live.

"Our guest this morning is the Rock God himself. Welcome to Z104, Scratch. Great to have you with us," DJ number 1 gushed.

DJ number 2 chimed in, "Yeah, especially after that scare on your plane yesterday."

Scratch laughed out with arrogance. On air, he was once again the omnipotent, immortal, fearless Rock God. "What? That little thing? It's gonna take more than a broken tail *rod* to kill the Rock *God*."

"What was it like on the plane, Scratch? Was that as scary as it sounded?"

"Hell *no, bro*... ain't no *fear* in Scratch *here*." The rhymes flowed like the deviled eggs and Black Jack that had come up his esophagus a day earlier.

"Okay, Scratch. You know our little drill... we ask every guest five rapid fire questions. Are you ready?"

“Fire away, DJ.”

“Okay, then, put 30 seconds on the clock,” DJ number 1 announced. “Question 1, Scratch, if you were stranded on a deserted island, what one thing would he most like to have with you?”

“Emphasis on *thing*, Scratch,” DJ number 2 clarified. “Groupies do not qualify.”

Scratch chuckled. “Okay. My guitar.”

“Question 2. If you could perform with one person who’s no longer alive, who would it be?”

“Easy. My little bro.”

DJ number 1 nodded. “Question 3. What is your favorite food?”

“Chicken pot pie,” Scratch replied nonchalantly. “My three favorite things.”

The DJs laughed in unison.

Scratch amended his answer, “Actually my mom’s chicken and *rice*, extra *spice*.”

“Okay, Question 4. What scares the Rock God?”

Scratch’s mind kicked into high gear... let’s see: my plane falling out of the sky... the devil I saw in my nightmare last night... the fires of hell. “Uh. Geez. Um, killer whales, I guess,” he said, remembering the scene from Free Willy.

“And last question, Scratch. If you were somehow able to pick the manner in which you die, how would the Rock God go?”

“Drowning,” Scratch answered without hesitation.

“Ding ding ding, time’s up,” announced DJ number 1. “Drowning. Really?”

Scratch shrugged. “They say it’s calming.”

“Not if a killer whale gets you first,” DJ number 2 injected, laughing.

DJ number 1 chuckled along. “So, final show of the tour tonight, Scratch-- what can folks expect at the sold out American Airlines Arena?”

“A whole lotta crazy rockin’ and a rollin’ and a *rappin’* ... ‘cuz one thing’s sure, the Rock God ain’t done tearin’ up this *planet*.”

“Right on, Rock God. Okay, as promised, we’re opening up a special line for a few questions from our listeners. 1-800-ROCK-GOD. Hello caller, what’s your question for the Rock God?”

The other DJ pressed a key on his keyboard and a male voice streamed from the station’s speakers. “Hi fellas, love your show. Scratch, how’d it feel to attend the Grammys last year while your mom was on her death bed crying out for you?”

The faces of the men fell in concert and an uneasy silence filled the booth, as if a deviled egg fart filled the air.

Scratch signaled for the mics to be cut, and on the other side of the glass partition the engineer scrambled and quickly pressed a series of buttons. Inside the sound room, the red ‘on air’ light went dark.

“What the hell kind of question is that?” Scratch yelled angrily.

The station engineer ran back into the booth. “I don’t know what happened,” he explained frantically. “That wasn’t the track I loaded.”

“Jesus Christ,” DJ number 1 moaned, “Can we have just one frickin’ show without something going wrong?” He knew now he should have previewed the questions.

“Alright,” he added, “send us the next question in the cue. And don’t come out of commercial ‘til it’s right.”

“Got it.”

The station engineer returned to his panel and played back the next question over the sound booth speakers. It was a female voice: “Hi Scratch. I was wondering where you get the inspiration for your songs.”

The DJs gave thumbs up to the engineer and the station came back on air.

“Aaaand we’re back,” DJ number 1 chimed out. “This is Jack and Phil on Z104 in the morning, live with the one and only Rock God. What’s your question for the Rock God, caller?”

The other DJ pressed a key on his keyboard and that same female voice streamed from the speakers. Only this time she had something different to ask.

“Hi Scratch,” the female voice said, “I was wondering why you begged God to save your life as your plane was spiraling toward earth instead of the devil you say you worship?”

Dead silence. An even smellier fart. “Screw you fucking people,” Scratch yelled, breaking the silence. He pushed a table over as he stormed out of the booth.

And Z104 went to extended commercial.

SEVEN

Nearly twelve hours later, Scratch was still seething as he readied himself backstage at Miami's American Airlines arena. He spewed at Dill. "You tell Z-1-Oh-fuckin'-4 that Scratch will never-- ever -- have anything to do with their station again. No promos, no intros, no nuthin'. You got it?"

"Relax, Scratch. They've been apologizing all day. Someone hacked into their network." Dill paused to let that sink in. "Listen, nobody's gonna remember that interview. Let's just go out and put on a great show."

"Yeah... *let's*," Scratch responded in an exaggerated patronizing tone. He extended his mic to Dill. "Feel free to warm up the crowd with that fuckin' Barney song of yours."

Abruptly, Scratch sang out angrily, "I fuckin' hate you, you fuckin' suck off of me, we're no fuckin' family, let's hang Dillie from a tree..." He shook his head and walked away, mumbling, as he readied himself behind the drummer.

With the crowd chanting excitedly-- "Rock God! Rock God!"-- at the blackened stage, Scratch crept out from behind the drummer, a spotlight flashed on him, and a great roar filled the arena as the opening guitar note blared from the speakers.

The Rock God was in the house!

Scratch opened the show with his latest hit, 'Momma Momma'. Standing at the center mic, he sang the soulful chorus:

Mamma, mamma, can't you see,
What the devil's done to me.
Took my soul and gave me gold,
I ain't never gettin' old.
Whoa, whoa, whoa-oh-oh.
Whoa, oooh-oh, oh-oh-oh.

Then he turned up the volume and speed and began sauntering around the stage as he broke into an energetic rap:

Bust a move,
Bust a cop,
Busty chicks make Scratch rock.

Girls gone wild,
Girls gone tame,
Girl on girl, That's insane.
Wicka wicka wicka...
whacka whacka whacka...

Back at the center mic, he slowed it up and sang again:

Mamma, mamma, can't you see—

And then it got weird... really weird.

As Scratch sang the chorus, the words and melody that came out of the speakers was: "How much is that doggy in the window... the one with the waggly tail." The sweet voice was that of Scratch's mom. And her wholesome motherly image flashed on the big screen behind the stage. She was rocking baby Jeremiah in her arms.

A chorus of boos quickly filled the arena and the confused band members stopped playing as a flurry of objects flew through the air onto the stage. Confused, Scratch threw his hands up-- WTF?-- and furiously motioned for them to play the next song. The band started into 'Rock me Rock God.'

Scratch shrieked, "And my baby screamed, Rock me, Rock God, Rock me hard, Rock me like a wrecking ball." He rapped, "I lay you down and kiss your bod--"

And then it got really, really weird again.

"I love you, you love me, we're a happy family," blared from the speakers. It was Barney's unmistakable silly voice. And on the big screen behind the stage his big goofy purple mug flashed. Barney was in the house with the Rock God!

More boos and flying objects filled the arena, and like a skilled dodgeball player, Scratch ran backstage.

Dill was there to meet him. "What the hell's going on, Scratch?"

"How the fuck should I know, Dill. You tell me. I'm out there singing like I always do."

Dill was quickly on his walkie-talkie with the sound board and video display guy. "Jimmy, what the hell's happening?"

"I don't know. I hear what Scratch is singing, but that's not what's coming out the speakers."

With the crowd in a near-riot, Dill turned to Scratch. “You gotta get back out there.”

“Like hell I do. I almost got hit by a battery. You go out there and tell ‘em the sound system’s fucked up.”

Dill walking onto the stage elicited a single thought from the crowd of 28,000 Goths: who the hell was this balding middle-aged dweeb in the tweed sport coat?

As Dill approached the mic in the center of the stage, the booing got louder and larger objects flew through the air. Once at the mic, Dill was like leaded gasoline poured onto a fire. “Um, folks,” Dill stammered as a motorcycle helmet whizzed by and bounced across the stage, “we’re having a technical problem with the sound system. As soon as we get that resolved, we’ll--”

It got weird again.

“Praise God the Almighty,” sang out majestically from the speakers, accompanied by a chorus of angelic voices.

The crowd was incensed, and Dill’s only choice was to run offstage. Unfortunately, Dill had never been good at dodgeball.

And that would be the Rock God’s final concert.

EIGHT

The night was unusually beautiful, as if the world were preparing for a visit from its Creator, and billions of shimmering stars and a bright full moon illuminated the ocean surface as the sleek 90-foot yacht cut through the water on its way to Scratch's private Bahamian island retreat. Inside the bridge, Dill sat next to Captain Jack in tall, aptly named captain's chairs that enabled them to see the main deck below. The two men were engaged in a spirited game of cribbage. Below them, on deck, Scratch sat alone at the bow, scanning the ocean, as if searching for answers.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, what a friggin' day," Dill said, his voice dripping with frustration and exhaustion, his prominent forehead covered with a prominent gauze bandage. "First concert I've ever had to cancel." By his calculations, they'd lost nearly five million bucks.

"I heard. Did you figure out what happened?"

"Nope. All the sound checks were fine. It's like someone took over the sound system... and the video display."

The Captain weighed in. "I saw where TMZ is already having a field day with it on their web site. They're asking fans to vote on whether Barney or The Wiggles should open up for Scratch on his next tour."

If there is a next tour. Somehow, somehow, Dill had a sinking feeling the world may have seen the last of the Rock God.

"Yep. And I'm sure Saturday Night Live won't be far behind," Dill replied with resignation. "One thing's sure, we'll find out pretty quickly who are enemies are."

They sat in silence for a bit.

"I tell ya," Dill said finally, "there's some weird shit going on with Scratch right now. First the plane, then the radio station, then the concert." He paused. "Let's hope bad things really do happen in threes, and not fours."

The Captain raised his coffee cup in mock toast. "On that happy note, here's to a safe passage across the southern boundary of the Bermuda triangle tonight."

“Aaaah, I’m not worried about that. You’ll get us where we need to get. You always do.” Dill pointed down at Scratch. “I’m worried about him.” “Look at him down there... I’ve never seen him like this... he’s completely obliterated.”

The Captain looked down to see Scratch, clearly wasted, sifting through his backpack like a nervous crack addict.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” Scratch sang out on cue, ala Jack Nicholson in ‘The Shining.’ He thought he’d found what he was looking for, but when he pulled his hand out, the leather-bound bible from the Ritz nightstand was in it.

“You are not my box of joints. How did you get in there?” Scratch wondered aloud in a sing-song voice that sounded a bit like Grover from Sesame Street.

“Ba-bye, book of *lies*,” he called out as he hurled the bible into the night and watched it disappear into the dark water. He reached back into the backpack and found the box of joints. “There you are, my pretty,” he cooed, as he cradled and cuddled the leather box like a little kitty.

He lit a joint and exhaled. “Oh yeah. That’s better.”

As he took a deep toke, Scratch caught sight of something flickering beneath the bow wave. It was a dolphin, he soon saw, and as it rose to the surface he watched it intently. In the light of the stars and moon, he saw a beautiful creature-- sleek and grey, with shimmering streaks of blue and green, gliding effortlessly through the water with seemingly not a care in the world. It was pure peace.

Scratch took another toke, closed his eyes, and felt that same peace embrace him. In that singular moment, he had but one wish: to be that dolphin-- free from worries, guilt, anger, and fear-- gliding along the big blue ocean under the silvery moon and a glowing blanket of stars.

Oh man, now that would be living!

Scratch exhaled a cloud of sweet purple smoke. “You got it made,” he called down to the dolphin.

As if waiting for Scratch to say that, the dolphin suddenly turned its head, looked up, and locked eyes onto Scratch’s. Then its long, smiling mouth opened and a deep booming voice filled the night air, “Why do you dishonor me?”

Whoa!

Like a powerful tsunami, the words swept away the peace and Scratch suddenly felt himself trembling all over. When he tried to look away, he couldn’t. Somehow, this strange enchanted dolphin had hold of him.

Frantic, his mind searched for an explanation as he continued to lock eyes with the creature. *It's the vertigo... or bad weed... or maybe he was hallucinating.*

Before Scratch could move or speak, the dolphin's mouth moved again.

"Answer me," the booming voice commanded, "Why do you dishonor me?"

Officially freaking out now, Scratch managed to wave his arms toward the bridge. "Dill! Dill!" he shouted out frantically, "Come here! Hurry!"

Dill arrived in a flash to find Scratch staring down at the water, trance-like. "What's the matter, Scratch?" he asked breathlessly.

Scratch continued staring at the dolphin. "Didn't you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

Scratch pointed a shaky finger down at the dolphin. "That dolphin... it just spoke to me!"

Dill looked at the dolphin swimming innocently alongside. Oh boy, he thought to himself, the hits just keep on coming. Here we go again...

Now able to look away, Scratch stared frantically into Dill's eyes. "I heard it, Dill. I really did. It looked right up at me and spoke. I swear to God."

"Okay, Scratch. First of all, dolphins can't talk. They make that yakety-yak sound." Dill did his best dolphin imitation. "Second, you're completely fucking wasted. And third, you swearing to God might be the craziest thing of all."

"No, Dill, I really heard it. I did."

"I'm sure you did, Scratch."

Dill took the joint from Scratch. "Look Scratch, it's been a long day... a long weird day. Why don't you just go down below and get some sleep... forget this day. Tomorrow we'll be at the island and we can all start fresh. Okay?"

Scratch didn't fight. He just wanted to be away from the freaky talking dolphin. "Yeah, okay. Whatever."

Dill tossed the joint overboard, led Scratch into his stateroom, and steered him onto the bed. He grabbed two pills from the nightstand and handed a bottle of water to Scratch. "Here. This'll help you sleep. If you need anything, just buzz. Okay?"

“Okay, but you owe me a joint,” Scratch called out as Dill left.

Alone in the stateroom, Scratch mumbled and mused aloud. “That was so weird... a talking dolphin. Riiiiight.”

He took the pills and closed his eyes, clueless that his life was about to change like few before him.

NINE

It began with a few gentle rocks-- back and forth -- like a father and son having a nice chat on a front porch swing. But instead of sitting on a swing, Scratch was lying on the bed in his stateroom-- alone -- still freaked out by the talking dolphin with the booming voice. And while he didn't feel those first few rocks, he sure as heck felt the sways and heaves, surges and rolls, and pitches and yaws that followed. Indeed, within a minute, the Rock God was being tossed about on the bed like the Rag Doll.

“What the fuck,” he yelled out angrily. Ten million dollars for the most stable platform in its class, yet here he was, clinging to the corner of the bed as if it were a life raft in churning ocean waves. His stomach heaved and he suddenly puked onto the floor.

Yuck. Fuck.

Somehow, amidst the chaotic bouncing, he reached out and managed to find the buzzer on the nightstand. He pressed it.

Help!

An immediate and brisk knock followed and a steward opened the door. “You called?” the steward called out calmly as he waltzed into the stateroom like a free spirit. Strangely, he wasn't bobbing about. In fact, the only thing being tossed around on this night was Scratch. Only Scratch was too dizzy to see that.

“What the fuck's going on?” Scratch yelled out angrily, as if the steward were responsible for the rough ride.

“Hmmm... hmmm,” the steward sniffed conspicuously, like a human air detector. “Smells like emesis,” he declared drolly. He sniffed deeper. “Hmmm. Yep. Definitely emesis.”

“E-what?”

“Emesis... throw up... yak... feed the fish.” The steward punctuated the explanation with a weird, high-pitched staccato laugh that sounded almost like a dolphin.

Scratch's stomach heaved again. *Didn't this idiot see him being tossed about and clinging to the bed? Was he laughing at him now?* “No, you *dumb shit*,” Scratch cried out with disdain as he bounced around on the bed, “why's it so rough?”

The steward stepped further into the stateroom, now just a few steps from the bed. “It’s not rough,” he announced with a strange confidence, “it’s just *you*.”

His eyes blurred by the vertigo, and his head swirling from the nausea and bouncing, Scratch attempted to identify the strange steward with the know-it-all attitude. He was sure he’d never seen him before. He was also sure he didn’t like him.

“Where’s Javier?” Scratch barked between bounces.

“He’s off tonight. That man works so hard, and for such little appreciation. He deserved a rest.”

“Off? Who the hell said so?”

“I did.”

“Who the fuck are *you*?”

The steward smirked with infinite authority. “I am,” he stated calmly, “*The One*.” And with that bold pronouncement, the rocking and rolling and bouncing stopped cold, and the steward stared at Scratch with a strange confidence.

That was weird. Scratch looked around and took a few deep breaths to collect himself. “Whoa! It stopped,” he said. Scratch rolled off the bed and stumbled toward the arrogant steward, intent on ripping him a new one. Scratch was ‘The One’ on *this* yacht... the only One. And soon enough, this arrogant, little nothing of a steward would come to know that.

Standing just a few feet away now, Scratch readied himself to tear into the steward. When he moved his mouth, however, it quickly froze into a perfectly shaped “O.” His body quickly followed, plastering the Rock God into a statuesque pose, his hand in front of his face, his index finger pointing angrily at the steward.

What was happening to him?

Only able to move his eyes now, they darted about on Scratch’s face nervously.

What the hell was happening to him?

When his eyes finally found the servant’s eyes, they stopped and locked on, immersing Scratch into a brilliant, sparkling blue, new world. Mesmerized, Scratch was drawn in and quickly seized by eyes so deep and rich that Scratch was sure he could crawl inside and find another world. *If only he could move.* As Scratch would come to know, they were eyes that had seen everything that ever was and ever would be-- eyes that held the answers to infinite questions. *Ooooooooh!*

Scratch and time both stood still, and though he tried to look away, Scratch couldn't. The steward was firmly in control now and he kept Scratch locked in that stare for what seemed to be a long, long time. After a while, the steward waved his hand before his face, unlocking Scratch's eyes.

His eyes now freed, Scratch took in the strange steward more fully. With his wispy moustache and soul patch, he was a cross between Johnny "Jack Sparrow" Depp and Eddie Vetter of Pearl Jam, and gave off a swashbuckling 'no worry' vibe as if he were the only real rock star in the stateroom. Adding to that comparison was his silky shoulder-length brown hair, its soft curls tucked neatly behind his ears. His hair was fabulous, just perfect, and Scratch could have stared in envy for hours. In fact, after he finished ripping the steward, Scratch made a mental note to ask what brand of shampoo and conditioner he used.

If only he could move his mouth.

The steward's bronzed, flawlessly smooth skin suggested perfect health and fitness. And he appeared to be a foreigner, although Scratch couldn't pinpoint the nationality. He looked like a perfect blend of just about everything— a euro-asiatic-afro-austral-american, perhaps? Nor could Scratch pinpoint the steward's age. His authoritative demeanor suggested considerable experience, yet that perfectly taut skin suggested youth, as if he were younger than even Scratch. Only one thing was sure-- he exuded a superiority that not even Scratch could deny.

Scratch's eyes found the steward's name tag and he squinted hard at strange symbols that looked to be from another time, another world. *Who was this guy? If only he could move his mouth to ask.*

As if on cue, Scratch felt his mouth unlock.

"Ooh, um, what's your name there?" Scratch asked, having all but forgotten about ripping the new steward a new one.

The steward chuckled. "Trouble with ancient Hebrew, *oh great Rock God?*" There was a mix of contempt and humor and confidence in his tone that fit perfectly with his look and vibe.

"Let me help you," he continued calmly. "My name is Elohim. That's G... O... D in English." He pointing to each squiggly symbol on the name tag as he spoke, his diction soft and slow and exact. He paused to punctuate his next words and his eyes blazed an even brighter blue as he boldly announced, "I am God."

Hah! And to think the night couldn't get more bizarre, thought Scratch. Now this joker. "Yeah, right. And I'm the friggin' pope," Scratch reacted, not hiding his contempt.

“Doubtful. But I’m usually up for a little fun, so let’s take a looksee.” The steward’s unexpected chuckle confused Scratch.

“What’s so funny?”

“Go take a look,” the steward replied, motioning to the mirror on the wall behind them. “You’re not *freed* yet, but you are *unfrozen*.”

Strange words.

Nervously, Scratch turned and looked into the mirror across the room. In the reflection he saw a Papal tiara on his head and a flowing white gown covering his body. Red leather loafers on his feet looked like antiques. He walked anxiously toward the mirror to get a closer look.

“Yes, I know,” the steward called out, “that tiara’s a little tight, but you, son, have a *really* big head... to match that *really* big ego of yours.”

Scratch felt for the tiara, certain it was all just a dream or some kind of twisted joke or sleight of hand. He studied himself curiously in the mirror.

The steward called out, “I know you’re a shoe-guy-- you like those? I had to go all the way back to the 17th century to find a pair that fit your big boats. Those belonged to Pope Pius.”

Scratch looked down at the shoes as he walked back toward the steward. “How’d you do all that?”

“*All that?*” The steward scoffed it humorously. “You’re looking at the Creator, son, the Maker of the heavens and the stars, and man and every other living thing. Ask me how I did *all that*, or how I made DNA, or better yet, *why* I did all that. Now *those* are good questions. Or even how I integrated it all with evolution.” He chuckled aloud as if a funny thought had just crossed his mind.

This dude was interesting, but weird, and Scratch was caught up in the moment. “What’s so funny?” Scratch asked.

“DNA evolution,” the steward responded.

Really weird. “What?”

“The notion that cold lifeless matter could evolve into the digital elegance of living DNA... all by its lonesome.”

Scratch had no idea what the steward was talking about. *Really, who was this strange dude?*

The steward continued, “A 1 in 13.3148659936 trillion probability, yet most of mankind thinks DNA evolved into My creation. When you really think hard about it, it’s quite funny.” He paused to set off his next set of words. “Why it would be a million times easier for a tornado to travel through a junkyard and create a pristine, working Boeing 747.”

Scratch was mesmerized, but before he could respond the steward put his clenched fist in front of Scratch’s face and slowly opened his fingers. In his palm was a small brown rock about the size of a quarter. He looked into Scratch’s eyes with a deep confidence. “This lifeless rock will be a lifeless rock forever,” he declared, “unless the Creator decides otherwise. For only the Creator can create life from non-life.”

Then, with twinkling eyes and a wry smile, the steward held the rock up to his lips and softly breathed onto it with all the theatrics of a magician performing a trick. Before Scratch’s eyes, the rock slowly quivered and morphed. As he watched in awestruck wonder, Scratch searched for an explanation to the magic rock trick.

Who was this dude?

In seconds, the magic rock had elongated into a furry brown mass about 10-inches long. Suddenly, four legs and a tail jutted out. Next came a head... and eyes... and ears... and a mouth and a wet nose. When it stopped, Scratch stared in disbelief at a brown puppy sitting obediently in the steward’s palm. As if grateful to be alive, the pup wagged its tail and barked out happily.

Whoa! Making a rock into a barking puppy-- that was some trick.

“How’d you do that?”

“Not exactly raising the dead, like you wanted, but still pretty impressive, eh?” The steward gently stroked the puppy’s head. “You and I have at least one thing in common,” he said smiling, “a love of dogs.” He kissed the puppy’s snout. “So simple yet so wondrous, with but one desire-- to love and be loved. Man could learn a lot from dogs.”

The steward’s eyes burned into Scratch’s. “Your dad could use a nice companion. Looks just like Sparky, doesn’t he?”

Sleight of hand and magic rocks were cool, but this steward couldn’t have known Scratch’s childhood dog’s name. Now it made sense... it was a dream. Of course! Scratch laughed aloud. “Hah! I get it. I’m dreaming. This is all just a big weird dream. Dolphins can’t talk, puppies don’t come from rocks, and you’re not God. Because there is no God. I just need to wake-up.”

The steward smiled wide as if he was enjoying all this. “Very well. The Creator will awaken you.” The steward set the puppy down and Scratch watched curiously as he placed his thumb and forefinger in front of their faces. Moving in slow motion, the steward brought his fingers together in the air, millimeter-by-millimeter. When they finally touched, a sudden pain registered on Scratch’s forearm.

“Ooow! Jesus Christ!” Scratch reacted as he looked down to see his skin pinched together. When Scratch looked back up, the steward flashed a stern, pained look his way. That look sent a shiver through Scratch.

“I gave My son to die for your sins,” the steward said seriously, “so don’t *ever* use His name except to honor and glorify him. Understood?” There was no slack in his tone. Then the steward tightened the pinch until his fingernails were a bright white.

The pain increased like nothing Scratch had ever felt before-- down to the bone, radiating through his body like the shock from an electric eel. Scratch screamed out and then managed a meek, ‘save-me Jesus’ nod. When the steward released the pinch, a golf ball-sized welt throbbed on Scratch’s arm.

“Holy shit,” Scratch moaned as he rubbed the welt. He began to feel unsteady, as if his bones were failing him. “You’re really *real*?” Then Scratch collapsed and oozed onto the carpet like a single-celled primitive life form.

Smiling above, God poured the bottle of water onto Scratch. As he slowly stirred, Scratch looked up and saw a strong, steady hand reaching down toward him. He grabbed for the hand and the steward took hold of him and helped him up.

“I don’t believe this,” Scratch said unsteadily, as he steadied himself on his feet. His heart was pounding fiercely as he wiped the water from his face as the puppy licked at the pool of water on the floor.

“And you also don’t believe I stopped your plane from smashing into a million pieces and kept you from bursting like a whiskey-saturated water balloon.”

Scratch’s heart pounded faster. This was getting way too personal. “That was you?”

“Only the maker of the universe can defy its laws,” the steward replied with raised eyebrows and a sly smile.

“But..... why?” Scratch asked in wonderment. In spite of the real-life visual effects, he was still sure it wasn’t real. Only one thing was sure-- it was weird, very weird.

“You prayed to me... and I answered. See what can happen when you stop running away?”

There was a long pause as the steward let the words sink in. “Oh, and FYI Rock Genius, making a plane out of the black box material won’t work. You can’t soften blunt force kinetic energy with more mass. That’s a terrible idea.” The steward winked and smiled wide. “So much for total consciousness, eh?”

Scratch’s nervousness actually subsided.

This dude couldn’t have known his thoughts. Of course it wasn’t real. Plus, this swashbuckling steward couldn’t have been much older than him...

The steward solved that question quickly. “For the record, I’m a tinge older than the universe,” he said, with a grin that showed his perfectly straight dazzling teeth. “But I must say, I don’t look a day over 30, do I?” Now His booming laugh filled the room. “For me, age really is just a number.”

Dumbstruck, Scratch watched as the steward reached out, plucked the tiara from his head, breathed onto the gems, and buffed them with his white jacket sleeve. “I should get these things back to the Vatican before they really freak out.” And then, in a blink, the tiara and shoes and gown were gone.

Scratch opened and closed his eyes several times in an attempt to clear them of the trickery. A puppy from a rock and disappearing papal clothing-- it had to be bad weed.

“I tell you what, my big-headed son, meet me up on deck. It really *is* a nice night.” The steward glanced across the room. “Oh, and bring that guitar of yours. Word is you wouldn’t want to be stranded without it...” The steward reached down, picked up the puppy, and in another blink, they were gone, leaving Scratch alone with his thoughts and fears.

Okay. Hmmm. That was weird.

Very weird.

Scratch looked around the empty stateroom and tried to make sense of the weirdest five minutes of his life. *Had that really happened? God? In his stateroom? Really?* He stared at the space where the steward had been. Empty. Then he reached into it. Air. He chuckled to himself.

Hah! Nah! No way. It was all just a dream. He just needed to wake-up.

The thought had scarcely registered when he felt the skin on his other forearm pinch together. “Ooow, geez-a-wheeze,” he called out. He looked down to see a new welt, this one smaller than the first, and less painful. He rubbed it. It didn’t make sense. What kind of dream had real pain?

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he pondered his next move. The safe thing to do was stay put, lie back down, close his eyes, and pretend like it never happened. Because it didn't happen. *It was just a dream.*

This time the pinch was on his cheek. "Holy fuck," he yelled out.

The expletive caused the pinch to tighten and that same excruciating electric pain shot through his body again. Nervously, Scratch felt for his cheek and rushed to the mirror to see another bright red mass pulsing. *WTF?*

Only one thing was certain: staying put no longer felt like the safe thing.

He paced the floor, hoping for some divine intervention, not believing he'd received that already. Perhaps the deck *would* be safer, he finally concluded... before he was completely covered in welts. And truth be told, he *was* curious, wondering what might happen if he did go up on deck. Except for the pinching, there was something about the steward he really liked-- he was cool... very cool. And he seemed so smart and confident, like no one Scratch had ever met.

Ah, what the hell-- go. What's the worst thing that can happen?

And so, Scratch grabbed his guitar and staggered out of the stateroom.

TEN

When he emerged from the darkened stairwell, Scratch's eyes were immediately drawn to the heavens-- the moon seemed brighter now and the star population appeared to have doubled. He took a deep breath-- even the air tasted sweeter and smelled fresher. In fact, if it weren't for the welts, the vertigo, and his fears, the night might have been perfect.

With a mix of curiosity and anxiety, Scratch scanned the deck for the strange steward. He saw him standing at the bow, gazing out at the moonlit ocean. Instead of the steward's outfit, however, he now wore what appeared to be a glowing white cruise Captain's uniform, minus the hat. That made some sense to Scratch-- he wouldn't have covered that beautiful hair, either.

Scratch stumbled toward him, seemingly drawn to the light like a clueless bug.

From the bridge, Dill and the Captain sat up when they saw Scratch's shadow on deck. They were surprised to see him out of bed and a sense of panic hit Dill, almost like a battery thrown by a rioting crowd. Like any babysitter, he preferred his charge in bed and asleep.

Dill leaned out the bridge window and called down, "You okay, Scratch?"

Scratch flashed the 'okay' sign as he reached God at the bow.

"Vertigo's a real bitch, isn't it, son?" God said nonchalantly, as if talking about karma. "Here's a little hint, smart guy: pounding your head with 140 decibels of that noise you call music doesn't help... nor do the drugs and alcohol. For good reason, that wasn't in my design."

Then God reached out and tenderly laid his hands on Scratch's ears, and for the first time in more than a year Scratch's head cleared and the world stopped spinning so violently.

"It stopped," Scratch shouted out excitedly. "It stopped! Oh my God! It's a miracle!"

Scratch's shout could be heard all the way to the bridge. "What'd he shout?" Dill asked the Captain.

"I don't know... something about a miracle."

“The only miracle is that he hasn’t killed himself... yet,” Dill responded.

Back down on deck, God was quick to correct, “That’s no miracle, you *dumb shit*.” There was no malice in his tone. In fact, he said ‘dumb shit’ with warm playful endearment, not cold harsh judgement.

Dumb shit.

The words hung in the air and relief filled Scratch’s face. No matter the tone, the real God wouldn’t call one of his children a ‘dumb shit’.

Hah! It was a dream!

Once again, the thought had scarcely registered when Scratch felt the skin on his good cheek pinch together. “Fuck me,” he yelled out without thinking. Nervously, he felt for another welt.

God watched in amusement, barely able to keep from bursting out. “Ah, sweet symmetry,” God finally sang out, “how I love thee-- the key to outward beauty, according to the experts at Vogue Magazine. See? Now you match. What’s that make... four?”

Scratch nodded, but the thoughts that filled his mind created a confused look on his face-- *why do you keep pinching me?*

God supplied the answer. “You deserved the first one. The other three were just my little way of helping you put this ‘dream-thing’ to bed. Behavioral conditioning-- it’s a rather simple concept.”

Scratch stared at him blankly.

“Surely you’ve heard of Pavlov’s dog?”

An even blanker look. *Huh?*

“Rewarding good and punishing bad?”

Scratch shrugged.

“I’ll go slow, son, so listen up. Every time you think this little encounter of ours is just a dream, I’m going to give you a little pinch... a friendly little wake-up. Eventually, you’ll stop thinking ‘it’s just a dream’. The only question is how many pinches it takes.”

A novel thought streamed through Scratch’s mind: pain could have a purpose.

God smiled and nodded approvingly at Scratch, reinforcing that novel thought. He came close to reaching out and patting Scratch on the head-- *good little doggie*.

“So, where were we?” God said, refocusing the conversation. “Oh, I remember now: the Lord God Almighty called thee-- *the great and mighty Rock God*-- a dumb shit. If memory serves me correctly, which it has for all eternity, you had no problem calling me a dumb shit back in your stateroom 12.23 minutes ago. So, I’ll assume you don’t have a problem with me calling you one. That’s not going to be a problem, is it?”

Scratch hesitated. *Twelve point two three minutes ago...* this dude was both nuts and scary. And yet, somehow, somehow, Scratch knew he liked him. It was all too weird. “Um... no.”

“No?” God repeated back with glaring dissatisfaction. “No what?”

The glare sent a chill through Scratch. “Um, uh, no sir?” Scratch replied fearfully. He was getting more scared by the minute. And he didn’t want another welt, either. Plus, the God inside the stateroom had seemed nicer, and Scratch hoped there wasn’t a ‘Good God, Bad God’ thing going on. He also hoped ‘sir’ was the right response.

It wasn’t, and God quickly corrected him. “Call me ‘God.’ Six days a week I work.” He winked and smiled softly, as if Good God were back. Real God eyed the Rock God with a new seriousness. “So Jeremiah Willy Fisher, now that we’ve got the introductions out of the way, I want you to tell me why you’ve been ignoring me for the past 17 years and publicly dishonoring me for the past seven?”

“You know my full name,” Scratch replied in wonderment, as if the talking dolphin, papal outfitting, barking puppy from rock, or long-distance welt delivery system were less amazing.

“Un-huh. And I also know the number of hairs on your head.” God reached out and pulled a strand of Scratch’s hair. “You’re down to 72,483 now and falling fast.” He ran his thumb and finger across the strand as if conducting a spectral analysis of it. “And you may want to cut back on shellfish... your hair count may be down, but your cholesterol’s up.” God chuckled. “I tell you what, someday I’ll get you a bottle of my personal shampoo and conditioner. That’ll help with the thinning.”

His mind swirling, Scratch wasn’t sure how to respond. But he knew what *not* to think. *This is real*, he heard himself say... *this is not a dream... this is not a dream*. Even though he wasn’t sure he believed that, he was running out of room for welts.

“So, son, do you want to tell me why you’ve been dishonoring me?”

“Um, not really, uh...” Scratch still couldn’t convince himself to say the name.

God supplied the missing word. “God.” He stared deeply into Scratch’s eyes as if communicating directly with Scratch’s soul. “Say it.” *Three times.*

“God,” Scratch repeated aloud. He hesitated, then felt the irresistible need to say it two more times. “Uh, God... God.”

“Good. See, it’s not that hard. Like most things, it just takes the right attitude and a little practice. Do something three times and it usually starts to take hold. Alright then, do you want to tell me now?”

“Not really... um, God.”

“Wise of you to tell me the truth... since *I am the truth*. Look, I know the answer already, but humor me. I really do like humor.”

“I dunno... I guess I stopped believing in you... like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, I guess.”

“Aaaaand... so much for wisdom... and humor.” God shook his head in pained disappointment. “Thirty years on the earth and you have less faith than you did when you were just a boy of seven. You’re going the wrong way, son.” God eyed him with a new seriousness. “Pay close attention, Jeremiah, we’re going to have a few teaching moments. Lesson number 1: I am... and always will be-- so never group the Lord God Almighty with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.”

“I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry. I just--”

“Sorry’s always a good place to start... especially for *you*. You might want to practice saying that one, too.” God stared into Scratch’s eyes and burned another command onto his soul. *Say it... three times.*

It took a while, but Scratch finally caught on. “I’m sorry,” he said solemnly. Then, once again, he felt the irresistible need to say it two more times. “I’m sorry... really, I’m sorry. Each apology was more heartfelt than the one before. Indeed, by that final apology, tears even welled in his eyes. Scratch hadn’t expected that. *He never cried.*

From the bridge, Dill watched Scratch intently. He seemed to be holding an imaginary conversation. “What’s he doing?” he asked the Captain, who was also watching the strange behavior below.

“I don’t know. It kind of looks like he’s talking to someone.”

Back on deck, God spoke out, “Strum that guitar, son.” He motioned up to the bridge. “Dill and the Captain up there think you might really be crazy.”

Scratch strummed the guitar.

“Sometimes, in life, a man just needs the right prop, eh, Jeremiah?” God couldn’t contain his chuckle and couldn’t wait to share that one with Saint Peter. “Alright then, let’s get to it. You’re wondering why I’m here, right?”

Scratch nodded slowly, fearful of what was coming. It had to be bad news.

Of course, God surprised him. “I bring good news, my son,” God announced enthusiastically. His words were punctuated by a great chorus of angelic voices resounding in the star-filled night.

Scratch’s eyes were immediately drawn to the heavens, as if searching for the Vienna choir boys amidst the stars, when God delivered the good news, “I have chosen *you*.”

What? The words caused Scratch to quickly refocus his eyes on the swashbuckling figure in the cruise Captain’s suit before him. *What did you just say?* “Chosen me? For what?”

“You, Jeremiah Willy *Fisher*, are going to be... wait... wait... wait for it”-- the chorus of angels echoed out gloriously again-- “a *fisher* of men.”

As he eyed God, Scratch’s eyes were as wide as the fear that engulfed him. *What the hell was this crazy God-dude talking about? He-- a Goth rock star-- a fisher of men? WTF?*

God chuckled at Scratch’s reaction. “You know, son, if you don’t lighten up, this trip could really get unbearable.”

Trip? What trip? The one on this yacht? Or some other trip? And unbearable? What was unbearable to God? The Ritz? Or the fires of hell? “What trip?”

“The trip you and I are going to take.”

Oh shit. Except for the welts, the little encounter had been kind of fun and interesting up to now. Plus, the vertigo was gone. But a trip with the God he’d been trashing for the better part of seven years... that couldn’t be good, could it? “What if, I, uh, don’t want to go?” Scratch stammered.

“Well son, I suppose that would make you either the most *forgetful* man on earth... or the *dumbest*. Tough choice there... you have a preference?”

Hmmm. That was a tough one. It would either be burnt toast and hard boiled eggs for breakfast every day, or being the guy everyone pointed at and whispered about...

And then, before Scratch could answer, God transformed *into Scratch* right before Scratch's very eyes. He was lying on the floor of the nose-diving plane, and in the air around them the co-pilot's frantic voice could be heard, "900 feet! 800 feet! 600 feet!" Scratch watched himself whisper that desperate final plea, "Dear God, please save me. Please. I'll do anything. I swear. I'll praise you all the days of my life."

The words "all the days of my life" hung in the air as God transformed back to God. He glared at Scratch. "You didn't exactly praise me after I saved you, did you? When were you planning to start?"

Scratch shook his head, afraid to vocalize the answer.

"Lesson number 2, Jeremiah: when you make a promise to God, keep it. Is that clear?" Authority oozed from the Almighty.

Scratch nodded. *Holy shit. This was really happening.* He grew even more scared and desperate. *Was there a way out?*

God continued, "And that leads right into lesson number 3: when God chooses you, the only acceptable response is: 'I trust you, God'. Understand?"

Scratch nodded again. He was beginning to feel like a real-life bobble head. Yet at the same time, he was discovering that nodding seemed to be the best response to just about everything God asked of him. *Hmmm. Interesting.*

God continued, "I tell you what, son, let's try it again... from the top. Okay?"

Another nervous nod from Scratch.

"I bring good news, my son" -- the chorus of angels resounded again and Scratch couldn't help but look to the heavens again-- "I have chosen you."

"I trust you, God," Scratch parroted back, flat and without conviction.

God was unimpressed. "Really? That's all the emotion and conviction you have for your Creator? Ooooy vey, son. Okay, I want you to look right here"-- God pointed at his crystal cool blue eyes that held all the answers-- "into the eyes that conceived and created the universe and mankind and even the human eye. Now say it again, *like you really mean it.*"

God paused to set up the moment.

"And, take three," God directed, eying Scratch again. "I bring good news, my son"-- the chorus of angels resounded again but Scratch remained focused on God-- "I have chosen you."

“I trust you, God,” Scratch responded with as much conviction as he could muster... but his fear was unmistakable. In spite of that fear, Scratch felt a stirring inside, as if he’d taken the first step to unshackle a million denials and lies of the past 17 years. And while that glimmer of freedom felt good, it was still overwhelmed by fear.

God clapped approvingly. “Bravo, Jeremiah. Why look, I can even see your next progress report.” God held out his hands and a beautiful gold-leafed paper appeared in them. He began to read aloud. “With help *from God Almighty Himself*, Jeremiah Willy Fisher is able to perform the most rudimentary task with *minimal satisfaction*.” God roared with laughter.

Across from Him, Scratch stared back with a blank, helpless look.

“Come on, son... now *that’s* funny. Laugh with me.”

Scratch let out a fearful, nervous chuckle. In spite of his very real fears, deep down, he liked this God standing before him. He seemed so cool... so knowing... and so fair. The real problem was this: Scratch was sure this God knew what the Rock God fairly deserved... and it couldn’t be cool. *Had God come to punish him? Is that what the trip would be? If so, what would that punishment be?*

“Give that guitar a few more strums,” God ordered.

Scratch did as he was told.

“All joking aside, Jeremiah, I want you to trust me. Understand?” He said it like a caring, patient teacher.

Scratch nodded sincerely.

“*Trust... Me*. Two little words-- yes-- but they can make all the difference in a man’s life...”

“I’m sorry, God. Really, I am. I’m just so confused... *and scared*.”

“You’ve been confused for 17 years now... and scared of all the wrong things. A *healthy* dose of fear will be good for you. *You’ll see*.”

The words sounded foreboding. “What’s that mean?” Scratch asked nervously.

“It means... *you... will... see*.” God punctuated each word with the certainty of the all-knowing Creator. “As in the future. Look, I’m not going to spoil it for you. I will give you everything you need... when you need it. And while you won’t always understand, that’s not entirely your fault.” God paused and a weird little smile came across his lips. “A sand crab can’t understand you, can it?”

Scratch shook his head. He had no idea how much sense that would someday make.

“You need to trust me,” God commanded.

Scratch nodded and repeated the words in his head three times: trust God... trust God... trust God.

Seemingly satisfied now, God looked out at the ocean as if ready to move on to something new. “Oh, how I love the solitude and peacefulness of my oceans, Jeremiah,” He mused. “Makes me glad I intervened in evolution when I did. Otherwise, man would live in the oceans with gills, like in ‘Waterworld.’ You like that Kevin Costner fella, right?”

Scratch didn’t know where this was going, but chose the path of safety and least resistance by nodding. “Sure. I guess so. Should I?”

“I gave man free will, Jeremiah. That’s why there’s so much evil and hatred in the world... and so much goodness and love, too. Last time I checked, you’re free to love or hate whomever you want. Why you can even badmouth the Creator with lies and lyrics that strain to rhyme.” He winked as Jeremiah cringed.

“Oh, and another FYI,” God said, “there are actually two English words that rhyme with orange-- Bloreng, a mountain in Wales, and sporange, a sac where spores are made. ‘Do me’ is not anywhere on the list. Got it?”

Scratch nodded. This God-dude was truly amazing... scary as all hell, but amazing, too.

“Anyway, of all men, you seem to have no problem using your free will.”

Scratch replied, “I feel like I should say I’m sorry.”

“Then say it, son. Why do you think I had you practice? Feelings are the unspoken truths of the heart and soul. And I gave you deep feelings... very deep feelings... for reasons that you will come to understand. You just need to stop ignoring them.”

“I’m sorry, God,” Scratch said truthfully. Tears welled in his eyes and he was shaking in fear.

“I forgive you, my son.”

Scratch’s face went blank, not reacting in any way, shape, or form to the God with the ultimate power to forgive or condemn.

God shook his head in frustration. “Work with me here, son-- did you not hear? I unfroze you before, but now you’re forgiven... *freed*. That’s all you really *need*.” God winked and paused. “What? God can’t bust a rhyme, too?”

God’s wide smile was Scratch’s proof that the Almighty was enjoying the time, and Scratch remembered his words to Dill in the Miami Ritz just 24 hours earlier: ‘Newsflash, Dill-- there is no God. But if there was, I bet He’d love to hang out with the Scratch-man.’

There was a God! Oh shit...

...but at least he seemed to be enjoying his time with Scratch.

Deep down, however, Scratch was sure he was on dangerous grounds. There was no way the night could end well.

“Come on, Jeremiah, let me see you smile,” God said.

Scratch feigned a smile that would have scared any child. “I’m sorry. I’m just really freaking out.”

God chuckled. “And the night is still so young.”

ELEVEN

“He’s still talking to himself. Maybe you should go down there,” the Captain suggested to Dill as they continued to observe Scratch’s strange behavior on the deck below.

“Yeah. Wish me luck.”

“Dill’s coming to see you,” God informed Scratch, “so listen closely. He can’t see or hear me, so you may want to keep me on the down-low... if you know what I mean. After that whole talking dolphin thing, he might think you really are crazy-- prop or no prop. But, remember, *Free Willy*, it’s *your* choice. You just nod if you want my help.”

Scratch saw Dill approaching and gave a quick nod to God.

“You alright, Scratch?” Dill called out as he neared. He saw the welts on Scratch’s cheeks. “Oh man, what happened to your face?”

Scratch hesitated and glanced at God for direction.

God was ready. God was *always* ready. “Tell him you think you got some bad pot. Probably an allergic reaction.”

Scratch repeated the explanation.

“Damn, man. I’ll see if Javier has some cream or something.” Dill sensed something was not right. “You sure you’re alright. It looked like you were talking to someone.”

God spoke to Scratch. “Tell him you’re just thinking out loud... working on a new song. He’ll like that. Dill loves money as much as you do. He’s still mad about the revenue lost tonight.”

“Just thinking out loud, working on a new song,” Scratch repeated aloud to Dill.

“Okay.” But Dill sensed all was not right. “You sure? No talking dolphins or anything?”

“Laugh and tell him you were just messing with him,” God instructed.

Scratch did as God instructed.

“Now tell him you want to give him this yacht... as an overdue bonus.”

Scratch eyed God, who was smiling mischievously. Scratch hesitated. *Was God just messing with him now? He had said He liked humor...*

God cleared it up. “Your choice, son. Word is ‘I’m just a tired ol’ fool that can’t be found’.” God rapped it like Scratch in concert... but better. “You just keep nodding if you want my help. If you do, I’ll help you...”

Scratch nodded softly, looked into Dill’s eyes, and the words flowed effortlessly, “You know, Dill, I’ve never really thanked you for everything you’ve done for me.” Scratch was visibly choking up, his emotions worthy of an Academy award. Tears welled in his eyes and his voice crackled. “I hope you know I love you like a father. Really, I do. I want you to have this yacht... you deserve it. Think of it as an overdue bonus.”

Dill was floored. “No shit, Scratch?” He stared into Scratch’s eyes as if searching for an answer to the strange behavior. Was it really Scratch behind those eyes? “You’re not messing with me again, are you?”

“Hug him,” God instructed.

Scratch reached out and mechanically hugged Dill.

“You sure you’re okay?” Dill persisted, backing away slightly.

God spoke, “Tell him you’ve never been better.”

“Never been better,” Scratch repeated.

“Now tell him to get some paper and a pen so you can put this little gift of yours in writing. Lawyers love things in writing.”

“Go get some paper and a pen so I can put it in writing,” Scratch repeated.

“Wow! Okay. Thanks! I, uh, I love you, too.” Dill turned and sprinted back to the bridge.

Scratch looked at God with confusion.

“It’ll make sense when you see where we’re going,” God said with a knowing smile. “So, Jeremiah, you want to see a *real* miracle?”

Scratch did ‘the nod thing.’ “I do. I trust you, God.” It was as heartfelt as fear would allow.

“Excellent, son. That, there, was all you. I tell you, a little quality time with me and that fear will be gone completely and you’ll really be praising my name and singing of my glory... *you’ll see.*” He punctuated those last two words with another wink and wry grin. Then God whistled into the air and out of the darkened water a mother orca and her calf suddenly appeared and began swimming effortlessly in the moonlight alongside the yacht.

God reached down and stroked them gently. “Here you go, Jeremiah-- a mother’s love -- truly one of life’s greatest miracles. Go ahead, pet them. Don’t be scared.”

Without thinking, Scratch reached down and stroked the baby orca’s smooth skin near the blowhole. As he did, he let out an excited laugh. “I’m not scared!”

From the bridge, the Captain watched Scratch leaning over the railing as Dill rushed in. “You got any paper and a pen?” Dill asked excitedly.

The Captain pointed to a set of drawers. “Yeah. Top drawer. Why?”

“Scratch is giving me this yacht... as a bonus.”

“No shit?”

“I know-- weird, huh? I’ve never seen him like this. He just told me he loves me like a father.”

Back on deck, God said, “So Jeremiah, you think you *really* trust me?”

Caught up in the excitement, and with fading fears, Scratch nodded quickly and excitedly... *hell yeah!* Anyone awesome enough to cure vertigo, turn a rock into a barking puppy, fill the air with angelic voices, and make orcas appear in the warm southern Atlantic waters with a whistle was someone Scratch should, and could, and would trust. “I do, God. I *really* do.” There was new energy and exhilaration in Scratch’s voice. *He was sure he would follow this awesome God-dude through hell if need be...*

As Scratch’s words trailed off, a strange new noise filled the air and found its way into Scratch’s ears. It began with a slow rolling melody, like an ocean wave, a few plucks of a piano, and a low, hauntingly beautiful voice. A song filled the night air, flowing gently:

You call me out upon the waters,
The great unknown,
Where feet may fail.
And there I find you in the
Mystery,
In oceans deep,
My faith will stand.

God spoke, "You hear something, Jeremiah?"

Jeremiah nodded.

God smiled. "Pay attention to the words you're hearing."

The song continued,

And I will call upon your name.
And keep my eyes above the waves.
When oceans rise,
My soul will rest in your embrace.
For I am yours and you are mine.

"Well, as the saying goes," God said, "talk is cheap, actions speak. What say we test what little faith you have left..." And in the blink of an eye, God hopped over the yacht's railing and landed atop the mother orca's back. Looking up at the yacht, he extended his hand toward Scratch. "Come with me, Jeremiah."

Scratch hesitated as he looked down at the swirling dark ocean and the radiant God sitting atop the killer whale. The haunting song continued,

Spirit lead me where my trust
is without borders,
Let me walk upon the waters,
Wherever you would call me.
Take me deeper than my feet could
ever wander...

"Fear not, Jeremiah... for I am the Lord your God and I am with you," God pronounced assuredly.

Faith, it appeared, had been put to the test.

To an outsider, it would have seemed illogical-- crazy, even-- for the planet's biggest rock star to throw himself off his perfectly good 10 million dollar yacht in the middle of the south Atlantic. But that's exactly what was about to happen.

Unable to hold himself back, Scratch slung his guitar over his shoulder, focused his eyes directly on God, reached out, and threw himself over the railing. "Hell yeah!" he yelled out as he flew through the air toward God and the orca. Never before had he felt so free, so happy, or so peaceful.

As Scratch was flying through the air, Dill was flying out of the bridge, pen and paper in hand, amazed at his good fortune. In minutes this 10 million dollar baby would be his. In fact, he was already scheming how he'd get around paying taxes on the gift.

Hearing Scratch's yell stopped Dill in his tracks, and he glanced down just in time to see Scratch's blurring figure sailing over the railing toward the dark ocean. He froze in horror, then yelled hysterically, "Holy shit, Scratch just jumped overboard!" He ran onto the flying bridge and looked for Scratch in the water below.

Having heard Dill, the Captain pulled a rope that hung over the helm and a shrill alarm sounded from the yacht speakers. "Man overboard, starboard side," he announced as he whipped the wheel to the right.

"Scratch! Scratch!" Dill screamed out in panic. His generous gift giver had just jumped into the middle of the Atlantic... without signing the paper he held in his hands!

"Do you see him?" the Captain yelled out.

"No... nothing," Dill called back. He could only see his yacht disappearing under the dark waves.

"Scratch! Scratch!" Dill yelled frantically, his voice disappearing into the quiet night air.

TWELVE

God and Jeremiah rode the mother orca beneath the surface, with God's light illuminating the way and attracting huge schools of colorful fish and every sea creature imaginable. Drawn to their Creator, it was the most beautiful, most amazing dive Scratch had ever made. After a while, the mother orca and her calf surfaced, and in the distance Scratch saw the yacht's floodlights crisscrossing the ocean surface, searching for the suicidal Rock God. That's when reality hit Scratch... and fear resurfaced.

Holy crap! He was riding atop an orca... in the middle of the Atlantic... with his arms wrapped around God's really old waist! What the hell had he just done?

God added to that renewed fear when He turned around, smiled, and said, "So... *any last words*, oh Great Rock God?"

Last words? "What, what do you mean?" Scratched stammered. *Had he been tricked?* He was remembering his words from the radio station-- about drowning being peaceful. He was also remembering the DJ's response: 'Not if a killer whale gets you first.'

Scratch peeked his head to the side and looked into the eye of the killer whale below him. The mother orca seemed to be eying him back... she seemed to be grinning... and she looked hungry.

God turned and sat facing Scratch directly. "Ummm, let's see... Scratch Hatchet just jumped off his yacht... in the middle of the Atlantic... without a life preserver." He winked and paused to let that reality soak in. "You know, if I didn't know better, son, I'd think that head of yours really *was* filled with rocks. *Rock God... indeed.*" God laughed so loudly that Scratch was sure the entire earth shook. But then again, it could have just been nerves.

"I'm sorry, God," Scratch stammered. "Really. I mean, look at me, I'm riding on top of a killer whale in the middle of the ocean... talking to God."

"It can always be worse, Jeremiah," God mused, "it can always be worse. Just think, you could be *inside* this whale, bathed in slimy, stinky gastrointestinal juices, *cursing* me... like Jonah. He tried to run away from me, too."

Scratch was confused. "Wait. Am I dead?"

"You think you'd be with me if you were dead?"

“Um, I don’t know. Probably not.”

“Probably?” God repeated back with raised eyebrows. He shook his head. “Oh, my son... my long lost prodigal son.” God buried his face in his hands, then looked back into Jeremiah’s eyes. “If you were dead right now, son, you’d be in the longest, most terrifying line ever-- longer than any DMV line, more terrifying than a man could ever imagine... a line without hope.” God paused conspicuously before adding, “I’ll take you there sometime...”

As God’s voice trailed off, Scratch felt a deep chill. At that moment he was thinking he should have stayed in his stateroom.

God continued, “I tell you what, I’ll say a few last words and we’ll be on our way.”

God bowed his head, closed his eyes, and Scratch followed his lead. And under that beautiful star-filled night, God solemnly delivered Scratch’s eulogy, “Good bye, Scratch Hatchet. You were everything man was created to not be: selfish, prideful, hateful, and irreverent. It’s no wonder you were so lost and lonely and scared.”

God opened his eyes and looked over at Jeremiah, who was peeking out, looking at God. “Anything I miss?”

“No, God,” Jeremiah answered, clearly ashamed of who Scratch was and how God had judged him. Now he felt utter sadness atop all that fear.

“Cheer up, son. Now that Scratch is gone, you’re *free*... free to be who I made you to be.” God smiled warmly at Jeremiah. “Free at last, free at last,” God sang out ala Martin Luther King, “Thank *me*, Jeremiah, you’re free at last.”

God’s expectant stare confused Jeremiah.

“Go ahead, son. I’m serious... *thank me*.”

“Thank you, God.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll let you in on a little secret-- I always *liked you*, Jeremiah. You were everything Scratch wasn’t. Plus, my Jeremiah always knew when to say thank you.”

“Thank you, God,” Jeremiah replied on cue.

God’s eyes shifted notably to the gaudy ‘Rock God’ necklace around Jeremiah’s neck. “Wait one cotton-pickin’ second,” God called out, “what’s wrong with this picture?”

Jeremiah was quickly confused again and wondered whether his punishment was coming. As God reached out toward him, Jeremiah cowered.

God grabbed the necklace and held it up before Jeremiah's eyes. "My Jeremiah would never wear something this prideful, would he?"

"No, God."

Like a skilled thief, God removed the necklace and rubbed his thumb over the largest jewel in the center. "Why I bet you could support an entire village with this little trinket. What do you think we should do with this, Jeremiah?"

"Uh, um, I, uh, give it to charity?"

"Eventually. For now, what say you deep six it... give it a nice burial at sea... send it into the abyss with Scratch."

God handed the necklace back to Jeremiah, who hesitated.

"Your choice, son. You can either drop it slowly, like the old lady in Titanic did with the Heart of the Ocean, or you can fling it as far as you can."

First the 10 million dollar yacht, now the 1.5 million dollar necklace... it was getting to be an expensive night for the Rock God. Oh, and God had just delivered a scathing eulogy... and there was that long line without hope waiting for him, too...

Jeremiah took a deep breath, reached back, and flung the necklace as far as he could. As it flipped and twisted in the air, God smiled. Then it splashed into the ocean. "I was hoping you'd throw it. You needed to get as far away from that life as possible. There now, feel better?"

"I guess. But how is that going to help anybody?"

"You let ol' God worry about that, son. Okay?"

Jeremiah nodded. 'Trust God', he reminded himself nervously.

"If nothing else," God added, "you lightened your load a bit."

Jeremiah held up his guitar. "Should I throw this away, too?"

God shook his head. "Oh no, son. No, no, no. I gave you the gift of music for a reason. You just need to start using it for the *right* reason..."

God reached into the ocean. When his hand emerged he was holding a book-- the bible Scratch had thrown off the yacht. He extended it to Jeremiah. "I think you may have dropped this."

Amazed, Jeremiah nodded and took the book. It was dry.

"I want you to read that sometime. I like to think of it as a treasure map... for mankind."

And God's eyes sparkled as he steered the mother orca across the moonlit ocean, his scared son holding on tightly to his really old waist.

THIRTEEN

God turned around on the orca and eyed Jeremiah directly. In his hand was a microphone. “Welcome aboard, Jeremiah,” he announced with enthusiasm. “Tonight, I’ll be *airing* one of my all-time favorite movies for your entertainment and education. Fair warning, though, in this movie, the girl keeps her clothes *on*.”

God’s disapproving stare made Jeremiah uncomfortable, and he looked down, once again ashamed. When Jeremiah looked back up, he saw God reaching out and wiping away a swath of stars from the sky, creating a huge black screen. As the air around them dimmed, Jeremiah marveled at God’s power.

God laughed out. “Now, that’s a big screen, eh? Too bad you don’t like sashimi or I’d whip up a nice plate for you. Oh well, I guess you’ll just have to settle for a batch of my special choco-popcorn.” Out of nowhere, a wooden bowl appeared in God’s hands and he offered it to Jeremiah. “*I use a special Himalayan sea salt and sprinkle in bits of Belgian chocolate... gives it that real good sweet and salty taste, ya know?*” Weirdly, God spoke these words with the drawl of a southern black gentleman.

“Thank you, God.”

“Someday you’ll love sashimi, Jeremiah. You’ll lose weight, your cholesterol will drop, and that vertigo will be gone for good. Why you’ll even thank me for it. Trust me.”

Wait? The vertigo wasn’t gone for good?

“I do trust you, God. I really do.” Jeremiah wasn’t sure that was exactly right, but at the moment he didn’t have any other good options.

God and Jeremiah turned on the orca and rode sidesaddle as the sky above them lit up and the movie began. God grabbed Jeremiah’s guitar and gave it a few strums. “Can’t have a good movie without a good opening song, right?”

And then, in a deep baritone voice that seemed to fill all of heaven and earth, God sang out:

Bless the Lord oh my soul,
Oh my soul.
Worship His Holy name.
Sing like never before,
Oh my soul.

I'll worship Your Holy name.

He sang with such rich passion, drippy emotion, and unfettered truth that the hairs on Jeremiah's arms and neck stood up, as if in reverence, and Jeremiah felt himself choking up.

On the big screen in the sky, Jeremiah saw a woman in her late 30's holding a newborn against her bosom as her husband looked on. The woman looked up to heaven and whispered, "Thank you for this beautiful gift, dear God." She returned her loving gaze to her baby. "Oh, my sweet baby Jeremiah, you will always be loved... always and forever."

Awestruck, 30 year-old Jeremiah watched his first breaths as God narrated:

"The year was 1986, and after ten years of hope and prayer, Claire and Chris Fisher of Tillman's Corner, Alabama, receive my greatest gift-- the gift of life. Now, take note, during that ten year wait they didn't complain or lose faith. Instead, they channeled their energy into building a church to glorify me and serve others. You see, Jeremiah, I work on my schedule, not man's, and theirs was the perfect and most beautiful response."

God sang again:

The sun comes up
It's a new day dawning.
It's time to sing
Your song again.
Whatever may pass,
And whatever lies before me,
Let me be singing
When the evening comes.

On the big screen, the sun was rising, and in a darkened nursery, Claire rocked baby Jeremiah and sang, "How much is that doggy in the window, the one with the waggly tail." It was the scene that had been projected onto the screen at the concert in Miami. Only now, the singing soothed Jeremiah, just as it had when he was that little baby.

Although Jeremiah didn't know where the movie was going, he decided to just watch... and trust God. Clearly, when one is sitting with God atop an orca in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean there was no better plan.

A montage of rapid fire images appeared in the sky. First, came 2-year old Jeremiah, sitting in his high chair, holding his parent's hands at a family dinner. His pregnant mom prayed out, "Dear Lord, We thank you for all the gifts you have given us. We trust in you now and forevermore."

Next, 9-year old Jeremiah and his 7-year old brother Josh were painting handrails of the steps leading to a small wooden church. Their mom sat near them, behind an easel, painting the scene of her two boys. “You’all are doing wonderful, boys,” she called out happily. “I think God would be so proud.”

She held up her painting for them to see. The boys were blobby figures with stick-like fingers holding blobby paint brushes. “I just wish I could paint half as well as you boys do,” she added.

In the next scene, 13-year old Jeremiah and 11-year old Josh were sitting next to the family Christmas tree, beaming with their new guitars. Their mom spoke out, “Maybe someday you two can play a song together at church.”

Jeremiah remembers her words that Christmas morning like they were yesterday. Sadly, he and his brother would never have that chance.

God continued his narration, “Your mother’s love for you was infinite and endless, Jeremiah. Every minute of every day she was there for you, with smiles to encourage, hands to help, arms to hug, prayers to guide, and a magnificent heart to hold you. You were given the greatest gift a child could have-- not that guitar there, but the gift of a mother’s unconditional and everlasting love.”

Jeremiah was lost in memories. Indeed, his mom had always been a great mom. And, for 13 years, he’d been a great son. But then everything changed...

When Jeremiah stared back up at the sky, he saw his mom and dad, tired and worn, sitting in a sterile hospital room next to Josh, lying in bed weak and frail. His mom held Josh’s hand and whispered, “Dear God, I don’t understand what you want from me, but I trust you and pray that you will hold my baby in the palm of your hand.”

“Look at me, Jeremiah,” God commanded compassionately.

Jeremiah looked away from his dying brother in the heavens and locked onto God’s endless eyes. In them, he saw love and compassion and a kind-heartedness that seemed to say, ‘Trust me, Jeremiah, I *really* do know what I’m doing... even if you can’t always understand...’

“I *was* there,” God spoke out, “holding your brother in the palm of my hand. I am always there. Now look back to the heavens.”

When he looked back at the big screen in the sky, Jeremiah saw God standing on the other side of the hospital bed, holding Josh’s other hand. And now, when Jeremiah looked closer, past the blurs and distortions of his own tears and pain, he saw a peaceful look in Josh’s eyes... a look he’d never seen before. That image burned into Jeremiah’s eyes and seared his brain, and without warning, Jeremiah’s chest heaved, his face scrunched, and tears welled in his eyes.

God had been there... holding Josh in the palm of his hand.

Instinctively, Jeremiah looked back at God. He felt the urge to cry out for forgiveness, but before he could utter a word, God shook his head slowly and directed Jeremiah's eyes back to the screen.

Claire, now older, stood in the driveway with Chris by her side. She whispered a prayer, "Dear Lord, please help Jeremiah. He's slipping away from me... and you."

Then, from atop the orca in the middle of the Atlantic, Jeremiah watched as he drive away in a cloud of dust 13 long years earlier. His final angry shouts on that day reverberated in the cool night air, "Oh, and by the way, there is no God..."

As tears from Jeremiah's mom's eyes fell onto the dusty driveway ground, God continued the narration, "No matter the circumstances, your mother's love never failed or faltered, Jeremiah... even when you cursed me and ran from her. She cried a million tears for you Jeremiah... a million tears. I know. I counted every one of them." And then, under that cloudless, star-filled night, rain began to fall on them. It was a salty rain-- the tears of his mother-- and when Jeremiah tasted her pain he felt his heart break. What had he done to her? Why? She hadn't done anything wrong. Why had he punished her for his anger toward God?

If only he could turn back time...

But time, tide, and hunger wait for no man, and the big screen quickly lit up again. This time Claire was at a soup kitchen, dishing out food to a line of hungry, worn men. As she filled their plates, she smiled warmly and said, "God loves you." Some actually believed her and silently thanked the Lord. Next, she was gathering and sorting clothes from a 'clothing drive' dumpster and handing them out to a line of poor, grateful moms, some of whom would never forget her kindness and would follow her example. Finally, she was on her knees, praying solemnly to the God she would indeed worship forevermore. And many who witnessed marveled at her faith and became faithful.

"Yet, instead of feeling sorry for herself," God narrated, "she used her pain and sorrow to help others-- feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, praying to me, and converting others."

God eyed Jeremiah with a new seriousness that made Jeremiah wince. "Your mom understood what it meant to be worthy of her suffering-- to turn her pain to purpose," God said solemnly. "And in doing so, she glorified me."

With a snap of God's fingers, the rain stopped, the sky jolted to life, and the heavens illuminated with a wondrous display of dancing lights and colors, as if God were conducting a celebratory visual symphony in the sky. Jeremiah watched wide-eyed at a

God who could make the sky and stars obey. At the same time he feared what he justly deserved and what this great God would do to him.

Oh God, please have mercy on me...

With another snap, the sky darkened and the screen lit back up. Claire was lying on a hospital bed. Atop her bald head was a colorful bandana with the words, 'The Good Fight'. Worn and tired, it was clear she was ready to go home.

God strummed the guitar and sang out soulfully:

And on that day
When my strength is failing.
The end draws near
And my time has come.
Still my soul will
Sing Your praise unending.
Ten thousand years
And then forevermore.
Forevermore.

Bless the Lord oh my soul,
Oh my soul.
Worship His Holy name.
Sing like never before,
Oh my soul,
I'll worship Your Holy name.

Jeremiah's chest heaved and through misty eyes he watched his father holding Claire's hand. They whispered faithfully in solemn prayer together, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, Lord."

Chris looked into her eyes with the purest of love and whispered, "It's okay to let go, Claire. You've fought the good fight and finished the race-- you've kept the faith. Go home and be with Joshua and Jesus." He leaned in and kissed his wife on the cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she whispered back weakly. Then she folded her hands in prayer and whispered her last words on earth, "Thank you, dear Lord, for giving me this wonderful life. I pray that I have done your will and made you proud. Please watch over my baby Jeremiah and return him to your loving grace." And she closed her eyes for the last time on earth.

Staring through blurry eyes at his dying mother, Jeremiah blinked back tears. When he was finally able to refocus on the screen, he saw God with her, his fatherly hands entwined around hers, holding her tightly. Jeremiah watched as God leaned in,

kissed his mom's cheek, and whispered proudly, "Well done good and faithful servant." Jeremiah stared in silent sadness as a peaceful smile came over his mother's face.

It was finished.

She was home.

On the orca, God spoke in a solemn whisper to Jeremiah, "Even in that final minute, in her final breath, she never lost faith in me, nor stopped loving you." There was a deep pride in God's voice that Jeremiah had never heard, and he knew one thing-- somehow, someday, he wanted to hear God say those words to him in that same way.

God pointed up at Claire in the sky. "That's what life on earth is all about, Jeremiah-- no world fame, no big bank accounts, no private jet or groupies. Her life was the exact opposite of yours, wasn't it?"

Jeremiah was frozen in shame. *Oh God, please forgive me...*

"Indeed," God added, "*Hers* was a simple life... a powerful and beautiful simple life of faith and love."

FOURTEEN

Jeremiah's eyes were fixed on the image of his dead mother, with God at her side, on the screen in the heavens above. "You should have been with your mother, Jeremiah," God said simply.

Lost in the bowels of regret, Jeremiah couldn't respond, and his heart boomed as he tried to understand why he'd treated her so poorly. Filled with the deepest regret, this was, without a doubt, the saddest moment of his life. It was also a moment he would never remember.

God spoke again, "Let's see, according to my calculations it's been 17 years, 2 months, 3 days, and 4 hours since you've cried. I'd say you're way overdue, son." God took Jeremiah's hands into his own and Jeremiah felt a deep warmth envelope him. "Stop fighting, Jeremiah," God said permissively. "Let it out. One of my greatest gifts to man is emotion."

The sky filled with music again, this time a band of solemn angelic voices.

Make me broken
So I can be healed.
'Cause I'm so calloused
And now I can't feel.
I want to run to you,
With heart wide open.
Make me broken.

Make me broken... As the words swirled in his head, Jeremiah knew one thing for certain-- *he... was... broken.*

Unable to contain his emotions any longer, he cried out in utter desperation: "Oh God! Forgive me... please forgive me." His voice was that of a broken child and tears streamed down his cheeks onto the orca's back. He cried for a while, and with those racking sobs and tears, the Rock God was officially dead... for the time being, at least...

When the catharsis was over, Jeremiah stared desperately into God's eternal eyes: *Help me, Lord... feed me the words of truth and life...*

Of course God heard his inner plea. He spoke, "Man is born with a perfect soul, Jeremiah. But man lives imperfectly, and bit by bit that perfect soul breaks. Some never

face that truth and die having lived a lie... like your alter ego Scratch.” Through tears, Jeremiah stared at the Creator and concentrated, taking every word in. “Those who face that truth experience life’s saddest moment... *but also life’s greatest* moment. For underneath that sadness, something powerful stirs... something more powerful than all the pain and sorrow and regret.”

God leaned in now and was so close that Jeremiah could taste the breath of life, and as he inhaled, he felt a new sense of life and power and hope, as if he could do anything. If he were a rock he would have become a puppy and barked thankfully at the Creator. God whispered, “You feel it, Jeremiah. I know you do. Tell me what you feel.”

Jeremiah gulped deep breaths as he started into his Creator’s endless blue eyes. He was no longer worried about right or wrong answers, or trying to sound like someone he wasn’t, or someone filled with fear. Instead, filled with the breath of life, he said what he felt inside, what he knew to be true. “Hope?” he uttered.

God nodded proudly and offered a handkerchief to Jeremiah. “Life can be hard, Jeremiah, but it’s not as hard as people make it. But it does require honesty. And once you are honest, and realize you are *broken*, you unleash the power of *hope*... hope that you can become the son or daughter that I created you to be.”

Jeremiah dried his eyes with the handkerchief and continued to focus, knowing he needed to understand God’s words. “How do I become *unbroken*?” It was the right question.

“You do what your mom did, Jeremiah-- you surrender to me. Give away all that you have, *in my name, in the name of love*.” God paused and looked at Jeremiah with intense seriousness and love, and more energy flowed into him. It filled him, warming like a torch to his soul, and deep within, he felt his soul stir and thaw and begin to bloom all at once with endless possibilities. “All the unique gifts and talents I have given you-- give them freely and wholly to others. Keep nothing for yourself, Jeremiah, *for once you give everything away, I will fill you with everything that matters*.”

...give everything away and you will fill me with everything that matters...
Jeremiah repeated the words in his head. And while it sounded simple enough, he knew it was probably the hardest thing he could ever do.

Jeremiah reached out with the handkerchief to return it, but God smiled knowingly and shook his head. “Keep it, son. I have a feeling you’re going to need it again.”

Clearly the trip wasn’t going to get any easier, and a part of Jeremiah still feared the future. A larger part of him was hopeful.

“Let me break it down as simply as I can, Jeremiah,” God continued. “Love or hate... which *should* you choose?”

“Love.”

“Help or hurt?”

“Help.”

“Give or take?”

“Give.”

“God?” God asked with a wry grin, “Or the rest of the field?”

“God.”

“Life’s pretty easy when you’re riding on an orca in the middle of the Atlantic and God’s asking the questions point blank, eh? You have seen me, touched me, and heard a rock bark, Jeremiah; blessed are those who have not seen or touched or heard, yet choose to live by faith, for they will live for eternity, with me, in my kingdom.”

God leaned in again and whispered solemnly, “Listen closely, Jeremiah: you must live with the end in mind, when you stand in judgment. For that end will usher in a beginning with no end. And you do *not* want to be judged unfavorably. Nor do I want to judge you that way. “

God paused.

“Yes, bad things happen to good people *on earth*. But that doesn’t mean I’m not there and I don’t care. I love all my children... especially the broken ones. I am faithful even when they are not, and in their weakness I give them strength. You need to become broken, Jeremiah, so I can fill you with strength.”

The words haunted Jeremiah and instinctively he cried out in anguish, “I’m sorry, God. I’m so sorry. I’m just so broken.” He broke down again, this time to the point of uncontrollable wailing, his sadness filling the air. After a few minutes, Jeremiah had exhausted himself and the wailing had turned into sad little whimpers. Soon even they died off-- he was completely spent. God pulled Jeremiah close, holding him like a scared, lost lamb that had been found. He stroked his head and Jeremiah’s eyes fluttered and closed.

“I’m here, Jeremiah,” God whispered. “I’ve always been here. I’ve heard the cries of your lonely heart and hopeless soul. Though you were lonely, you were never alone. And though you felt hopeless, you were never without hope. I am never more than one step away. But you must take that last step.”

God sang out softly:

I'll make you empty,
So you can be filled.
'Til you are holding,
Onto My will.
And you're completed,
And I am with you,
I'll make you empty.

God gave Jeremiah a soft kiss on the forehead, and Jeremiah, his eyes still closed, smiled peacefully, just as his mom had on her deathbed.

Holding tightly to his broken son, God steered the mother orca and her calf toward a soft glowing light a million light years away... in the heavens.

FIFTEEN

Jeremiah was lying on a bed of velvety sand, his black leather pants and silver-studded vest gone, replaced now by a silken white gown. His face was shaved clean, his hair pulled neatly back into a pony tail. Gone, too, were his tattoos. With the guitar and bible lying by his feet, he stirred slowly, as if waking from months of hibernation or jet-lagged from a long, long journey.

“Huh? What? Where am I?” he said groggily.

When he opened his eyes, intense light flooded in, blinding him like a child born out of darkness into the light of a new world. Instinctively, he closed his eyes. In truth, the intense light had felt good-- like the grace and truth and love he'd seen from God's eyes-- and he reopened his eyes. Prepared now, the light entered him, filling him with a peaceful energy.

He stood up and looked around to get his bearings. Although no sun was visible, the air was bathed in a brilliance that soothed him, and the temperature caressed and hugged his skin. Ummmmm. It felt perfect. Wherever he was, it felt good, like home.

Water was everywhere and he quickly realized he was on an island, and a small one at that. With no trees or no vegetation, it was really no more than a sandbar, maybe a few acres in size, in the middle of all that peaceful blue water. Waves lapped in from all directions, as if the sandbar were the center of this new world.

He looked down at the gown. It wasn't like a hospital gown or anything he'd ever seen before, and certainly like nothing he'd ever felt. It was seamless and form fitting, yet loose; indeed, it seemed to have been made to fit him-- and him only-- perfectly. The material was curious, too-- a smooth lightweight silky fabric with a luster and shine that seemed to radiate light, as if it were an energy source.

He held his arms out and noted his tats were gone. That was weird. Although naked without them, he also felt free, as if no longer shackled to what they represented. When he looked closer for signs of their removal, his skin glistened smoothly. It were as if they'd never existed, and his hand glided effortlessly over his arm when he rubbed it.

He felt weird, not like himself, and he felt his face to determine if he was still the man he thought he was. His face felt smoother than he remembered and he wished for a mirror... to see who he was now.

He tried to make sense of it all. Had last night really happened? Had he really jumped off his yacht and rode atop a killer whale with God? It seemed too far-fetched, too overwhelming. And where was God now? It felt like the other side of a drunken one-night stand, but a good one.

He called out, “God? God?”

No answer came so he walked down to the water’s edge. He saw words carved into the sand: “Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in you.” Although waves washed over the letters, they did not wash them away. A sand crab scurried nearby.

He came up with an idea and pinched himself. No pain. Then he punched himself in the leg as hard as he could. Again, no pain. A quick hard punch to the face followed. It was just a light touch. He could definitely feel... just not pain. This would have been handy back in 4th grade when the other kids bullied him for being the buck-toothed preacher’s kid.

Jeremiah looked for the God-given welts on his arms. They, too, were gone, and there were no bruises. He had another idea. He hiked up the gown to look for the nasty scar from the knee operation when he was seven. The skin was as smooth as the silky gown covering him. *Weird*. His mind raced. *Who was he? What was he? Where was he?*

“I must be dead,” he mused aloud finally, somewhat glad to hear a voice, even if it was his own. His conclusion was reinforced when he remembered God’s words, ‘You think you’d be with me if you were dead?’ *That’s why God wasn’t around. Jeremiah had to be dead.*

He took a deep breath. With that, perhaps, decided, he took inventory-- he could still talk... and hear... and think. Considering the life he’d led, this death didn’t seem all that bad. Check that, death seemed even better than life-- no scars, no pain, no vertigo, and no aching joints from one too many speaker jump. In one sense, he never felt so alive.

Was this his purgatory? Or his hell-- alone for all eternity with just his thoughts?

“I’m dead! I’m dead!” he screamed out at the top of his lungs.

The words had scarcely stopped ringing out when he realized how wrong he was. He couldn’t be dead, he realized, as he remembered more of God’s words from the night before. He wasn’t in that long, scary, hopeless DMV line. Plus, God had chosen him... to be a fisher of men. He hadn’t done that yet.

He looked around again. God hadn’t put him on this sandbar to fish for men, had he?

He looked out at the water, wondering if there was anything out there. As if by suggestion he saw two black dorsal fins surface a few yards offshore-- the orcas from last night.

As he gazed out, he remembered something else God had said, "A sand crab can't understand you, can it?"

Now he looked down at the sand crab. Did the crab understand what he had just shouted?

Hmmm.

The last time he'd looked at a creature with such fascination was the dolphin. And that's when God had appeared. God wasn't inside that little sand crab, was he? Jeremiah got down on his knees and leaned into the little crab, putting his face just an inch away. "Is that you, God?" he whispered at the crustacean.

The sand crab reached out with its claw and latched onto Jeremiah's nose. Although surprised, Jeremiah laughed out-- it didn't hurt. Hah!

Jeremiah un-clawed himself and set the crab back down. So, if God wasn't in the crab, where was He? Would he ever see God again? Was this his life from now on? It didn't make much sense.

Jeremiah closed his eyes, thought hard, and more of God's words surfaced: 'I will give you everything you need, when you need it.'

Hmmm.

Okay.

Alright.

Jeremiah looked around and took inventory: a bible, a guitar, water, orcas, sand, and that sand crab.

Evidently, he didn't need anything else.

He'd already interacted with the orcas and sand crab, so maybe it was time to try something else. Let's see, he asked himself, bible or guitar?

More of God's words registered: 'I want you to read that sometime.'

Okay.

Now seemed like a good time.

Jeremiah picked up the bible, sat down on the soft sand, opened it, and began to read, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...."

Just a day earlier, these words would have caused Scratch to curse and scoff in anger. Now, they danced in Jeremiah's head, filling him with awe and wonder. To think that he-- Jeremiah Willy Fisher-- had just spent an entire evening with the Great Creator! And not only did God know his name, He knew the number of hairs on his head!

Time seemed to stand still as Jeremiah read and thought, and thought and read. They weren't just *words* anymore, they were *God's words*... and God was alive... and always there! That meant God was there now... with him.

"Thank you, God!" Jeremiah sang out at the top of his lungs as he turned the final page.

In the silence that followed, Jeremiah thought about all he'd read. While he couldn't reconcile everything, he didn't outright reject that which he couldn't understand. And the idea crossed his mind that maybe he was to God as the sand crab was to himself.

Indeed, with an open mind and open heart, the bible seemed to come alive. It was too overwhelming, and his heart and soul cried out in joy and awe-- there *really* was a God. And God loved Jeremiah as his son!

Not knowing what else to do, he began to pray. "Dear God. I may not understand everything, but I know you love me and I will trust in you. I surrender to you and your will. Guide me to serve you, to do your will."

Then he picked up his guitar and began to play, singing out softly,

Bless the Lord oh my soul,
Oh my soul.
Worship His Holy name.
Sing like never before,
Oh my soul,
I'll worship Your Holy name.

Wherever Jeremiah was, he was at peace. And if this was his life from now on, he was fine with that.

SIXTEEN

After a while, Jeremiah looked up from his guitar and saw a spec on the horizon. Something was out there. He watched intently as the spec got closer and larger, and soon Jeremiah could make out the colorful sail of a boat. As it approached the sandbar he could see someone waving at him. He waved back. "Hello," he called out.

The figure did not respond. He couldn't tell if it was a man or woman yet, but whoever it was wore a dazzling energy-emitting gown like his. That seemed like a good sign.

When the boat was within 50 yards of the sandbar, Jeremiah could clearly see it was a woman, and by 10 yards, he was sure she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Skillfully, she brought the sailboat onto the beach and stepped out without saying a word.

Walking toward him now, her shoeless feet seemed to glide across the smooth sand as if levitating. She was tall, slender, supple, and perfectly proportioned, and she moved effortlessly, like an elegant flowing gown blowing in the wind. When she finally stopped a few feet away he took her in fully. Wow! She was even more beautiful than he'd first thought. Her skin tone was the same as God's-- a deep perfect latte color that reminded him of Whitney Houston.

"Hello Jeremiah," she finally said, smiling warmly, as if greeting an old friend. Her dazzling white teeth matched her gown. Given the events that had unfolded with God, she could have been a billion years old, he figured. But like God, she didn't look a day over 30.

He was surprised she knew his name. "Do I know you?" He tried to say it in a non-confrontational tone.

She extended her hand. "I'm Beth. I was sent to ferry you where you'll be going."

Ferry.

Something about the way she said it made him uncomfortable. Plus, it wasn't the word one normally used. But then again, riding an orca with God wasn't normal either, so in this brave new world all bets were off. And it definitely was a brave new world, and he was definitely a brave new man. Indeed, after spending a night with the Almighty, Jeremiah was sure nothing could scare him.

Of course he couldn't have been more wrong.

Notwithstanding his new fearlessness, he would have preferred if she had said 'transport' or even 'take'. Jeremiah racked his brain-- ferry... ferry. Where had he heard that? A Sunday school lesson from decades before hit him hard and fast and he began to feel queasy. A ferry was used to cross the River Styx... on the journey to hell.

Styx.

In a blink, his mind conjured up the Styx song from the night in the Ritz: *Come sail away... come sail away.* It all seemed to fit... and all too well. Quickly, he knew two things: one, he didn't want to be ferried or sail away with her; and two, he was now scared, very scared.

"Where's God?" he asked tensely, now looking at her differently, searching for clues as to who she was and where she intended to ferry him.

She smiled sheepishly, re-boarded the boat, and motioned her hand gracefully across the sky. "He's everywhere, of course."

She reached out to him and looked deeply into his eyes. "Come with me, Jeremiah." She couldn't have sounded more inviting or more sincere.

And that's what really bothered Jeremiah. Was it possible she was the devil in disguise? The bible he'd just read had said as much: 'even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.' No doubt she was an angel... of sorts. He hesitated to step aboard.

"Fear not, Jeremiah... God is with you," she said, paraphrasing God's words that had precipitated Jeremiah's jump from the yacht.

He looked at the sand crab, wishing it could tell him what to do.

"A *healthy* dose of fear is good for you," she added, again using God's words, this time raising her eyebrows for effect.

Damn, she *was* good. But so was the devil, he reminded himself. A variety of thoughts flooded his head. The one that stuck was one of the bible verses he'd just read: 'Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.' Screw you, Satan, he whispered confidently to himself. He followed that with a silent quick prayer, "I trust you, God."

No doubt, the Rock God had come a long way since that concert in Miami!

He grabbed the bible, slung his guitar over his shoulder, took her proffered hand-- which, thankfully wasn't burning hot-- and boarded the boat. He was all-in with God--

which was good-- because he had a sinking feeling he may have just boarded a boat with the devil.

Soon they were sailing on the most beautiful water Jeremiah had ever seen. It was also the quietest, as Beth was clearly not interested in small talk, nor any talk for that matter. She stared directly ahead as she steered, as if on a mission.

“Am I dead?” he asked point-blank, breaking the silence. He wasn’t even sure it was a question she could answer, but it was better than the unnerving silence and the thoughts of fire and hell that he conjured in his worst-case mind.

She answered with a question, and a strange one at that. “Do you feel dead?”

“I don’t know... what’s death feel like?”

“That depends.”

Huh. Interesting response. Clearly she knew something...

“On what?” he asked, following up.

“On where you go after you die.”

That got his attention. Clearly, she knew something about *life after death*. She was, he concluded, either wholly good or wholly evil. And this, in a nutshell, explained why he’d never done well on multiple choice tests in high school.

Before he could ask his next question, she asked, “So, how do you feel?”

“I feel great, better than ever, really. It’s weird. My vertigo’s gone; my mind feels sharper than ever; and I feel a strange peace, like God’s on my side and there’s nothing to fear.” That last part was a bit of a stretch because inside he was a bundle of nerves. But, if she were the devil, he wanted her to think he had a full armor of God on.

She smiled warmly. “Look, I know you have lots of questions... about where you are and where you’re going, but I’m just here to take you where you need to go, not to answer your questions. Fair enough?”

Jeremiah’s head bobbed at her reasoned response. She wasn’t the devil, he concluded. She was just a ferry captain in this brave new world.

They were back to sailing in the silence over the calm, clear blue water. After a while, Jeremiah broke the silence again, “Wow. This is so beautiful.”

Beth nodded and smiled knowingly. “Just wait. It gets better.”

Her answer further calmed him. Unfortunately, it was the calm before the approaching hellish storm.

As they continued sailing, the sky above had turned into an interesting swirl of blues and purples and pinks. With so many colors in such a mesmerizing pattern, it looked like a sky that only God could have created, and as he took it in, Jeremiah felt complete peace.

Soon, birds of every size, shape, and color appeared, flying with effortless grace and curious synchronicity. As he looked down over the edge of the boat, Jeremiah could see hundreds, maybe even thousands, of feet into the clear blue water. Every sea creature imaginable-- dolphins, orcas, rays, and huge schools of brightly-colored fish-- swam with that same harmonious synchronicity.

Jeremiah marveled-- it was the most beautiful, perfect scene he'd ever seen.

And that's when everything changed... he realized he'd seen this before. His mind kicked into high gear as he remembered *this* very scene, from the dream in the Ritz. Worse, that dream was a prelude to the devilish nightmare.

Nervous now, his mind went into overdrive. It couldn't be, he told himself. Could it? Was he really stuck on this sailboat with the devil in disguise?

As if on cue, Beth spoke out, "I need go below. Would you mind steering for a bit?"

Holy hell... it was happening.

If she went below, he'd be alone at the helm, just like in the dream. He looked around frantically and had a fleeting thought to jump off and swim back to the sandbar. But when he looked back, the sandbar was completely gone. He was hysterical inside now as he searched for a way out.

Beth pointed into the distance. "Just keep her straight ahead," she instructed, and without another word disappeared below, her cleverness carefully concealed.

With shaking hands, he took the wheel and did as she'd instructed.

'Trust God', he whispered to himself over and over, 'trust God.' The mantra calmed him a bit and soon he was whistling the tune God had sung to him on the orca... when he watched the movie about his mom... when he discovered that God had been with her, and his brother, every step of the way. Those thoughts calmed him even more. He could do this, he told himself. God had chosen him! He was going to be a fisher of men!

He started singing out softly:

Bless the Lord oh my soul
Oh my soul
Worship His Holy name
Sing like never before
Oh my soul
I'll worship Your Holy name.

Everything's gonna be okay, he assured himself-- God had brought him here for a reason. He continued to hum the tune. And everything was okay...

...Until it wasn't.

In a flash, the calm, clear, blue water had turned into a bubbling, boiling red cesspool, with blackened veins creeping across the foggy surface. Above, the sky had darkened into a foreboding mix of billowing black and grey clouds. And the thunderclaps were even louder than he remembered.

It was the nightmare!

Knowing what was coming scared him more than not knowing, and he longed to be blindsided by anything... anything but this. The plane dive hadn't been this scary, and now, he was almost wishing they'd just crashed. That's because he knew what was coming.

As if cued, the bony human hand poked out from the blood red water and reached for him. When Jeremiah pulled back he heard *the footsteps*. Turning toward the sound, a shadowy figure poked up in the fog from the boat's stairwell.

Oh God! No. He'd been duped...

Shrouded by fog, the shadowy figure quickly illuminated itself-- the devil! And as it glided toward him, Jeremiah's eyes locked onto the stainless steel box in its bony hands. Of course 'Scratch's Soul' was etched onto the top.

It was really happening!

Had the devil played some twisted trick on him? Had he been suckered into jumping off his perfectly good ten million dollar yacht for this? Had he drowned in the Atlantic or been eaten by the orca? Was he to be a fisher of men in this bloody hellhole?

Jeremiah threw his hands out as the devil moved closer. "No, please, get away. I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Help me, God! God?" With the devil just a step away, he screamed as loudly as he could, "Help!"

And then, with his scream still reverberating, it was quickly over. In a blink, Beth had transformed back into the angelic ferry captain. She smiled sheepishly at him. “For the record, that wasn’t my idea,” she announced.

“Oh my God! Whose was it?” Jeremiah asked, still hyperventilating, his heart beating feverishly.

“God’s,” she answered nonchalantly. “He said something about a dream you had at the Ritz. He didn’t really elaborate, but he said you’d understand.”

Jeremiah nodded as he looked around and saw that the calm blue water and soothing sky had returned. He took a few more deep breaths as his heart slowed.

“You actually handled it pretty well,” she added. “There were some folks betting that you’d jump overboard and try and make a swim for it.” She paused to let that sink in.

Could everyone read his thoughts, he wondered? It felt like he was the star of some weird, warped, Godly-version of the Truman Show.

Beth eyed Jeremiah warmly. “Look, it takes a while to understand God, but he knows what he’s doing. Truly. And once you surrender to him, you’ll never want for anything else.” She chuckled unexpectedly.

“What?”

“But he *can be* pretty quirky... in his own Godly way,” she explained. “You okay now?”

“No. That was too freaky.”

“Better to glimpse hell than to actually go there.”

“So there really is a hell?”

Beth raised her eyebrows.

“Wait. So is this heaven?”

“Like I told you, I’m not here to answer questions. I’m going below again.” She laughed a little laugh. “Nothing scary this time. I promise.”

He trusted her... and now more than ever, he trusted the amazing God who knew his thoughts, saw his dreams, and called him ‘son’ He longed to be with God again.

When Beth returned, she was carrying a guitar. “But God did say we could work on a song together.”

She sat down next to him and started playing a tune. As he listened and studied her playing, Jeremiah relaxed further. Music was his pacifier.

“Hmm. I like that,” Jeremiah reacted when she stopped.

“Thanks. I started it a while back, but never finished it. I have the tune, but not the lyrics yet.”

Jeremiah picked up his guitar. “May I?”

“Sure. Word is you’re a pretty good musician.”

Jeremiah began strumming, replicating the tune she had been playing, but in a faster tempo.

Her head bobbed to the beat as he played.

“Oooh. I like the faster tempo,” Beth reacted. She joined in, playing alongside Jeremiah.

Moved by the peace he now felt, Jeremiah began to sing aloud:

You are not alone,
If you are lonely,
When you feel afraid,
You’re not the only.
We are all the same,
In need of mercy,
To be forgiven and be freed.
It’s all you got to lean on,
But thank God it’s all you need.

He stopped playing and Beth followed suit.

“Wow! Those lyrics fit perfectly,” she said.

Jeremiah was amazed and confused all at once. “I don’t know where those words came from,” he said.

“I do. Your heart. You spend time with God and amazing things happen. Hey, do you mind if I use that?”

“It’s all yours. We can keep going if you want... I mean, if we have time.”

“I have all the time that ever will be,” Beth said confidently.

He wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but he had some guesses. "It still needs a chorus," he said.

"Un-huh. I have some ideas."

Jeremiah and Beth continued to work on the song as they sailed along. The process took Jeremiah's mind off life and death and the other questions that nagged him, and he was at peace as time seemed to stand still.

When Jeremiah finally looked up, he noted that they had sailed into a beautiful river winding through mountains on both sides. On the cliffs, spruce trees reached upwards as high as he could see. Whoa! They were easily 500 feet tall. Huge eagles and osprey soared above, free and easy, in what looked to be a soaring contest of some sort.

Out of the corner of his eye he spied a picture taped on the bulkhead near the stairwell. He walked over to it. It was Beth, he could tell, but not the same Beth standing before him now. In the picture, she was as black as coal. She stood on a dock with sailboats in the background, flanked by a white man and a boy of maybe 13 years old. The boy had the same complexion as hers was now. It was clear they were a happy family.

He grabbed the picture and took it back to her.

"Who's this with you?" he asked, holding up the picture.

"My husband and son. That picture was taken the week before I died."

"Before you died?" He paused. *Did that mean he was dead too?* "So this is heaven?"

Beth didn't answer.

He stared back at the picture and then looked at her. "I have to ask the obvious. You were black. Now you're not. Why?"

She gasped pronouncedly. "I was black? Are you sure?" She raised her eyebrows playfully and smiled.

Jeremiah held up his hands in front of himself, as if to deflect her sarcasm. "Just saying..."

"We're all the same... here... all the colors bleed into one." She smiled warmly. "We're the amalgamated tone of every man, woman, and child who has ever walked the earth. It's perfect." She held her arms out for him to see. From up close he could see that her skin was speckled with every color of mankind-- white, red, yellow, brown, black.

But from a distance the colors bled together to form the most beautiful, most perfect tone. “See?” she said, “God knows what he’s doing.”

Jeremiah looked at her differently now. She *was* perfect. And how great and awesome and perfect was their God? It nearly took his breath away and tears welled in his eyes. He gulped a deep breath and motioned back to the picture. “Will you see them again?”

Beth smiled warmly as she envisioned that day. “Un-huh. Someday. God said that was his plan.”

“So do you just sail around while you wait for them?”

“No,” she answered with a little laugh. “There’s too much else to do.” She paused, lost in memories. “My dream was to sail around the Caribbean when my husband and I retired. So, I’m just getting some practice in before he gets here. Plus, whenever God asks me to ferry someone, I do that, too.” She paused again, this time for effect. “When God asks you to do something it’s best to do it...”

Nodding, Jeremiah looked up and saw a most wondrous castle carved into the mountain above the river. “Wow. Whose is that?”

“Saint Theresa’s.”

“It’s incredible,” he marveled.

Beth chuckled. “And that’s just her guest house.”

As they sailed around another bend in the river, the mountains morphed into gentle rolling hills of deep green, like a landscape from Scotland, and they came upon a classic Victorian house with a wraparound porch. The paisley purple house was surrounded by beautiful gardens. Next to the Victorian was a spectacular log cabin, with conspicuous scaffolding supporting a clearly unfinished front porch.

“Well... you’re here,” she announced abruptly as she docked the sailboat in front of the Victorian. “And hey, thanks for helping with my song.”

Here? Where’s here? He responded to her, “Glad I could help.” He turned his attention to the house before him. “Um, so where do I go now?”

Beth pointed to the front door of the Victorian. “Right there.”

Okay.

Jeremiah disembarked, waved goodbye, and turned and walked toward the Victorian. He was climbing the first step to the porch when he remembered he still had Beth's picture. He turned back around.

He called out, "Hey, I forgot to give you..."-- but the sailboat was completely gone-- "your picture back..." His voice trailed off.

SEVENTEEN

Jeremiah looked curiously at the paisley purple Victorian. It looked like Prince had picked out the color, and he half-expected to see the rocker on one of the four white rockers that faced the dock where Beth had just dropped him.

He walked up the stairs, onto the wraparound porch, and stared at the front door. It was cracked open a few inches, as if inviting anyone who came onto the porch. Obviously there were no locked doors in this place-- heaven?-- and probably no active duty cops either, so breaking and entering was probably not a concern.

He called out through the tiny opening, "Hello? Anybody home?"

There was no answer.

Anxiously wondering what was on the other side, Jeremiah pushed the door open and stepped inside. As he did, his eyes opened wide and the hairs on Jeremiah's body stood firm.

The inside was bright and cheerful, the walls decorated with the most beautiful paintings... of his brother Josh, his father, his mother... and Jeremiah! A huge mural on one entire wall depicted the entrance to his father's church, with Jeremiah, Josh, and his parents standing proudly on the front steps. They were a happy family.

With the hairs on his body now tingling, Jeremiah drifted toward the mural. Now just a few feet away, he stared at himself and his brother on the wall. The painting was so life-like, so perfect in every detail, even down to the wet-looking paint smears on their hands and faces from painting the handrails earlier that day. Josh held his little hand up in a wave, as if saying good-bye to the family he somehow knew he would be leaving in just a few years.

As Jeremiah looked into his own eyes, he was transported back to that very day. He could remember every detail of his conversation with Josh as they'd painted the handrails.

Josh: One day I'm gonna be a major league baseball player.

Jeremiah: Yeah, and I'm gonna be a famous rock star and travel all over the world.

Josh: Maybe you could come to one of my baseball games and sing.

Jeremiah: Oh man, that would be awesome.

Josh: And maybe I could sing with you?

Jeremiah: No way, Josh. You have a terrible voice.

Josh: No I don't.

Jeremiah: Yes you do.

Four years later, they were carrying Josh's casket down those very same church steps.

Inside the Victorian, Jeremiah put his hand against his brother's and closed his eyes. It was magical, and he swore he could feel his brother's touch. "I miss you so much, bro," he whispered.

His whisper was not the only noise, however. From outside, in the back, Jeremiah heard a feint, familiar hum. With a racing heart, he walked toward that hum, through a kitchen and out a back door. Once outside, he was flooded by the sights and sounds and smells of flowering gardens, a meandering brook, lily ponds, and tumbling waterfalls. The air was filled with what looked to be a million colorful butterflies flitting and floating above the perfectly manicured lawn that framed the water features. Across that lawn, inside a sparkling white gazebo, a woman in a dazzling gown sat. She was the source of the humming. And Jeremiah knew the tune all so well: "How much is that doggie in the window..."

She sat with her back to Jeremiah, a puppy by her feet, perfectly posed as she painted.

Could this be?

Jeremiah felt tears welling in his eyes as he stepped toward her, and with each step, his heart raced faster and faster in excitement and trepidation. When he was about ten yards away, the woman stood and slowly turned around, as if she'd been waiting for him and this very moment.

When she had completed her turn, Jeremiah stopped in his tracks...

... when he saw his mother!

She was younger and more beautiful than he remembered, especially with the heavenly skin tone. And when their eyes met, she broke into a glorious gleaming smile that made death seem impossible. Oh, God, she was so, so beautiful!

Jeremiah hesitated, but his emotions and bare feet soon took over, and he sprinted across the soft green grass without so much as bending a blade. “Mom! Mom!” he yelled as he closed in on her. Was this real? Could this really be?

He collided and collapsed into her arms and felt her motherly warmth envelope him. Without a doubt, this was the happiest moment of his life. It, too, however, was a moment he would never remember.

“Oh, my baby!” she cried as she squeezed him tightly.

“Is this a dream? Is it really you?” he asked, still pressed against her. Joyful tears fell from his eyes into her glowing gown.

“It’s more real than anything, Jeremiah.”

That familiar voice, the one he thought he’d never hear again, brought back a flood of memories and he wanted to stay pressed against her forever. After a while, however, he released and stood face-to-face with the woman who’d given him life. He looked deeply into eyes that were brighter, greener, and more alive and knowing than ever. “Oh mom, I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I know, baby, I know,” she said with a tender mother’s smile.

“I missed you so much, mom.” He was like her little boy again, and his tears fell fast.

She reached out and pulled him back into her again, and soon he was wailing, his chest heaving. “Mmmmm. My sweet baby boy,” she said softly, as she stroked his hair and took in his scent. “Mama’s here,” she whispered as she rubbed his back the way he remembered.

He continued to cry into her.

“It’s okay, Jeremiah, it’s okay,” she whispered assuredly.

He released from her again and stared back into her lively eyes. He needed to tell her something. “Oh, mom, I’m so sorry. All the pain and suffering I caused you... and Dad. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Really. I... I...” He started breaking down again, his chest heaving, his face scrunched tightly as another round of unstoppable tears came.

She took him into her again, hugged him tightly, and whispered calmly. “I know, baby. I know.” After a while, she released him and wiped his tears. “Look around, Jeremiah,” she said, gesturing to everything. “Take it all in. See and smell and feel the beauty and love that surrounds me.”

She paused as he took it all in.

Their eyes met again. “You couldn’t have known it,” she explained, “but all that pain and suffering on earth made me a better person.” She paused again to allow him to really take it in. “*You helped me build my house in heaven.*”

In that moment, her words released a lifetime of sorrow and mourning and he felt himself go limp. Inside, his heart soared like one of those mighty eagles. Then, overcome by the enormity of it all, he fell to his knees, held his head in his hands, and cried out in joyous relief. *Thank you, God! Thank you, oh great God!*

Soon, the puppy had nuzzled in and Jeremiah felt it licking the tears from his face.

Collecting himself, Jeremiah corralled the puppy and looked up at his mother. A butterfly had landed on her finger and she was gently petting it. “There’s a butterfly for every tear I ever cried,” she said. “God knew how much I loved them, and this was the special gift He gave me.”

Jeremiah picked up the puppy and stood facing her.

She eyed him with a new seriousness. “Our God really is wondrous, Jeremiah. Whether you see Him or not, He is always with you. Trust Him.”

“I know that now, mom. I will. I really will.”

“Oh, baby, I pray so. Because the only way heaven could be better would be having you here with me and Joshua and your Dad.”

He was confused.

“You know your Dad will be here soon, right?”

“No. How do you know?”

“The house next door... the log cabin he’s always wanted. You saw it, right? It’s almost finished.” She paused to accentuate her next words. “He’s coming home soon.”

He felt the hair on his neck stand up. “I don’t know what to say? I guess that’s good, right?”

“It is Jeremiah. That will be such a happy day... for him, and me, and Joshua.”

Jeremiah was lost in thought, grappling with the idea that his father’s death would be a happy day. Indeed, his father’s death on earth would not be the ultimate tragedy, but rather the ultimate triumph.

At the same time, Jeremiah felt grief for himself, certain he'd be alone for all eternity. There was no home in heaven for him. Hell, he couldn't even be homeless in heaven. And in a flash, he envisioned himself living under a crumbling, fiery underpass *in hell*, pushing a rusty grocery cart uphill over hot coals... endlessly. The image was almost too much. *Oh God, what had he done with his life? He wanted to be with his family! He wanted a home in heaven, too...*

The puppy continued to stretch up from Jeremiah's arms and lick the salty tear stains from his face.

His mom spoke, "I think Sparky missed you more than I did."

He did a double-take. "Wait. This is really Sparky?"

She smiled. "Uh-huh. All dogs *really do* go to heaven, Jeremiah."

Jeremiah stared deeply into the little pup's eyes. It really was him.

Then Sparky's mouth moved. "Really, dude? You really didn't recognize me?"

Jeremiah almost dropped the little pup. "Oh my God, you can talk?"

Sparky chuckled in a husky voice. "I know. Sweet huh? Dogs go to heaven *and* can talk to boot. Go figure, eh?"

"Holy shit," Jeremiah responded incredulously.

Sparky cast a disapproving look at Jeremiah. "You can't say that in heaven, Jeremiah." Sparky looked over at Claire. "I told you we were gonna need another swear jar, Claire."

Claire nodded and chuckled.

Sparky spoke out again, "I tell you, Jeremiah, I thought I had it good on earth, but this place is amazing. You should come by and see my house."

"*Your house?* Really?"

Like an English pointer, Sparky motioned towards a modest brick rambler set back in the woods across the stream. "Swing by if you have time. I'll grill some steaks up. Maybe we can play fetch like we used to..."

As Sparky's words trailed off, Jeremiah was lost in thought, wondering what kind of pets lived in the hell that would be his eternal home. Out of nowhere, the image of a strange and evil creature-- like a cross between an armadillo and a Tasmanian devil-- flickered in his head. A name for the creature even popped out: armadevil. Sadly, it made

perfect sense to him: the armadillo would transmit leprosy with its licks and the Tasmanian devil would eat the crusted body parts after they fell off. No doubt, he concluded, they would come in pairs. He could even hear the voice of the devil in his head, “Welcome to hell, Scratch. Stand over there on those hot coals and Adolph will bring you your hungry armadevils. You can put ‘em in your buggy. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Jeremiah shook his head and the scary image was gone. Quickly, he changed the subject. “And Josh is here, too?” he asked his mother.

“Of course he’s here,” she answered. “He loved God and accepted Jesus as his savior.”

“So where is he?”

“Probably off playing baseball or hanging with Grandpa Frank. They spend a lot of time together.”

“Does he live here with you?”

She shook her head. “He has his own house.” She pointed across the lawn at a huge tree house spanning three giant oak trees. “Remember how he always wanted a tree house?”

Jeremiah studied the tree house. It was made completely of glass, with stunning cantilever decks on three levels that extended from the main structure. A person standing on any of those decks would have looked like they were floating in the air.

“Wow. That’s incredible.”

“He designed it himself-- mostly-- with a little help from Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright. The views are amazing... all the way to infinity.”

Jeremiah didn’t understand what that meant. “So what’s he like? I mean, is he still, you know, 12-years old?”

“He’s just our Joshua,” she said with a soft smile and a sparkle in her eyes. “Things are different here, Jeremiah. We’re kids, we’re adults... we’re everything and anything we want to be, whenever we want to be, wherever we want to be.” She paused, trying to come up with the right description. “*Heaven is how we always wished earth would have been...*”

“So you’re a little girl sometimes?”

“Sure... when I want to go out play with other kids. But usually I’m like you see me now... because this was the happiest time of my life... when you and Joshua were my little boys and we were building your Dad’s church.”

Those were the happiest days for Jeremiah, too. “Can I see Josh?”

“You’ll have to ask God about that.”

She motioned toward the house. “Come on inside. I made you a treat. I know you haven’t eaten anything since that silly chocolate popcorn, right?”

“How do you know about that?”

“Oh Jeremiah, my sweet boy, I keep a close eye on everything you do. We all do. I made your favorite-- chicken and rice... extra spice.” Her eyes were so alive, happy to have her eldest son with her again.

They walked into the house and his mom motioned to the paintings on the walls. “What do you think of my paintings?”

“These are yours? Really?”

She nodded proudly. Evidently, nobody painted blobby figures with stick fingers in heaven.

“They’re amazing.”

“Mr. Monet is helping me with some of my brush strokes... he says I’m getting there.” She began to gush with a happiness he had never seen before. “Oh, Jeremiah, if only you could know how great it is to be here...”

He was beginning to understand... and he felt a happiness and sadness beyond anything he’d ever felt or thought he could ever imagine.

Jeremiah sat down at the table and his mother brought him a steamy, heaping bowl. Across the table, Sparky ate from his own small bowl. In the background, Jim Croce’s ‘Time in a Bottle’ played.

“Mmmmm. I almost forgot how good this was.”

Sparky nodded in agreement. “Un-huh. Really good, Claire. I like the saffron.”

Claire eyed Jeremiah. “It was never *this* good, Jeremiah. Everything’s better here. *Everything.*”

“So, you eat and everything, just like on earth?”

“We eat because we want to, not because we have to. Everything we do here is because we want to.”

He spotted a heaping glass jar of snickers bars on the counter. “I see you still love candy.”

She laughed. “And zero calories.” She handed him one and he took a bite.

“Oh, wow, these are amazing.”

“I told you, everything’s better here.”

Jeremiah spied a list on a chalkboard hanging on the wall: skiing, surfing, painting with Mr. Van Gogh, concert at R.R., fly fishing, bridge at Theresa’s, eagle soaring, mountain with Josh. “What’s that list?” he asked.

“Just some of my activities.”

“Skiing... surfing... *fly fishing?*”

She laughed. “Now I know why your Dad loves it so much. Last time I went, I caught a four pound rainbow trout.” She winked. “And the surfing on the north shore... wow! Just wow! Some of the heavies and honkers will take your breath away. Last time I went I was really rippin’.”

Heavies... honkers... rippin’... whoa! He never expected to hear those words from his mom’s lips. And when Jeremiah tried to picture his mom on a surfboard, he couldn’t. No, truly, heaven was beyond earthly imagination.

“But my favorite thing is to soar like an eagle, so peaceful, so free. Oh Jeremiah, that is heaven.”

He couldn’t even imagine.

Mother, son, and pup sat at the table talking, laughing, and crying as they flipped through her scrapbook, and his mom brought them a second helping.

As they came upon the last pictures of Jeremiah’s childhood, Sparky looked at Jeremiah and said, “You never said good-bye to me that day you drove away. That hurt me. A lot. I think I sat out on that driveway for two weeks waiting for you to come back home.”

“I’m sorry, Sparky. I really am. I was so stupid.” Jeremiah began to cry.

“Don’t cry, man. We all make mistakes,” Sparky responded knowingly. “Live and learn, right?”

Jeremiah collected himself and nodded at his philosopher of a pup with the brick rambler in heaven and the grill on the back deck. As he finished his last bite, God appeared at the table.

“It’s time to go, Jeremiah,” God said curtly.

It was the first time Jeremiah had seen God since the night on the orca. And so much was different now. *He* was so different now. On the island he had learned to trust God even though he couldn’t see Him. The ferry ride had taught him that as long as he put on the full armor of God, he could stand firm against the schemes of the devil. And now, seeing his mom and knowing that his brother was here, forevermore... it was all too humbling. God *was* great... so very great!

Jeremiah wanted to hug God and tell him so many things. Most importantly, he wanted to ask how he could have a house in heaven. But the answer scared him, so instead all he said was, “So soon?”

“Time is different here, Jeremiah. With me, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”

The idea confused Jeremiah.

“Thank you for letting me see my mom.”

“You’re most welcome. You’ve come a long way. It would have been a shame to come this far and not see her... and Sparky, too.”

Sparky winked at God, thumped his paw against his chest quickly, and pointed it back at God, appreciating the recognition. God smiled and tenderly patted Sparky’s head.

Jeremiah looked at his mom, wondering if he’d ever see her again. “I love you, mom,” he said, thinking he wouldn’t. At least now, he told himself, he’d said a proper good-bye and had some semblance of closure. And if he spent eternity in hell, he’d do so knowing his mom was where she deserved to be. No arguments, God served justice well.

“I love you, too, my sweet boy... always and forever.” She took the gold cross from her neck and placed it around Jeremiah’s neck. “I wanted to give you this before I died. Whenever you are lonely or confused or afraid, hold it close to your heart, and pray.”

Jeremiah envisioned himself clutching it next to his heart for all eternity, as a pair of armadevils licked and nipped at his hot, crumbling toes.

“Be careful with it,” she added, “the clasp comes loose once in a while.”

Jeremiah hugged his mother and gave Sparky a final pat. “I love you, too, Sparky.”

“Peace out, bro. I love you, too.”

EIGHTEEN

As Jeremiah and God walked away from the Victorian, Jeremiah looked back one last time to see his mother waving and Sparky's tail wagging. He choked up. He wanted God to tell him that he'd see them again, and that it was not too late for him to build his house in heaven. But how?

Quickly, he came up with a plan. If he concentrated hard enough, he told himself, and thought those thoughts exclusively, perhaps God would provide the comfort he sought. Indeed, it sounded like a good plan to him.

But God had his own plan. And it was nothing like Jeremiah's.

"Where's Beth's picture?" God asked abruptly.

"Um, uh, I think I left it at my mom's." Jeremiah turned to levity. "You know, you really need to put pockets in these gowns."

God didn't smile or laugh, which surprised Jeremiah.

"We don't need pockets. We think it and it happens. Watch." God put his hand out and Beth's picture was instantly there.

"Wow... you'd make a fortune in Vegas as a magician," Jeremiah remarked, doubling down on humor.

Again, no smile or laugh from the mighty God.

"Sin city? Not really my kind of place, Jeremiah. But I do appreciate your confidence. And if I ever need a manager, I think I know where to find Dill."

God's eyes glimmered now as He continued to talk. "Just so you know, I do enjoy your attempts at humor. Not many people could spend their life trashing me and act so comfortable around me. As I was telling Saint Peter, you are either the bravest man in the world or the stupidest."

God laughed to let that sink in. Then God held up the photo. "So, you want to try it?"

Jeremiah nodded. This was his chance, he knew.

“Close your eyes and concentrate-- think very hard about something you want.”

Bursting inside with excitement, Jeremiah did as he was told.

“Now put your hand out,” God instructed.

Jeremiah extended his hand.

“And slowly open your eyes.”

Excited with anticipation, Jeremiah slowly opened his eyes. There, before him, stood a rusted shopping cart with a glowing hot molten steel handle. Sitting inside the cart were two of the strangest creatures he'd ever seen-- they had the face of a small black bear, with angry eyes and pointy bat-like teeth. Their sharp claws peeked out from armored scaling covering their body. Rat-like tails wagged.

Jeremiah was speechless as he stared at the strange new animals.

“They're armadevils,” God announced heartily, breaking the silence, “in *your* buggy.” God smiled quizzically at Jeremiah. “What's the matter? You wanted an eternal home here, right?”

Jeremiah shrugged. How was he supposed to react to this? Was God serious?

“Give her a little push, see how she drives. Careful though, that handle looks hot.”

Jeremiah stood fast.

God sang out, “I guess the tiny house craze has finally reached heaven, eh? Oh, and I liked your idea about the armadevils coming in pairs, too. Go ahead, pet them.”

Jeremiah didn't move.

“Maybe let 'em lick you first,” God said with a wry grin. He seemed to be enjoying the hell out of this.

Knowing he deserved this, Jeremiah remained quiet.

And then, with a snap of God's fingers, the shopping cart and the armadevils were gone.

“Well played, my Lord,” Jeremiah said solemnly.

“I knew you'd enjoy that.” God's eyes sparkled. “Look, I like you, Jeremiah. I really do. In spite of all the horrible, despicable things you've done, I know there's a tiny

bit of soul inside you just waiting to catch fire, and a kind and gentle heart waiting to show itself to the world. I really hope you can bring it all forth... before it's too late."

Although he didn't fully understand the implications, God's words gave Jeremiah hope. And that was a lot. "Thank you, God."

Quickly, God changed the conversation's direction. "So, did you like Beth?"

"Yeah. She's great."

"Indeed... like your mom... another beautiful, beautiful soul." God eyed Jeremiah with a seriousness that made Jeremiah wince.

From the change in God's look and the tone of his voice, Jeremiah knew something important was coming. And given Jeremiah's 'horrible, despicable' past, it probably wasn't good. He braced.

"How would it feel to know you helped kill her?" God said, dropping the 100-kiloton nuke.

Jeremiah's heart exploded. No way. He may have been a lot of bad things, but he was no killer. No way. "What are you talking about?" he shot back. He said it like God was both crazy and wrong, and right away he wished he could take back the words and tone. Now he re-braced waiting for the answer.

In measured tone, God explained, "Two fans did what their Rock God implored them to do-- they raped and they pillaged." He eyed Jeremiah sternly. "You know the song... Scratch's first big hit. Sing it for me." There was no slack in his Almighty tone.

Jeremiah was ashamed. "No, God. Please. No." He didn't feel right saying 'no' to God and immediately he regretted saying that, too. He should have just nodded.

God's face tightened and Jeremiah felt himself trembling from head to toe as he sensed his punishment coming. With a blink or a snap, Jeremiah knew it could all be over.

"Look in my eyes and sing the chorus and rap the first verse," God commanded.

Jeremiah wanted to creep out of his body and hide somewhere safely out of sight, but there was no hiding from God, he now knew. Cornered and caught, he took a deep breath and sang out, low and ashamed:

Oh, I don't give a flyin' fuck what you want or
what you say.
Yeah, I don't give a flyin' fuck what you want or
what you say.

Then he quietly rapped the first verse:

We rape and pillage and take what's ours.
Modern-day Vikings, 'cept we got cars.
Scream all you want, you stupid bitch,
'Cause when we done, you in that ditch.
Yeah, when we done, you in that ditch.

By the end Jeremiah was whimpering the words, barely audible, fighting back tears. *He never intended to kill anyone.*

And then, suddenly, as if they were in a surround sound booth, the song "Rape and Pillage" blared from all around. Jeremiah hated every word he heard himself singing.

Please, God, make it stop. Make it stop.

God spoke solemnly as the song played. "February 4th... 2011. Beth was on her way home from the hospital in Memphis where she worked when the timing belt on her Civic broke. Good cars those Hondas... almost never break down. And, of course, it was the one day she forgot her cell phone. So there she was, scared and alone on a back country road when two men came along... two men high on meth, with the Rock God's lyrics of rape and pillage blaring from their truck speakers and into their hardened hearts."

The music came to a shrilly end, and from all around, Jeremiah heard a woman's piercing scream. It echoed for a long while before leaving them in a deafening, deadly silence. And in that silence, Jeremiah was sure he'd never see his mom or Sparky again.

God finally broke the silence. "I wonder how much money Scratch made from that song, Jeremiah? What? Two, maybe three million?"

"I don't know, God." Jeremiah looked down ashamed now, unable to make eye contact with his Creator.

"I do. As of this very minute, 2 million, 702 thousand, 3 hundred and 16 dollars... and 13 cents." God began calculating with his fingers in the air. "Let's see, carry the one, add a zero... un-huh, just as I thought... worth exactly thirty pieces of silver back in the day."

Jeremiah's eyes stayed low in shame.

"Look at me," God commanded. "Of all people, you know how powerful words can be, Jeremiah. What was it the other kids called you in 4th grade-- the buck-toothed bible thumper?"

Jeremiah nodded, lost in a memory.

“That was the start of it-- when you began to choose Satan over me. And what did it get you in return for those choices-- a life of lies, dirty money, and lonely, scared misery.” God paused. “And maybe an eternity in hell, pushing a rusty grocery cart with a pair of armadevils...”

Jeremiah’s mind raced as he gasped for air. “I wish I could go back and do it over again,” he cried out softly.

“You don’t get mulligans on earth, Jeremiah. At best, you get a chance at that redemption we talked about. Pat attention now. Lesson number 4, Jeremiah: let your words and actions on earth be as your words and actions would be standing before the Lord God Almighty here in heaven.”

Jeremiah fell to his knees and covered his face. “I’m sorry, God. I’m so sorry,” he cried out in anguish, unable to look up at God.

Through his sobs, Jeremiah heard God’s voice. “You’ve disappointed me many times, Jeremiah; so, so many times.”

Balled up on the ground, Jeremiah braced for his punishment, knowing he deserved whatever was coming.

After what seemed like an eternity, Jeremiah felt God’s hand reach down, pick him up, and place him face-to-God. “And each time,” God said, “I’ve forgiven you. And now I do it once again.”

Then God hugged Jeremiah tightly. And in that undeserved hug, Jeremiah felt life and hope return.

When He released Jeremiah, God commanded, “You must get things right, Jeremiah! You are my glory on display. Do not disappoint me again.”

“I won’t, God. I won’t. I promise, I won’t.” And Jeremiah vowed, then and there, to never disappoint or disobey God again. If he suffered, he told himself, he would suffer in a way that was worthy of that suffering, in a way that was worthy of being called God’s son.

And the God of Grace smiled warmly at Jeremiah.

NINETEEN

God raised his finger as if struck by a novel idea. “I know what... let’s go see a ball game. You still like baseball, right?” Of course, God already knew that answer.

Seeing a baseball game wouldn’t have been his first choice of ‘things to do in heaven’, but Jeremiah trusted God, so he nodded. Because of his Rock God persona, he hadn’t seen a ballgame in years. Indeed, the last thing his satanic fans wanted to see was their Rock God eating a hotdog at a baseball game. His fans were the cock-fighting, dog-fighting crowd.

God continued, “Good game today. Saints versus the Armadevils.” God winked. “New kid we just called up is pitching. Supposed to be good.”

Then God blinked...

...And they were standing in front of the most colossal stadium Jeremiah had ever seen. Shimmering gold, it looked to be at least a thousand feet tall, with huge Roman Coliseum-like arches encircling the base, mid-section, and top. Glistening diamond spires rose mightily from the top until out of sight.

“Whoa!” Jeremiah reacted.

“If you build it, they will come...” God whispered and winked. “Nice, huh?”

“What’s it made of?”

“Solid gold, baby.” God smiled, like a proud papa.

God blinked again...

...And they were inside the massive stadium, in first row seats next to the first base dugouts. In front of them, the field was a lush bright green with a red clay infield and pitching mound. The players had yet to take the field.

Jeremiah stood and made a slow 360 degree turn to take it all in. Next to seeing his mom, this was the most beautiful thing his eyes had ever seen.

His eyes!

That's when it hit him. Wherever he looked-- near and far-- everything was right before his eyes. And by adjusting his focus, he could zoom in or pan out. Amazingly, he could do it independently, such that near object could be moved away and far objects could be brought in close... at the same time. It were as if each of his eyes were independently controlled binoculars, and somehow his brain could process all the inputs simultaneously and make complete sense of it all.

God watched Jeremiah with amusement.

"I call it diamond-vision," God said proudly.

"Oh, my God," Jeremiah exclaimed in utter awe.

"Yes, son?"

Jeremiah shook his head. "No, I meant, Wow!"

"Once upon a time I thought about making man's eyes like this. But thankfully my foresight was, and is, and always will be 20/20. You could only imagine how man would have abused such a gift. So, instead, it's just another one of those things that makes heaven so special."

Jeremiah continued to look around. "This is so amazing."

"Like grace," God tacked on.

Jeremiah smiled at Him as his eyes continued to look around the colossal crowd. "How many people does this place seat?"

"That's easy. Count."

It seemed like a stupid idea, but Jeremiah looked down his row, "1, 2, 3-" he whispered aloud.

God cut him off. "No. Just move your eyes all around, like this... and then sum it up... like calculus." God demonstrated with a quick looksee around the stadium. "You try."

Jeremiah did as God had shown. When he finished, a number popped into his head and he announced it, "6,242,355."

"You forgot to count yourself," God said grinning. "But not bad for a first-timer. You'd do well enough as a carny, guessing weights and ages." God winked. "Now you see why we have diamond-vision. Not a bad seat in the house."

The enormity of it all hit Jeremiah and he couldn't contain himself. "You are so awesome," he gushed.

God chuckled. "Well, well, after all these years, I guess the Creator Himself is finally complete... confirmation of awesomeness from the Rock God himself." God smiled sarcastically.

As they waited for the players to take the field, Jeremiah decided to ask God about things he'd never understood. "Can I ask you something?"

"You may. But I will just give you the answer." God looked deeply into Jeremiah's eyes. "Love. Love is the answer. The Beatles had it right all along. That's why I created the universe, and man, and everything."

"But why--"

God cut him off. "-- is their evil and pain and suffering in the world? And how can"-- He made the quotes sign-- "a loving God allow that?"

Jeremiah's head bobbed.

"It's all part of the process I've ordained for man, Jeremiah. As *you will see*,"-- wink, wink -- "a beautiful sunrise gives peace and security because of the loneliness and fear of a stormy night. Think about it-- can one really appreciate good without bad? Or develop courage without danger? Or perseverance without obstacles? Or compassion without someone in pain or in need?"

"I guess not. But all that pain and suffering... it just seems so barbaric."

"It will pass. Indeed, all of earth's pain and suffering is but a fleeting moment in heaven-- a few words on the latest page of CoCo's futile effort."

"Who's CoCo?"

"You'll see," God said smiling. "Patience, my son."

Jeremiah didn't hide his dissatisfaction with God's explanation. Balancing himself cautiously on the slippery, thin line that separated bravery from stupidity, he decided to press the Almighty. "But you could end all the pain and suffering if you wanted to... I just don't understand why you don't do something."

"I did do something." God paused for what could have been an earthly hour or a heavenly millisecond before eying Jeremiah with a new seriousness. "I created you."

"Me? What can I do?"

“You can do everything that *you can do*... same as everyone else. To whom much has been given, much is expected. To whom little has been given, little is expected.”

Jeremiah nodded, but was less than impressed with the One who had created all the heavens.

God continued, “There will always be pain and suffering on earth, Jeremiah. *Temporary* pain and suffering. That’s part of the Divine Design. But *everlasting* faith in the face of that *temporary* pain and suffering reveals my true glory.”

“So it’s all about you?”

“My glory isn’t for me.” God practically scoffed the words. “It’s for man... to make choices that lead to eternal salvation.”

God brought it down a notch. “Take your mom for instance. When she glorified me in all her earthly suffering, many who witnessed became believers and lived faithfully. So, yes, while her suffering glorified me, what it really did was save herself... and many others.”

As he contemplated God’s explanation, Jeremiah decided to ask point-blank the question that had consumed him for the past 17 years. “I still don’t understand why you allow innocent kids to die of cancer... yet everyone is still supposed to glorify you. Doesn’t that sound a bit twisted?”

“Look Jeremiah, I’m not up here moving chess pieces around on earth like life is some silly game and I’m bored. I’m not creating hurricanes, inflicting cancer, or picking lottery numbers. I created man and have given him everything he needs to succeed in carrying out my will. I intervene when I intervene and I have my reasons for everything I do.”

“So I guess it was your will to let my brother die and leave me and my parents behind to pick up the pieces?”

God was exasperated. “Oh, Jeremiah... you simply want to know too much for that simple little mind of yours. If only you could grasp the ignorance and futility of resisting my will.” God looked deeply into Jeremiah’s eyes and laughed out. “Fact is, that’s often when I do my best work.”

Jeremiah sensed a pivotal moment.

God continued to explain. “Take Caiaphas and the other high priests of the temple, for example. They had the audacity to accuse my son of blasphemy and turn Him over to Pilate to be put to death. They thought they were taking care of their so-called ‘Jesus problem’ and that killing one innocent man from Nazareth-- from which they said nothing good ever came-- would be no big deal. All so they could preserve their

temporary riches and their temporary hold over the people. But my son's dying was *my will-- not theirs--* and unbeknownst to them, their futile little minds were instrumental in carrying out my will. And now, they are merely footnotes in history, gnashing their teeth in Gehenna for all eternity."

"So was it your will for them to end up like that-- footnotes gnashing their teeth?"

"Absolutely not. My hope for all my children is salvation-- eternal life here with me. But that doesn't mean I *force* my will on man. I don't ravish, I woo. Man makes his choices freely, for love must be freely given, not coerced."

God leaned, now just inches away. "Listen Jeremiah-- when your brother died and I didn't intervene it meant one thing and one thing only: Joshua's salvation had come. He is exactly where I wanted him to be and exactly where *he* wants to be. End of issue. Know this Jeremiah-- every child who dies is here with me in heaven."

God smiled warmly and let that sink in.

"As for you and your parents, you were left behind-- not to pick up pieces-- but to save yourselves and others. Again, to do my will. Your mom and dad realized that and embraced it. You, on the other hand, not only resisted, but turned full force against me." God smiled knowingly. "As I knew you would. Good and bad, you were indeed made to feel deeply, Jeremiah. But that's also why I knew you would eventually come back to me. And when you did, you would be an even greater force in carrying out my will."

Jeremiah tried to sort out the puzzle. Even though his deep resistance to God had been of his own will, it had been purposeful... to God. Jeremiah just hadn't known it at the time and wouldn't know it until later. So, how would it all fit together? How could he become that even greater force of good?

"And here's the best news," God tacked on, "the more intense the battle, the greater the feeling of victory. So, as you will see, you've got all the makings of quite an interesting future in front of you... assuming you make the right choices."

Whoa! Jeremiah had to ask what all that meant. Unfortunately, when he tried to speak, no words came out. It was clear God was not entertaining any more questions.

God had the stage and He spoke out again, "Think, son. Your mother and brother are happy here with me-- where all wrongs are righted, where there is no pain and suffering-- for all eternity. Why isn't that enough for you?"

Jeremiah took a long breath as he pondered God's question. "I don't know," Jeremiah responded, now able to speak. "Maybe because I haven't seen my brother yet."

God nodded. "Fair enough."

After a moment of silence, God pointed toward the playing field. “Look out at the pitching mound, Jeremiah.”

Jeremiah turned and saw a rugged twenty some year-old man with a thick dark beard and long black hair flowing out from his cap. He looked part lumberjack, part middle linebacker. He also looked a lot like Jeremiah. Then, as if he’d been waiting for this exact moment, the pitcher looked directly at Jeremiah. When their eyes met, he broke into a wide smile that radiated with near-blinding brilliance. That’s when it fully hit Jeremiah-- Josh. It was Josh! It was really Josh... on the mound, less than 30 yards away!

The hair on Jeremiah’s neck stood up and he felt the breath leave his body as Josh tipped his hat and nodded at his older brother.

“How’s he look?” God asked.

“Oh, my God.” Jeremiah replied, his voice now trembling. “He, um, he looks amazing. *This* is amazing.” Jeremiah’s chest was heaving now and he gulped for air. He was speechless for a while, his thoughts on the memory of his frail brother in the hospital bed.

“This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Jeremiah finally said as tears streamed down his cheeks. How badly he wanted to run out on the field and hug the living brother of his who’d been dead for 17 years.

God grinned and handed Jeremiah a handkerchief. “I guess maybe pockets in these gowns aren’t such a bad idea... for visitors. Well, what are you waiting for... go give your brother a hug.”

Jeremiah didn’t need God to tell him twice. Like a cat, he leaped over the small wall that separated the first row of seats from the field and sprinted toward the mound. Josh sprinted, too, and the two brothers collided into each other’s arms amidst a roar from the crowd in what was surely the greatest meeting on the mound in baseball history!

After a while, Jeremiah released himself and took in his little brother. “Oh man, Josh, look at you. I can’t believe it... it’s you, it’s really you.”

Josh’s smile was as wide and bright as God’s mercy. “Believe it, bro.”

“Oh man, I’ve missed you so much.”

“I know. I’ve been watching you.” Josh swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Jeremiah, really sorry. I know it’s been really tough for you.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for, Josh. Absolutely nothing.”

“I just wish I could have been there for you. Seeing you in all that pain and confusion has been hard, real hard. I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to reach down and tell you I was okay. Not just okay, I’m great. I just want you to be great, too.”

“I’m great now,” Jeremiah beamed. He stepped back and took in his baby brother fully. “Look at you. You’re... you’re a man,” and without warning, Jeremiah broke down and was crying again.

Josh reached out and pulled him close. “It’s okay, bro, it’s okay. Compared to what I have now, that cancer was nothing. Absolutely nothing. I’d do it a million times over if I knew this was waiting for me. A million times...”

Jeremiah was still crying, now uncontrollably, both in happiness-- *his baby bro was great*-- and in deep sorrow and regret-- *if only he’d trusted God, maybe he could be here with his brother... for all eternity*. He didn’t want to be a footnote or a teeth-gnasher. He wanted to be that greater force *for* God.

Josh released him and took a step back. “Hey, Jeremiah, I love you bro, but I really need to go pitch. I’ve been looking forward to this day for 17 earth years.”

Through tears, Jeremiah smiled at his brother, walked back to God, sat down, and tried to sort out all that had just happened. In that one hug with his brother, 17 years of doubt and hate and anger had been wiped completely away. It was almost too much to process, too much to reconcile.

God broke the silence, “HmMMM. So, anything you want to say to me?”

Jeremiah turned and looked directly into God’s merciful blue eyes. “I’m sorry.” He started to break down. “I wish I never doubted you.” He was crying uncontrollably again.

God let him cry it out, then pulled him close. “I understand, Jeremiah. Believe me, son, I understand. I’ve seen and felt more pain than you will ever know... so, so much pain-- every hurt, every heartache, every stress and strain.” He let out a bottomless breath. “I know life is not always easy. I truly do. That’s why I invented grace and forgiveness. Without grace and forgiveness, there would just be hell.”

After a while, Jeremiah released and spoke out again. “Thank you... for bringing my brother here.”

“You are most welcome, Jeremiah.”

They sat in silence for a bit and Jeremiah thought about pain and suffering, grace and forgiveness, and glory to God.

As they watched Josh strike out Shoeless Joe Jackson, God smiled warmly at Jeremiah. “You do know it’s not too late for you, right?”

Jeremiah felt another injection of hope. “I guess. But I’ve done so many bad things... so many.”

God feigned a shocked look. “Really? Huh. I-did-not-know.” God winked. “Think, son... think. For once in your life, use that brain I gave you for something other than creating loud music and crappy lyrics. It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, it’s the sick.”

God leaned in and his sweet breath enveloped Jeremiah’s face. “Listen carefully: So long as you have a single breath, you have a choice... and hope. Got it?”

Jeremiah nodded as he breathed in God’s words of life. If he could turn a rock into a barking puppy, surely he could turn a sinning Goth rapper into a saint... right?

“But, I will say, you have dug yourself quite a hole... and unfortunately it’s not a foundation for a house here in heaven. On the plus side, I sense quite an interesting battle coming for the Rock God.”

And though Jeremiah didn’t fully understand, at least he still had hope.

God continued, “But you know I love a good story. And there is nothing-- absolutely nothing-- more powerful than redemption. So, we will see, won’t we?” God winked conspicuously again.

For the longest time, Jeremiah sat there, unable to take his eyes off God. How awesome it must have been to be the Creator of heaven and earth and mankind. Indeed, for a man whose claim to fame was the creation of a futile lie-- a satanic Goth rapper-- it was almost too much to fathom.

“Watch the game,” God finally said. “And yes, it is awesome to be me.”

Through the first six innings, Josh had struck out ten and the Saints were leading 4-0, thanks to a grand slam by Roberto Clemente. By then, Jeremiah had emptied two bowls of choco-popcorn.

In the top of the seventh, God looked at Jeremiah and said, “Seventh inning stretch coming up. You up for a little singing?”

“Excuse me, God?”

“Sing. You know... a song. It’s what I created you to do.”

“Me? What song could I sing?”

“How about Rape and Pillage?”

It sounded like a sick joke to Jeremiah. He hesitated. “Please, no, Lord.” Then he quickly remembered his promise-- to never again say ‘no’ to God. “But I will if that’s your will,” he tacked on as tears quickly filled his eyes.

God smiled... *atta boy*. “It’ll be okay. We’ll use your tune and my lyrics.”

Jeremiah dabbed his eyes with the handkerchief and nodded. “Thank you, God.”

God spoke, “Just say a prayer, listen to your heart, and do what you feel. That’s how you should live life on earth. When you have doubts or fears, that’s how to carry out my will.”

Jeremiah had never sung without knowing the lyrics beforehand; and he’d certainly never sung in front of a heavenly crowd of 6,242,356. But the God of Love had a way of putting him at ease, so after the third out, Jeremiah walked to home plate, excited to see what God had in store for him.

Unexpectedly, Josh walked off the mound and joined him. He put his arm around his big brother and pulled him close. “Word is you wanted to perform with me. How ‘bout we sing this one together?”

Jeremiah laughed out as if they were kids again. “I hope your voice is better now than it was 17 years ago.”

Josh winked and nodded confidently. “Oh, it is, big boy. You just wait. I have a heavenly voice now...”

The music started, Josh took the mic, smiled wide at Jeremiah, and sang out the new lyrics of the chorus to the tune of Rape and Pillage:

Oh, I don’t wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don’t wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

His voice *was* heavenly, and the words brought tears to Jeremiah’s eyes again as he gulped more of heaven’s air. The words were perfect, so very perfect.

Josh smiled knowingly into Jeremiah’s eyes, looked up and out at the crowd, and rapped enthusiastically to the beat: “Give it up for our brother Jeremiah, y’all... ‘cause he’s in God’s house today... and he wants to honor our Father with a little free-verse... straight from his heart. Brother Jeremiah, step up to the mic, please.”

Jeremiah took the mic, closed his eyes, and felt the beat as he swayed and bopped his head at home plate in heaven. It was beyond surreal. Then, he whispered a silent prayer, heard his heart whisper out, and the words and rap flowed smoothly from his lips:

Father God I am clay in your hands,
Help me to stay that way through all
life's demands,
'Cause they chip and they nag and they
pull at me,
And suddenly I ain't the man,
You made me to be.

Nodding and smiling and grooving with his big brother, Josh moved in close and they sang the chorus together:

Oh, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

Filled with the purest of love, Jeremiah rapped a second heartfelt verse:

Lord God, please raise me above
The road that is wide and filled with
self-love.
Empty me of hate, greed, and vanity,
And fill my heart with love like Thee,
Teach me to see as You see Me,
So I may live in sweet harmony.

Josh moved in close again and they sang out together, this time accompanied by a gospel chorus in the background:

Oh, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

And then on cue, the crowd joined in and the angelic voices of 6,242,356 souls filled heaven:

Oh, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

Through teary eyes, Jeremiah looked around with diamond-vision clarity in awe and wonder as the words reverberated throughout heaven. This, he clearly saw, was the music God had created him to create! And deep within his heart, he knew this was God's will for him.

And from the front row, God smiled at all his children.

TWENTY

“I still don’t understand why we had to leave before the game was over.”

God raised his eyebrows. “Do you have any idea what the traffic is like when six million people leave that place all at once?”

“Seriously?”

God’s laugh boomed out. “Of course not, Jeremiah. There’s no traffic in heaven. Truly, I say, you are one of my most lovable little *dumb shits*.” He shook his head and laughed again.

“Thank you, God.”

“The fact is, we have a few more stops to make.”

“Should I assume the Saints win?”

“Absolutely. No team from purgatory has ever won. We let them get a lead once in a while, you know, to make it interesting.”

God laughed. “One time we spotted them 17 runs going into the 9th. They got the first two outs and we proceeded to score 18. Talk about a heartbreaking loss. Especially since I have a standing offer that they’ll skip their remaining time in purgatory and advance directly to heaven if they ever win.”

“Sounds kind of mean-spirited.”

“Not at all, Jeremiah. They are merely reaping what they sowed. But eventually they’ll make it up here to the bigs... even that sneaky Ty Cobb. That little shit still sharpens his cleats before every game. But I guarantee one thing: he’ll never assault another handicapped fan again.” God winked.

“Why? What’d you do?”

“First of all, there are no handicapped souls here in heaven. But more importantly, I took him to the next place on our list. That got his attention.”

God had Jeremiah’s attention, too. And Jeremiah wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that. “What is it?”

“Remember that line I told you about... the one longer than the DMV... the one without hope?”

Jeremiah nodded nervously.

God blinked.

“Well, here it is,” God said, motioning to the right. Jeremiah turned and saw what appeared to be an endless snaking line of people.

As they walked toward the line, Jeremiah could see the people were weighed down by huge objects on their backs. The objects were alive-- animals of some sort-- and they snorted and honked and blathered, as if distressed or sending out a mating call. As they got closer, Jeremiah saw they were camels-- some babies, others full grown. And some of the full grown camels had grotesque humps upon humps upon humps.

Most in line were dressed exquisitely: the men perfectly groomed in their fashionable double-breasted suits, Gucci Jordaan loafers, and Rolexes; the women in beautiful dresses and colored silks and furs, their arms and throats and ears dripping with diamonds and jewels; others wore sports uniforms and military uniforms with medals stacked high; still others looked like movie stars and seemed almost bothered to be in line-- as if stars didn't wait in lines, even in heaven. Jeremiah even saw a few pairs of Saint Laurent Wyatt Leather Black Harness Boots. Unable to muster the energy to lift their heads and see God and Jeremiah, the people were stooped low, trying to keep from crumbling under the weight of the camels.

As God and Jeremiah approached the front of the line, there was a huge golden gate tended by a man holding a tiny object. Once at the gate, Jeremiah could see it was a small needle.

The gatekeeper called out, “Next.” He held the needle out conspicuously.

The well-dressed man in front of the line stepped forward, unloaded the camel from his back, and attempted to push it through the eye of that tiny needle. As he struggled, the camel snorted and honked and blathered louder and louder. Furiously, the man pushed and pushed amidst a shower of slobbering green spittle from the camel's nose and mouth.

After a few minutes of this noisy, messy, futile wrestling, the gatekeeper shook his head. “Nope.” He pointed to his left, away from the golden gate. Dejected, the man slung the camel onto his back, staggered to the left, and stepped into a dark wormhole. As the man disappeared, a blood curdling scream arose.

“Next.”

Jeremiah looked at God. “Wow! So it really is true about the camel and the needle...”

God nodded solemnly. He never liked watching this. “I don’t need filler in my bible, Jeremiah.”

“That man with the needle looks familiar,” Jeremiah remarked.

God’s face brightened notably. “That’s Danny Thomas. He was a bit before your time-- an actor and comedian from the 1960s and 70s. When his prayer to me was answered, he kept his promise. And when he founded St. Jude’s hospital he found true happiness and fulfillment. Better than that, by emptying himself of pride and selfishness on earth, I filled him with grace and love, and the camel on his back shrunk down to less than a pinpoint. That’s how he gained eternal life here with me.”

Jeremiah was lost in thought, wondering just how many humps his camel must have had.

God continued, “Every so often Danny mans the needle gate here as a reminder of what would have happened if he’d chosen wrongly with his free will.”

As they listened to the snorting and honking and blathering from the next camel, God noted the quizzical look on Jeremiah’s face.

“Ask and ye shall receive, Jeremiah,” God said.

“I don’t get it. I know man has free will, but you intervene sometimes... like when my plane was about to crash. Why?”

“Because I, too, have free will, Jeremiah, and sometimes I choose to exercise it. And like it or not, my free will trumps man’s. The fact that man can’t always understand me is just the way it is. Just like the sand crab can’t understand you, so you can’t understand me. As Saint Peter likes to say, ‘RHIP’.”

“Huh?”

“RHIP-- Rank Has Its Privileges.”

There was a long silence. Finally God chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Jeremiah asked.

“Sometimes man’s free will is not really as free as man thinks.”

“What do you mean?”

“For starters, I control all the circumstances in which man exercises”-- God made air quotes-- “his free will.” God elaborated. “Let’s say I wanted a certain someone to choose between me and the devil he supposedly”-- air quotes again-- “worshiped.”

Jeremiah was listening intently.

“I might pull the linkage pin of his starboard elevator at 25,000 feet. So, yes, you had free will that day, and if you’d chosen wrongly, you’d be standing in that long line right there... holding a camel with, let’s just say, *numerous* humps. You see, Jeremiah, sometimes I force man’s choice in order for my will to get carried out.”

“Wow. So you really did know I was going to cry out to you...”

“I told you, I heard the cries coming from your heart and soul. And when I listen-- which is always-- I do so intently and carefully. You and I both knew your life was a futile lie. It was time to get your life back on the right path... so long as you chose correctly in that final moment.”

God eyed Jeremiah solemnly. “Look, I’m not surprised very often. And by that, I mean never. Disappointed: yes. Saddened: yes. Surprised: no.”

Jeremiah squinted at the endless line before him. “But why me, Lord?” he said emotionally. “Why not one of them?”

“That’s a very good question, Jeremiah. Unfortunately, once again, the answer is not quite so simple. Suffice it to say that every person in that line made their choices while they walked the earth... same as Caiaphas and the other high priests.”

“But surely if they would have seen what I’ve seen they would have lived differently.”

God raised his eyebrows. “Who’s to say they didn’t see what you’ve seen?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I have given every one of my children enough evidence to convince anyone willing to believe, yet have also left some ambiguity so as to not compel the unwilling. As I told you, Jeremiah, I woo, not coerce. My expectations and the potential consequences are clear, and you have seen nothing that a willing believer has not, and could not, have seen. It’s all right here.” God held up the bible. “And when you leave, this will be all that you have. Same as all of them.”

God handed the bible to Jeremiah. “You better hold on to this, son, because I think you’re going to need it.”

Jeremiah tried to process what he was hearing. “But, I thought--”

God cut him off. “Someday it will all make sense to you... hopefully.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then I have no doubt you will be standing in that long hopeless line.” God sounded cold, callous. “Come now, there’s more for you to see.

As Jeremiah walked away, he turned back and looked at all those poor rich people in the endless line. Undoubtedly, while walking the earth, they’d had one thing in common: that feeling of power and superiority and arrogant importance. Sadly, they now had another: a humped camel that would only fit through a wormhole straight to Gehenna.

Jeremiah took an anxious breath and felt immeasurable fear. “Please, God,” he pleaded, “What is going to happen to me? Please tell me. Why me?”

God eyed Jeremiah. “You are going to be my modern day Paul,” God answered simply. “He was another who felt deeply.”

Jeremiah was confused.

God explained, “I chose Paul because he persecuted and killed my followers. Seemed like a bad choice at the time, right? Turned out pretty good, I think. Indeed, it’s the story of the great reversal... when a persecutor praises God, people take note. That same logic applies to a devil-worshipping Rock God. See? By all your choices up to this moment in time, you now carry around both a great opportunity and a heavy burden-- to carry out my will. And have no doubt, Jeremiah, my will can be very demanding. So, we will see how it works out, won’t we?”

A burden? And a heavy one at that... the words scared Jeremiah to his core.

“I told you, Jeremiah, ‘To whom much has been given, much is expected. To whom little has been given, little is expected.’ Like many of the people in the camel line, you have been given much... and much will be expected of you.”

Jeremiah tried to speak out again, but God held up his finger to his lips, and no words came from Jeremiah’s mouth.

“Come now,” said God, “I’m going to show you one of my favorite places and introduce you to one of my favorite people.”

And suddenly, heaven wasn’t so heavenly to Jeremiah. He now carried around a heavy burden, as if it were a grotesquely humped camel.

TWENTY ONE

Some steps later, they were standing in front of an enormous pearly-white wrought iron gate with a long line of people at the gate's entrance. Most wore ragged clothes, and many showed signs of disease, sickness, and malnutrition. And there were lots and lots of children.

God's face brightened noticeably as they approached the gate. Indeed, by the time they had reached the gate, He was aglow in a bright soothing light.

Standing before the gate was a kindly-looking man with a flowing white hair and beard. In his white cloak, he, too, glowed. Conspicuously, he held a large golden key.

God led Jeremiah up to the man. "Greetings, Peter," God sang out cheerfully.

Saint Peter smiled warmly. "Greetings, my Lord."

God motioned at Jeremiah. "Well, as promised, here he is..."

Saint Peter sized-up Jeremiah conspicuously. As he did, his warm look quickly disappeared and he didn't even attempt to hide his disdain. "Enjoying your visit, Jeremiah?" He by-and-large scoffed the words.

"Yes, sir."

"Call me Saint Peter. I work... for the Lord."

Jeremiah attempted a weak smile, but Saint Peter continued the cold, condemning stare.

God leaned in, lowered his voice, and whispered in Jeremiah's ear. "He doesn't like you."

Jeremiah's face dropped.

"I heard that, my Lord," Saint Peter called out.

"Well it's true," God replied.

"Yes, my Lord. But that doesn't mean he needs to know it."

“I think he could see it in your eyes and hear it in your voice. Am I right, Jeremiah?”

Jeremiah felt like he was caught in the middle of a weird heavenly game of tug-of-war, and he was the rope. Discretion being the better part of valor, he retreated to a nod, but kept it small and simple.

God’s eyes gleaned as he spoke to Saint Peter. “Did you like that one on the yacht?”

Saint Peter laughed a loud belly laugh that boomed. “Indeed, my Lord. Sometimes in life a man *does* need the right prop.” Saint Peter stared directly at the bible Jeremiah held in his hands. “And sometimes no prop is ever enough.”

Jeremiah was notably confused.

God leaned in and whispered in Jeremiah’s ear again. “The bible in your hands,” God explained. “Saint Peter doesn’t think it makes you look faithful.”

Saint Peter nodded gently as Jeremiah looked his way.

Jeremiah wanted to leave. *Why was he here?*

God motioned to the line and spoke directly to Saint Peter. “We’re going to have a big back-up if you don’t get back to carrying out my will.”

“Yes, Lord.”

God leaned in and whispered to Jeremiah, “Watch this.”

Saint Peter walked to the front of the line and took the hand of a ragged, frail, old woman. He led her to a huge, human-sized golden two-pan balancing scale and opened a large leather bound book with golden letters on the cover: The Book of Life.

Saint Peter began to read from the book, “Sister Rita Maria Sanchez. You faithfully served the Lord God for 75 years, 2 months, and 24 days. You let his son Jesus into your heart and emptied yourself for God’s glory, carrying out his will on earth. Please step onto the scale, sister.”

Saint Peter guided the woman to one of the pans. As she stepped onto it, it tipped down with a great force. Simultaneously, Saint Peter inserted the key and the pearly gates swung open. Bright golden light flooded the gate entrance amidst a chorus of angelic voices.

Saint Peter smiled warmly at the woman and motioned for her to step off the scale and enter. As the grateful old woman stepped through the gate, she was transformed into

the beautiful young woman she once was, her rags turned into a glorious glowing gown. She looked back at God, smiling radiantly.

God smiled back and flashed a thumbs up. “Well done, good and faithful servant,” He called out proudly.

God turned to Jeremiah. “Let’s follow Sister Rita Maria for a bit. There’s something up here I want you to see.”

Jeremiah followed God through the pearly gates.

As they walked, God called back to Saint Peter, “Don’t forget about our bet.”

Saint Peter laughed out. “Can’t wait to see what happens,” he replied. Saint Peter cast a final glare at Jeremiah and called out, “Good luck, Jeremiah.” Then he laughed out like he knew a secret.

TWENTY TWO

As she continued past the pearly gates, Sister Rita Maria was greeted by a smiling crowd of friends and relatives. Jeremiah wasn't sure why they were following this woman, because he was sure he'd never seen or known her before. But then again he hadn't seen or known Beth before either. Had he somehow been responsible for this woman's death, too? Was he a mass murderer? Whatever the case, perhaps a more troubling and more immediate concern was Saint Peter's attitude toward him.

Jeremiah spoke out, "What's the deal with Saint Peter? Why doesn't he like me?"

"Perhaps a better question you should ask yourself is, 'Why should he?'"

God didn't mince words, and Jeremiah thought about the multitude of answers to that question.

"Don't hurt yourself thinking too much about that one," God said, intervening. "The fact is, Saint Peter has absolutely no tolerance for people like you."

"People like me?"

God nodded. "Yes, people who have been given great gifts from me and choose to use those gifts to destroy, rather than build, my kingdom."

So much for grace, thought Jeremiah. Deep down, however, he couldn't argue with the reasoning. Not now, at least. Not when he knew there really was a good God and eternal life in heaven. Jeremiah was at a loss for words.

God continued, "Day after day, Saint Peter sees the downtrodden-- the poor, the lame, and the sick-- the least of the earth; and as he watches them step onto that scale and become the first, it affects him in two profoundly polar-opposite ways. While he's obviously joyful beyond measure for those people, he's-- for lack of a better word-- disgusted by the people who've squandered their God-given gifts. In Saint Peter's eyes, the people with those God-given gifts should not only be in *his* line, they should be *the ones tipping the scale the deepest*. And it bothers him to the core when they fail."

Jeremiah couldn't argue. He felt regret.

"He just has so much love in his heart and it breaks a little bit each time he sees someone like you. That's the long and short of it."

Jeremiah became quickly depressed.

God let him stew a bit. “Aren’t you going to ask me about the bet Saint Peter and I made?”

“I don’t know, God. I’m pretty sick with myself right now.” Jeremiah thought about it a bit more. “And anyways, what kind of idiot bets against you?”

God laughed. “Off the top of my head, I can think of one: a scared and lonely rock star who claims Satan his king and proclaims himself the Rock God.” God smiled. “Isn’t that what you’ve been doing the past 17 years-- betting that I didn’t exist and there wasn’t eternal life in my kingdom after death?”

Jeremiah hadn’t really considered it that way.

God continued, “In fact, the only people who don’t bet against me are the ones who surrender to me, accept my son Jesus into their hearts, and live a life that honors me and carries out my will.”

“So why does Saint Peter bet against you?”

God laughed. “That’s easy. Because I let him win once and a while. You know, like a parent who lets their kid win at cards or chess. Same thing. Saint Peter just never knows when it’s going to be. That’s what keeps things interesting. What fun would it be to win every time?”

God smiled as if lost in a memory. “Remember when the Jets won the Super Bowl?”

Jeremiah nodded. Evidently God didn’t need to call it the ‘Big Game.’

“I told Saint Peter I’d take the Jets. He jumped at that one... thought I was throwing one his way. Hah!”

“So what’s the bet now?” Jeremiah asked.

“*You’ll see.*” God winked. “It involves you.” God mused now, “I just hope it doesn’t kill you.”

Jeremiah didn’t like the sound of that. There was certainly a lot of mystery involving God. Trust God, he reminded himself, trust God.

They continued to follow Sister Rita Maria down a golden road with diamond inlay. People walking toward them held golden plates with exquisite pieces of red velvet cake, and Jeremiah looked at them with fascination. They were all so happy and content. No matter what they’d been on earth-- poor, sick, smart, dumb-- none of that mattered

anymore. They were ‘heaveners’ now, their future endless and fantastic, and he yearned to be one of them. Unfortunately, when he tried to picture himself as one of them, he failed miserably. In his heart and soul, he knew he didn’t belong here.

God held out his hand and a plate with red velvet cake appeared. He offered it to Jeremiah. “Cake?”

Jeremiah took the plate. “Thank you, God.”

“Merry Christmas, son. Enjoy.”

God smiled as He watched Jeremiah eat. “Never pass on cake, Jeremiah. You never know when it might be your last meal for a while.” God winked conspicuously.

By now they were walking through a quaint town, with cobblestone streets and Tudor houses. It looked like a Bavarian village. They passed an especially cute little Gingerbread-looking house with a sign above the door that said, “Eternal Timekeeper.” A line of people glided through the house on a golden moving sidewalk. They wore headphones, as if listening to a guided tour. Jeremiah spotted Sister Rita Maria in the line.

“What’s that?” Jeremiah asked.

“This is one of the first stops for folks after they arrive in heaven. Go take a look.”

Jeremiah walked up to the window of the house, peered in, and saw what appeared to be the missing link-- a half-monkey/half-man sitting at a desk in front of an old manual typewriter. The monkey-man watched Curious George on t.v. as it banged away on typewriter keys. When the page was filled, the monkey-man knuckle-walked the paper to a man sitting inside a booth with glass walls. On a shelf behind the man was a huge leather-bound book entitled, ‘The Complete and Unabridged Works of William Shakespeare.’

The man looked at the paper, shook his head, balled it up, and threw it onto a huge pile. The monkey-man knuckle-walked back to its little desk and banged away again.

“I don’t get it,” Jeremiah said to God.

“Eternity is such a difficult concept. This helps the newbies grasp it.”

“How?”

“When CoCo there successfully recreates the entire works of Shakespeare, without so much as one mistake, we will have reached eternity.”

Ah... so this was CoCo.

God laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Jeremiah asked.

“The first century he just urinated and defecated on the typewriter. Took him nearly ten centuries to learn how to load paper and take it out. But he’s getting better. In fact, back in 1929 he actually got the first two lines of Macbeth right.”

Now God took on the form of William Shakespeare and began quoting Macbeth like a Shakespearean actor, “When shall we three meet again... in thunder, lightning, or in rain?” Then, back to God, he mused, “If only man could grasp the concept of eternity in heaven-- the enormity of it -- he’d live so differently on earth. He wouldn’t resist.”

God motioned to the back door. “Come on inside. There’s something else I want you to see.”

As he stepped inside the house, Jeremiah immediately grabbed for his nose. “Oh! Geez.”

God chuckled. “Now you’ll never have to wonder what centuries of monkey urine and feces smells like. I could get it out, but CoCo actually likes it.”

God motioned to the man in the glass booth. “Bob, there, prefers that smell-free booth. That’s his purgatory. Now you understand why we have the tour stay on that side of the glass...”

God pointed at the t.v. and a new station clicked on. “This is what I want you to see. Trust me, you’ll like it.”

A newscaster on the screen spoke out, “Our final story of the night comes from the small island of Los Testigos, just off the coast of Venezuela. Our Jackie Beck has the story of one very lucky catch. Jackie.”

On the screen, a female reporter was standing in front of a huge fish hanging from a weighing hook on a pier. She began her report.

“Good evening, Brian. It was one very lucky catch indeed. Behind me is the 400 pound drum that a group of local fisherman from a tiny fishing village on Los Testigos caught yesterday. And what they found in the drum’s belly is the real story.”

The screen showed the image of Scratch’s “Rock God” necklace.

“Inside was the necklace that Goth rock star Scratch Hatchet was wearing nearly two months ago when he jumped off his yacht into the Atlantic and is presumed to have

drowned. With over 1,000 diamonds set into nearly four pounds of 18-karat gold, the necklace is valued at more than 1.5 million dollars. The lucky villagers say they'll sell the necklace and use the money to pay for medicine, a wastewater treatment system, and a solar energy system for their village."

"Hmmm," said God, "What do you know, I guess I was right-- you could support an entire village with that little trinket."

Jeremiah smiled at his wondrous God.

"Good people in Los Testigos," God commented. "You don't remember any Spanish from high school, do you?"

Jeremiah shook his head sideways.

God spoke, "Los Testigos... *The Witnesses*. I love witnesses. Plus, they're fishermen... and you know how much I love fishermen."

Jeremiah still didn't understand how he was going to be a fisher of men, but he did have trust.

"You should go to Los Testigos sometime."

Jeremiah nodded, unsure what that meant. Evidently he and his heavy burden weren't going to be staying in heaven.

They left the timekeeper's house and walked on.

TWENTY THREE

As they walked, Jeremiah heard music coming from the distance and soon they were in the middle of a festival with street performers, dancers, face painting, cotton candy, and smiling ‘heaveners’ glowing in their gowns as far as the eye could see.

Ahead of them, Jeremiah spotted a beautiful amphitheater carved into cavernous red rocks. Two musicians were on stage playing before a packed crowd.

They walked toward the stage and Jeremiah recognized Beth as one of the two performers. Next to her was a familiar face-- the face of a Beetle.

“Whoa! Is that John Lennon?”

“Imagine,” God said, with a simple nod. “Great song. They’re going to play it later.”

Jeremiah watched in awe. Behind the stage, name after name scrolled down a huge screen.

“If we hadn’t detoured to see CoCo you could have seen Peter, Paul, and Mary... the *real* Peter, Paul, and Mary. Now that trio can harmonize. Even I get goosebumps when I hear the Virgin Mary sing ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’.”

Jeremiah wished they hadn’t stopped to see CoCo.

Jeremiah heard Beth at the mic. “This is a new song I started a while back. A friend helped me finish it recently. I hope you like it.”

Then she and John Lennon began to play the song Jeremiah and Beth had written on the sailboat ride. Beth sang out,

You are not alone,
If you are lonely,
When you feel afraid,
You’re not the only.
We are all the same,
In need of mercy,
To be forgiven and be freed.
It’s all you got to lean on,
But thank God it’s all you need.

“This is frickin’ awesome,” Jeremiah blurted out.

“Congratulations, Jeremiah,” God said simply.

Jeremiah was sure God was congratulating him for helping Beth with the song.

God continued, “I do believe that’s the first time frickin’ has ever been said in heaven.” God chuckled.

As usual, God kept Jeremiah guessing.

“What are all those names up there on the screen?” Jeremiah asked.

“Those are my children... who were lost but now are found. They are true believe now... and they’ve surrendered to me. This is what I like to call the Amen Celebration.”

As if cued, Beth was singing the song’s chorus:

And all the People Said Amen.
And all the people said Amen.
Give thanks to the Lord
For his love never ends.
And all the people said Amen.

God spoke, “Nice job helping Beth with that song. Perfect lyrics, too. See, you *can* write a good song without putting me down.”

“You’re way too cool, God.”

“I strive for cool.” He winked. “Hey, you know what would be really cool to see?”

“I’m afraid to guess,” Jeremiah replied.

“Your name... scrolling down that screen. That would make me and your mom and Joshua proud.”

“It will, God. I know it will.”

“We shall see.” Then God pointed in the distance. “Come, there’s something up ahead I want you to see.”

Soon they were walking past the front gate of an amusement park that stretched as far as the eye could see. Kids ran around everywhere, laughing and yelling in pure joy. The rides looked like they defied gravity and earthly concepts.

God gestured toward the golden entrance gate. “Welcome to God-Isney-World,” He announced sheepishly, almost embarrassed by the name.

“God-Isney-World?”

“Yes, I know, I don’t like the name, either. But it’s still better than Disney-Heaven, which is what that Walt fella wanted to call it. I tell you, that man’s a genius in his own mind when it comes to designing theme parks, but he has this insatiable need to put his name on absolutely everything. Can you imagine heaven getting second billing to Disney? I threatened to make him ride ‘It’s a Small World’ for a few decades. That got his attention. So, in the end, we compromised. He gets to tell all his friends it’s pronounced “Go-Disney-World”-- God winked-- “but we all know the truth. Other than that, he did a pretty good job on this place. And because we don’t have gravity or friction or other earthly constraints, the rides really rock.”

Jeremiah was listening, but at the same time, trying to understand why God was showing this to him. He wondered if the amusement park might have something to do with the bet with Saint Peter. “I’m trying to understand why you’re showing this to me.”

“One, I thought you’d be interested in seeing this, especially since Joshua spends so much time here. And two, where we’re going is right up ahead.” God pointed at a towering mountain up ahead.

“I entered you in a race... to the top.”

TWENTY FOUR

Now at the base, Jeremiah stared at the imposing mountain. With its sheer vertical face, it rose like the Matterhorn's great granddaddy into the air and out of sight. It looked like something only God or Spiderman could scale. To others, death not only looked possible, it looked probable.

"To the top?" Jeremiah asked nervously.

God smiled and raised his eyebrows.

"Are you going to snap your fingers or blink and just magically get me up there?"

"Heavens no, Jeremiah. It's all about the journey. Plus, some of the scenes are to-die for." God laughed.

Jeremiah shrugged, certain it was related to the bet with Saint Peter. No matter, he decided, as long as God was with him, he'd be fine.

"It can be an incredible journey... but it can twist and turn and be treacherous, too... you'll see." God winked. "For a few, it's relatively easy to reach the top; for others, unfortunately, they never make it."

It sounded a bit ominous, and as he looked at the towering mountain, Jeremiah couldn't fathom anyone reaching the top.

God continued to explain. "I probably should have mentioned-- the back side of the mountain isn't nearly as steep. Plus, there are paths to choose."

That sounded better. "And it's a race? Who am I racing against?" Jeremiah asked.

"Yourself."

"How? What's that mean?"

God's eyes twinkled. "You'll see."

Of course.

"I have a few other things I need to tend to," God added, "so you'll be with your mom at the start. And Joshua will join you for a bit later on."

Jeremiah didn't understand, but nodded. He was excited to spend some more time with his mom and Josh. He had a million more things to ask them.

"Oh, and I have another surprise for you, too. Your dad will be there, too."

"My dad?"

God smiled and nodded. "You'll see."

Did this mean his dad had died?

"You can decide if you want me along for the latter part of the hike," God added, with a final curious grin.

Jeremiah thought it sounded silly. Of course he wanted God with him. Why wouldn't he?

God pointed to a path that led to the back side of the mountain. "Choose well, my son."

They seemed like strange parting words.

Jeremiah waved good-bye and took the first big step onto the path...

...and found himself squished into a baby carrier against his mother's bosom. She was humming "How Much is that Doggie in the Window?", and the sound of her voice gave him comfort. Jeremiah's dad walked alongside them. Baby Jeremiah peeked out from the carrier to see a wide, gently sloped path bathed in soft, soothing light. Although he didn't know where they were going, he trusted his mom and dad and felt no fear. He really didn't understand the big world out there. He was tired. So he closed his eyes and took a nap.

Around the bend they walked...

...and now Jeremiah toddled along the path next to his mom and dad, with his brother Josh squished in the baby carrier. Although the path was smooth, he'd learned that falls happen, as evidenced by the scar on his knee. Thankfully, his mother was always there to pick him up and show him the way. By God's grace they would make it to the top of the mountain, she said, and Jeremiah had no reason to doubt her. Life was better than ever.

Around another the bend...

...and the two brothers were all smiles as they ran playfully along the path and threw rocks over the mountain's edge. They were higher on the mountain now, but

probably not high enough that a fall could severely hurt them. No matter, their mom and dad protected them like a guardrail, and life was a grand adventure, the journey a beautiful hike through God's beautiful world. And Jeremiah was thankful to have a brother along to experience all the majesty. Life just kept getting better and better. What a wonderful, wonderful world it was.

But then the path turned quickly...

...and it darkened and grew dreary as a chilly wind blew cold misery. When Jeremiah looked around, Josh was conspicuously missing. Missing, too, was the spring in Jeremiah's step and a part of his soul. Life was no longer fun, the world no longer wonderful, and he was beginning to question the path. But his mom and dad, although looking more worn, pressed them onward and upward. The path was steeper here-- dangerous even-- with rocks and potholes everywhere. Jeremiah wondered why the path wasn't properly maintained. Why weren't there guardrails? Did God no longer care?

Jeremiah tripped and fell a few times, and when his mother tried to help him, he refused her help. By now, he didn't care about reaching the top. In fact, he was pretty sure there was no top... and perhaps, no God. After all, when he looked, he could no longer see the top of the mountain or God. Indeed, they might just well have been chasing the wind on this path.

Yet they trudged on...

...and as they rounded the next bend, Jeremiah pulled back the long hair from his teenage eyes to see the path diverge. To the right, the path was quiet and narrow and seemingly not well travelled; to the left, the path was shiny and wide, and Jeremiah could hear music and laughter. When Jeremiah glanced at his mom and dad, they motioned to the right.

Having lost confidence in everything-- in his parents, in the path they'd chosen for them, and in their absentee God-- Jeremiah looked left. The new path *had to be* better than the lies, pain, and tears of the old path. It just had to be.

And so without any hesitation Jeremiah ran to the left, leaving his parents behind in a trail of dust, his curses, and his mom's tears. Over his mom's cries, Jeremiah ran as quickly as his feet would carry him and never looked back.

The shiny path was awesome and exciting. It even had magical potions that allowed Jeremiah to forget the pain and lies and tears of the first path. There was so much more, too-- seductive girls, boatloads of money, fast cars and freedom, and lots and lots of other things. Indeed, the shiny path was everything the first path wasn't. Of course there were no free lunches on the shiny path, but Jeremiah didn't care. He didn't need what little soul he had left. Plus, he didn't need to reach the top of the mountain... if there even was one. The top couldn't have been as great as the shiny path.

Along the new path, Jeremiah became a new man-- Scratch; and he danced and sang and drank and smoked his way along the shiny path...

...until it lost its shine.

The magical potions, it turned out, were really not so magical; the girls not so seductive; and no amount of money could buy the things that really mattered, because no thing mattered that much. Indeed, beneath its crumbling façade, the shiny path was nothing more than a twisted maze of self-love and dead ends, with seemingly no way out. And so Scratch became increasingly scared and lonely.

And he ran.

But with each stride the path crumbled a bit more. Unable to escape the decay, Scratch tripped and fell... and sank. The shiny path, he now knew, had been built on quicksand, and the more he struggled, the more he sank; and the more he sank, the more he struggled. It was futility that would lead to certain eternal death.

Buried to his chest and exhausted, he finally stopped struggling. As the sinking slowed, he had time to think...

...of Josh. Was it possible that Josh had somehow run ahead when he went missing? Could he perhaps have reached the top?

Only one thing was certain: Scratch had picked the wrong path.

Dumb shit.

Now buried up to his head and still slowly sinking, he suddenly felt the edge of something hard in the sand. He tunneled his fingers through the wet sand and grabbed it. Whatever it was, it felt heavy, like the weight of the world. With all the strength he could muster, Scratch freed his hand and held it up in front of his face. It was a golden cross necklace.

Huh? What was that doing there?

It looked like the necklace his mother had always worn, and his thoughts turned to her. Maybe she had reached the top, too? Resigned to his fate, he asked himself one final question as he lay dying there: what would his mother do? Thankfully, that answer was easy: she'd pray. In fact, he could still hear her voice, "Now just remember boys, when you don't know what to do, pray. Just tell God whatever you are feeling. He'll hear you."

With his last breath, Scratch called out, "I'm done running, God. If I am to die here, then I will die praising Your great name. I surrender... my soul is Yours. I will trust in You..."

And when Scratch closed his eyes, for the last time probably, he felt a sense of peace come over him and heard faint singing from above. He opened his eyes and looked up...

...and a strong, steady hand reached down. It grabbed his hand, pulled him up, and wiped away the sand and his tears. Then Jeremiah was set back down where the path had diverged.

Safe for the moment, Jeremiah said a prayer of thanks. He may not have understood everything, but in a binary world of right/wrong, left/right, and God/No God, knowing what not to do was as good as knowing what to do. And knowing now that the path to the left had been wrong, he took a deep breath and set off to the right-- on the quiet and narrow path. Soon enough, he found his dad.

Although the quiet and narrow path had its share of rocks and obstacles, he no longer felt alone, and when he tripped, someone was always there to help him up. And when someone else tripped, he was there to help them. Along the way, he sang joyous songs of praise to the Lord. Happy, shiny people followed him and sang along.

As he climbed, he came upon other wide and glamorous and exciting paths. "Been there, done that," he said with a knowing smile. Higher and higher he rose and his peace became greater and greater. And now, when he looked out from his path, he saw endless fields of gold and skies of blue. *This*, he knew beyond doubt, *was the right path*.

But he was getting tired.

Barely able to move, he said a quick prayer, put one foot in front of the other, and trusted in the Lord. His stride got shorter and shorter and slower and slower, and then, just when he thought he couldn't go another step, he heard singing.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
Who are torn apart.
Blessed are the persecuted,
And the pure of heart.
Blessed are the people longing,
For another start.
For this is the kingdom,
The kingdom of God.

And all the People Said Amen.
And all the people said Amen.
Give thanks to the Lord
For his love never ends.
And all the people said Amen.

And then, with his remaining strength, he managed that one last final step...

...and he was standing atop the mountain!

There too, like a beacon of grace and hope, was God, waiting for him, smiling. God flashed Jeremiah a wide smile and a big thumbs-up. “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

The sight of God was all Jeremiah needed and he was quickly on his knees, crying in joyous happiness. After a while, he collected himself and smiled back at God. “Wow! That was quite a journey. Thanks for picking me up when I got lost.”

“Anytime, my son, anytime. Never forget-- I love you.”

TWENTY FIVE

“So, did you enjoy that?” God asked as he reached down and helped Jeremiah to his feet.

Jeremiah hesitated. “Um, yes and no.”

God smiled. “Let me guess, you enjoyed the good parts of your life and didn’t enjoy the bad parts.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s because you made those same wrong choices.”

Jeremiah looked at God quizzically.

“You do understand what that was, right?”

“Sort of. A journey that depicted my life. Right?”

“Basically.” God explained. “You hiked the metaphoric version. I thought that would be less-- shall I say-- emotionally scaring for you. But you’re right, it was an opportunity for you to relive your life’s steps and the paths chosen.”

“I still don’t understand what the purpose was?”

“It’s a long story, actually. But I’ll give you the condensed version.” God leaned in. “I was talking with that Walt Disney when he first arrived, and he just couldn’t stop gushing about how great his rides at Epcot are.” Now God rolled his eyes. “Well, as you probably know, I’m not a big fan of self-promotion, so I just stood there and listened politely. Plus, I try and save my judgements for things that really matter.” God winked.

“Truth is, Epcot needs a lot better rides for the price Disney charges. But that’s another discussion. Anywho, Walt was saying he wanted to build rides like Soarin’ and Test Track up here so folks could experience what it’s like to hang glide and drive a race car.”

Now God smiled wide. “After I told him we have *real* hang gliding and *real* race car driving that kind of depressed him a bit. But, it did give me a great idea. And that was the genesis of ‘Mount Mulligan’.”

“Mount Mulligan?”

“Un-huh. That’s the name of the ride.” God explained. “You know, in golf, sometimes you take a mulligan... a do-over. That’s what Mount Mulligan is-- a chance for folks to relive their lives and see how things might have been different if they’d chosen differently.”

“So it’s an amusement ride?”

“Yes and no.”

“I kind of hate when you say ‘yes and no’.”

“I know,” God replied, grinning sheepishly, “That’s why I say it so often around you.”

Jeremiah couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I’m with billions of people when they take their last breath and think their last thought, Jeremiah, and what I see most often is regret... a wish that they’d made different choices in their lives.”

Jeremiah knew regret well. And he wasn’t even on his last thought. Hopefully.

“Mount Mulligan gives folks a chance to relive their lives and make different choices if they want to... so they can see how their lives would have turned out if they’d chosen differently. Of course all the folks here in heaven eventually found their way, so for them it’s really just for fun. I let the purgatory folks on the ride once in a while. For them, it’s pretty emotional.”

“You said it was a race, too?”

“Life is a race, Jeremiah-- a race to surrender to me and carry out my will before you die. Win that race and you make it to the top of the mountain. Lose that race and... well, you know... you get in that long line with that humpty humped camel on your back. And unfortunately, that’s not a ride... nor is it fun.”

“And I got the metaphoric version?”

God nodded. “The ride can either be life-like or metaphoric... symbolic. The symbolic version is less, shall I say, emotional. Plus, it compresses time. In the life-like version it plays out in essentially real-earth time. If I’d let you do that, folks would be calling you Rip Van Rock God.”

Confusion filled Jeremiah’s face.

God was enjoying Jeremiah's confusion. "I told you, time is different here. A day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day."

"Amazing."

"Walt thought so when I took him on it. I will say this: he never gushes about *his* rides anymore." God chuckled. "I'll let you in on another secret. There's a setting that allows folks to choose someone else's life. That's the *really* fun version."

"So a person can relive someone else's life?"

"Exactly. Take Joshua for instance. He picks your life most of the time. He gets to experience what you experience if he chooses what you've chosen. Plus, he gets to see how your life would have turned out if different choices had been made. Suffice it to say, he has a pretty good idea what you've been through these past 17 years."

"Oh my God..."

"Yes?"

"I meant 'wow' again."

God smiled. "I know. I just love answering you when you say that." God winked. "Neat, huh?"

"I imagine it can be upsetting."

"Momentarily. But as soon as folks step off the mountain they're back in heaven proper. And we don't have feelings of regret or tears of sadness here-- only tears of joy. But it's still a wildly popular ride."

"I can imagine."

"I will say I've been a bit intrigued by the number of folks who want to experience Hitler's life."

"Who's the most popular?"

"That's easy. My son... Jesus."

That made sense to Jeremiah.

God continued, "You'll be interested in hearing the top 10: "Jesus, Saint Paul, Marilyn Monroe, William Shakespeare, Saint Theresa, Martin Luther King, Katharine

Hepburn, Tom Brady, Hitler, and... drumroll please... Scratch Hatchet. How about that... the Rock God made the top 10. Right after Adolph.”

Jeremiah wasn't sure how to react.

“Seems like a lot of folks want to see what it's like to live on the wild side... especially a lot of the older souls. You're in the top five with the pre-1900 crowd.”

God laughed. “So you got that goin' for you, which is nice...”

Jeremiah was at a loss for words.

“But you are trending down. You used to be ahead of Adolph.”

Jeremiah wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

God continued, “You know whose name I'd like to see in the top 10?”

Jeremiah shook his head.

“Jeremiah Willy Fisher. I'd like to see you knock Scratch out of the top 10.”

Jeremiah couldn't fathom how that would happen.

God continued, “I guess we'll see how things change when Scratch gets back to earth.”

Jeremiah's mind kicked into high gear. “I'm confused. I thought Scratch was dead?”

God raised his eyebrows. “Is he?”

Jeremiah's face drooped in confusion.

“The choice will be yours. *You'll see*,” God added with a knowing smile and quick wink.

Of course.

“Can't you just tell me?”

“What fun is it to know the ending? Like I told you, Jeremiah, it's all about the journey. Just like Mount Mulligan.”

“I don’t know about fun, but it would sure be a lot less stressful.” Jeremiah remembered something else. “What about that bet with Saint Peter? Did he bet that I wouldn’t make it to the top of the mountain?”

God laughed. “That wasn’t the bet.”

“Really? Then what was?”

“You mean, ‘what is’? That bet is yet to come.”

“I’m so confused.”

“I know. But hopefully it will all be clear after your exit interview.”

“My exit interview?”

“Un-huh. *You’ll see.*”

TWENTY SIX

God took Jeremiah by the hand and in a blink they were sitting in a fine mahogany-paneled office with beautiful stained-glass windows that allowed all of heaven's light to flood in. The light picked up on the colors in the glass and Jeremiah felt like he was sitting in the midst of a rainbow. God sat back in a leather chair, his feet propped onto his desk, his face bathed in rainbow lights. Across the desk, Jeremiah sat on a plain wooden chair. To an outsider, it would have looked like Jeremiah was interviewing with the CEO of The Skittles Corporation.

"Okay, then. Time for your exit interview," God began. "This is your opportunity to ask any remaining questions and to provide feedback. God said it as if reading a script for an official transcript. "Okay?"

Jeremiah's head was swimming. *No, it's not okay. What was happening to him? More importantly, what was going to happen to him?* "Um, I don't know."

God laughed. "If you don't know what to ask, just tell me what you're feeling." He paused, "Or, you can just remain quiet and we'll skip ahead to the last part."

"I'm scared... and overwhelmed. All I know is that I don't want to leave. I never want to leave you... or here.

"Any person with an imagination would be scared and overwhelmed, Jeremiah. And by now, you must know that you never have to leave me." God paused and Jeremiah felt relief. Unfortunately, the relief was short-lived. "But you do have to leave *heaven*," God tacked on.

"Why? Can't I stay? Please, Lord? I fit in real well."

God shook his head. "You have yet to be judged, so you have no idea whether or not you fit in well. Is that what you want? To be judged now?"

Jeremiah was shaking all over. "No, Lord. Please, no. I fear my judgment."

"As you should," God replied with a knowing nod. "You've made some very bad choices up to now. Plus, my work and your story are not complete yet."

Jeremiah had a flashing thought that he hoped would save him. "I surrender to you, God," he blurted out with as much sincerity as one can have while blurting. "I proclaim that you are my heavenly Father and your son Jesus is my savior."

God's laugh was not the reaction Jeremiah envisioned. "You can't surrender here in heaven, Jeremiah. That would be cheating. You must surrender back on earth." God let out an exasperated breath. "You never cease to amaze me. You *really are* a dumb shit."

Jeremiah nodded profusely. "I will, Lord. I'll surrender as soon as I get back to earth. I'll never forget this."

God laughed out again, this time even louder.

Jeremiah didn't understand, but he knew the booming laugh didn't mean good news was coming. "What, Lord? What's so funny?"

"I can't let you remember any of this."

"What do you mean? Why not?" Jeremiah was freaking out now.

"Because I've spoon-fed you. What would it prove if I drop you back on earth and you just regurgitate it back to me?"

"It would prove that I listened and understood... and that I love you and want to be with you. That's a lot." Sadly, Jeremiah knew it was futile to argue with God.

God shook his head. "No. It would just prove that maybe you're *not really* as big a dumb shit as I've portrayed you. And that's not the test you must pass. You must live by faith, not by sight. Heaven is only for the truly faithful."

"Then why did you bring me here?" Jeremiah asked, frustrated.

"I told you, Jeremiah, I have chosen you... to be a fisher of men. That is my will for you. My most vocal critic of the 21st century will be a fisher of men and lead many to eternal salvation." God paused and grinned. "Assuming you make the right choices in the future..."

"What does that mean... fisher of men?" Jeremiah asked, completely and utterly frustrated.

"Your job is to figure that out for yourself. But I will be with you... if you decide you want me with you. And if you do, and do everything that is expected of you, you will see me again." Now God smiled warmly. "I promise. Plus, between us boys, I will say I have truly enjoyed being with you. If nothing else, you amuse me."

"But how can I figure out what that means when I won't be able to remember any of this? That doesn't seem fair."

“Let me decide what’s fair, Jeremiah. I told you, I’ll give you everything you need when you need it. You just need to open up your heart and let me in.”

“I have to come back here, God. It’s just too amazing...”

Go raised his eyebrows. “And you haven’t even seen the real deal,” God remarked nonchalantly.

“What’s that mean?”

“You’ve only seen what I’ve allowed you to see, Jeremiah-- the smallest, thinnest, sliver really. If I showed you more... well, you might explode... Saint Peter and I seem to have a little disagreement as to what will happen.”

Jeremiah’s mind kicked into high gear. “Is that what the bet between you and Saint Peter is about?”

God smiled knowingly. “Very good, Jeremiah. There’s hope for you yet.” God paused. “So, what do you say... do you really want to see the real deal? Do you want to see more of heaven?”

“Can I ask you a question first?”

God supplied the answer. “I’m betting you won’t explode. Because I think there’s enough goodness deep inside you.” God paused. “But then again, I do throw bets once in a while.” Now God’s eyes sparkled.

“Okay, then, I do, Lord. I really do want to see more of heaven.”

“Be careful what you wish for, okay?”

Jeremiah nodded. He trusted God.

“Okay, then, let’s do it.” God placed his hands on either side of Jeremiah’s head and Jeremiah’s eyes closed and his body wilted, as if he’d been sedated.

“I’m going to gradually turn your senses back on to ease you into it,” God announced, sounding like an anesthesiologist.

Jeremiah managed to open his eyes a bit.

Hand in hand, God led Jeremiah from the office. They were quickly ascending along the path leading to the top of the mountain. “Feel anything?” God asked.

“It feels like we’re gliding, but upward.”

“Un-huh. It’s anti-gravity. It actually assists you going up. Take a deep breath.”

Jeremiah breathed in. The air was fragrant with flowers and lilac and jasmine and some other delights Jeremiah had never before smelled. “Ummmm,” he moaned. He breathed in deeper now and the sweet air filled him like a balloon. He didn’t want to let go of that air.

God chuckled as he watched Jeremiah soak in the fragrances. “You can let it out,” He said. “There’s plenty more.”

As he looked ahead, Jeremiah saw they were coming to the top of the mountain now. A soft golden light peeked over the crest.

“You need to close your eyes now,” God instructed, as He led him forward.

Jeremiah closed his eyes. Then he heard a sound he’d never heard before. It was like laughter, but more pure, more joyful.

“That’s what laughter sounds like on heaven’s side of death,” God informed him. God stopped them and Jeremiah felt a peaceful warmth kiss his face. “You ready?”

Jeremiah nodded.

“Okay, a couple things you need to know. If you feel like it’s too much to handle, close your eyes.”

“How will I know?”

“You’ll know. Trust me.”

“Yes God.”

“And whatever you do, do not look to the right. Just look straight ahead. Left is okay, but not right.”

Jeremiah took in a deep breath. “Do not look right,” he repeated.

“Okay. Very slowly now... open your eyes.”

With a pounding heart, Jeremiah slowly raised his eyelids and heaven flooded in-- his body jolted, his heart leaped, and his mind flashed, the intensity overwhelming and overloading to his senses. He became dizzy at once and he felt his body convulse. He glanced to the left.

Close your eyes... close your eyes.

No. I don't want to.

Finally, after a split-second, he closed them and crumbled into a lifeless heap on the holy ground.

Jeremiah laid in that heap for a while. After a while, he slowly opened his eyes to see a strong steady hand reaching down, grabbing his long hair, and pulling him up.

God set Jeremiah on his feet and released him. “Ah, very good. You lived.”

Still groggy, Jeremiah managed a weak smile.

“Give it time. You’ll be okay. Just breathe.”

A little while later, Jeremiah stood weak-kneed before God. “That was unbelievable,” Jeremiah said, trance-like.

God was smiling wide. “Tell me what you saw.”

With the images imprinted on his brain, Jeremiah began rattling them off excitedly. “I saw everything, as if there was no end... beaches, waterfalls, mountains, lakes, swimming pools, soccer fields, golf courses, balloons in the air, villages, fairs, big cities. It was all there right before my eyes, and it was like I could see everything for hundreds, maybe thousands of miles. And it was all so clear and crisp. And there were millions, no, make that billions, of people dressed in those dazzling gowns.”

“Did you count them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Close your eyes and think about what you saw in that split-second. It’s there.”

Jeremiah closed his eyes. “55 billion, 188 million, 245 thousand and 24,” he said without thinking.

God nodded. “Over 107 billion people have walked the earth, and heaven’s population passed the 50 percent mark in the late 1800s. But the 20th century was a tough one and the 21st isn’t getting any better.”

Jeremiah couldn’t stop talking. “It was like that diamond-vision, but better, clearer. And everything was in slow-motion, but the dimensions weren’t normal. It’s like time was part of what I saw, too. I mean, I know I saw the past because there were cavemen and knights and crusaders. And I saw the present because Josh and my mom and Uncle Joe were sitting on her porch drinking... lemonade, I think. It was dazzling and dizzying and overwhelming all at once.”

“You saw infinity, and caught a glimpse of the past, too.”

“Whoa! So, that’s what the left was?”

God nodded. “Left is the past and right is the future.

“What would have happened if I had looked to the right?”

“You would have seen more than you were meant to see.”

“Why? What happens?”

“*You’ll see...* if and when the time is right.”

“So I could have seen how it all ends?”

God chuckled. “I can tell you how it all ends.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Everyone dies. And the truly faithful are reborn and live here with me forever.” God smiled wide. “You really need to read that bible, son.” God continued, “Unfortunately, human eyes just can’t fully comprehend all that heaven is.”

Jeremiah was still bubbling with excitement at it all. “And I could hear every laugh, every happy scream, every whisper. There must have been billions of sounds, and I could hear every one of them clearly and distinctly. I even heard Josh say he hoped I would figure things out before it’s too late.”

“I heard,” God remarked.

“And the smells, they were amazing-- fresh breads, cotton candy, chocolate chip cookies, steaks on the grill.”

God smiled. “That grilling was Sparky. Now tell me what you felt.”

Jeremiah smiled wider than ever. “That was the best part. It was like every bad feeling was wiped away and I was free... completely free. No worry, no anger, no fear or pride or regret or sorrow. It was just pure uh...”

“It was love, Jeremiah. Pure, pure love. And there is no love like it on earth. Man was made for heaven.”

Jeremiah felt a rush of emotion. He’d felt the kind of deep love that man was only supposed to feel after death... on that mountaintop looking out at the glory of heaven. And it was more than he could handle. Without warning, tears filled his eyes and

streamed down his face. He felt his heart swelling and crying out longingly, 'I want more, Lord. Please, I want more.'

God pulled Jeremiah close to him and put his arm around him. Looking out at all of heaven's majesty, God began to preach aloud:

God took Jeremiah to the top of a mountain where they could see all of heaven's glory. And God said, all of this can be yours, for all eternity, if only you surrender your life to me and live with the love that I have placed in your heart. And Jeremiah cried out, "I have been to the mountaintop and mine eyes have seen the glory."

God looked into Jeremiah's eyes. "Sometimes I wish I had put that in the bible rather than the story of Jesus looking down on earth with Satan tempting him."

Jeremiah had a different idea. He vocalized it, "I think you should just bottle a slice of heaven and send it down to earth."

God took on the saddest, most forlorn look that Jeremiah could ever imagine-- a look that could have accumulated all of mankind's earthly sorrow into a single moment. "I did," God whispered sadly, "2,000 years ago... I sent my son. And man spat on him and nailed him to a tree."

Jeremiah watched as a perfect solitary tear fell down God's face in grief-stricken slow motion.

God spoke out again, his voice filled with deeper sadness than any earthly being could conceive. "And when he cried out to me in all his agony, all I could do was sit on my hands in sad, lonely silence." God paused. "But it had to be... for I so loved the world." God took a deep breath. "And when it was finished, I shook the entire earth, so mankind would never forget."

And then, atop that mountain in heaven, Jeremiah cried alongside the wondrous Creator.

TWENTY SEVEN

God and Jeremiah walked down the mountain together and soon were back in God's office where they assumed the same positions as before.

"Okay, then, let's finish up the exit interview," God said. "Any other questions?"

"What was the bet between you and Saint Peter?"

"He said you'd explode. I said you wouldn't. That was all."

Jeremiah face indicated he wanted more.

God elaborated. "I don't bring too many visitors up to the top."

Jeremiah nodded. "So I really could have exploded?"

"Absolutely. But I would have put you back together again... just like Humpty Dumpty."

Jeremiah was envisioning the scene.

"So what did you win from Saint Peter?"

"Nothing big. Next time we play St. Andrews I'll use both hands instead of playing with one hand tied behind my back. It really doesn't matter. He only wins when I let him. But I will say, he's a helluva best ball partner." God grinned. "Okay, we need to move this along. Tell me your questions."

"Can I just keep asking questions forever and never leave?"

God chuckled. "Good one. Um, no."

"One thing I've wondered about-- how can you spend all this time just with me? I mean, don't you have more important things?"

"What's more important than saving the soul of one's child?"

"I guess nothing. But what about the rest of your children?"

“I’m a pretty good multi-tasker, Jeremiah.” God smiled. “You do know what omnipotent and omniscient and omnipresent mean, right?”

“I guess. It’s just hard to grasp.

“Infinity and eternity are like that. Suffice it to say you don’t need to worry about me. Okay?”

Jeremiah nodded. “So, I’m not going to remember any of this, but you’re going to give me everything I need.”

“What’s your question?”

“How can I do it? I just wish you would give me something more...”

God took on an angry look that worried Jeremiah, as if He was ready to be done with the exit interview.

“I owe you nothing, Jeremiah. Remember that. But I will give you what you need. And when I do, you would be wise to say ‘thank you’ and figure out how to use it to carry out my will. I am not your bodyguard God, your on-demand God, or your vending machine God. But I am your loving God and I am always with you and always for you.”

God eyed Jeremiah with a new seriousness. “Man’s biggest problem is not understanding that I give him what he *needs*. If it’s not what man *wants* or *thinks it should be* or is not a *spectacular quick answer*, then man can’t conceive how it could be good, or is what he needs, or that it’s my will. Instead, he is ready to curse me and lose all faith.”

Jeremiah’s face was flushed. God had just described him in a nutshell.

“Sure, I could force man’s love and obedience through power, but what then? That would be nothing. Only love can summon love. Love has its own power, and is the only power capable of capturing the heart.”

Jeremiah nodded as he processed God’s words.

“Listen carefully, Jeremiah. Though these memories will not be in your mind, they *will be* in your heart. And the heart holds onto everything that matters. That’s where I always am-- in your heart.”

God smiled warmly again as if He wasn’t so ready for the interview to end.

“Lesson number 5, Jeremiah: Listen to your heart... especially the tugs that tear at it and cause it to ache and break. For there you must go, and from there you must act, for there you will find my will and the true peace and happiness and purpose you seek.”

Jeremiah sat visibly confused.

God reached out with his hands and created a visual screen before Jeremiah's eyes. "Watch this," God instructed.

The screen lit up to show 10-year old Jeremiah fidgeting and kicking at the bark of a pine tree, a small bunch of wildflowers in his shaky hands. A school bell rang and the sounds of screaming children filled the air.

God began narrating, "May 24, 1995. The last day of 4th grade. You remember this?"

"Un-huh."

"You remember who you kissed or what she wore?"

"No."

"Indeed, the mind may forget. But do you remember how you felt while you waited there for her?"

"I remember being really nervous... but mostly excited."

God nodded. "The heart never forgets what tugs at it..."

On the screen, 10-year old Deanna walked onto the playground. She wore jeans and a pink Hello Kitty shirt, and when she saw Jeremiah, she smiled sweetly and he smiled back.

"Hi," she said nervously.

"Hi," he replied, extending the flowers. "Um, I brought you some flowers."

"Thanks."

"You look pretty."

"Thanks." Deanna hesitated. "You sure you want to do this?"

"Un-huh. Do you?"

Deanna stepped closer to Jeremiah, their faces just inches apart. He smelled her minty breath. She smiled and whispered. "Un-huh."

Jeremiah looked deeply into Deanna's eyes as she leaned in to kiss Jeremiah. He closed his eyes and they kissed.

God spoke out, "You remember how you felt when you kissed her?"

"Un-huh. My heart was beating so fast. And I felt so happy... like a bird soaring."

"Your heart will never let you down, Jeremiah. Listen to it."

"I will, Lord. I know I will."

"You say that now, as you sit with me in my kingdom. But... will you listen when you walk on earth with only faith and not sight? What makes you think it will be any different this time?"

"I don't know, God." Jeremiah started to cry, soon out of control. "I'm sorry, God. I just want to be with you... here."

"I know, my son. Believe me, I know."

"Please, God... what's going to happen to me?"

"I know the plans I have for you."

Jeremiah yawned. He hadn't slept for a long while.

"Come here, son. Let me hold you."

Jeremiah walked over and God cradled him.

Engulfed by his creator, Jeremiah looked up into God's eyes and said the words that overflowed his heart. "I love you, Father."

"I know. I love you, too, my son."

God began to hum a song as He slowly rocked Jeremiah, and soon Jeremiah's eyes were closed and he was sleeping peacefully.

God sang out softly:

There's hope for the hopeless,
And all those who've strayed.
Come sit at the table,
Come taste the grace.
There's rest for the weary,
Rest that endures.

Earth has no sorrow
That heaven can't heal...
Yes, earth has no sorrow
That heaven can't heal.

As God kissed Jeremiah's forehead, Jeremiah smiled peacefully. Then God pressed his thumb against Jeremiah's chest, above his heart.

"You've been redeemed, Jeremiah" God whispered.

PART TWO

TWENTY EIGHT

Asleep on a bed of rocks, seashells, and coarse sand, Scratch was naked except for boxers and remnants of his \$3,000 Saint Laurent black leather pants. His bare back and chest revealed an assortment of tattoos-- of skulls, devils, and dark sayings. One in particular reflected his basic philosophy toward God: 'You Can't Be Fixed By the One Who Broke You.' His face was covered by a thick black scraggly beard, his hair wild, twisted, and crusty. Had Lloyds of London seen his hair, they might have worried about a forthcoming claim.

He stirred sluggishly, as if waking from months of hibernation or jet-lagged from a long, long journey. With his eyes crusted shut, it was difficult to open them, and when he did, the sun's rays stung like 10,000 tiny invisible knives. It had been a while since his eyes had seen annoying light like this, and he closed them quickly.

"Huh? What? Where am I?" he moaned groggily, his eyes still closed. He squinted to allow the tiniest sliver of light to enter. "Hello? Anybody?" he called out, as he slowly adjusted to the light.

After a minute, he was able to open his eyes fully, and from his knees, looked around to get his bearings. The world was a spinning blur, but he saw enough to know he was on a beach and water was everywhere. He expected it to be his private Bahamian island. When he tried to stand, his knees buckled and he collapsed back onto the sand. His second attempt also failed, but the third was successful. Lightheaded and unsteady, his vertigo was back and in full attack mode. Bending down with his hands on his knees, he closed his eyes and took deep breaths, hoping to calm the wooziness. That helped.

Reopening his eyes, he saw that indeed it was an island, but a small one at that. With no trees or no vegetation, it was really no more than a forlorn sandbar, maybe a few acres in size, in the middle of all that water as far as the eye could see. Waves lapped in from all directions, as if the sandbar were the center of his new world. It was definitely a private island, but not the one with his palatial estate, boats, pool, and servants... or food and water. *Something's not right. Something's different. Am I still me?*

With a trembling hand, he touched at his face and felt the thick scraggy beard. Whoa! That wasn't a day or two of stubble. That was a full grown bush that had been weeks, maybe months, maybe even more, in the making. *How long was I sleeping?*

And he was so hungry, as if he hadn't eaten in days or weeks or even longer. "This is so weird," he mused aloud, the image of Rip Van Winkle in his mind. *What happened? Where am I and how did I get here?*

He sat back down on the sand and tried to make sense of his situation. But trying to remember hurt. It were as if his mind were fried, short-circuited. *Think, man, think. You were smoking a joint on deck watching that dolphin. Then you wished you were a dolphin. That's right. Then it got weird. Remember? The dolphin spoke out in that loud booming voice. Geez, what did it say? Damn, I can't remember. But it was scary, I remember that much. Dill came and took me to the stateroom and gave me those pills. After that, everything got fuzzy... really fuzzy.*

What did Dill give me?

Beard growing pills? Time lapse pills?

His head was pounding now and he closed his eyes to ease the pain. With the sun beating down, he felt himself frying. Knowing he needed to get out of the sun, he walked down to the water and waded in up to his neck. While that provided temporary relief, it wasn't a long-term solution. Unfortunately, a sunburn was the least of his problems. From the looks of it, he had no water, no food, and no way off this sandbar. He was, it seemed, a castaway, ala Tom Hanks. What he needed was to be a fish or grow gills, like Kevin Costner in *Waterworld*.

Waterworld.

The clip from the Ritz filled his mind and he heard Kevin Costner saying, "You're a fool to believe in something you've never seen before." Strangely, when he thought about those words now, he didn't believe them anymore. There were plenty of things that were real that couldn't be seen: his voice... air... gravity... even the wind. It *could* be chased. No matter the awesome long hair, Kevin Costner was, he now concluded, an idiot.

That's when Scratch realized he was different *inside* as well as outside. In fact, although he wasn't sure who he was, he knew he wasn't who he was before. *That* was something. *Maybe I'm dead.*

He pinched himself on the forearm. "Owww." But perhaps there was pain after death, too? He'd been in the water for about five minutes when he noticed movement in the water no more than twenty yards out. Seconds later, he saw the first black dorsal fin breach the surface, and then a second smaller one. *Holy shit. Those are sharks or something.*

Scratch scrambled out of the water quickly. Once safely back on the sandbar, he saw their unmistakable black and white bodies-- orcas... killer whales. But they were almost never seen in Caribbean waters. *Where the fuck am I?*

The sun was relentless, and in an effort to escape it, he dug a small trench, lined it with seaweed from the shoreline, laid down, and covered himself with more moist

seaweed. For a while it felt good, but it soon became a slow-cooker. He came to the realization that he was facing a terrible choice: quick fried, Mr. Hatchet, or slowly, in a sandy seaweed crock pot? As he cooked, he thought about the orcas swimming lazily offshore. Somehow, he knew, they were an integral part of the story. He closed his eyes again...

...It got rough in the stateroom and I got seasick. Then, for some reason I went back out on deck. Un-huh, that's right... 'cause the moon and stars were super bright. It felt good up there, like somehow the world was new, better. And then everything stopped spinning-- remember?-- everything except the ocean. It was swirling. And then, for some reason, I decided to give Dill my yacht. That was weird. Did I give it to him? Then I wanted to jump. No, check that, I needed to jump. There was something in that water calling me... something I needed. What was in that water?

Scratch opened his eyes and looked out at the orcas swimming lazily around the sandbar. He wouldn't have jumped to be with them, would he? He closed his eyes again...

...I slung the guitar over my shoulder, put my hand on the railing, and threw myself over the railing. I can even remember what I shouted as I flew through the air: 'Hell yeah!' And there was that feeling of freedom and happiness and pure peacefulness-- that was awesome. And then Dill was screaming out my name.

After that, however, it went black and blank, like a computer disc wiped clean.

With his mind on fire now, overheating and dizzy, Scratch stopped thinking. For the rest of the day he slow-cooked while the orcas patrolled. More prisoner than castaway, he tried to understand what possessed the orcas to be there. Didn't they have somewhere else to go? It made no sense.

Of course Scratch couldn't fathom that they were there to help save him...

Had he not considered himself a castaway/prisoner, he might have noticed the beauty of the sunset as the sun sank into the water that first evening. The mix of yellows and oranges created a million new colors, and when they melded into reds and purples they created a million more. It was breathtaking. Sadly, Scratch didn't see any of that. He only saw Day 1 end with no fresh water, no food, and no hope of escape; at best he'd survive three more days without fresh water. There was no way around that one.

As darkness came, he heard a voice in his head. It was his, from the Ritz again:
Build a raft, dumb shit.

Yeah, right. Out of what? Sand... seashells... rocks.

Dumb shit.

“Dumb shit,” he repeated aloud without malice. The words actually elicited a chuckle as an imaginary conversation popped up in his head. He was standing face-to-face with a man who looked a lot like Captain Jack Sparrow.

“How do I get off this island, Captain?”

“Easy. Hop on board one of those orcas and ride them back to the Ritz on South Beach.”

“Really?”

“No. They’ll eat you... or you’ll drown. You really are a dumb shit.”

“So what do I do?”

“When I don’t know what else to do, I pray, son.”

That’s when Scratch knew he was in real trouble.

He shivered through the night and tried to remember more. If he’d been in the water after jumping from the yacht, he couldn’t remember it. Nor could he remember swimming. None of it seemed possible. Why hadn’t he, a mediocre swimmer at best, drowned? It made no sense.

Unable to sleep, he laid on that dark sandbar in the middle of that dark water and stared at the stars in the heavens for most of the night. They were truly spectacular and he swore he could see beyond them, perhaps to infinity. Was something up there, past all those stars, he wondered?

Maybe.

Definitely maybe.

When he refocused on the stars, he was certain they were peering down on him like birds of prey, and Scratch envisioned himself being pecked at and torn away in small chunks. ‘Tastes like Goth chicken,’ the birds would say.

‘Tough, too.’

Day 2 sunrise was just as beautiful, a color reversal of the sunset, with purples and reds followed by the oranges and yellows. Scratch saw just one thing-- the absence of clouds. It looked like another scorcher. For most of the day, Scratch slow-cooked and shriveled like one of his mom’s Sunday pot roasts, increasingly weakened, increasingly closer to being done. *Dinner will be ready soon. Hope everyone’s hungry.*

The orcas maintained their vigilant patrolling, making sure he didn't try escaping on a homemade rock raft. After he died, perhaps he'd wash out into the water and be eaten in one giant bite by the orcas. Maybe that's why they were waiting. 'Tastes like Goth chicken,' the orcas would say.

'Tender, too.'

Around midday he caught sight of a sand crab crawling out of a small pool of water that had formed in a depression on the beach. The crab looked like breakfast, lunch, and dinner to Scratch, and he knew it could be the key to his survival. He was right about that, but for all the wrong reasons. Scratch crept up slowly on the crab. "Come here, little crabby," he whispered out. "I'm not going to hurt you."

It was a lie of course, and Scratch was all but certain the crab smirked, lifted its claw, and flipped him off... but perhaps he was reading too much into things. Plus, crabs don't have middle fingers. Of course he could have been hallucinating from the heat and dehydration.

The crab skittered ahead, just out of Scratch's reach, seemingly daring him to follow in some sick game of crustacean tag, with Scratch 'it'. The crab led Scratch toward the little pool and disappeared into the sand below the water as if to say, 'let's play hide-and-seek now'. Only Scratch never liked that game, so he walked away.

Curiously, the crab repeated the game of tag several times, each time leading Scratch to that same little pool, each time disappearing into the sand at the bottom of the pool. *I'm here. But if you really want me, you'll have to put forth a little bit of effort...*

Day 2 ended much like Day 1, and Day 3 began much like Day 2. With the sky still cloud-free, Scratch knew he would be finished soon.

Day 3 brought more excitement with the sand crab. Over and over, the crab led Scratch to that little pool before disappeared below. Evidently, the little bugger lived there or truly considered it to be home base in the game of tag. Shriveled even more, Scratch shivered again on Night 3. He was sure it would be his last lonely night. Indeed, by morning of Day 4 he could barely move, his mouth dried nearly shut, his organs on the verge of shutdown.

As the sun rose higher, Scratch laid on his back in the surf near the little pool and closed his eyes, thinking he might never open them again. So this was to be his death--out with a whimper. On that sandy death bed, the rhythmic waves were soothing and he felt the water wash over and under him, gently pushing and pulling him. It felt like he was being rocked and a comforting tune filled his delirious head. He hummed it at first and then softly sang the words, his scraggy voice barely audible:

How much is that doggie in the window,
The one with the waggly tail.

How much is that doggie in the window,
I do hope that doggie's for sale.

He was thinking of days long gone, when his mom would rock him and sing this song to him. In fact, he'd been thinking of her almost constantly these past four days. He wasn't sure why-- he just knew he missed her. Evidently, he concluded, that's what people do on their death bed-- they think of the ones they've loved, especially the ones they've hurt, and the choices they've made, especially the bad ones. And they are filled with regret. But, sadly, no amount of water could wash away Scratch's regret.

At one point, Scratch felt something crawling on his chest, and instinctively, he flicked it away. The little sand crab flew through the air and landed a few feet away. Still lying on his back, Scratch turned on his side to look at the translucent crab. He hadn't noticed before how the crab seemed to glow with energy. And now it seemed to be staring at him as if saying, 'Get up, man. Don't give up. Not while you still have a breath left. Fight the good fight'.

"Not today," Scratch whispered, barely able to muster the energy to speak. He rolled onto his back and closed his eyes again. A few minutes later, Scratch felt the crab again. He tried to smack it this time, but the little crustacean was too fast.

"Wait 'til I'm dead," Scratch whispered hoarsely. "Then you can eat me." Scratch was barely conscious now.

A bit later, Scratch felt the crab crawling on his face. He tried to move his arm, but couldn't muster the energy. The crab sunk its claw into Scratch, pinching his nose. "Jesus Christ," Scratch moaned out.

He could have sworn the little crab pinched him harder. Ouch!

He summoned enough energy to flick the little crab away and watched it land in the small pool and disappear from view. He rolled his body over, toward the pool, and reached in, wondering if he'd killed the crab. No longer thinking of eating the crab, he just wanted to know if he'd killed it or not. Indeed, except for the pinch, he was actually growing fond of the little bugger. It was his only friend in the world, and the thought of dying alone scared him.

He fingered the sand at the bottom of the pool and felt around. No crab.

Then, as he tunneled down, Scratch felt the edge of something hard, something unexpected. He pushed his fingers further down into the wet sand and grabbed it. Whatever it was, it felt heavy, like the weight of the world. With all the strength he could muster, Scratch lifted his hand out of the pool and held the object up in front of his face.

Squinting into the bright sun, Scratch saw a golden cross necklace in his fingers.

Huh?

What was that doing in there?

TWENTY NINE

As he laid there, with the cross clutched against his chest, Scratch closed his eyes. In the darkness, he saw his mom, a gold cross around her neck.

That's right... Mom always wore a gold cross necklace...

More thoughts of her flooded his mind and washed over him, leaving him dripping with emotion and nostalgia. She had always been such a great mom and an even greater person-- kind and gentle, always there for him, always there for anyone who needed anything. Hers was a simple, but beautiful life in which the choices were easy: she gave, not took; loved, not hated; helped, not hurt; and when it came to God, she never lost her way. Indeed, even after Josh was taken from her, pain and sorrow became her catalyst for helping others, and Scratch could still remember her dishing out food at food kitchens, organizing clothing drives, and praying day and night.

Lying on his death bed of sand, Scratch wondered what it must have been like on her death bed. Had she thought of him as she lay dying? What were her last thoughts, her last words? Had she also died with regret? Was *he* her regret? He should have been there with her, he now knew, instead of the stupid Grammys with all its superficial self-love. Indeed, when he thought how badly he'd treated her-- when all she'd ever done was love him-- it was almost too much. Scratch felt his chest begin to heave, and that heaving brought his deeply-held regrets to the surface and out. *Oh, God! What have I done with my life? I wasted it... and now it's too late...*

He laid there as broken as a man could be, and without a doubt, this was the saddest moment of his life. It was also a moment he would always remember.

He cried parched tears into the surf, devastated by the realization that he'd taken the wrong path, and now, with so few breaths left, it was too late. He might as well have been slowly sinking in quicksand. And with life undoubtedly over, he decided to stop struggling. But that didn't stop the memories of his mother-- they continued to tug at his heart and soul until he finally cried out, "I don't know what You want from me, God. But I'm sorry. I... am... so... sorry. Really." And then he closed his eyes, probably for good.

Night fell and some 55 billion stars came out to see Scratch still alive, the cross still clutched against his chest. Although he hadn't moved in nearly 16 hours, he still had a breath and thoughts and regrets...

I'm sorry, God. I'm really sorry. Please forgive me...

Though the sky had been clear for four days and four nights, a band of clouds now formed and quickly piled up on one another and moved toward the sandbar. Soon, the stars were hiding as lightning flashed and thunder cracked.

And then the rain fell.

The first drop hit Scratch's hand, the one clutching the cross against his chest, and soon the drops congregated together and began falling like rich forgiveness and mercy. Barely breathing, the rain hit Scratch's salt-crustured eyes, washed them, and ran through his parched lips and into his mouth. It tasted like salty tears. As more rain fell, he opened his mouth and the fresh water of life soon filled him.

After a while, Scratch was able to sit up and look to the heavens, catching drops in his mouth. In the heavens, lightning flashed, thunder clasped, and the sky seemed to speak out: 'When shall we three meet again... in thunder, lightning, or in rain...'

The storm lasted through the night and gave rise to the most prophetically beautiful sunrise Scratch had ever seen, its beauty enhanced by the dark loneliness and storm that had preceded it.

Now rehydrated, Scratch was able to stand and walk again; although still weak from a lack of food, he'd been given a reprieve for at least a few more days. What he'd do with those few days he didn't know. But he knew he couldn't do it alone. He was, he knew in his heart, at the mercy of someone or something bigger than the Rock God.

The sand crab seemed particularly energetic on this morning as well, scurrying from the pool as soon as Scratch was on his feet. Fearless, it skittered up to him, as if it knew that Scratch would never eat his only friend. Scratch bent down, put his hand out, and the crab fearlessly climbed onto his palm. Scratch brought his palm up to eye level and stared at the little crab. *Were its eyes really blue?* It stared back and they locked eyes.

"I know you can't understand me," Scratch said, "but somehow I think you may have saved my life."

He could have sworn the crab raised its eyebrows as if to ask, 'Is there something else you want to say to me?'

"Thank you," Scratch said.

Strangely, Scratch could have sworn the crustacean nodded.

He set the crab down and watched it scurry across the sandbar, to the furthest side of the sandbar, as if on a pilgrimage. Scratch followed it. *Indeed.*

The southern shore of the sandbar was littered with seaweed and a few pieces of driftwood from the storm. Amidst the seaweed, Scratch saw something curious—a book. He picked it up. It was a bible. *Huh?*

Although the cover had been torn away, the inside looked intact, albeit waterlogged. Scratch remembered having thrown a bible off the yacht. This couldn't be that same one, could it? What were the odds of that?

Its mission seemingly complete, the crab returned to home base and Scratch followed, cradling the soaked bible in his hands. With both a friend and reading material, things were looking up for the Rock God. Had he known that God had heard his confession and forgiven him, he might have been really upbeat-- *to be forgiven was to be freed. And that's all we really need.*

Uncharacteristically, and without giving it any real thought, Scratch looked to the heavens and whispered thanks. He wasn't sure why he did it. It just felt like the right thing to do. And afterwards, he felt good having done it.

And God smiled down on him.

By carefully fanning the pages, Scratch was able to dry the bible, and before sunset he could even turn pages individually. Then, with the sun hanging a few inches above the water, he began to read, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...."

Strangely, the words danced in Scratch's head and tugged at his heart. He hadn't read the bible in 17 years, and back then, it seemed like made-up stories of floods and burning bushes and an angry God. After Josh died, God was not only angry, but uncaring as well... if at all. But somehow it felt different now. Perhaps reading the bible stripped down-- in a near-death state without possessions or the other trappings of life-- gave one a new perspective. Maybe weakness gave clarity... and strength.

As he read, time seemed to stand still, the sun seemingly hanging in perfect balance between night and day, as if providing the perfect amount of light to read. It were as if a day were an hour, and Scratch read through most of the Old Testament before the sun and light were gone. In the light of the moon, Scratch sat on the beach with the little crab by his side, looking out at the reflections on the water and up at the great heavens. Billions of stars shone with life, their beauty so vast and magnificent and mesmerizing that it took Scratch's breath away. And a bible verse he'd read made perfect sense: the heavens declare the glory of God. *Indeed!*

"I know I'm going to die," Scratch mused aloud to the crab. "The only question is when. You, too... just like my dog Sparky."

The crab looked sad... but then again, it could have just been tired or hungry.

“The big question is what happens after death. And I just don’t know about that. I mean, even if there is a heaven up there, would I want to spend it with a God who lets children just die... of cancer, starvation, disease... I mean, what kind of God allows that?”

The crab didn’t respond and they sat in silent sparkling moonlight.

“I don’t know. Maybe I just can’t understand God, you know. Maybe I’m not supposed to? Maybe it’s only supposed to make sense afterwards. All I really know is I really miss my mom and my brother.” Scratch began to cry, and the crab seemed to lean in and inched a bit closer to him.

“If I just knew that Josh was okay, it would have been so different... I would have been so different.”

He cried harder. After a while, he collected himself and looked down at the crab. “It’s weird, too, ‘cause I feel this strange peace right now... like maybe God could forgive me for all I’ve done, and maybe there’s some grand plan and I just need to listen to my heart and it’ll all make sense someday.”

More silence.

Scratch stared at the crab. “I know. That sounded weird... the Rock God listening to his heart. Our little secret, okay?”

No worries, Scratch. I’m here for you, buddy. Just don’t try and eat me.

“But maybe it’s just the hunger. You know what I could go for right now-- a snickers bar.”

Me too, dude.

THIRTY

By late afternoon of the following day, Scratch had read the remainder of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Although weak, reading about Jesus gave him strength... and newfound hope.

Jesus had begun his public life at the age of 30, the same age as Scratch, and in just three years, he'd changed mankind and the world like no one before and no one who would ever be-- not too shabby for the son of a teenage mom and her carpenter husband from a little dirt town from which supposedly nothing good ever came. Three years. Amazing.

And Jesus' life wasn't just faraway fairytales or fables, either. This man had walked the same earth and breathed the same air as Scratch, with thousands of witnesses. Hundreds saw him crucified, felt the earth shake, and then witnessed his rising and walking the earth again. Real witnesses!

Out of nowhere a vocabulary word from high school Spanish class popped into his mind: *Los Testigos... The Witnesses*. He didn't know much about history or biology, and didn't remember much about Spanish or high school for that matter, but for some reason, that's what popped into his head as he read about God's son. The idea of real live witnesses to Jesus was an affirming revelation to Scratch.

Los Testigos!

Hmmmm.

Two days had passed since the storm and the rain, and Scratch was once again feeling dehydration, his hunger worse than ever. Perhaps the end was drawing near and there would not be another reprieve from the heavens. Perhaps he'd lived just long enough to find that bible and read it. Perhaps he didn't have three more years like Jesus. Perhaps there was only time enough to do the one thing that really mattered. And no matter the circumstance, he was pretty sure he had another breath.

With the necklace around his neck, and the cross hanging near his heart, Jeremiah reached down, held that cross, and thought back to his mother. What would she do if she were him right now? That was an easy answer: she'd pray. In fact, he could still hear her voice, "Now just remember boys, when you don't know what to do, pray. Just tell God whatever you are feeling. He'll hear you. He hears everything you say and everything you think."

At the time, the idea had scared Scratch. Like most 12 year-old boys, his mind was filled with some pretty bad thoughts. But now, the idea of an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God brought him comfort. Scratch was not alone. And he had something to say, and he wanted God, with the ultimate power to forgive, to hear him.

It was time to surrender, even if it was only a death-bed surrender.

With the sun teetering on the horizon, and the sky filled with a million or more colors, Scratch got on his knees, stretched his arms to the heavens, looked up, and cried out, "I'm done running, God. If I am to die here, then I will die praising Your great name. I surrender... my soul is Yours. I will trust in You."

And then Scratch burst into tears of happiness.

Far above Scratch, on stage at a beautiful amphitheater carved into cavernous red rocks, a band played before a packed crowd. With the aid of diamond-vision there wasn't a bad seat in the house, and behind the stage, names scrolled down a huge screen as the band sang,

This is my Resurrection song,
This is my Hallelujah come,
This is why it's to you I run.

As the name 'Jeremiah Willy Fisher' scrolled down, a great cheer arose from the 25 million souls in attendance. In the front row, God stood proudly with Jeremiah's mother and Josh, who were smiling and cheering, tears of happiness falling down their golden cheeks as the band played.

There's no space
That His love can't reach,
There's no place
Where we can't find peace,
There's no end to Amazing Grace.
I am...
Holding on to you.
I am...
Holding on to you.
In the middle of the storm,
I am holding on...
I am.

As Scratch looked to heaven, he felt the same freedom and happiness and pure peace in his heart as he remembered when he'd jumped off the yacht. That's when he was sure he'd made the right choice.

And he wasn't done yet.

Energized by the prospect of God's grace and forgiveness, and the promise of hope, he walked down to the water, stood in up to his waist, and lifted his hands to heaven. He cried out, "I, Jeremiah Willy Fisher, proclaim that You are my heavenly Father and Your son Jesus is my savior. I renounce Satan and all his empty promises. Lord, baptize me in Your great name." He stretched his arms outward, as if trying to measure the distance from the east to the west, and fell backwards into the water. Jeremiah was redeemed!

And Scratch Hatchet was finally dead... for good.

Upon surfacing, Jeremiah smiled and cried like a man reborn. Through his happy tears he breathed deep, taking in air that tasted sweeter and smelled fresher.

And there was more.

Looking out, he saw the orcas not more than twenty yards away; for some reason he felt the need to swim to them. And so, with his heart pounding, that's just what he did. As he neared, the whales flipped their tails and began swimming away, as if spooked. Jeremiah fought their pull and treaded back to the sandbar. Crawling onto the sand, he turned to see the orcas driving ferociously toward the beach. They were pushing a bait ball, and within seconds, a school of small fish had beached themselves. Jeremiah got on his hands and knees and pushed the beached fish further up onto the sand, and soon he was biting into fish, devouring their meat.

Sashimi!

When the commotion was over, Jeremiah looked out and locked onto the mother orca's sparkling eyes. He could have sworn she was smiling at him. He lifted his eyes to heaven. "Thank you, God," he whispered.

You are most welcome, Jeremiah, my son. Welcome back! I know the plans I have for you, and they are big... very big!

THIRTY ONE

As the sun rose out of the water, Jeremiah added another seashell to the line he'd created to track days. He called out to the orcas, "Day thirty." He walked to the little pool and scooped out a fish, leaving about ten more. What he'd do when the last was gone was another day's problem. He whispered a prayer to God, thanked the fish, stabbed it with a sharp shell, and carved out life. When he finished eating, he walked over to another pool he'd created higher on the beach. The remains of his leather pants lined that pool and held a few gallons of fresh water from the latest storm. It might have been the most expensive water bucket ever. He reached into the leather-lined pool, cupped a handful of water, and brought it to his lips and drank.

"Ahhhh."

Jeremiah sat down next to the sand crab, which picked at a fish head. Out on the blue water, it was another beautiful day. Best of all, his vertigo was virtually gone.

He looked down at the crab directly. "You know what you need, Mr. Crab? A first name. It's been thirty days... I'd say it's about time."

How about Poseidon? I've always liked the sound of that. Or Zeus. That sounds like me... strong.

Jeremiah thought for a moment and a name popped into his head. "How about CoCo? CoCo the Crab. That's got a nice ring to it, right?"

The crab continued tearing at meat with its claw. It wasn't as strong as Zeus, nor as nautical as Poseidon, but CoCo worked.

It fits my laid back vibe. True dat.

"CoCo it is," Jeremiah said enthusiastically. "Plus, it's a name that fits you whether you're a boy or girl... like Pat or Mackenzie or Alex."

I'm a dude, dude. Evidently, CoCo said it too softly for Jeremiah to hear.

"So, I figured something out last night when I was looking up at the stars. You remember I was telling you how the story of Adam and Eve tripped me up after we learned about evolution in 6th grade science?"

Although enthralled, CoCo didn't look up from its meal. *Yes, go on.*

“Well, I reconciled it. When God created the big bang, He created DNA, too. Everything fits together when you think of it like that. God created the DNA, and then evolution occurred. DNA didn’t just come from nothing, it was created by the Creator. It makes perfect sense. So the story of Adam and Eve is both figurative and literal. See? Completely reconciled.”

Coco nodded. *Yup. Classic God.*

“And I had an idea about getting off the sandbar, too. Maybe I could get on one of the orcas and ride them. Right?”

They’re called killer whales for a reason. If they were for riding, they’d be called riding whales or ferry whales or something like that. You’re such a dumb shit.

“I know it sounds crazy because supposedly orcas can dive down hundreds of feet and stay under for like 20 or 30 minutes.”

How did a dumb shit like you amass a net worth of 100 million dollars? Geez, I gotta believe I’d be a billionaire in the human world. But, on the flip side, I must admit, you do serve up a pretty nice dish of sashimi...

“Yeah, I guess I could drown. Supposed to be a peaceful way to go though, right?”

Not if a killer whale gets you first. If he had a louder voice, CoCo would have been a helluva DJ.

“I don’t know what to do, to tell you the truth. I pray about it daily. I guess I’ll just keep praying ‘til something feels right, you know?” Jeremiah looked back down at CoCo. “You’re a great listener, you know? I mean, I’ve been to a thousand shrinks and I’ve never felt as good as I do right now, sitting here with you... on this little sandbar with no way off.”

You haven’t seen my bill yet...

A little later, when Jeremiah looked out at the water to check on the orcas, he noticed something bobbing. He waded out and swam past the orcas, fearlessly. A guitar! He grabbed it and swam back to the sandbar with one arm, his other holding the guitar above the water. “My guitar,” he said as he stepped out of the water. He held it up for CoCo to see. “I don’t believe it.”

He turned the guitar over and over in his hands, inspecting it. It was intact, the strings still attached, and although a bit warped, it still looked playable.

Jeremiah strummed it and listened to the notes. He tightened several of the knobs, plucking each string and tuning it until it sounded right. “Wow. I guess it must have just been floating like a little boat for all this time.”

With new melodies singing out in his head, Jeremiah spent the rest of the day playing his guitar and thinking up new songs. They were nothing like his songs of old.

CoCo seemed happy, too. *It'll be nice to hear something other than all your blah... blah... blah.*

As the sun began to set, Jeremiah softly sang his first new song,

Bless the Lord oh my soul,
Oh my soul.
Worship His Holy name.
Sing like never before,
Oh my soul,
I'll worship Your Holy name.

That sounded pretty good and felt even better, as if this was the music he'd been created to create. And, as he sat there looking out at the sunset over the ocean, a peaceful feeling came over Jeremiah. What a beautiful world.

THIRTY TWO

With three fish still swimming in the little pool, Jeremiah watched CoCo tearing at his breakfast fish head. “Three more days of food,” he said. “After that, we’ll see. I guess.”

CoCo stopped eating and looked up, troubled. *Hey, the orcas are gone...*

Jeremiah spoke out, “I wonder where the orcas are. They swam out yesterday afternoon and they’re still not back. This is the longest they’ve been away, for sure.”

“Oh, and hey, I was thinking about last night, too. If you *were* in a crab trap and I tried to help you, I think you *would* fight me... no matter how much I tried to convince you that I wanted to help you.”

True dat. CoCo shoveled another claw-full into its mouth.

“You just wouldn’t be able to understand me.”

CoCo paused from eating. *Why you gotta disrespect me like that, Jeremiah?*

“No, no, of course you’re not an idiot. It’s just that, well, you’re a crab and I’m a man.”

True dat. CoCo returned to the food.

“Hmmm. Yeah, I guess that could be like me and God. Just because I can’t understand Him doesn’t mean He doesn’t want to help me... maybe I’m just not capable of understanding Him. Right?”

Dude, I know you enjoy the contemplative life and all that deep thinking, but sometimes you just need to give it a rest or keep it to yourself. Can’t we just have some peace and quiet?

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I ramble sometimes. I wish I would have just kept my promise to God... everything got weird after my plane almost crashed. I tell you one thing— if I ever get off this sandbar, I’ll keep my promise... I will praise his name all the days of my life.”

You say that now... stuck here on the sandbar...

“And another thing, if we ever get off this sandbar I’m going to take you to meet my Dad. You’d like him. Not quite as talkative as me, but the man sure can preach.”

Sweet! I’ve always wanted to visit America. Hey, I got cousins in Florida... any chance we can swing by there?

“I wonder what happened to the orcas... I mean, I told them if they really cared about me, they’d go find help. But, between you and me, I don’t think they understood... kind of like that God-thing we were just talking about.”

Blah, blah, blah. Dude, take a chill pill.

“I’ll play you another song.”

Sweet Jesus, thank you!

Jeremiah strummed a melody, stopped abruptly, and looked down at CoCo.

“It’s weird... my head is just filled with song after song. Here’s a new one I’ve been working on.”

Jeremiah sang out:

Make me broken,
So I can be healed.
‘Cause I’m so calloused,
Now I can’t feel.
I want to run to you,
With heart wide open,
Make me broken.

Make me empty,
So I can be filled.
‘Cause I’m still holding,
Onto my will.
And I’m completed,
And you are with me.
Make me empty.

“That’s all I have so far.”

Nice. More music, less talk...

“Yeah, thanks. I knew you’d like it.”

THIRTY THREE

Jeremiah finished eating the last fish from the pool and set the fish head down for CoCo, who emerged from his morning constitution in the surf. “Good morning, CoCo,” Jeremiah sang out happily.

CoCo seemed to be dragging.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, felt energized. “It’s a great day to be alive,” he sung out. “The vertigo’s gone, my weight’s down, my spirits are up, and I do believe I am officially de-toxicated.” Jeremiah sang out, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God, I am free at last.” He looked to the heavens and spoke out solemnly, “Thank you, God.”

Jeremiah glanced down at CoCo, who had settled in beside him and was eating. “I had the weirdest dream last night-- all about food. I was eating the most awesome chocolate popcorn... it was sweet and salty and just melted in my mouth. Then I had two big bowls of chicken and rice, extra spice, just like my mom used to make. And for dessert there was this red velvet cake... oh, man, CoCo it was so good.”

If CoCo had a tongue and lips, he would have licked them.

Jeremiah counted the line of shells. “10, 20, 30... day 40.”

It was a number CoCo knew well from all the bible readings.

“Yep, you got that right... the same number of days Jesus wandered in the desert.”

CoCo yawned. He seemed bored.

“I don’t know what it means. Maybe this is my 40-day trial, but maybe it’s nothing. *We will see*, eh?” He winked at the crab.

CoCo did not wink back.

“By the way, I was thinking about the name for our wellness center. I don’t think CoCo’s Wellness Island has the right ring to it. How about Enlightenment Island... you get it? ‘Enlighten’ because of the spiritual element, and ‘lighten’ because of the weight loss aspect.”

Although it sounded like a fine name, CoCo wanted some sort of billing in the name. Had this dumb shit forgotten who'd led him to the cross? Hell, Walt Disney put his name on everything, why couldn't CoCo, too?

“I tell ya what, I'm willing to—“

Before he could finish verbalizing his thought, a spec on the horizon caught Jeremiah's eyes. He did a double take. Something was out there. No doubt. He stood up and began waving his arms, jumping up and down, and yelling, “Hey! Hey!”

CoCo jumped up and down, too... but sand crabs are a lot like white men in that regard.

Jeremiah watched intently as the spec got larger and larger, and soon he could make out the colorful sail of a boat. As the boat got closer, Jeremiah could see someone waving back at him. He couldn't tell if it was a man or woman yet, but they had a boat and they were coming to him. He would be getting off the sandbar! Or so it appeared. As the boat got within 50 yards of the sandbar, Jeremiah could see a man at the helm. Then another younger man appeared. He, too, waved cautiously.

The man at the helm brought the sailboat close to the beach and called out, “You need help?”

Jeremiah shouted back. “Yes, sir. Thank God you found me. I've been stranded here.” He watched as the man brought the sailboat closer in. “It's sandy all the way in,” Jeremiah called out.

The man at the helm was wary of the wild-eyed castaway. With his long knotted hair, out-of-control beard, and tattoos covering his emaciated frame, he looked like a hunger-stricken Charles Manson-escapee from San Quentin.

“Alright.” The man stopped the boat about ten yards offshore.

The younger man was deeply tanned-- almost black-- and was wearing a black t-shirt and black shorts. He stared hard at Jeremiah, studying him. He was sure he knew those tattoos and recognized the face behind the beard. “Holy cow,” he yelled out, “You're Scratch Hatchet, aren't you?”

Jeremiah nodded.

The younger man turned to the man at the helm. “He's that singer/rapper I told you about... the one who disappeared.”

His father nodded, still wary.

Jeremiah had begun wading toward them, the bible in his right hand, CoCo in his left, and the guitar slung across his back. Once at the boat, he set the bible on the deck, and with a helping hand from the older man, climbed aboard.

“Thanks for stopping,” Jeremiah said. “I thought I was going to die on that island.” He held out his right hand to shake. “Jeremiah Fisher,” he said.

The older man shook his hand. “Chad Hommes,” he replied. “I thought you were Scratch Hatchet.”

“That’s who I was. My real name is Jeremiah Fisher. That’s who I am.”

Chad motioned to the younger man, “That’s my son, Matt.”

Jeremiah shook Matt’s hand.

Matt stared, mesmerized by the sight of the Rock God. Holy smokes! He couldn’t wait to tell his friends.

Chad spoke, “Well, whoever you are, today’s your lucky day, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah,” Matt agreed, “It’s a good thing we followed those orcas.”

“Wait. You followed orcas here?”

“Un-huh,” Chad answered. “They came right up to our boat when we left St. John. You never see them in the Caribbean. So we followed them for the past day and a half, and they led us right here.”

Jeremiah felt himself starting to cry, but he took a few quick deep breaths and held back his tears.

“Who’s your little friend?” Chad asked, motioning to the little sand crab.

“CoCo. He was all I had on that sandbar for a while. Then that bible washed up, and then my guitar.”

It sounded all too contrived.

Jeremiah spoke out, “You wouldn’t happen to have something I can put him in, would you? After 40 days I just can’t leave him.”

Matt went below and returned with a clear rectangular container about the size of a board game. “How’s this?”

“Great. Let me get some sand and put some water in it.”

Jeremiah jumped down into the water and filled the container with sand from the ocean bottom and some water. He handed CoCo's new home to Matt and re-boarded.

"Forty days?" Matt asked.

Jeremiah nodded.

"That can't be right," Matt said.

"What do you mean?"

You disappeared in early November. I remember because of, you know, what happened at your last show in Miami..."

Jeremiah thought back. That seemed like a lifetime ago. "Yeah, right. That was November 3rd. So what's today?"

"February 4th."

"February?" Jeremiah's head kicked into gear. "That can't be."

Chad grabbed the newspaper from inside the bridge and handed it to Jeremiah. "See for yourself. I grabbed a paper yesterday when we stopped in St. John for supplies."

Jeremiah stared at the date on the paper. "Oh man... how can this be? I remember jumping from my yacht... and then I ended up on this sandbar. But that was 40 days ago. I know. I kept track of the days."

Chad responded. "Look, all I know is it February 4th. You think maybe you lost track of the days?"

"Maybe. But I don't see how." And while that would explain the full grown beard, it begged many more questions. Most notably, what had happened during the other two months? He couldn't have been passed out on the beach for that long. He'd have died.

"Where are you heading?" Jeremiah asked.

Chad responded. "Nowhere really. Just sailing around the Virgin Islands mostly. We come sailing the first week of February every year."

"Would you be willing to take me home?"

"Where's that?"

“Alabama.”

“Um, that’s probably at least three days away, and we’ve only got the boat rented for two more. But we can take you back to St. Thomas.”

“I tell you what, Chad. You take me to Alabama and I’ll *buy you* this boat.”

“Serious?” Chad replied. “You have that kind of money?”

Matt jumped in. “Dad, he’s Scratch Hatchet. He’s worth almost 100 million dollars.”

Chad looked at Jeremiah differently.

“Is that true?”

Jeremiah shrugged. “That sounds about right... depending on the value of my island.”

Chad extended his hand to shake. “Okay. Deal.”

Jeremiah shook his hand.

As they set sail for Alabama, the orcas reappeared and joined them.

THIRTY FOUR

“You wouldn’t happen to have some clothes I could borrow, would you?”

Chad eyed him seriously. “I can sell you some. Pants are a half million, shirts are two for a hundred grand.”

“Really?”

Chad chuckled aloud. “Nah. I’m just messing with you. Of course I have clothes for you.” He sized Jeremiah up. “What are you about a 32?”

Jeremiah laughed. “I used to be a 38, but 32 sounds about right now.”

“I’m a 36, but I have a belt you can use. *For free.*”

Jeremiah smiled at Chad. He knew he liked him.

Chad led Jeremiah below deck and motioned to drawers and a small closet. “Take whatever fits or whatever you want. Me clothes are your clothes.”

He pointed to the small bathroom. “Shower might feel good, too,” he added. “Help yourself. Oh, and the shampoo in the shower there is from the guy who rented me the boat. Try it. I’m not a hair guy, really, but my hair’s never felt so full. It’s really amazing stuff.”

“Thanks Chad.”

“There’s shaving stuff, too.”

“Thanks.”

Chad went back above.

When Jeremiah emerged forty-five minutes later he was wearing jeans with a belt and a New Orleans Saints jersey with the name ‘Hommes’ on the back. His hair was washed and pulled back neatly into a ponytail. He’d spent the majority of the time trimming the beard into a wispy moustache with a soul patch. It gave Jeremiah a swashbuckling, pirate look. It felt right and he liked it.

“You were right about that shampoo,” Jeremiah called out. “My hair feels great.”

Chad was at the helm, sailing them westerly into the sun. “I told you. The boat guy couldn’t stop gushing over it. And I see you picked out my favorite jersey” He said it with a smile.

“I promise to buy you ten new ones. For real. So, what kind of name is Hommes... Cajun?”

Chad nodded. “Partially. It’s actually French-Cajun... my family’s originally from New Orleans.”

“Well, between you and me, I am a huge Saints fan, now.”

“Now?”

Jeremiah winked. “I used to be a Devil’s fan. But not anymore.”

“I take it you’re not talking about sports because you’re mixing football and hockey?”

Jeremiah laughed. “Life. Chad. I’m talking about life.”

“So you’re really a Goth rapper?”

“I was. Not anymore.”

“So what are you now?”

“Just a man seeking redemption.”

“Oh yeah. Redemption from what?”

“From the lie I was living. I spent the last 17 years running from God. Now I’ve decided to run to Him.” Jeremiah said it with pride, and he had scarcely finished saying the words when he felt himself choking up. Standing there in that Saints jersey, he was as completely changed as a man could ever be changed.

Jeremiah’s words seemed to cause an uneasiness with Chad. His face took on a burdened look. “You okay?” Jeremiah asked.

Chad shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. I’m not sure you’d understand... or care.”

“Try me.”

“When you said you were living a lie and running from God, I just couldn’t help but think of my Matty down there.” Chad motioned down to the deck, where Matt was sitting, strumming his own guitar. “That’s him in a nutshell.”

As he looked, somehow Jeremiah saw his younger self sitting down there.

“Huh. Tell me more about him,” Jeremiah said.

“Ever since his mom died, I’ve been losing him bit by bit... and it just keeps getting worse. He just doesn’t seem to care about me or school or life anymore... he’s all wrapped up in Goth and heavy metal and revolt.”

“When did she die?”

“Five years ago. Matty was just 13.”

“I’m sorry. Cancer?”

“I wish.” His eyes were low and sad. “She was raped and murdered.”

“Oh geez. I’m sorry.”

“It is what it is,” Chad sighed. He took a few deep breaths. “Anyways, her dream was to sail the Caribbean. So every year I take Matt on this trip to celebrate her memory. He’s a senior this year, and I was hoping it might help bring us back together, but every day we just seem to grow further apart...”

There was a long silence.

“Maybe I can help.”

“Look, nothing personal, but I’m not sure someone who made their living as a Goth rapper is exactly the help I was looking for... even if you are an ex-Goth rapper. I’m really hoping this is just a phase he’ll get over before he hurts himself too much.”

“Look, Chad. I’m serious. Let me talk to him. Please.”

After a moment of silence, Chad replied, “Alright. I guess it can’t hurt. You cleaned up well enough.” He winked. “Maybe Matt and I can be part of your finding redemption.”

Jeremiah smiled at the man who seemed to be in the same predicament as his own parents were 17 years earlier with him.

Chad added something else. “Oh, and hey, he doesn’t know all the details about how his mom died, so I’d appreciate if you don’t mention anything about rape or murder. He never brings it up and it just seems to be better that way.”

“Got it.”

Chad opened a small fridge door and held a package of meat up. “You like steak?” Chad was grinning.

“I guess. I was kind of hoping for sashimi... but I guess steaks will do.” Jeremiah winked back. “I’m gonna go talk to Matt, okay?”

Chad nodded. “I’ll fire up the barbie. Good luck.”

THIRTY FIVE

Jeremiah walked toward Matt, who was playing guitar and singing the chorus to “Rape and Pillage.” The words made Jeremiah cringe. “That may be the worst song ever written and recorded,” Jeremiah called out as he sat down next to Matt.

Matt stopped playing. “What are you talking about?”

“I hate that song. Absolutely, 100 percent hate it.”

“But it was your first big hit.”

“It was *Scratch’s* first big hit, not mine. And it’s crap. Just like the rest of Scratch’s songs.”

Jeremiah eyed Matt seriously. “Look, Matt, I don’t know how else to say this, but those songs are all just lies. Scratch Hatchet is a lie... was a lie...”

“Oh, I get it. My Dad put you up to this, right?” Matt began to imitate his father, speaking in an exaggerated deeper, older voice. “Hey, would you mind talking to my son... maybe you can get him to give up on this Goth stuff...”

Jeremiah spoke out quickly. “You couldn’t be more wrong. In fact, I had to beg him to let me talk to you. Listen to me. Really. Don’t be like Scratch.”

“Oh yeah? Why not?”

“Because you don’t have to be. You can still make the right choices.”

“Right. Like you did?”

“I made the wrong choices. And now I’m going to make the right choices. Really. I’m not Scratch anymore. He’s dead. That’s the honest to God truth.”

“Yeah, right.”

“You think you know Scratch?”

“Yeah, I know a lot about him... you... yeah.”

“Really? Okay. Tell me what you know.”

“Let’s see. Like I said earlier, he’s got a net worth of almost 100 million dollars, he drives a Ferrari, he owns a yacht and a jet and a private island. He’s got everything.”

Jeremiah shook his head. “Those are all just things, Matt. They’re not important. No thing makes you happy. Plus, you forgot a few things... things about him... things nobody knows about.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Like he was sad and lonely and scared. And he hated his life and the lie he knew he was living. I wish you could believe that.”

In the silence, Scratch eyed the orcas swimming alongside the sailboat. An idea popped into his head. It seemed crazy... until it tugged at his heart, which pounded fiercely at the crazy idea.

“If you know so much about Scratch, tell me what scared him.”

“Easy.” Matt pointed at the orcas. “Killer whales. I heard that interview from that radio station.” He seemed proud of himself.

“So, I guess Scratch would never jump in the ocean and swim with a killer whale, would he?”

“Um. I guess not. Why?”

“I’ll make a little bet with you, Matt. If I jump in that water and swim with those killer whales, you agree to have an honest talk with me... okay? No bullshit.”

Matt chuckled out. “And if you get eaten?”

“I die. And hopefully go to heaven. And all those things of Scratch-- the cars and yacht and money -- you can have them all.”

Matt wondered what the catch was.

“I tell you what, go get a pen and piece of paper and I’ll put it in writing. And bring that newspaper and a camera... or your phone... that’ll do.”

Matt ran off and returned with everything.

Jeremiah quickly wrote out a last will, signed it, and posed with the dated newspaper to document the fact. As he stood there posing, he glanced at the newspaper in his hand and saw an interesting headline on the page: ‘Lawrence Livermore Scientist

Concludes DNA Evolution Improbable', with a sub-title saying, "1 in 13 Trillion Probability Supports Case that DNA Created by God."

Huh...

With Matt watching in amazement, Jeremiah stripped down to his boxers

"You mind if I video this?" Matt asked. If Scratch got eaten the video would be worth a million bucks even if the will didn't hold up. And if he didn't get eaten, it would still be a cool video to have.

"Sure, go ahead."

Chad had been watching Jeremiah strip down. Confused, he luffed the sails, the boat slowed to a crawl, and Chad walked out on deck. "What's going on?"

"Matt and I made a little wager," Jeremiah replied nonchalantly. He had exchanged his clothes for a full armor of God. He walked to the bow and looked at the swirling blue water and the orcas.

"What are you doing?" Chad asked.

Jeremiah smiled at him. Then he closed his eyes and said a quick prayer. *If this is what you want me to do God, then I will do it. I trust You. But I must say, I am scared... really scared.*

"You're not going to jump in there, are you?" Chad asked.

With his eyes focused on the orcas, Jeremiah reached out and threw himself over the railing. "Hell yeah!" he yelled out. And as he flew through the air toward the orcas, Jeremiah felt complete freedom, happiness, and peacefulness. That's when he was sure it was the right thing.

He hit the water and swam confidently to the orcas, who seemed to be waiting for him. Soon he was treading water next to them. He reached out, stroked the baby orca's head near her blowhole, and laid his head on her. "I'm not scared," he cried out to Matt up on the boat. "See? Scratch would never do this. He's dead, Matt. Dead!" Jeremiah laughed out loudly.

As Chad and Matt watched in amazement, Jeremiah swam to the mother orca. With his heart still pounding fiercely, he looked directly into her big black eye. "I'm going to get on your back" he whispered. He wasn't sure why he whispered to her, but it felt right.

As if she understood, the mother orca pushed down a bit in the water, making it easier for Jeremiah to climb onto her back. Strangely, as Jeremiah boarded, he felt

completely comfortable up there, as if this wasn't his first rodeo in Waterworld. What's more, he had the feeling he wasn't alone up there.

The mother orca kicked her tail gently, as if ensuring he wouldn't fall off, and Jeremiah rode her in circles around the sailboat like a bareback rider. After the second trip, the orca seemed to understand that the point had been made and it was time to stop. Jeremiah dismounted, gave her a final pat, and swam back to the sailboat.

As he boarded the boat, he looked to the heavens. *Thank you, God.*

God smiled. *Nice job, Jeremiah. That there took some real faith. I'm proud of you, son...*

THIRTY SIX

“Phew, I’m gonna say that was fun!” Jeremiah said, as he took the towel Chad held out to him.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” Matt said. “You’re crazy.”

“That, or I have a lot of faith,” Jeremiah replied with a wink. “But clowns scare the heck out of me, so don’t even think of leaving me alone in a room full of them.”

Chad laughed. “I still don’t understand what that was all about.”

“Just a little icebreaker Matt and I needed. We’re all good now, right Matt?”

Matt nodded.

“Okay. If you say so. Hey, steaks in an hour?”

“Sounds good. Matt and I are gonna talk for a bit, maybe play some music.”

“Okay.” Chad left to attend the helm and the grill. He was glad they had decided to follow the orcas.

“So Matt, let’s talk... okay? Just two guys talking about life. Okay?”

Matt nodded. Even if this dude wasn’t Scratch anymore, he liked Jeremiah. Indeed, any man that would jump in the water with two wild orcas, just to get him to open up, was alright by him... a bit crazy maybe, but he had to respect the passion.

Jeremiah and Matt talked and talked-- about life and its problems, and death and its promises; about loss; and music; and God; and redemption-- and the hour flew by. Near the end of the conversation, Jeremiah told him, “I just don’t want you to make the same mistakes I did.”

“Why do you care so much about me? I mean, you just met me.”

Jeremiah smiled at Matt. “You remind me of myself when I was your age. After I lost my brother, I shut down, too-- I never believed in anything again. I wish someone would have taken me under their wing and tried to get me to go down the right path. Maybe life would have turned out differently for me.”

Jeremiah wasn't done. "Plus, you remind me of my brother, too." Jeremiah felt himself begin to break down.

"I can't really explain it, but it feels like somehow I'm supposed to be here for you. I know that sounds weird, especially since we just met, but I feel it." Jeremiah pointed to his heart. "I never got the chance to be there for anyone after my brother died..."

Tears now filled Jeremiah's eyes and he couldn't finish speaking. It made Matt feel uncomfortable and special and loved, all at once. He liked feeling again.

Jeremiah regrouped. "Hey man, I'm sorry. It's been an emotional day."

"Nah, it's all good. No worries." Matt hesitated. "I guess you really aren't Scratch Hatchet... anymore."

Jeremiah laughed through teary eyes. "Really? That's all it took-- a few tears. You mean I didn't have to jump in the water with those killer whales. Geez-a-wheeze Matt, that scared me to death."

"Really?"

"Yeah, kind of. They're called killer whales for a reason..."

"Well, you sure looked calm. It was cool. You made your point."

Jeremiah put his hand out to shake. "Brothers?"

Matt shook his hand. "Sure. Sounds good." He paused and his eyes took on a gleam. "Hey, bro, mind if I borrow the Ferrari some day?"

"Um... no. But you can wash and wax her." Jeremiah laughed out.

"So, if you're not Scratch anymore, what are you going to do?"

"I'm still trying to figure that one out. Look, I don't have all the answers. All I know is this: I think God has a plan for me... for all of us. And even though I may not fully understand it now, someday it'll make sense. Right now my job-- our job-- is to try and follow that plan as best we can."

"So how do you know what God's plan is for you?"

"I pray a lot now... and listen to my heart. And I just do what feels right." Jeremiah laughed out.

"What's so funny?"

“When I was thinking about jumping in with those orcas I could almost hear God saying, ‘Fear not, Jeremiah... I am with you’. It sounds crazy, I know, but it was if God was telling me I needed to do something to reach you. And then my brain was saying, ‘Don’t do it, man. That ain’t God’s voice tugging at your heart. That’s just hunger.’”

Matt laughed.

“Look, I’m not saying you should lie down in front of a train or put your head in a lion’s mouth, all I’m saying is this: pray, listen to your heart, and do what feels right. Okay?”

“Yep.”

“Right now I’m just putting one foot in front of the other and going down what I think is the right path. Colossians 3:17— And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

“Whoa... you are definitely not Scratch Hatchet anymore.”

“Amen to that, brother.” Unexpectedly, Scratch threw his hands up into the air and sang out, “And all the people said Amen.” He winked at Matt. “My Dad used to shout that out in church all the time when I was growing up.”

Jeremiah couldn’t wait to see his Dad again.

“But seriously, Matt, what you just said— about me not being Scratch anymore-- may have been the best thing anyone’s said to me in the past 17 years.”

Jeremiah kept talking, “I do think God gave me the gift of music for a reason. I think I just need to start using it for the *right* reason.”

“So you’re still going to make music?”

“Absolutely. But I’m going to make music that inspires and moves people... toward God. At least I hope that’s what it does.”

Matt nodded in understanding.

Jeremiah picked up Matt’s guitar and held it out to him. “I heard you playing. You’re good. What do you say we work on a song together?”

“Great.”

Jeremiah picked up his own guitar. “You want to hear the song I’ve been working on?”

“Sure.”

Jeremiah started playing “Beth’s tune” and Matt’s brow furled. He knew that song. When Chad heard the tune, he walked over.

“That’s weird,” Chad said.

Jeremiah stopped playing. “What?”

“It sounds just like the song my wife used to play. Only she played it slower.”

Jeremiah played the song again, a beat slower. “Like this?”

“Yeah. Exactly. She was always trying to write a song. You remember that tune, right Matt?”

“Yeah, but I like the faster tempo.”

“Me, too,” said Chad.

Jeremiah looked at Matt. “You want to play it with me?”

“Sure. My mom taught me the chords.”

Jeremiah began to play the tune at the faster tempo and Matt joined in.

“While I was on the island, I started putting words to it. You ready?”

Matt gave a quick nod.

Jeremiah said, “One, two, three, four,” and then sang:

You are not alone,
If you are lonely,
When you feel afraid,
You’re not the only.
We are all the same,
In need of mercy,
To be forgiven and be freed.
It’s all you got to lean on,
But thank God it’s all you need.

Jeremiah and Matt stopped playing. “That’s all I have so far,” Jeremiah said, “It still needs a good chorus and a few more verses.”

“Wow, I think my wife would have loved those words. What do you think, Matty?”

“Un-huh. It sounds like something mom would have written.”

“Hey, the steaks are done. Maybe after dinner you two can work on the chorus,” Chad said.

With the orcas leading the way, the three men sailed into a dazzling sunset as if on a sunset dinner cruise. It had been one of the greatest days in all of their lives.

At dinner, Jeremiah all but licked the plate clean. “Man, Chad, I gotta say that may have been the best steak I’ve ever eaten. And I’ve had some good steaks.”

“Hold your praise ‘til after you see the dinner bill.” Chad laughed. “No, seriously, after 40 days of raw fish, I’m guessing the bar wasn’t too high.”

The two men smiled at each other.

THIRTY SEVEN

After dinner Matt sat on deck with his guitar while Jeremiah stayed behind to help Chad with dinner cleanup. Chad said, “You made quite an impression on Matty. That was the first meal in the last seven days that he’s actually engaged in conversation.”

“We had a real good talk. I guess I forgot how impressionable kids are, and how easy it is to lead them down the wrong path. Man, when I think about all the crappy lyrics I’ve written...”--Jeremiah shook his head-- “I can’t help but wonder how many people went down the wrong path because of me.”

“Hey, if you can take ‘em down the wrong path, you can take ‘em down the right path now... right?”

“Exactly. That’s the plan, at least.”

“It makes sense to me. Isn’t that why God chose Paul... because he persecuted the Christians? Seems like you’re the perfect person to lead people to God today.”

Jeremiah smiled at Chad. He like that he knew the bible. And Chad’s reasoning energized Jeremiah.

Chad continued, “But the bible also says God chooses the foolish to shame the wise”-- Chad winked-- “so maybe you got that goin’ for you, too...”

Jeremiah laughed. He definitely had been one of the foolish.

Chad concluded, “Maybe things really do happen for a reason. It does seem like we were supposed to find you.”

Jeremiah replied, “I know. Somehow, someday, I feel like we’re supposed to be together. I said that exact thing to Matt right before dinner.”

“I’ll say this, you are absolutely nothing like I expected when I saw you standing there on that beach and Matt said you were that Goth rapper.”

“Tell me about it. I can barely remember what it was like to be Scratch Hatchet.”

“Well, I don’t know what Scratch was like, but I like you, Jeremiah.”

“Thanks, Chad. I hated myself for so long, it feels good to actually like myself, too.”

They finished cleaning up the dishes and Chad said, “Oh, by the way it looks like we won’t get to Mobile until Monday.”

“Okay. No problem. I guess I was hoping we might get there by Sunday morning.”

“Not much chance of that.” Chad picked up the chart from near the conn and held it up. “See? We’re here. We’ve got about 750 miles, so we’d need sustained winds of about 25 knots. But, say a prayer, who knows, stranger things have happened...”

Matt’s guitar echoed from down on the deck. “Hey, I’m gonna go back down with Matt and work on the rest of that song, okay?”

“Sure thing. Hey, you mind if I come down and join you two? I play a little drums.”

“Sure. Come on.”

Jeremiah and Chad sat down next to Matt, who stopped playing. “I came up with an idea for the chorus,” he said.

Jeremiah smiled at him. “Awesome. Go for it. And your Dad’s gonna accompany us on drums.”

Matt and Jeremiah played the tune together from the top and Chad joined in, drumming with his hands on top of a cooler.

Jeremiah and Matt sang out:

You are not alone,
If you are lonely,
When you feel afraid,
You’re not the only.
We are all the same,
In need of mercy,
To be forgiven and be free.
It’s all you got to lean on,
But thank God it’s all you need.

As the chorus came up, Jeremiah pointed at Matt and winked.

Matt sang solo:

And all the people said Amen.
And all the people said Amen.
Give thanks to the Lord
For his love never ends.
And all the people said Amen.

The three stopped playing and Jeremiah smiled wide at Matt. “Wow, dude. That was awesome... like exactly what it needed.”

Matt replied, “It was your idea... or your Dad’s. And then I thought about what you said-- ‘whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’ It just felt right.”

“Right? It’s better than right... it’s perfect. What do you say we work on a second verse?”

Matt and Chad nodded and the three men worked on the song into the night. As they did, the winds picked up noticeably.

The wind blew hard through the night and all the next day, and the sailboat chewed up the miles like fisherman coming home from a long voyage, with home in sight and fish that needed to get to market.

The three men were eating dinner topside.

“Whew... what a day! We made over 600 miles,” Chad said aloud. He looked over at Matt, who was flipping through Jeremiah’s bible. “That’s a new record for Matty and me.” Chad continued, “Looks like we’ll be pulling into Mobile Bay by sunrise.”

“I almost don’t want this trip to end, you know? We’ve got a couple great songs already.”

Matt chimed in. “I know. This has been awesome. I feel like a different person.”

“That makes two of us,” Chad said, smiling. Thanks to Jeremiah the trip had brought the father and son together... perhaps for all eternity.

The next morning, Jeremiah was alone on the bridge, at the helm, keeping them pointed on a course of 300 degrees, as Chad had instructed him a few hours earlier when they’d changed places.

Chad was getting dressed below and Matt was still sleeping.

Jeremiah sipped his coffee when Chad came up with a picture in his hands.

“Good morning,” Jeremiah said. “Coffee’s ready.”

Chad fetched himself a cup, then walked over to Jeremiah. He held out the picture to Jeremiah. “I never showed you a picture of my Beth.”

Jeremiah looked at the picture. Chad was standing on a dock with sailboats in the background, flanked by a black woman and 13 year-old Matt. They were a happy family.

“Oh wow, she was beautiful.”

“Thanks. That was the last picture I have of her. That was taken a week before she died.”

Unsure what to say next, Jeremiah tried to lighten the mood. “Now I see where Matt gets his complexion.” He smiled.

Chad feigned a look of bewilderment. “What do you mean?”

Jeremiah hesitated. “Um...”

“Yeah?”

“Beth... you know, being black.”

Chad gasped theatrically. “She was black? Are you sure?” He raised his eyebrows playfully and smiled. “I’m just messing with you, buddy.”

Jeremiah let out a breath.

Chad spoke. “I miss her so much.”

“I can imagine.”

There was a long silence.

“You’ll see her again,” Jeremiah said with confidence.

“I hope so.”

“And until you do, hopefully we can make some beautiful music and give that same hope to others.”

“Absolutely.”

On the horizon they soon saw land and a few dots of buildings. Chad said, “As soon as we get in cell range, I’ll call for a taxi to meet you at the dock. Looks like we should be there in an hour or so.”

“Thanks Chad. You sure you and Matt don’t want to come with me?”

“I think we’ll just travel on up to Memphis. Plus, I’ve always wanted to sail up the Mississippi. We should be able to get there by tomorrow morning.”

“Okay.”

An hour later, they had docked and Jeremiah hugged Chad and Matt and said good-bye. “You fellas travel safely, okay? We’re in this thing together.”

Chad and Matt nodded.

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

With bible in hand, CoCo in the other, and his guitar slung over his back, Jeremiah hopped off the boat, bent down onto one knee, kissed the ground, and whispered a prayer. Then he walked to the waiting cab.

THIRTY EIGHT

Jeremiah stepped into the taxi and carefully set down CoCo next to him on the back seat, along with the guitar. With the bible clutched in his hand, he was excited and scared, but mostly hopeful. “Hey there, good morning,” he said enthusiastically to the taxi driver as he settled into the back seat. “I need to get to Tillman’s Corner. Do you know the way?”

The driver, a black man, perhaps 60 years old, with graying hair around the sides and black horned rim glasses, turned his head toward Jeremiah. He looked like so many other southern black taxi drivers. “Yes, sir. I do indeed know *the way*.” He said it with an enthusiastic confidence, emphasizing ‘the way’ as if talking about something greater than the directions to a small Alabama town. He drove off.

“What is it... about a half hour?” Jeremiah asked.

“Yessir.”

They drove in silence for the first five minutes and then the taxi driver began whistling a familiar tune: “How Much is that Doggie in the Window?” Jeremiah thought it a strange song choice. “My mom used to sing that song to me when I was little,” he said, making conversation.

“Un-huh. First song with a question mark in the title to ever reach number one on the charts,” the taxi driver replied nonchalantly.

“Huh. I did not know that.”

“Patti Page sang it. Sold over 2 million copies.”

“You know a lot about music?”

“Yes and no. Guess it just depends on who you ask. Some folks say I know a lot about a lot of things. Some folks say I don’t know much about anything.”

Jeremiah could tell right away he liked the driver. He looked at the placard with the driver’s picture and name above the passenger seat visor: El O’Him. Funny name, he thought. “What kind of name is El O’Him? Sounds like a mix of Arabic and Irish.”

The driver smiled at Jeremiah through the rear view mirror. “It’s just my name... always been.” They drove in silence for a bit.

“Who’s your little friend in the box?” the taxi driver finally asked.

“A little sand crab I found. He kind of grew on me when I was at this beach. So I figured I’d bring him back with me.”

“He got a name?”

“CoCo.”

The driver chuckled unexpectedly. “You don’t say. I got a monkey named CoCo. Been with me forever it seems.”

“Really? Why a monkey?”

“Not sure exactly. He just kind of grew on me... kinda like that sand crab of yours, I guess.” He chuckled.

Okay.

The driver took a long look at Jeremiah in the rear view mirror. “You know you look a bit familiar to me. Do I know you?”

“Nah. But I get that a lot.”

They drove past a bunch of cattle and another stretch of silence.

“I got it now... you look like that rap star that disappeared a few months back.”

Jeremiah didn’t want word out that he was alive. He wanted a little time with just his Dad before the inevitable news became public. “Trust me, I’m not.”

“Okay, son.”

More cows and more silence.

“So, you live in Tillman’s Corner?”

“Nah. Grew up there. Just stopping in to see my Dad.”

“Un-huh. What’s your Dad do?”

“He’s a preacher. First Baptist church.”

They drove in more silence, past more cows.

“Hmmm. If I remember correctly, that rap star’s Dad is a preacher, too... right?”

Jeremiah knew he was caught in a lie. This taxi driver really did seem to know a lot about a lot of things. “Um, yeah, I think so.”

The silence had now become uncomfortable.

“Mind if I put the radio on?” the driver asked finally, as if he, too, sensed the uncomfortableness.

“Nah. Sure. Go ahead.”

The taxi driver turned the radio on and a male voice streamed out the speakers: “He was a struggling young entertainer with a baby on the way, yet he was so moved at church one day that he placed his last \$7 in the collection box. When he realized what he’d done, he prayed for a way to pay the looming hospital bills. The next day, he was offered a small part that would pay 10 times the amount he’d given to the church.”

The taxi driver chimed in, “Um, um. Nothing better than Sunday morning radio in the south...”

The radio preacher spoke again: “Two years later, he had achieved moderate acting success, but was still struggling to take his career to the next level. Once again, he prayed, this time to St. Jude Thaddeus, the patron saint of hopeless causes. ‘Help me find my way in life, and I will build you a shrine’, he prayed. After that, his career took off and he became an internationally known entertainer, rich and famous. But Danny Thomas never forgot his pledge. And, thus, St Jude’s hospital was born.”

The taxi driver spoke, “Must be that St. Jude’s telethon weekend.” He turned the radio down low. “That Danny Thomas was one smart fella, huh? Made a promise to God and kept it... smart.”

“Un-huh,” Jeremiah grunted. There was something strange and magical and significant about the cab ride, Jeremiah somehow concluded, but he didn’t know what.

“Always wished I was a preacher,” the driver mused. “Sure seems worthwhile.”

“Un-huh.”

The driver smiled warmly into the rear view mirror, his eyes sparkling like a man who knew the answers to a million secrets. “Look son, I may be just an old cab driver, but I know you’re that rap star that disappeared... alright?”

“Yeah, ok, you got me.” Jeremiah’s eyes locked onto the driver’s in the mirror. He hated that he had lied.

“Look, I’m still trying to figure things out, so I’d appreciate if you don’t tell anyone. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Not a problem, son. But I don’t need your money... no sireee... truly is the root of so much evil...”

“Okay. Well, thank you.”

“You are most welcome. So what happened to you anyways?”

“I wish I knew. One minute I was on my yacht and the next minute I jumped off it into the ocean. That was the last thing I remember before I woke up on a little sandbar. A few days ago two guys in a sailboat found me.”

The taxi driver shoveled a handful of popcorn into his mouth. “Hmmm. Interesting.”

“You’re not gonna believe this, but I actually had a dream about popcorn a few nights ago on that sandbar.”

“You don’t say? You want some?” The driver held the bag out to the backseat.

Jeremiah took the bag. “Sure, thanks.” He ate a handful. “Oh wow, this is really good.”

The driver smiled into the rear view mirror, his eyes now twinkling. “*I use a special Himalayan sea salt and sprinkle in bits of Belgian chocolate... gives it that real good sweet and salty taste, ya know?*”

Jeremiah nodded as the scenery became familiar and they approached his father’s church.

“Well, here we are. Welcome back to Tillman’s Corner, son. If memory serves me right, First Baptist is the little white church on the corner, right?”

“Un-huh. But you can stop now. I can walk up from here.”

“Okay. And your friend who called already paid and gave me a nice tip.”

The driver stopped and Jeremiah hesitated to get out.

“Don’t be scared, son.”

“Who says I’m scared?”

“Look, son, I’ve been at this a long time... a *real long time*. I’ve seen more fear than you’ll ever know-- runaways, folks trying to escape problems, folks who lost their way-- you name it, I’ve seen it.”

“I haven’t seen my Dad in almost 13 years. And I’ve done some pretty bad things. It’s kind of complicated.”

“He’s a man of God, right?”

“Yep. He loves God.”

“Well, then I’m betting this’ll be one of the happiest days of his life.” He paused. “Can I give you some advice?”

“Sure.”

“Choose faith over fear... every time. Trust God and don’t worry about anything. But-- and this is a pretty big but-- pray about everything and listen to your heart.”

Jeremiah smiled. Ever since he’d surrendered, that had been his mantra.

“You wouldn’t mind if I go in there with you, would ya?” the driver asked.

“No. Why?”

“I just love a good redemption story. Just not enough of ‘em in the world today, ya know?”

Jeremiah and the taxi driver exited the cab and walked up the steps of the little white church. It had been 13 years since Jeremiah had walked these steps and held these handrails, and a flood of memories filled his mind. He remembered painting the railing with Josh while his mom painted a picture of them; then, a few years later, he helped carry Josh’s coffin down the same stairs. Although it seemed like forever ago, the memories were so vivid.

“I love you, bro,” Jeremiah whispered to himself as his hand glided up the handrail. He could sense Josh’s presence.

Nervously, Jeremiah reached for the door as a butterfly fluttered above. Before his hand was even on the door knob, he heard his father’s confident voice ringing out. Jeremiah pictured him at the pulpit, his glasses propped on his head, his eyes alive as he spoke about the living God.

“My brothers and sisters, the story of the prodigal son teaches us that God will always welcome us back after we’ve sinned... even when we don’t think we deserve forgiveness. God’s grace and love are infinite.”

Jeremiah took hold of the door handle, twisted it, and pulled the door open.

“Indeed,” he heard his father say, “I believe there’s a celebration in heaven every time a sinner returns to God and surrenders. So, let us rejoice in—”

The loud creak of the door interrupted the preacher and he paused as Jeremiah and the taxi driver stepped inside. Because of the sun’s glare through the opened door, the preacher couldn’t make out the faces of the late arrivals. Nonetheless, he made a quick motion inviting them inside.

“Come on in,” the preacher called out in that folksy Southern manner of his, “Please. All are welcome here.”

Jeremiah missed that voice and that welcoming manner and he felt himself instantly choke up.

The taxi driver held the door open to allow the butterfly to sneak in, then pulled the door closed and stayed in the back as Jeremiah walked down the aisle. With the door now closed, the glare was gone and all eyes in the church were on the long-haired, tattooed 30-year old in the Saints jersey. There were a few immediate whispers and a few pointing fingers.

The preacher pulled his glasses down and did a double take before finally calling out, “Jeremiah? Is that you?” His voice cracked.

Jeremiah nodded and cried out, “It’s me, Dad.”

The preacher released the bible and ran to Jeremiah with open arms. His prayer had been answered!

They met in the aisle, and as father and son hugged, the stunned congregation broke out into staggered applause. Many of the parishioners were undoubtedly thinking the same thing: wow, the old preacher sure knew how to bring home God’s message; imagine that, staging the disappearance of his rock star son and then bringing him home on the day of The Prodigal Son sermon. God was great, for sure; but *their* preacher was awesome!

“Oh, my son! My son! Oh Jeremiah, I thought you were dead,” the preacher cried out, still hugging his eldest, and last remaining son on earth.

“I was, Dad. I really was.”

The preacher released Jeremiah and took in his son fully. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I know, Dad.”

“I missed you so much, son.” The preacher re-hugged Jeremiah and began to cry into his shoulder.

Jeremiah hugged him back. He’d spent many a moment thinking what he might say to his Dad if this day ever came and now it was here. He spoke the words from his heart, the pain evident in his voice. “I’m so sorry, Dad. All that pain and suffering I caused you and mom. I never meant to hurt you. Really. I didn’t.”

“I know, son. Deep in my heart, I’ve always known. Take heart, son. You’re helping me build my house in heaven...”

Jeremiah felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. He fell to his knees, held his head in his hands, and cried out in joyous relief. And none of the flock would ever forget the sermon of The Prodigal Son. When Jeremiah stood back up, he looked back at the taxi driver, who smiled knowingly and flashed a thumbs-up at Jeremiah.

And above it all, the butterfly flitted happily.

THIRTY NINE

Jeremiah sat at the small kitchen table looking at the scrapbook from his childhood. Under the table, a small brown puppy was chewing on an old steak bone. “So how’d you get this pup?” he called out to his dad who was cooking at the stove.

The preacher turned and smiled at his son. “It was the darndest thing. That day you disappeared he just showed up at my doorstep, just sitting there like somehow he knew I needed him. So I brought him in.” The preacher took on a faraway look. “Believe it or not, he brought me so much comfort those first days you went missing. He just wanted to love and be loved. It’s like God knew I needed that.” The preacher smiled again. “Looks just like Sparky, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah. Uncanny.”

His dad winked. “Uncanine-ey.”

Jeremiah chuckled.

“But he’s a good pup, that’s for sure. Strong willed, too, just like Sparky.”

“What do you mean?”

“Absolutely refused to eat dog food. I tried to break him, but he refused to eat for four days. Finally, on the fifth day, I couldn’t take it anymore, so I gave in. Now he eats what I eat, just like Sparky used to. You should see him eat steak and pot roast. Pure joy. It brings a smile to my face every time.”

On the shelf above the stove, a 1970’s portable radio played low in the background. Jim Croce’s “Time in a Bottle” came on and Jeremiah’s Dad turned up the radio.

The preacher began to sing along:

If I could save time in a bottle,
The first thing that I'd like to do,
Is to save every day 'til eternity
passes away,
Just to spend them with you.

As Jeremiah watched, he knew his Dad was thinking of Claire, and the hope of eternal life with her. Separated love like theirs was both sad and uplifting, and nothing affirmed love like nostalgia. As he ladled out the food, the preacher spoke out, “Your mom loved this song.”

“I know. It was the first song I learned to play on my guitar.”

“Now, I know this won’t be as good as your mom’s,” the preacher said as he brought the bowl to Jeremiah, “but hopefully it’ll be close. Word of warning though, I didn’t have enough curry powder, so I used a little saffron. Might taste a little different.”

Jeremiah smiled at the sight of the chicken and rice. “I dreamt of mom’s chicken and rice on that sandbar.”

As the preacher set the bowl down in front of Jeremiah, and one for Sparky, he noticed the gold cross around Jeremiah’s neck.

“Where’d you get that cross?”

“That’s another thing I can’t figure out. When I woke up on the sandbar, my necklace was gone. And this cross necklace was buried in the sand.”

Jeremiah motioned to CoCo, who had been relegated atop a buffet across the kitchen, like an afterthought. “That sand crab led me to it.”

‘That sand crab’? CoCo was taken aback. Is that what he was now? *Hey, Jeremiah, I have a name... CoCo... remember? I was the one that saved that cross from being washed out to sea after it came off your neck.* It was becoming clear to CoCo that he’d never make it to Florida.

“Can I see it?”

“Sure.”

Jeremiah unclasped the necklace and handed it to his Dad. The preacher stared at the cross for a while, then turned it over and looked closely at the back. His hands were shaking.

“Praise Lord God Almighty. I don’t believe this,” he finally said aloud, his voice dripping with wonder and disbelief.

“What?”

“This is your mom’s cross. It has to be.” He handed the cross back to Jeremiah. “Look on the back. See that gouge? One night she was doing dishes and it fell right into

the sink and into garbage disposal... and left that big gouge.” The preacher studied the clasp. “See, the clasp doesn’t close right. It never did.”

Jeremiah stared at the cross with new interest.

“When she was dying, she asked me to give it to you, but I just couldn’t. I wanted her to take it with her.” The preacher shook his head in disbelief. “How could you have it?”

“I don’t know, Dad. Like I said, it was just lying there in the sand. None of it makes sense.”

“Let me hold it again.”

His hand now also shaking, Jeremiah handed the cross necklace back to his Dad.

“What are you doing?”

“This is probably gonna sound crazy,” the preacher said as he held it tightly, “but I want to see if I can feel your mom’s presence.” He closed his eyes tightly, held the cross against his heart, and whispered a prayer.

When he reopened his eyes, Jeremiah stared into them. “I don’t think it’s crazy. In fact, ever since I woke up on that island, I felt mom’s presence... and Josh’s... and God’s.” Jeremiah continued, his voice now filled with excitement and confidence. “I *know* there’s a God, Dad. I just *know it*. I feel like I’ve walked with Him, and talked with Him, and laughed and cried with Him. And mom and Josh are with Him... and Grandpa Frank. I just know it.”

The preacher nodded as he listened to words he never expected to ever hear from his son. “I believe you, son.”

“When I was on the sandbar, everything changed after I surrendered to Him. I swear He made it rain when I needed water, He gave me fish when I needed food, and He sent those orcas out to find help for me. It wasn’t just some big coincidence.”

“I believe you, son. And I love you. I always have and I always will.” The preacher’s heart could have exploded right there and then and he would have died happier than ever. “Praise God the Almighty,” he sang out, “this is one of the happiest days of my life.” The words ‘happiest days of my life’ echoed out.

“That’s weird,” Jeremiah responded.

“What?”

“The cab driver this morning... he said you’d say that exact thing.”

The preacher held the cross in one hand, took Jeremiah's hand in the other, and bowed his head. "Dear God, Thank You for bringing Jeremiah back to me and to You. And thank You for all Your wondrous and glorious mysteries. Though we cannot understand fully, we trust You, Lord. Guide us to do Your will here on earth. We ask this in Your name, and in Your son's name. Amen."

'And all the people said Amen', Jeremiah thought to himself happily. "Amen," he said aloud.

The preacher looked at his son. "When I don't know what else to do, I pray. Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything... Philippians 4:6."

"Un-huh. The cab driver said that, too."

"Smart fella." He handed the cross back to Jeremiah. "I know you'll always cherish this, Jeremiah."

"It's the only thing that will ever hang around my neck again."

"So, how's that chicken and rice?"

"It's good... really good. And I like the saffron, too." He looked down at the pup, who was licking his bowl clean. "Looks like Sparky Junior liked it, too."

The radio beeped the sound for breaking news and a newscaster's voice followed, "CBS news is reporting that Scratch Hatchet, known to many as the Rock God, is alive. The rock star rapper, who disappeared from his yacht in the Atlantic Ocean more than three months ago, and was presumed dead, was sighted by eyewitnesses in Tillman's Corner, Alabama earlier today. We'll have more on this breaking story at the top of the hour."

"That didn't take long," Jeremiah said. Almost simultaneously, a brisk knock came from the front door. Jeremiah and his Dad walked into the living room, looked out the front window, and saw two news trucks on the street.

"Do you mind if I go out and talk to them?" the preacher asked.

"No. Why?"

"Whenever God gives me a forum, I use it for his glory..."

"Go for it, Dad." Jeremiah sat down on the couch and looked at the t.v.

On the porch, a swarm of media surrounded the preacher, thrusting microphones at him. The preacher did what God had created him to do. "God really does work in

strange and mysterious ways,” he preached into the microphones. “My son was dead. And now he is alive. All glory is God’s and I thank Him for keeping my son safe and bringing him back to me. Bless all of you in God’s great name.”

The preacher closed the door and walked back into the living room to see Jeremiah sitting on the couch, tears streaming down his cheeks. “You okay, son?”

Jeremiah shook his head and pointed to the t.v., which showed a montage of kids in a cancer unit at a hospital. Jeremiah managed to speak. “All those poor kids... just fighting to stay alive... just like Josh. Oh God, it breaks my heart...”

“I know, son,” his Dad replied. “I just remind myself that God has his plan, and He knows what He’s doing, even if we don’t always understand.”

As the t.v. showed more images of the children, an announcer spoke out, “This year we’re happy to announce that St Jude’s is teaming up with the Make a Wish Foundation. Most of these kids just want to take a trip to Disneyworld, have some fun, and just be like other kids... your contributions help make that happen.”

Then Marlo Thomas appeared on the screen. “As we wrap-up this year’s St. Jude Telethon,” she announced, “I’d like to thank all of our wonderful volunteers and generous supporters. This weekend we’ve raised almost 7 million dollars, which is tremendous, especially in today’s uncertain economic circumstances. Even though it’s slightly less than last year’s record of 7.5 million, it still represents a great...”

Her voice trailed off as Jeremiah picked up the house phone and frantically punched buttons. “Yes, hi,” he spoke into the phone, “I’d like to make a donation... if it’s not too late.”

There was a pause.

“One million dollars,” he stated calmly.

Another pause.

“Yes ma’am, I’m serious.”

Another pause.

“No, this isn’t a joke. Of course I have the money.”

Another pause.

“Yes, ma’am. My name is Jeremiah Fisher. My address is...”

As he finished providing the information, Jeremiah looked up to see Marlo Thomas back on the t.v.

“As we go off air, I—” She hesitated. “--Hold on. I’ve been informed that we’ve just received a single pledge of one million dollars! Praise God. That puts us at a new record this year...”

Jeremiah was just hanging up. “Oh man, Dad,” he said with a big smile, “That feels so good. I swear my heart just leaped.”

“I’m proud of you, son.”

“It’s like a huge weight’s been lifted off me.”

“Tis easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Jeremiah nodded. On the sandbar, when he read those very words from the Bible, he made a promise to God to empty himself of his money in hopes that God would fill him with what really mattered. And he intended to keep that promise.

The phone rang and Jeremiah immediately recognized the number on the phone’s caller i.d. “That’s my manager, Dill,” Jeremiah said to his Dad. He hesitated as the phone rang for the fourth time. “I should answer.” He hit the ‘talk’ button. “Hello.”

Pause.

“Yep, Dill, it’s really me... alive and kicking.”

Another pause.

“It’s a long story, Dill... kind of complicated. Look, I can’t really talk right now. I tell you what... can you meet me in Memphis on Thursday?”

Pause.

“Un-huh. There’s something I want you to see... something that’s gonna makes us both rich beyond our wildest dreams.”

Pause.

“I’ll tell you all about it when I see you there.”

Pause.

“Yep. Look, just meet me in Memphis. I’ll text you a cell number that you can reach me on.”

Jeremiah hung up.

He looked at his Dad. “Hey, this might sound crazy, but can you drive up to Memphis with me tomorrow?”

“Sure, son. Why?”

“There’s something I need to do.” He smiled and his eyes sparkled like he knew a great secret. “Oh, and do you mind if I use our office? I need to make some phone calls and set some things up.”

“What’s mine is yours, son.”

FORTY

The next night, Jeremiah and his Dad were lounging in Adirondack chairs around a fire pit on Chad's patio in Memphis, the smell and warmth from the fire perfect on this chilly February night. "Oh, I forgot to mention," Chad said, "I invited a woman from our church to come over. When you mentioned St. Jude's, I remembered she works there. I think she pretty high up in their fund raising chain. I hope that's okay."

"Nah, that sounds perfect. Hopefully she's the right person to help us get this thing off the ground."

"I think you'll like her. She's about your age... nice girl... passionate about helping kids. Pretty, too."

"Great."

"Did you have a chance to think about a name?"

"Un-huh. I did a little research yesterday." Jeremiah paused and smiled sheepishly like he knew a secret.

Even though Chad had known Jeremiah less than a week, he knew that look. "Ooooh, I have a feeling you're going to tell us something good."

The flickers from the fire enhanced the twinkle in Jeremiah's eyes. "Guess what Hommes means in French-Cajun, homey?" he asked.

"I don't know... good looking men who rescue Goth rock star?" Chad chuckled.

"Close. It means 'of men'," Jeremiah injected. "So you know what that makes me and you and Matt?" Jeremiah's face lit up as he announced it, "Fisher of Men."

Chad let it sink in. "No way." He paused. "Oh, wow, I like it. No, I love it. It's perfect, just like we said that first day on the boat-- it's as if somehow we were meant to be together."

"I know. I got chills when I put our names together."

The front doorbell rang.

“That’s probably my friend from St. Jude’s,” Chad said, rising from his chair. He walked into the house. Chad returned accompanied by a tall, smiling brunette in skinny jeans and a grey and white striped sweater. Jeremiah, his Dad, and Matt rose as the two approached the patio.

The woman did an obvious double-take when she saw Jeremiah’s larger-than-life figure standing there.

“Everyone, this is Deanna Kidwell,” Chad announced, making the introductions. “Deanna, this is Jeremiah Fisher and his Dad, Chris. And you know my son, Matt.”

She smiled at them, but maintained eye contact with Jeremiah the whole time.

“Jeremiah’s the guy I was telling you about,” Chad added.

“Jeremiah? I thought you were Scratch Hatchet?” she asked quizzically.

Jeremiah smiled. “I *was*. It’s Jeremiah from now on.” He held out his hand to shake. “Nice to meet you.”

She shook his hand. “Believe it or not, we’ve met before.”

“Really?”

“Un-huh. We were in 4th grade together, in Miss Jasnica’s class... Huddleston Elementary.”

Jeremiah looked into her eyes deeply. His heart spoke to him: she’s the girl! He replied aloud, “Oh wow, you’re the girl I kissed... the root beer dare. Right?”

She nodded, but confusion was written on her face. “That’s right.”

“What’s the matter?”

“The second time we met was at your concert in Birmingham, right before you went missing. We talked backstage after the concert...”

“Really?”

“Un-huh. You didn’t have a clue who I was. In fact, you were quite the arrogant ass.” She didn’t mince words.

“Oh wow, I’m sorry... really.” He hesitated. “Between the booze and drugs and vertigo, I was pretty messed up. I really don’t remember any of that to tell you the truth.” He couldn’t have been more sincere or honest.

Deanna smiled warmly at him. “So you *do* remember kissing me in 4th grade?”

Jeremiah smiled sincerely, his eyes alive with the memory. “Absolutely. In fact, ever since I’ve sobered up, sometimes I close my eyes and think about that first kiss.” He eyed her, hoping she didn’t think it was crazy for a 30-year old man to think back to a kiss when he was just a boy of 10.

She thought it was romantic.

Jeremiah continued to explain. “I know, weird huh? But you know how first kisses are, right? I can still feel how my heart was beating that day.”

Deanna remembered saying the exact same words to Angie at the concert in Birmingham. “Oh my God... you are so different than you were in Birmingham,” she said directly.

Jeremiah smiled at her. “Good. Because that wasn’t the person God made me to be. In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve changed a bit since then.”

“A bit?” She chuckled. “This is like Dr. Jekyll and Hr. Hyde.”

“Or Satan and God,” he replied.

They all sat.

“So, let me tell you my idea,” Jeremiah said to Deanna.

“I can’t wait to hear it.”

And then Jeremiah explained his plan to Deanna.

Two days later, Jeremiah was seated at a small table on a stage with Deanna, a simple podium to their right. He wore blue jeans and a long-sleeved Oxford button down shirt that covered all of his tattoos. His hair was pulled neatly back into a ponytail. In front of them, a royal blue curtain was pulled shut, and on the other side they could hear the murmur of a crowd.

Deanna looked at Jeremiah. “You okay?” she whispered sweetly.

“I hope so,” Jeremiah said nervously. “I’ve never been on stage as Jeremiah Fisher before.”

“You’re going to do great. I know it. I feel it. This is such a great story.”

“Thanks. It sure feels right. Jeremiah pointed to his heart.

“You want some water or something?”

“A root beer would be great,” Jeremiah said with a smile and wink. “I’m kidding. I’m fine. Let me just say a quick prayer.”

He grasped the cross hanging around his neck, closed his eyes, and whispered, “I am not afraid, for You are with me, Lord. Help me to do Your will.” Then he opened his eyes and smiled at Deanna. “Okay, I’m ready,” he announced confidently.

She looked at her watch. “Great. Let’s do this.”

She walked to the podium and signaled for the curtain to be opened. As it was, she looked out to see a packed auditorium, with a bank of photographers kneeling below the front of the stage. Amidst flashing cameras and clicking shutters, she smiled and took a deep breath.

“Good morning and thank you for coming,” she announced. “My name is Deanna Kidwell, and I am one of the fund raising managers here at St Jude’s hospital. Today, it’s my pleasure to introduce Mr. Jeremiah Fisher to you. Mr. Fisher has an important announcement he would like to make. Afterwards, he’d be happy to answer any questions.” She looked to her left for Jeremiah to take the podium.

Jeremiah rose and took his position at the podium, smiling at the crowd with the confidence of a man who’d figured out the real meaning of life. He spoke out without fear.

“Thank you, Deanna. For those of you who were expecting to see Scratch Hatchet today, let me say clearly and unequivocally: Scratch Hatchet is dead. In fact, if you think about it, Scratch Hatchet was never really alive. Scratch Hatchet was selfish, prideful, hateful, and irreverent. And none of that speaks of life. Today, I stand before you as God made me-- I am Jeremiah Willy Fisher. And for the first time in many, many years, I am alive! And it feels great.”

Beaming now, Jeremiah turned to the side and winked at Dill who was standing backstage.

“I am here today to renounce everything that was Scratch Hatchet-- his music, his lifestyle, his money, everything. It was all wrong and if I could erase it from the past I surely would. For those of you who own anything related to Scratch Hatchet, I ask that you throw it away. Please. It is garbage, and I apologize to God, and to all of you, for making such garbage. Scratch tried to gain the world by selling his soul. And I, Jeremiah Fisher, refuse to do that.”

The crowd was mesmerized. The press release had mentioned that it was to be an important announcement by Scratch Hatchet, but nobody could have expected this.

Jeremiah continued, “Every asset and every penny that Scratch Hatchet ever had now belongs to St. Jude’s, in hopes that they can use it for good. In addition to funding their core cancer research, St. Jude’s has agreed to create an addiction and wellness program on Scratch’s Caribbean island. My hope is that St. Jude’s will be as successful in fighting adult addictions as they have been in fighting childhood cancer. Finally, and most importantly, I would like to say that God is alive, He cares, and He is all that any of us need in life. I pray that everyone who hears me today will say a prayer to God and ask for his guidance in your life. To God be all the glory! Thank you. And now I’d be happy to answer your questions.”

Hands shot up in the audience and Jeremiah pointed to a reporter in the front row.

“Can you tell us what happened to you? Where were you? Was it all some sort of staged publicity stunt?”

Jeremiah laughed. “Of course it wasn’t staged. On November 3rd, I jumped off my yacht in the middle of the Atlantic. I can’t explain why, because I really don’t know why. All I know is that I just wanted to be-- no, I needed to be-- in the water that night.” He paused. “Somehow I ended up on a small sandbar with no water and no food... just me. After four days, I was weak and dehydrated. I was dying. As I laid there on the sand, stripped of all possessions, I knew the only thing that could save me was God. So I prayed to Him. And that night it rained. And the next day a bible washed ashore.” Jeremiah held up this bible.

“I read it. And as I lay there dying, it all became clear. That’s when I surrendered to God. And that’s when everything changed.”

He felt himself starting to choke up. “When I was thirsty, God gave me rain. When I was hungry, God gave me fish. And then, one day my guitar washed ashore. Don’t ask me how or why. I guess God knew I needed it. And finally, when all my fears were gone, He sent help for me. Even though I can’t explain it all, as God is my witness, that’s what happened.”

The reporter called out a follow-up question. “How do you know it was God? That’s a pretty big leap?”

Jeremiah eyed her. “It’s called a leap of faith. And, yes, it is big. Trusting in God is big, it’s bold, and it has given me freedom and conquered my fears. I highly recommend that all of you choose to give it a try.” His smile was as wide as the east to the west.

“At the same time, it’s actually a pretty easy choice. You see, as I sat on that island, I came to the realization that life’s not nearly as hard as we make it. And so, from

now on, when I make a choice I will choose whatever best honors and glorifies God. I will choose to love not to hate, to help not to hurt, to give not to take, and to trust in God and live by faith. And now, here today, for the first time in many, many years, I stand without fear. I trust God and it feels great.”

Another reporter called out. “So what’s next for you, Scra... er, Jeremiah?”

“I’m glad you asked.” Jeremiah motioned to the side of the stage. “Let me show you.”

Matt and Chad walked onto the stage carrying guitars and backstage folks rushed out and set up a drum set and microphones. Jeremiah stood with his guitar behind the microphone in the middle of stage, flanked by Matt and Chad.

“I’d like to introduce you to my new band. This is Matt Hommes,” Jeremiah said pointing, “and that’s his Dad Chad on drums. They’re the ones who found me on that little sandbar. We are Fisher of Men, and we’d like to play a song that Matt, his mom, and I wrote.”

Jeremiah smiled at Matt and Chad and spoke into the mic. “One, two, three, four...”

They three men began playing and Jeremiah sang out:

You are not alone,
If you are lonely,
When you feel afraid,
You’re not the only.
We are all the same,
In need of mercy,
To be forgiven and be free.
It’s all you got to lean on,
But thank God it’s all you need.

And all the people said Amen.
And all the people said Amen.
Give thanks to the Lord
For his love never ends.
And all the people said Amen.

If you’re rich or poor,
Well it don’t matter.
Weak or strong,
You know love is what we’re after,
We’re all broken,
But we’re all in this together.

God knows we stumble and fall.
And he so loved the world
He sent His son to save us all.

And all the people said Amen.
And all the people said Amen.
Give thanks to the Lord
For his love never ends.
And all the people said Amen.

Over claps from the audience, Jeremiah spoke out, “Thank you all for coming. Praise God the Almighty.”

The stage curtain closed.

Backstage, Dill rushed up to Jeremiah. “Are you crazy, Scratch? You can’t renounce everything that was. The record label’s going to sue you. You’re going to lose everything.”

“Did you listen to anything I said out there, Dill? I don’t have *anything* the record label can take from me... I gave it all away. And just about everything in the future is earmarked for St. Jude’s, too. All I need is enough to pay my bills.”

He smiled at Dill in a way that Dill had never seen before. There was a peace about him. “You know what I finally figured out, Dill? *The more I give away, the more I have.*”

“You’re crazy.”

“Crazy free. And crazy at peace.” Then Jeremiah sang out, “Free at last, free at last, Thank God, I’m free at last.” He looked into Dill’s eyes. “Join me, Dill. I’m serious.”

“It doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“Trust me, Dill. Better yet, trust God. I’m serious— try it. Have you ever seen me this happy?”

Jeremiah smiled and sang out, “I love you, you love me, come change the world, Dilly please.”

Jeremiah spoke now. “For real, Dill, let’s change the world for good this time.”

Dill shook his head and walked away, firmly convinced that Scratch had finally flipped out.

FORTY ONE

Less than a week after publicly announcing the death of Scratch and the rebirth of Jeremiah, Jeremiah sat bare chested in a tattoo chair at the Tillman's Corner Tattoo Shop. In the background, the song 'Our God' played as Jeremiah's high school buddy Nick, himself adorned with Christian tattoos, inspected the used canvas on which he was to work.

"Well, you picked the right place, that's for sure. I do more devil conversions than anyone... 'cept maybe your Dad. So, you want to redo *every one* of these?"

"Un-huh. I brought some ideas." Jeremiah handed a stack of pages to Nick. "Take a look and see what you think."

Nick studied the pages filled with images of Jesus, God, the cross, and passages of scripture. He stared at one in particular for a minute before holding it up. It was a picture of a man who looked somewhat like Jack Sparrow, minus the pirate features, reaching down from heaven and pulling the hand of a man sinking in quicksand.

"I like this one," Nick said. "It would be cool if God looked like this."

"I know. For some reason when I saw that one I just couldn't stop looking at it. Look into his eyes. It's mesmerizing." Jeremiah pointed to his right forearm. "I want that one right here, where everyone can see it."

Nick surmised the situation. "These'll definitely work." He looked at another one closely. "I don't really get this one with the orcas." He held up a sheet of paper that showed a mother orca and her calf. Riding on top of the mother orca was Jeremiah with the gold cross around his neck and the bible in his hand. A soft glow of light surrounded Jeremiah.

"That one's a long story, I'll tell it to you while you're inking me."

"Sounds good. Mmmm, I like this one, too." He held up a sheet with a gold cross. The word 'FAITH' was written in the crossbar. "You know this is gonna take a few days, right?"

"Absolutely."

Nick looked closely at Jeremiah's chest, around the area of his heart. He leaned in. "What about this one? It looks like one of those UV tattoos... you want that one done, too?"

Jeremiah pushed his chin down in an attempt to look at his chest, but couldn't see anything. "I don't even remember getting a tattoo there... what is it?"

Nick moved the flex arm from the floor light close-in, shined the light against Jeremiah's chest, and squinted hard as he looked. "It's some sort of pattern of lines. But it's hard to see in this light."

Nick walked away and returned with a portable black light. "These UV tattoos are easier to see with a black light."

Nick flicked on the black light and turned off the other lights. The song in the background seemed to be in synch with the scene in the tattoo parlor, and Chris Tomlin's voice sang out through the speakers, "Into the darkness you shine, out of the ashes we rise..."

When Nick focused the black light onto Jeremiah's chest the tattoo seemed to come to life. Seen under the black light, it was an intricate design, with deep, rich, vivid colors and a mesmerizing pattern.

Unable to contain his wonderment, Nick exclaimed aloud, "Oh my God!"

"What?"

"I've never seen anything like this," Nick responded as he grabbed a magnifying glass from the table next to the chair.

Jeremiah didn't know whether to be scared or excited. "What is it?"

Nick studied the tattoo through the magnifying glass for a while before finally looking up. In the dark light, he locked eyes onto Jeremiah. "It's a fractal. But I've never seen one like this."

"A fractal?"

"Un-huh. I studied them in graphic design class."

Nick returned his attention to the tattoo, studying it again through the magnifying glass. "Some people call them the thumbprint of God, because no matter how much you magnify a fractal, the pattern just keeps going on and on... like infinity... for all eternity."

He looked up from the magnifying glass and took a deep breath. “Phew. But, like I said, I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Nick handed the magnifying glass to Jeremiah. “Here, look at it through this. It might be hard from that angle, but from straight on it’s the most amazing image, let alone tattoo, I’ve ever seen.”

Jeremiah looked through the magnifying glass, craning his neck to try and get a better view. “I can’t really see it from this angle,” he said.

“Hold on. I’ll take a picture of it.” Nick held the camera against the magnifying glass and took a picture of the fractal. He handed the image to Jeremiah.

As he viewed the image, Jeremiah’s eyes lit up. The patterns kept recurring at a progressively smaller scale... on and on and on. “Whoa!”

“Yeah. Supposedly if you stare at a fractal long enough, it can take you to another dimension. How could you not remember getting this?”

“I don’t know, Nick. I was drunk and high for most of the past seven years, I barely remember anything.”

“I’m just trying to imagine how long this took to do, much less who did it, and what kind of needles they used to get this level of detail. Man, I wish you could remember where you got it.”

“I wish I could, too. But I know one thing-- don’t cover it up or change it one bit.”

“Dude, I’m an artist... first and foremost. It would kill me to see this thing destroyed. This thing should be on display somewhere, for everyone to see.”

Jeremiah smiled at him. “It is,” he said, pointing to his chest. “Right here. On my heart.”

FORTY TWO

Less than a year after renouncing everything that had publicly personified and defined his previous existence, Jeremiah was atop a new world. And in this new world, he loved himself and those around him, and lived with a singular purpose: to build his house in heaven and help others build their houses, too.

The Fisher of Men debut album had reached number one and stayed there for a record 33 weeks on the Christian charts, and their concerts had become somewhat of a revival show, grossing nearly 50 million dollars. With essentially every dollar going to charity, by the end of the year, Jeremiah had contributed over 150 million dollars to charity.

He'd also been named 'Man of the Year' by Time Magazine, a distinction that both embarrassed and inspired Jeremiah. Much had been given to him, he realized, and much was expected of him; and, with the eyes and ears of the world on him, he embraced that great responsibility with great seriousness. Indeed, everyone in the world, it seemed, wanted to hear what the ex-Rock God thought and had to say. Yet through it all, Jeremiah managed to stay humble and kept building his house, brick-by-brick.

Their debut album tour completed, Jeremiah had moved back to Tillman's Corner to be with his Dad, occupying the same bedroom he'd once shared with Josh.

It was December 15th, and Jeremiah was celebrating with the woman he'd first kissed more than 20 years ago, and whom he now loved more than he'd ever dreamed possible.

They were driving in Jeremiah's Honda Accord, with Deanna in the passenger's seat, strangely blindfolded.

"Can I look yet?" Deanna asked anxiously.

Jeremiah smiled at his blindsided lover. "Not yet. Just relax."

"If you weren't Time Magazine's 'Man of the Year' I might be scared."

"Yup. That's my new *thang*. I use it to lure pretty girls into my lair." He chuckled. Finally Jeremiah stopped the car. "Okay. You can look."

Deanna removed the blindfold to see that they were parked in front of Huddleston Elementary School. "Hmm. Not what I expected. Okay. I'll bite. Why are we here?"

“There’s something I want to show you.”

Jeremiah led Deanna around the school. When they rounded the corner she saw the playground lit up by hundreds of candles. They sparkled like stars on the ground. “Surprise!” Jeremiah shouted.

“Oh wow, it’s so beautiful.”

Jeremiah took Deanna by the hand, led her to sit on a swing, and bent down to eye level. “Since this is where we first kissed, this is where I wanted to ask you.”

“Ask me what?” Deanna said with nervous excitement.

Jeremiah balanced on one knee and pulled out a jewelry box from his jean’s pocket. “To do me the honor of marrying me.” He opened the ring box. “I love you, Deanna. *Always and forever.*”

“I love you, too, Jeremiah.” She looked down at the ring. “Oh wow... it’s so beautiful. Of course I’ll marry you. You know I want to spend eternity with you.”

Amidst the stars and candles, they kissed.

“Your kissing has gotten better,” she said with a playful smile.

He smiled back, happier than ever. “So have I... in a lot of ways.”

Deanna felt the same. “Sometimes I think this is all just some big, crazy dream. I’m sooo happy.”

“If it is, I never want to wake-up. This has been the best year of my life. I can finally see the plan God has for me and my life.”

Deanna nodded. “You know what I hope?”

“That I don’t start a fire and burn down the school with all these candles?”

“Well, that too,” Deanna replied with a chuckle. “I hope heaven is one-millionth as great as this.”

Jeremiah responded quickly. “For some reason, I know it’s a million times better.”

“And for some reason I believe you.” She returned her attention to the ring. “When are you thinking for the wedding?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Really?”

“Un-huh. I wasted most of my life. I want to make the rest of it count. How’s April sound?”

“April? As in four months from now?”

“Sure, unless you want to do it sooner.”

“I can’t imagine sooner.” She smiled wide. “April it is.”

“And I have another surprise,” Jeremiah said.

“It better not involve handcuffs,” she said playfully.

“Hah. I told you, those were Scratch’s, not mine.”

“Riiiiight,” she winked. “Okay, what’s the surprise?”

“You know how you talked about wanting to go to Aruba some day?”

“Really?” she replied excitedly. She was sure he was talking about their honeymoon.

Jeremiah nodded. “Well, my bride-to-be, I am taking you on a trip and you are going to be very, very close to Aruba.” He couldn’t contain his laugh.

“Close?”

“Un-huh.”

“Where?”

“Los Testicles.”

“The testicles?”

“Nah, that’s not right. I was thinking of something else.” He winked. “Los Testigos.”

She knew Spanish well. “The Witnesses,” she said aloud. “What’s that?”

“It’s part of a little chain of islands off the coast of Venezuela. Only about 200 people live there... mostly fishermen.”

She never knew Los Testigos was a place, too. “Well, I did say I’d go anywhere with you.” She hesitated. “So why there?”

“You remember that Rock God necklace?”

“Um, you mean the one Scratch-- you? -- almost shoved down my throat after the concert in Birmingham?” She made a saucy face. “Oh, that’s right, you don’t remember that, do you?”

He rolled his eyes. “One of the many benefits of being the former Scratch Hatchet... ye olde selective memory. Comes in a wee bit handy at times.”

She smirked back.

“Anyway, the people who found it in that big drum-- the fish, not the musical instrument-- invited me to come to their village and see all the things they did after they sold it. So I accepted their offer.”

“Let me guess, they want to name you Los Testigos’s Man of the Year. Right?”

He brightened up. “Maybe. We’ll see. I can’t imagine anyone else has done as much for them...”

“I assume they have beaches.”

“Un-huh. Lots of beautiful beeches... mostly brunettes, but some blondes and redheads, too, I think.” He smiled mischievously. “With long legs and awesome tans to make up for their attitudes.” He winked.

“Oh you are on a roll tonight.” It was her turn to roll the eyes. “So when are we going?”

“Next week. On Christmas Eve.”

She considered it. “Okay. Christmas in Los Testigos. What more could a girl want?”

“How about a set of handcuffs?”

“You better start blowing out candles before the fire department gets here.”

FORTY THREE

Jeremiah walked down the corridor of the cancer ward of St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Birmingham, where he was a frequent visitor, bringing toys and hope to the kids as they battled. On this day, he heard the unmistakable sound of a guitar playing an unmistakable tune, and he couldn't help but think of the horrible words he'd written to accompany that tune:

Oh, I don't give a flyin' fuck what you want or
what you say.
Yeah, I don't give a flyin' fuck what you want or
what you say.

Jeremiah stopped outside the room where the guitar was being played.

"Knock knock," Jeremiah called out, as he walked into the room. A boy of about 12 was propped up in bed, the guitar in his hands, and a colorful bandana with the words, "The Good Fight, covering his obvious bald head. When the boy looked up, his pale face brightened immediately.

"Hey there," Jeremiah said warmly.

"Oh my God. It's you. You're really here. The nurses said you came a lot."

Jeremiah walked over to the side of the bed. "What's your name?"

"Liam. Liam Maxwell."

"Nice to meet you, Liam. You play well."

"Thanks. I taught myself."

Jeremiah nodded. "Me too."

"So, I gotta ask... why are you playing *that* song?"

"I like the tune. But my mom won't let me sing the words."

"Good. You listen to your mom, Liam. She's right. That song has some terrible, terrible words."

“I’ve been trying to think of new words for it,” Liam said proudly.

“Huh. I hadn’t thought of that.” *What a good idea.* “You want to share what you have?”

“Sure.” Then Liam wavered. “But I don’t have that good of a voice.”

“Neither did my brother, but that never stopped him.” Jeremiah winked.

Liam took a deep breath and began playing the tune and singing the lyrics he’d created:

Oh, I don’t wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don’t wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

The words quickly brought tears to Jeremiah’s eyes and he gulped earth’s air. They were perfect.

Liam stopped playing and stared into Jeremiah’s misty eyes.

“Bad?” he asked.

Jeremiah collected himself. “Oh, my God, no, Liam. They’re perfect.”

“Really?” Liam’s voice burst with excitement.

“How’d you come up with them?”

“I saw a clip on Youtube of your speech from last year, you know, when you said Scratch was dead. You said you didn’t want to gain the world by selling your soul.”

Jeremiah nodded. Words were indeed so, so powerful.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Jeremiah suggested. “What do you say you and I work together and finish the song you started?”

“Really? Serious?”

“Absolutely. I just hope I don’t screw up what you got started.”

Liam smiled.

The two talked for a while-- about cancer and chemo, God and heaven, and family and music-- and Jeremiah learned a lot about Liam: his particular cancer had about a 50-

50 chance of survival; his big brother was the star of the high school baseball team; his mom was a nurse; his Dad had been in the Army and had died in Afghanistan; and Liam loved Jesus and God.

“Okay, let’s talk about what we want this song to say,” Scratch said. “What do you think the singer wants to tell the audience?”

“That we all need to rely on God no matter what happens to us... no matter how much life tries to pull us away from Him.”

Jeremiah nodded. “I like that... life pulling us away from God... nagging at us, chipping away. Let’s work with that.”

Jeremiah caught sight of a butterfly fluttering outside the window, and on the windowsill he saw cans of playdough.

“How about this,” Jeremiah suggested. “We’re all playdough in God’s hands and he molds us and shapes us into the people we are, but life tries to pull us away and we need God’s help keep us like God made us and wants us to be.”

Jeremiah closed his eyes and began to feel the words in his heart and see them in his head.

He looked back at Liam. “I think clay sounds better than playdough.”

Jeremiah nodded. “Me, too. Hey, play the tune and let’s see what we can do, okay?”

“Sure.”

As Liam played, Jeremiah sang the new chorus:

Oh, I don’t wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don’t wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

He then whispered a silent prayer, felt his heart whisper, and the words and rap flowed smoothly:

Father God I am clay in your hands,
Help me to stay that way through all
life’s demands,
‘Cause they chip and they nag and they
pull at me,
And suddenly I ain’t the man,

You made me to be.

He smiled at Liam as he came to the end of the first verse and pointed at him to join him in the chorus:

Oh, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

They stopped singing.

“What do you think?”

Liam was on cloud nine. “Oh, wow, that was awesome.”

“A couple more verses and we've got ourselves a song, little man.”

“I can't wait to tell my mom and my brother.”

As Liam's words trailed off, they heard footsteps entering the room.

“Tell us what?” the woman entering called out as she walked toward Liam's bed. She hadn't yet recognized who was there with her son.

“I'm writing a song with Jeremiah Fisher,” Liam announced proudly.

The woman turned her eyes to Jeremiah. “Oh, wow. It's you.” She teared up immediately and held her hand over her mouth.

Jeremiah smiled warmly at her. “Yes, ma'am. Liam was just showing me how to improve the lyrics to a terrible old song.”

“Really?”

“Yes, ma'am.” He extended his hand. “Hi. Jeremiah Fisher.”

She shook hands, “Mary Maxwell”, then motioned to the tall athletic teen beside her.

“You must be Lucas,” Jeremiah said.

“Yes, sir.” They shook hands.

“You have an awesome son.”

She smiled at Jeremiah. “Thank you. Two of them. Liam loves your music.”

“Hopefully the new stuff more than the old...”

She nodded. “So you’re really writing a song with him?”

“Un-huh. Liam started it. You want to hear it.”

“Yes, please.”

They sang it, and by the end, both Mary and Lucas were choking up.

“Did you like it, mom?” Liam asked.

“Oh, baby, it’s perfect, just like you.”

Jeremiah saw a look in Mary’s eyes that tugged at his heart.

She looked at Liam. “Hey Liam, I’m going to talk with Mr. Fisher outside for a minute.” She turned to Lucas. “Stay and talk with your brother, okay?”

Mary led Jeremiah out of the room and down the hallway.

She whispered. “Thank you for spending time with him.”

“Oh, really, it’s my pleasure. He’s a great kid.”

He’d scarcely finished speaking when her face squished up and tears filled her eyes. She dabbed at them with a tissue, collected herself, and looked into Jeremiah’s eyes. “Liam’s doctor told me they’re going to stop chemo.” She burst out now and the tears followed.

Jeremiah pulled her close, hugged her tightly, and rubbed her back. “Oh, geez. I’m sorry... I’m so sorry.”

She pulled away and wiped her tears. “He doesn’t know yet... I--, I just don’t know how to tell him.”

Jeremiah let out a deep breath. “How long are they saying he has?”

“Three, maybe four months.”

Jeremiah was frozen, unsure what to do or say.

“Today was the happiest I’ve seen him in months,” Mary finally said.

That made Jeremiah feel good and his heart leaped--immediately he knew exactly what to say and do. "Well, I tell you what, how about if I spend some more time with him? Would that be okay?"

"I think he'd love that."

"Okay then. Let's make this the best four months-- or more-- of Liam's life here on earth. Okay?"

"Praise Jesus, you are so wonderful for visiting all these poor, sick children."

"It's my honor. Truth be known, I'm the one who gets the most benefit. The more I give, the more I receive."

Mary dried her tears, collected herself, and they walked back into the room.

Jeremiah was upbeat. "Hey Liam, your mom said it'd be alright if I come visit on a regular basis... so maybe we can finish that song of ours."

Liam lit up. "Really? That's awesome."

"How about I come back tomorrow about the same time. In the meantime, you get some rest and think of what we want that song to say in the second verse. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Call me Jeremiah. Please." *I work for the Lord.*

"Okay Jeremiah. Thanks."

Jeremiah smiled at the family and was about to walk out when Liam called out. "Do you think you can sing it at one of my brother's baseball games... you know, during the 7th inning stretch or something."

"Sure, I don't see why not. When's the first game?"

"April 5th."

"Let's do it," Jeremiah said enthusiastically. "But under one condition."

"What?"

"That you sing it with me."

"Serious?"

“Absolutely. This is gonna be your song as much as mine.”

“Okay.”

Jeremiah left the room praying they'd get the chance.

FORTY FOUR

Jeremiah continued to visit Liam and they'd almost finished their song when Jeremiah left with Deanna for Los Testigos. After a 4-hour flight to Margarita Island, they boarded a 48-foot catamaran charter for the 50-mile trip east.

Although excited, Deanna was clearly exhausted. "Sure would have been a lot easier if fishermen from Aruba had caught that fish."

"True dat," Jeremiah said, smiling, sounding like an islander. "But sometimes the easy thing isn't what God wants for us, ya know."

"I know. I just hope God doesn't want me to sleep in a hammock in a thatched hut, like on Gilligan's Island." She smiled.

Jeremiah remembered when he would have loved a hammock in a hut with a thatched roof.

"Relax Ginger. I'm sure they'll treat Los Testigos' Man of the Year, and his entourage, like Rock Gods." He winked. "I know one thing-- they have a great solar energy system and wastewater treatment plant."

"I'm not sure what that means."

"It means you'll have a light in the bathroom... and you'll be able to flush."

"Oh. Okay."

She tied her shirt off just above her navel to reveal her mid-drift. "And for the record," she said smiling, "I'm more the Mary Ann type."

"Oh believe me, my brown-eyed girl, I know. I had a crush on her, too." He laughed.

She rolled her brown eyes. "No doubt."

Once the gifts they'd brought had been loaded, they were lying in front of the catamaran's center console, sailing in the bluest water Deanna had ever seen. She'd shed her shorts and shirt and was in full bikini mode.

"Oh wow! It's so beautiful," she marveled.

Jeremiah agreed. “Just like you, babe.”

“How long will it take to get there?”

“Depends on the winds, but I’d say about three hours.”

“A three hour cruise,” Deanna sang out, remembering the Gilligan’s Island theme song. “Oh, and don’t get any ideas about jumping off, either. Because I will jump in after you.”

“Hah, I was just thinking about that.”

“I can imagine. I bet you can’t be on a boat without thinking about that.”

“I can’t go a day without thinking about it. I rack my brain and rack my brain and I still don’t understand what happened that night. It’s just never made sense. And when I think about those missing two months, that’s when it gets real freaky... like I was in some sort of time warp.”

She looked deeply into his eyes and he told himself to focus on her brown eyes, not the bikini. He held her eyes.

“You know what I think happened?” she said.

“What?”

“You were abducted by a band of angels and taken somewhere...”-- She looked into his eyes even deeper-- “to heaven, I think.”

“You’re joking, right?”

Her face was dead serious. “No.”

The hair on his body stood up. “How’d you come up with that?”

“It’s the only thing that fits all the pieces.”

He inched toward her. “Hmm, I’ll bite. Go ahead.”

She explained. “It’s all predicated on the assumption that you are 100 percent sure that you were on that sandbar for only those 40 days—”

“Which I am,” he injected. “Absolutely no doubt. I mean I could be off by one or two days, but not more than that. No way.”

“Okay, so here’s how I see all the pieces fitting together. One, whatever happened to you, and wherever you were during those two missing months, we know one thing-- you were protected.”

He nodded.

“Two, we know your mom’s cross was buried with her.”

He nodded again. “No doubt. My Dad was there when they closed the coffin.”

“So, what are the chances that a *different* cross, but one exactly like hers-- even with the exact same gouge and the broken clasp-- ended up on a spec of land in the middle of the ocean... with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Virtually impossible,” she said.

He was also sure it was his mom’s cross.

“So, if that’s really your mom’s cross, there’s only two ways it could have gotten on that sandbar-- either it dropped down from heaven... or you went there to get it from her. And I’m not talking about grave robbing.” She continued, “And even if it somehow dropped onto that sandbar that doesn’t explain why you went missing for two months... right?”

He was lost in thought. “Yeah.”

“So the way I see it, if you went to get it from your mom, I’m saying you went to heaven... somehow, someday, don’t ask me how.”

He replied, “If mom’s not in heaven then I can’t imagine many people are. She was as close to a saint as anyone.”

“But all that aside, you know what the most important piece of the puzzle is?” she asked.

“What?”

She put her finger on his chest, on his heart.

“My heart?” he said softly and sweetly and proudly.

She smiled at him warmly. “No. But when you say it like that... maybe.” He did have a changed heart and a soul on fire, no doubt. “That tattoo,” she said, touching her finger on the fractal.

He raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Un-huh. I showed the magnified picture you sent me to some of the doctors at St. Jude’s and they all said the same thing: it would be impossible for someone to have put that intricate a tattoo on your chest. They said the lines were just too close together and distinct, and the skin couldn’t handle being inked like that.”

He was listening intently.

“One of the doctors was talking about how people write on a grain of rice, but he said the lines on your tattoo would be like putting 100 distinct lines of different colored ink on the pinhead of a rice grain. He said there’s just no tool that can do that... not even the most focused laser in the world.”

“So what do you think made that tattoo?”

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence that a fractal is called the thumbprint of God... I think it was God.”

Jeremiah felt an intense wave of energy flowing within his body and his hairs stood at attention. “Seriously?”

“Absolutely.”

“Why?”

“Because it defies any earthly logic.”

His heart was pounding. It wasn’t the first time he’d thought of something like this, but it was the first time *someone else* had suggested it. And he’d never pieced it together so eloquently, so compellingly. Maybe it wasn’t so crazy.

She continued, “I mean unless you were abducted by a bunch of benevolent aliens who wanted you to have your mom’s necklace and then they cast some righteous spell over you, I can’t think of anything else.” She paused and then said, “If I were betting I think you had an encounter with God.”

“Jesus,” he said in awe.

“Maybe Jesus, too.” She smiled at that one.

His head was swimming. “Wow, so much for a relaxing sailboat ride.”

“It can still be a relaxing ride.”

“Maybe for you... but not for me.”

“Why not?”

“Because if you’re right-- and believe me I’ve had fleeting thoughts similar to what you just laid out-- then I gotta believe I’m carrying around a heavy burden.”

“How do you figure?”

“Think about it. If I did have an encounter with God, He must have done it for a reason... like He chose me special... to do something special.”

Jeremiah remembered Chad’s words that first day on the sailboat back to Alabama. “Kind of like he chose Paul.”

“So now I am living a life in which He must be expecting great things from me.”

“And you’re doing great things,” she assured him.

He shrugged. “I think I’m living the kind of life that God would be proud of now, but I wonder if I’m doing *everything* He wants me to do?” He emphasized ‘everything’.

“What if I’m falling way short? What if He sent me out with all the clues that you talked about and I’m still just going through the motions...”

He paused.

“I just don’t want to disappoint Him.”

“Oh babe, I’m sure you’re not. You’ve become everything that I think God wants all of us to be.”

He hoped she was right; but he had doubts.

He took a deep breath. “It sure would have been nice if He’d told me all this a little more clearly.”

“Maybe He told you as clearly as He intended. Maybe He gave you just enough, and if you have just enough faith, you’d figure out what He intended for you to do...”

He couldn’t argue with that.

“So how long have you been thinking about all this?”

“Ever since you told me about your mom’s cross and the tattoo and those lost two months... so basically for the past year. I guess I was just scared to tell you what I thought.”

He pulled her close and hugged her. Out of the blue he started to cry.

She hugged him tightly. “It’s okay, babe, it’s okay,” she assured him.

After a minute, he collected himself and pulled back and looked at her through misty eyes. “You know what I just figured out?”

“What?”

“That we’re all supposed to live as if we had an encounter with God. That’s what Jesus was-- he was mankind’s encounter with God.”

She’d never thought of Jesus like that. “Totally agree. And I think you’re living that life now, too. I just hope some of you rubs off on me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it-- a year ago, you were an arrogant, self-absorbed, satanic Goth rock star. Now, you’re the model for God and Christ-like behavior: you give everything you have to the poor and the sick, and your whole life has become one of serving others.” She began to tear up. “You make me want to be like you...” Now she was crying.

He pulled her close. “Oh, baby, I love you so much. You do so much for others, too...”

He had a cute thought. “And you haven’t even been to heaven. Just think what a person like you would do if you had an encounter with God.”

She chuckled through tears. “I love you, too.”

They rode in silence for a bit, just holding each other and looking out at all the beautiful blue water.

“I know all this sounds far-fetched and daunting, but I think we just need to do what you always say-- pray a lot and listen to our hearts,” Deanna summed.

Jeremiah nodded. “And when we feel a tug on our heart we listen.”

“Absolutely.”

About an hour into the voyage they were joined by a pod of dolphins swimming in the bow wave. Jeremiah and Deanna looked at them intently, focusing on the lead one,

the one closest to the surface. In the light of the sun, they saw a beautiful creature— sleek and grey, with shimmering streaks of blue and green. It glided through the water effortlessly, without seemingly a care in the world. It was at peace.

They both felt that same pure peace.

The lead dolphin seemed to look up at them, and when Jeremiah's eyes locked onto the dolphin's sparkling eye, he could have sworn it was smiling at him.

FORTY FIVE

They docked at Los Testigos a few hours before sunset and were met by, they would later learn, the island's entire population. Excitement filled the air-- children scampered happily about, fingers pointed at them, heads nodded and mouths whispered, and faces smiled at Jeremiah and Deanna as they stepped onto the dock and then onto the beach. To the people of Los Testigos, Jeremiah was indeed a rock god!

"Welcome Los Testigos, Meeester Fisher an Miss Deanna," a smiling, tanned man of authority pronounced in obviously practiced English. He wore white shorts and a colorful banana print shirt.

"Uh, thanks," Jeremiah managed with a slight smile. He extended his hand and the man shook it vigorously. From his words and the children's shouts, it was clear that very little English was spoken on the island. *That* would have been a nice thing for Jeremiah's publicist to have mentioned.

Deanna jumped in. "Muchas gracias," she said with gusto and a considerable smile. "Estamos felices de estar aquí," she added animatedly.

Jeremiah looked at her like she'd grown a second head... and the new one could speak Spanish with gusto and animation.

"El placer es nuestro," the tanned man replied with a little nod.

"What did y'all say?" Jeremiah asked Deanna.

"I told him we we're happy to be here and he told me it was their pleasure to have us."

"It never occurred to me to ask what language they spoke. I'm glad you paid attention in Spanish class."

She smiled. "I'm glad I minored in Spanish in college, too."

The tanned man spoke out again. "Ahora le llevaré a la suite presidencial."

"What'd he say?" Jeremiah asked.

"He said they want to crown you President and sacrifice a virgin in your honor."

“Really?”

“No, you *dumb shit*.” She laughed out. “He’s going to take us to the Presidential suite.”

“Oh, okay. Cool. For a minute there I was worried you might have to stand in as the sacrificial virgin.”

She smirked.

Deanna and the tanned man spoke some more Spanish and Jeremiah stood tall, trying not to look stupid. And he wasn’t about to ask what was being said, although he did find it amusing when she’d called him a dumb shit. She did it in a kind, loving way... he liked that.

For some reason, his thoughts turned to God. That’s the way God would probably call someone a dumb shit, he thought happily to himself. He continued thinking of God. It sure would have been nice if God had bestowed a little bit of Spanish knowledge on him while he was in heaven.

The islanders led Jeremiah and Deanna to a small yellow one-story house with a corrugated tin roof that was just off the beach, and the tanned man proudly showed them the inside while the other islanders waited on the beach. Inside was a living room with a love seat and two hard chairs, a small kitchenette with a metal 1950s coffee pot on a hot plate, a single bedroom with a twin bed, and a water closet with sink and toilet. By the time they’d finished the tour, their bags had been piled into the living room and occupied most of that space.

So much for the Presidential suite.

The tour complete, they walked back to the beach and Jeremiah smiled, stood tall again, and nodded indiscriminately while Deanna and the tanned man continued to speak in foreign tongues. When the Spanish words stopped, Deanna smiled big and shook the tanned man’s hand; Jeremiah followed her lead and the islanders herded themselves inland.

As they left, Deanna gave a final wave and called out happily, “Nos vemos más tarde en la barbacoa.”

She took Jeremiah’s hand and led him back into the little yellow house.

“So what’s going on?” he asked.

“They’re cannibals. And they’re going to bar-b-que you later and eat you. Barbacoa.” She was doing everything in her power to keep from laughing out.

“Baloney.”

“Barbacoa... not baloney. Say it. Bar-ba-co-a.” She smiled mischievously at him.

He didn't bite.

She looked into his eyes, “Seriously, they're going to roast Scratch.”

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, really. What's going on?”

“There really is a bar-b-que later... barbacoa. And they are roasting a pig they named Scratch.”

He chuckled and stared at her-- God how he loved her. He stepped toward her and kissed her hard.

“Wow!” she responded, “must be the ambiance of the Presidential suite that got you so turned on.”

“True dat.” He looked around conspicuously.

So, you want to christen this place?” she asked sexily.

“Absolutely, baby.”

He took her by the hand and led her into the bedroom.

“Hey babe, where's the shower?” Deanna called out a bit later from the water closet.

“Use the sink.”

“Really?”

He laughed. “No.” Jeremiah pointed toward the back door. “It's out back... outside.”

Peeking out the back door, she saw a plywood enclosure with a shower head. As she showered, Jeremiah sorted through the bags with presents. He hoped they had enough for all the children.

“Hey, Jeremiah, can you come here?” she called a bit later.

Outside, a gaggle of giggling kids were playing in the sand dunes next to the shower. Jeremiah lifted onto his tiptoes and peered over the plywood to see Deanna naked.

“Hmmm. I heard Los Testigos was beautiful, but I never thought it would be this beautiful.”

She smiled at him sheepishly. “I forgot a towel and I can’t really get out of the shower with all those kids out there.”

He smiled inside. “Huh. What’s a towel worth to you?” He chuckled.

“How about you get to sleep with me on that little bed.”

“And if I don’t bring a towel I guess I get that little bed all to my big self, eh?” He raised his eyebrows. “Tough choice.” He smiled and quickly retrieved a towel.

As the sun set over the ocean, the islanders began to herd back onto the beach in front of the little yellow house. A great bonfire was lit and children ran around playing and screaming while the women of Los Testigos set up the ‘Presidential’ table, complete with wooden plates and well-worn utensils. A separate table was set up for food, with fruits and rice and some other foods that Jeremiah couldn’t identify.

Table set, four islanders carried a bamboo litter heaped with a pile of smoking banana leaves and set it down on the food table. Jeremiah breathed in deeply. “Ummmm.” It smelled like heaven.

Juan Pablo, the tanned man, offered up a Spanish prayer and then escorted Jeremiah and Deanna to the front of the line. Plates were fixed and a beautiful sunset set the mood for an unforgettable Christmas Eve dinner on Los Testigos.

Midway through dinner, Juan Pablo stood up, raised his glass, and called out, “Gloria a Dios en las Alturas.”

The other islanders raised their glasses. “Amen,” they sang out, and drank.

Deanna whispered to Jeremiah. “They’re praising you.”

“Really?”

She laughed and shook her head. “No. That was for the *real* God.”

He smiled at her. “You are a very naughty girl outside the United States.”

She raised her eyebrows.

When dinner was finished they gathered around the bonfire, the younger kids in the laps of their moms and dads, and the island came alive with native Christmas songs. In the midst of all that love, Jeremiah caught sight of a little boy and girl sitting on the edge of the gathering, with no parents or adults near. The boy looked to be about 4, the girl 6. He nudged Deanna.

“See that little boy and girl?”

She studied them. “Un-huh. They look like they don’t have anyone.”

He nodded. “Let’s go see if they want to sit with us.”

They walked over to the two and Deanna bent down to their level and smiled. “Quiere sentarse con nosotros?”

The brightened up immediately and nodded, and when Deanna held out her hands, each child quickly took one. Jeremiah and Deanna returned to their spots of honor, sat back down, and without hesitation, the boy snuggled into Jeremiah’s lap, the girl into Deanna’s.

After singing Silent Night, a guitar was passed toward Jeremiah. Juan Pablo motioned for him to play by strumming an imaginary guitar in front of his body.

“Okay... sure. Gracias.” Jeremiah said, as he took the guitar and began strumming the tune to ‘All the People Said Amen’. As soon as he began to sing, unbeknownst to him, the entire island joined in, smiling wide, singing happily with loud, exuberant voices:

You are not alone,
If you are lonely,
When you feel afraid,
You’re not the only.
We are all the same,
In need of mercy,
To be forgiven and be freed.
It’s all you got to lean on,
But thank God it’s all you need.

They may not have known English, but they knew the English words to his song, and Jeremiah was half-laughing, half-crying in joy.

They sang the chorus even louder and Jeremiah could barely contain his smile. He was thinking back to the boat ride to Alabama, when Matt had first created those words for the chorus.

And all the People Said Amen.
And all the people said Amen.
Give thanks to the Lord
For his love never ends.
And all the people said Amen.

Even the little 4-year old boy and 6-year old girl knew the words and sang out as loudly as their little voices could.

“Wow!” Jeremiah called out excitedly when they’d finished the song. He clapped his hands in a circular round of applause at the islanders. It was truly a magical moment.

After a few more Fisher of Men songs, the bonfire had morphed into glowing embers, the islanders said their ‘buenas noches’ and returned to their homes, leaving Jeremiah, Deanna, Juan Pablo, and, curiously, the little boy and girl.

“Ask him where they live,” Jeremiah whispered to Deanna.

“Donde viven?” Deanna said to Juan Pablo, motioning to Ángel, the boy, and Sophia, the girl.

Juan Pablo shook his head as if pained. “El orfanato. Les llevará.”

“What’d he say?”

“They live in the orphanage. He said he’ll drop them off on his way home.”

Jeremiah felt his heart break.

He got down on one knee and looked into their tired eyes. “Buenas noches,” he said sadly, trying to smile.

Deanna did the same.

“Buenas noches,” the kids said with soft resignation.

Deanna talked a bit more with Juan Pablo, who smiled a lot and nodded even more; then he took hold of their little hands and the three walked away.

“Wow, that was quite a night,” Jeremiah called out to Deanna, who was just walking back into the bedroom from brushing her teeth.

She tried to suppress her emotions, but her face scrunched and she quickly burst into tears.

Jeremiah hadn't expected that. He pulled her close and hugged her. "Oh baby, what's the matter?"

"Little Sophia and Ángel... I can't stop thinking about them... in that orphanage. Juan Pablo said they were the only kids left."

"I know, I know. It breaks my heart, too."

They were both thinking and feeling the same thing.

She pulled back, looked into his eyes, and said what they both felt. "What do you think of adoption?"

"You mean in general? Or more specific... as in, what do I think about the two of us adopting Sophia and Ángel?"

She smiled, knowing she didn't need to answer.

"I don't know, Dee. I mean, if we were to adopt every kid who tugged at our hearts we'd have a couple million mouths to feed. You know?"

"I know. But if we adopted Sophia and Ángel, we'd only have two mouths to feed. We could do that... right?" Her heart and eyes were pleading.

"I don't know what the process would be, you know? I guess we could ask Juan Pablo..."

She brightened up. "I already asked him. That's what we were talking about at the end there. He said he thinks we could have all the paperwork done and approved by April. We can honeymoon here and take them home with us."

Three thoughts hit him: one, she had it all figured out already; two, April was suddenly becoming very busy; and three, what kind of father would he be?

"Whoa. Are you serious?"

Tears filled her eyes again. "Un-huh. I know this is right." She touched her heart and then reached out and touched his. "You do, too. I know it. We were brought here to do more than just look at solar paddles and that wastewater beater plant."

He laughed aloud. "Solar *panels*... and wastewater *treatment* plant." He smiled warmly at her. "I know. I know." He hesitated. "And I think you're right. But—"

“But what?”

“It’s scary, too.”

“I know, but like you said, we need to make sure we’re doing as much as we possibly can... so we don’t disappoint God.”

He couldn’t argue with that.

“Why don’t we pray about it tonight and see how we feel in the morning. Okay? I think we’ll know if it feels right.”

“Okay. We’ll see.”

They were up early and walked most of the beach on the north shore, all the way to the cliffs that rose up and gave the island a fortress look from that view. Below the cliffs, they found a nice spot under four coconut palms and looked out at the water and a few smaller islands that formed the Archipelagos Los Testigos.

“You sure?” Deanna asked.

“Absolutely. These people found that necklace for a reason, God saved me for a reason, you and I are together for a reason, and we’re meant to adopt Sophia and Ángel *for a reason*. We may not know what that reason is yet, but somehow this must all fit together... ya know?”

She smiled and nodded.

“I say we go for it.”

She hugged him. “I love you!”

“I love you, too.”

He took her hands into his and bowed his head. “Father God, we trust in You. Guide us today and everyday as we do Your will on earth. In your great name, we say Amen.”

“Amen,” Deanna said.

An hour later they were handing out presents to the children who’d gathered on the beach for Christmas morning. They gave shoes, flip flops, athletic shirts and shorts, soccer balls, Frisbees, baseball gloves and balls and bats, candy, and bibles.

After all the presents had been distributed, Deanna and Jeremiah guided Sophia and Ángel away from the other children and sat with them in the sand.

Deanna smiled at them. “Cómo dos desea venir a vivir con nosotros?” she said.

Jeremiah studied their faces as they considered Deanna’s question to live with them.

“Muy?” Sophia responded, excitedly.

Deanna nodded. “Yes... really!”

“Awesome!” Sophia exclaimed, using one of the few English words she knew. She and Ángel threw themselves into the arms of Jeremiah and Deanna.

“Esta es la mejor Navidad nunca,” Sophia and Ángel called out in unison.

Indeed, it was the best Christmas ever... for all of them!

FORTY SIX

For the first week of April, it was exceedingly hot, and Jeremiah was sweating as he sat on the end of the first row of aluminum bleachers. In truth, he was more nervous than hot.

Deanna grabbed his hand and squeezed it three times in rapid succession: I-love-you. He squeezed back three times.

It was still early, but the bleachers were filling up quickly, and Jeremiah looked around, searching.

“He’s not here, yet,” Jeremiah whispered to Deanna.

“Just pray. That’s all we can do.”

Jeremiah bowed his head and closed his eyes.

Dear God. If it is Your will, please give Liam the strength to be here and to glorify You before all these people who have come in love. Though we may not fully understand all of the pain and suffering in this world, we trust in You and give all glory to You, so that one day we may live with You in Your kingdom. Amen.

He let out a deep breath. That felt better.

Finally, the players took the field and Jeremiah nodded at Lucas, who had taken the mound. Lucas nodded back and began taking his warmup throws. As the umpire dusted off home plate, a faint siren could be heard in the distance. It got louder and louder and all heads turned as an ambulance pulled into the parking lot and stopped, the back doors opened, and two paramedics guided a wheelchair down a ramp. Liam sat with his head held high, his guitar in his hands, across his lap. His mom walked next to the wheelchair.

As they wheeled him toward the bleachers, the crowd began a chant, “Liam, Liam...”

Feeling the love, Liam smiled as they parked his wheelchair next to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah took Liam’s hand in his. “Dude, I thought you were gonna leave me hanging.” He said it cheerfully.

Liam smiled. “Come on, Jeremiah. You know me better than that.” The words came out slowly as Liam mustered the energy to speak.

Jeremiah smiled and squeezed his hand three times.

“Play ball,” the umpire shouted out, and before he threw the first pitch, Lucas tipped his cap to his little brother.

Through the first six innings, Lucas had struck out ten and the Saints were leading 4-0, thanks to a grand slam by their right fielder, whose father had miraculously survived the devastating 1972 earthquake in Nicaragua before his family had relocated to Alabama.

“You have any more popcorn?” Liam asked Jeremiah.

“Dude, you’ve eaten two bags already.”

“I know, but it’s so good.”

“It’s a secret recipe.” Jeremiah winked as he handed him another bagful.

“I promise I won’t tell.”

Jeremiah leaned in and whispered. “Himalayan sea salt and little bits of Belgian chocolate... gives it that real good sweet and salty taste.”

In the top of the seventh, Jeremiah looked at Liam and said, “Seventh inning stretch coming up. You up for a little singing?”

Liam nodded. “Your tune, my lyrics.”

Jeremiah winked and smiled.

After the third out, Jeremiah wheeled Liam to home plate, excited to see what God had in store for them.

Lucas walked off the mound and bent down and hugged his brother. “I love you, bro.”

“I love you, too, Lucas.”

“Knock it out of the park, all the way to heaven.”

“Thanks.”

Jeremiah stepped up to the mic and looked around the ballpark at the crowd.

“God is great,” he said simply and profoundly, “And though we may not always understand everything that happens in this world, we can trust in Him. Where there is danger, we learn courage; where there are obstacles, we learn perseverance; and where there is pain or need, we learn compassion. And through it all, we give all glory to God.”

He felt himself choking up.

“Four months ago,” Jeremiah said with a cracking voice, “I had the pleasure of meeting Liam Maxwell here. He’s an amazing young man who’s taught me so much about life and God’s love. He’s also a talented musician. And today, you have the honor to hear the song that he wrote. Some of you may know the tune. And when you hear the lyrics that Liam wrote, I think you’ll agree that they are the only words that should ever be sung to this tune. So, without further delay, Liam and I would like to play it for you. The song is called ‘Lose My Soul’.”

Amidst yells and applause, Jeremiah took a seat on a small stool, eye-level with Liam, and picked up his own guitar. The two smiled at each other as Jeremiah counted out, “One, two, three, four...”

They began to play the melody, leaned into the mic together, and sang out:

Oh, I don’t wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don’t wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

There were immediate tears in the listening crowd and everyone had the same thought: what perfect words.

Liam smiled into Jeremiah’s eyes, looked up and out at the crowd, summoned all of his energy, and spoke a rap to the beat: “Give it up for our brother Jeremiah, y’all; ‘cause he’s in God’s house today; and he wants to honor our Father with a little free-verse... straight from his heart. Brother Jeremiah, step up to the mic, please.”

Jeremiah smiled at Liam, took the mic, closed his eyes, and felt the beat as he swayed and bopped on his stool. He whispered a silent prayer and the words and rap flowed smoothly:

Father God I am clay in your hands,
Help me to stay that way through all
life’s demands,
‘Cause they chip and they nag and they
pull at me,
And suddenly I ain’t the man,
You made me to be.

Nodding and smiling, Liam moved in close and they sang the chorus together:

Oh, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

Jeremiah was feeling it. He rapped the second verse Liam had written:

Lord God, please raise me above
The road that is wide and filled with
self-love.
Empty me of hate, greed, and vanity,
And fill my heart with love like Thee,
Teach me to see as You see Me,
So I may live in sweet harmony.

Liam moved in close again and they sang out together:

Oh, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

As if cued, the crowd joined in and the angelic voices of 188 souls filled the earth:

Oh, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.
Yeah, I don't wanna gain the whole world
and lose my soul.

Through tears, Jeremiah watched Liam sing out loud and proud, and he looked around in awe and wonder and unmistakable clarity. This was the music God had created man to create!

And from heaven above, God smiled at his children.

FORTY SEVEN

A week later, Jeremiah and Deanna were sitting on opposite sides of Liam's bedside, each holding one of his hands, as he drifted in and out of consciousness. In the background, Fisher of Men music played and Jeremiah and Deanna softly hummed along. His dying was both solemn and life-affirming, and they could feel God's presence in the room. Jeremiah couldn't help but think of his mom and Josh.

Liam's mom walked into the bedroom. "How's he doing?"

"Comes and goes. But doesn't seem to be in pain."

"He smiled a little bit ago," Deanna added. "It was nice, almost like he was being comforted."

Mary smiled at them. "Thank you for coming over. He loves you two so much."

"We love him, too," Jeremiah said emotionally.

At the sound of Jeremiah's voice, Liam stirred and his eyes fluttered. He had just enough energy to glance at Jeremiah's right forearm. "Him," he moaned out.

"What? Who's him?"

Liam touched at Jeremiah's arm, trying to grasp the inked hand of God reaching down from heaven. "He... here."

Jeremiah looked down at Liam's hand reaching out toward his tattoo. Instinctively, Jeremiah looked around the room and even felt around with his hands. Air.

When Jeremiah looked back down at Liam, he saw the most peaceful smile on his face.

It was finished.

He was home.

Afterwards, they went for coffee and tried to make sense of it all. "You think Liam's there now?" she asked.

“I do. I really do. I gotta believe that any child who dies goes to heaven. We may not fully understand God, but nothing else would make sense otherwise.”

“I agree. I know we’re not supposed to understand everything, but I can’t believe God would punish any child who never got the chance to live out their life on earth.”

He nodded. “You know what’s amazing?”

“Grace?” she suggested with a coy smile.

“Yeah, well that too. What’s amazing is the fact that I can sit here today and not be angry about it. In fact, I kind of feel a sense of joy and hope, like I’m happy for Liam right now because I know he’s in a better place. You know? It’s amazing what faith can do.”

She sipped her latte and let him continue.

“When I think about that, I can’t help but wonder how my life would have turned out if I had lived like this after Josh died.” He paused. “I wasted so much of my life. I wish I could go back and do it differently.”

He expected her to agree, but she surprised him. “I don’t think you wasted anything.”

“Really?”

“Un-huh. I think everything that happened to you was the way your life was meant to be... and you are right where God wants you to be and knew you’d be. And you are stronger and better today because of it.”

“Well it sure was a torturous path.”

“The most beautiful sunrise comes after the stormiest night,” she said simply.

He scooted toward her a bit and remembered his days on the sandbar.

She continued, “We can’t appreciate the good without the bad. It’s like Shakespeare said, ‘If every day were a holiday it would soon grow boring’, or something like that.”

He wasn’t sure that was how the quote went, but he got her point. Perhaps with more time-- perhaps eternity -- she could get the quote exactly right...

“So,” she continued, “if you hadn’t gone through everything you went through-- all that pain and anger and fear and hate-- I don’t think you’d be sitting here now with all

the peace and love you feel. You feel things so deeply. And I think that's why you matter so much to so many people now. You represent the redemption that God wants in all of us. There's nothing more powerful and compelling than redemption."

He felt himself tear up.

She saw his eyes glaze. "Oh baby, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

He whispered out. "I'm not upset. I'm just amazed... by you."

"Really?"

He fought back the tears. "You say some of the most beautiful and thoughtful things. Sometimes it just hits me here"-- he pointed to his heart-- "and I can't believe what a blessing it is to be with you. I love you so much."

She smiled at him. "Oh baby, I love you, too. I can't wait to be your wife."

"Five more days."

She looked into his eyes deeply. "What do you think about what Liam said when he looked at your tattoo and said 'He here'? You think God was really there?"

Jeremiah looked down at the tattoo on his right arm and gently rubbed across it with his left hand. "Absolutely. It's crazy and amazing all at once. I mean, I remember when I found this tattoo online. I must have looked at a million images. And when I saw this one, I just knew it was the one. I looked into those eyes and it was like I knew it was Him. I felt it here." He pointed to his heart again.

"I can't wait to see God's face," he tacked on.

"You may have seen it already."

"I know. That's the craziest thing. I'm always wondering what that was like, and what I saw, and who I saw."

"I think about that a lot, too," Deanna replied.

"Really?"

"Yeah, ever since our boat ride to Los Testigos. I have a theory that every one of your relationships here and now on earth are somehow related to what happened to you in heaven."

"Huh. Go on."

“You saw your mom and she gave you her cross and that led you back to God and Jesus.”

“Yeah.”

“And then Chad and Matt. What are the odds that you’d come up with essentially the same song as Beth’s, then be rescued by them, and then form a band together and become one of the greatest Christian bands ever? It wasn’t all a coincidence.”

He smirked and raised his eyebrows. “One of?”

She laughed out. “Okay. The best Christian band ever.”

“Thank you.”

“I think you met Beth in heaven.”

“Yeah. I’ve had that same thought.”

“And I did some research on her death,” Deanna added. “You know the two guys who raped and murdered her?”

He shrugged. “Chad told me a little bit, but not much.”

“I found a story online from the Memphis newspaper that said they were meth addicts and into Goth.”

He shook his head. “So you think maybe I somehow was meant to help atone for her death... maybe help turn Matt around?”

“Yep. And I was thinking about Liam, too.”

“Like what?”

“Like maybe you saw Josh in heaven, and then when you met Liam it was as if God was giving you a chance at redemption... you know, a second chance to get it right.”

“Huh. I never thought of it like that.” He paused. “That makes sense, too.” He thought of his brother. “I can’t wait to see Josh, too.”

She smiled warmly. “I’ve never met someone who can’t wait to get to heaven as much as you.”

He shrugged. “I guess. Maybe when you’ve been there once, you never want to leave. And if you do leave, you can’t wait to get back. I know one thing-- it sure gives me a peace about my life. I can just live without fear. It’s so great.”

There was silence and he was lost in thought as he stared into her brown eyes. “So what about you? What happened to me in heaven that led me to you?”

“That’s an easy one. I think God showed you what love was and He opened up your heart. And He led you to me.”

No doubt, he knew she was right.

FORTY EIGHT

They buried Liam's body on Thursday and held the rehearsal dinner on Friday. On Saturday, Jeremiah woke up early--excited-- knowing that by the end of the day he'd be married to the love of his life, and by the end of Sunday he'd be the father of two Los Testigosians... or two Los Testigosers... er, two kids from Los Testigos.

But first, he was meeting his best man for a wedding day breakfast at the Waffle House. Ten minutes after climbing into the Accord, Jeremiah was sipping coffee at the counter, contemplating a major decision: pecan waffles or sausage gravy over biscuits. Such was life: sweet or savory...

Although light travels faster than sound, you never would have known it had you been sitting with Jeremiah at the Waffle House, for on this morning, the sound arrived well before anything else. Jeremiah knew that sound, and he turned around to see the red Ferrari come into view. After parking it well away from any other cars, Matt sauntered in.

"Nice ride," Jeremiah said as Matt sat down on the stool next to him.

"Thanks. A buddy of mine gave it to me."

"Gave it to you? Really? What possessed him to do that?"

Matt shrugged. "Eh, he said something about finding God and Jesus... said a Ferrari wasn't part of the life he wanted."

"Idiot."

"Yup."

The waitress poured Matt coffee and Jeremiah nudged him. "I get the pecan waffles, you get the biscuits and gravy, and we share?"

"Yup... like you always say, life's better both sweet *and* savory."

Jeremiah broke into a wide grin. "So how you doing, Matty ice?" He had grown to love Matt like the brother he'd lost, and the two always seemed to draw serenity from the other. Consequently, Jeremiah expected an upbeat reply; he was surprised when Matt hesitated.

“Uh oh,” Jeremiah continued, “Something’s going on in that head of yours. I can almost hear the gears grinding and see wisps of smoke coming out your ears.”

“Nah, it’s all good.”

“Really, man? I give you a frickin’ Ferrari and that’s the love and honesty I get back? Come on, what’s up, my brother?”

Matt’s face got emotional all too quickly.

“Dude, are you okay?”

Matt shook his head. “I just feel like I’m living a lie,” he confessed bluntly.

“What? No way, Matt, you write great songs that move people. You move me.”

“No, no, not with Fisher of Men. That’s been awesome. I mean the other part of my life.”

“Then change it.”

Matt considered Jeremiah’s advice, but tried to bring the subject to an abrupt conclusion. “Hey, look, this is your day. I came to eat pecan waffles and biscuits and gravy with you and talk about a toast at the reception, not about me.”

Jeremiah would have none of that. “Come on, Matt. Don’t do that. We’re brothers, remember? There isn’t a time or place that should ever get in the way of that. You know anyone else who would jump into the ocean with an orca just to get you to open up to them?”

Matt shook his head and smiled as he remembered that crazy moment.

“So what do you want to change in your life that feels like a lie?” Jeremiah asked straight-up.

“I think I want to be baptized,” Matt answered directly. “I think I need that.”

Jeremiah beamed. “Dude, you just made my day.”

“Really?”

“Oh my God, yeah. I mean, I watch you up on stage and I feel you. But I know that you could be even more... you could go even deeper.”

“How come you’ve never said anything?”

“I talk enough, Matt. You know that. I guess I never thought I had to say it. Plus, I wanted it to come from within you... from your heart... like you’re doing right now.”

They sipped coffee for a bit and their food arrived.

“You remember the story when I was on the sandbar, right, after I surrendered?”

“Un-huh. I think about it all the time.”

“I found such peace... real peace, deep peace. And once you experience that kind of peace you’ll wonder how you ever lived without it... and why.”

“That’s what I want.”

“Then that’s what you shall have, little bro.”

Matt smiled wide. “So what do I do?”

“You let ol’ Jeremiah worry about that, son. Okay?”

Matt was deep in thought. “Does this mean I’m going to have to give up the Ferrari?”

“Do you think God wants you driving around in a Ferrari?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sure he does, Matt. You’re 20 years old. Everyone doesn’t have to live like Mother Theresa to please God. He wants life to be fun, too.”

Matt exhaled. “So God and fun can coexist...”

“Absolutely. Sweet and savory,” Jeremiah said grinning. He paused conspicuously. “And anyway, it’s your house.”

“What?”

“While I was alone on the sandbar I came up with a theory that everything we do on this transitory earth is how we build our eternal houses in heaven. The more you do, the better your house.”

“Huh. I like that.” He paused and thought some more. “I think.”

“Sooooo, if you want to be homeless in heaven, pushing around a rusty grocery buggy, then by all means, keep driving that Ferrari here on earth.”

“Are you serious?”

“Nah, man, I’m just messing with you. Look, last year you were part of a band that donated over 50 million dollars to charity. More importantly, you write songs that bring people to God and Jesus. For being all of 20 years old, I think God’s probably pretty happy with you...”

With Pastor Fisher firmly planted in his officiating position at the center of the altar, Jeremiah and Matt stood shoulder-to-shoulder two steps below him. To their left was Dill. Two bridesmaids-- one a perky maid of honor-- stood across the aisle from them.

As the back door creaked open, heads turned to see Deanna step inside the church, her father close behind, stooped down like a shortstop, trying to keep her train from dragging too much. The crowd stood, collectively expecting to hear the grand opening note of ‘Here Comes the Bride’ on the organ.

They got Pastor Fisher’s voice instead, “My brothers and sisters, before I marry my son to the woman of his dreams, we have another great event to celebrate. Today, it is my pleasure and honor to officially welcome another into God’s amazing family.”

He looked directly at Matt. “Matt. Please join me.”

Matt hesitated, but soon walked past Jeremiah, who was tickled with himself. Matt followed the preacher up a set of stairs to a Baptism pool above the altar.

Pastor Fisher called out, “Now, normally we have shorts and a t-shirt to wear, but Jeremiah requested that Matt wear his tux, so Matt you have him to thank for that.”

Matt smiled at Jeremiah and called out. “Thanks, bro.”

“Send me the dry cleaning bill,” Jeremiah shouted back.

Pastor Fisher spoke out, “Okay. Cell phone and wallet safe?”

Matt fumbled at his pockets and removed his phone, keys, and wallet, and took off his shoes and socks. The two men stepped inside the clear tank.

“Matt Thomas Hommes, your heavenly Father is smiling today as He looks upon you, and it is my great pleasure to baptize you into his family, for all eternity. Is there anything you would like to say?”

Matt looked out. “Today, I come before you to publicly proclaim that God is my Father and his son Jesus Christ is my savior. I praise God Almighty and pray that I will do his will all my days on earth.”

The preacher smiled, took hold of Matt, and dunked him backwards into the pool. When he emerged, Matt was smiling wide as cheers filled the tiny church.

“And all the people said ‘Amen’,” Pastor Fisher called out.

“Amen,” the congregation shouted out joyously.

Far-- *but never too far*-- away, on stage at a beautiful amphitheater carved into cavernous red rocks, a band played before a packed crowd. They sang:

And all the people said Amen.
And all the people said Amen.
Give thanks to the Lord
For his love never ends.
And all the people said Amen.

As the name ‘Matthew Thomas Hommes’ scrolled down a huge screen, Beth stood next to God, smiling and cheering, the tears of happiness falling softly down her golden cheeks.

Matt was scarcely out of the pool when the perky maid of honor inched forward hesitantly. In her heart, she wanted what the rest of them had, but she was scared.

Sensing what was happening, Jeremiah smiled at her. “Go ahead, Angie” he implored. “It’s always a good time to surrender to God.”

She was barely out of the water when another soul cautiously inched forward. Jeremiah couldn’t contain his smile or his enthusiasm. “Go for it, Dill. Go.”

After Dill emerged from the water, the Amens and cheers continued until the opening note of ‘Here Comes the Bride’.

And a beautiful bride walked down the aisle toward her love and three saved, but drippy, witnesses.

Los Testigos!

FORTY NINE

The year and a half that followed was a whirlwind for all of them. Families adjusted and grew, love and testimony were created and sung, and lives were surrendered and changed forever.

It was November 3rd, and a festive crowd funneled into the Birmingham Amphitheater. Most in the crowd were adorned in the Fisher of Men signature tie-dyed t-shirts with Godly sayings on them. Up ahead in the distance, above the entrance to the Birmingham Amphitheater, lights on the marquee brightly displayed:

FISHER of MEN
November 3rd
8PM
SOLD OUT

In her skinny jeans and tie-died t-shirt, 33 year-old Deanna looked peaceful and completely at ease as she walked alongside Angie, who sported a similar look. Angie carried a poster with the words, "I LOVE YOU MATT!" With pink and red hearts dotting each corner, it looked like something a love-struck 31 year-old would have carried into a Christian concert.

As they approached the amphitheater entrance, Deanna studied the fascination around her. Two thoughts surfaced. One, what a beautiful world it was, with such beautiful people. And two, what a difference three years could make.

Angie turned toward Deanna. "You don't think Matt's too young for me, do you?"

"No way. Age is just a number. Plus, sometimes I think it's possible you're stuck at 16, so if anything, he might actually be a bit on the old side."

Angie wasn't sure if it was a complement or a burn.

Deanna quickly changed the subject. "Are you excited about going to Red Rocks with us for the show this weekend?"

"Oh my God, I can't wait. I've always wanted to see a concert there. And Matt said we could go hiking in the Rockies, too." She paused. "What about Sophia and Ángel? Are they excited?"

“Un-huh. But not as excited as Jeremiah’s Dad. And Jeremiah’s excited to take him, too. For some reason, he’s been really worried about his Dad’s health lately.”

Deanna changed the subject again. “It seems like just yesterday we were walking into this arena to see the Rock God.”

“I know. And now we’re going to see Fisher of Men... and your husband and my boyfriend.”

Dressed in jeans, a tie-dyed t-shirt, and adorned with the gold cross from his mom, Jeremiah sat on a stool and talked to the crowd. Off stage, Dill smiled and listened.

“You know, three years ago when Scratch Hatchet sang on this very stage, he was lost and lonely and scared... and definitely very broken. But God’s grace and forgiveness is infinite, and if we just surrender and trust in Him, He will fill us with his love, and make us into the people He knows we need to be. Tonight, and every night, let us praise God, for He is our rock and our salvation. He is, truly, the one and only Rock God.”

The crowd burst into applause and shout-outs.

Jeremiah spoke again, “We want to thank you’all for coming out and worshipping with us tonight. We’ve got big plans for the coming year and we look forward to worshipping with you again. But for now, we’re going to leave you with a new song we’ve just recorded. It’s called, ‘Keep Making Me’.”

Jeremiah looked at his bandmates Matt and Chad and counted off, “One, two, three, four...” Then he began to sing:

Make me broken,
So I can be healed.
‘Cause I’m so calloused,
Now I can’t feel.
I want to run to you,
With heart wide open,
Make me broken.

Make me empty,
So I can be filled.
‘Cause I’m still holding,
Onto my will.
And I’m completed,
And you are with me.
Make me empty.

Til you are
my one desire
Til you are
My one true love
Til you are
My breath my everything
Lord please keep making me.

Make me lonely,
So I can be yours.
'Til I want no one,
More than u lord.
'Cause in the darkness,
I know u will hold me.
Make me lonely.

Amidst the thunderous applause, Jeremiah signed off with a final shout, "Thank you, Alabama. We love you. God loves you. Good night."

FIFTY

They were all sitting in the back of the Learjet talking excitedly about the coming weekend and the plans they'd made.

"You're going to love Red Rocks, Dad," Jeremiah said animatedly. "It is absolutely the most beautiful concert venue... like heaven on earth."

The pastor nodded as he held Sparky Junior tightly on his lap. It was the pastor's first time on an airplane and he was loving the trip already. In fact, he'd spent most of the flight with his face pressed against the window, looking out at the lights of the big world below and the stars in the even bigger heavens above.

Deanna looked excitedly at Sophia and Ángel. "And we're going to go on an awesome hike with Matt and Angie. They say it's so beautiful you can almost see heaven."

"Muy?" Ángel responded, excitedly.

Deanna nodded. "Yes... really!"

The plane began to quiver ever so slightly as Jeremiah spoke out, "The first time I—"

A loud pop interrupted Jeremiah and the plane jerked violently, throwing the nine passengers from the couches and seats onto the floor. There were screams as the plane nosed down and they rolled toward the cockpit into a pile of humanity against the partition. They heard shouts from the cockpit.

"I'm getting nothing!"

"The starboard elevator's gone! Holy shit, I've got zero hydraulic pressure."

"Denver Tower, Denver Tower, this is Jeremiah 1, declaring an emergency. I repeat, this is Jeremiah 1 declaring an emergency."

"Altitude 2-1-0..... 2-0-0... 1-9er-0."

"I can't control it!"

As they fought to untangle themselves, Jeremiah found Deanna's hand, grabbed it, and pulled her close.

"Don't be scared. I'm here. I'm with you," he said to her, breathing deeply. In the darkened plane, he looked deeply into her eyes, as if he truly weren't scared. And he wasn't.

They managed to corral Sophia and Ángel and pulled them in tightly against themselves.

By now the plane was in a death spiral, accelerating uncontrollably.

Pastor Fisher wasn't exactly sure what was happening, but instinctively he whispered out, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures..."

Entangled on the floor, Jeremiah, Deanna, Sophia, Ángel, Matt, Angie, Chad, and Dill quickly joined in, "He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

"900 feet, 800 feet, 600 feet, 400..."

"Holy shit!" came another scream from the cockpit.

They closed their eyes, held each other tightly, and continued to whisper, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me."

When Jeremiah, Matt, and Chad walked out onto the stage, the crowd roared, as if they understood how truly miraculous it was for the three to be together on *this* stage.

Jeremiah looked out in awe-- as far as the eye could see-- and couldn't contain his smile: what a beautiful sight and what a beautiful crowd!

He spoke out, "We are so happy to be here. We are Fisher of Men and we'd like to sing a great song for you. If you know the words-- and I know you'll do-- sing it out with us as loudly as you can. We want all of heaven and earth to hear us."

As the song began, Jeremiah glanced offstage at Dill, who was looking out, seemingly calculating what a huge gate it could be. Classic Dill.

On the second verse, Jeremiah sang out with deeper conviction than ever:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
Who are torn apart.

Blessed are the persecuted,
And the pure of heart.
Blessed are the people longing,
For another start.
*For this is the kingdom,
The kingdom of God.*

And with each name that scrolled down the huge screen behind the stage, the crowd roared and cheered.

On the right side of the stage, Beth sat on a stool between Matt and Chad, who couldn't stop staring at her. And to the left side, Josh and Liam leaned into mics and sang the chorus.

And all the people said Amen.
And all the people said Amen.
Give thanks to the Lord
For his love never ends.
And all the people said Amen.

In the front row of the vast crowd of 45,563,291 beautiful souls, Chris held Claire's hand and looked into her green lively eyes. "Jeremiah was right. This place really is beautiful."

"It's even more beautiful now that you and Jeremiah are here," she replied.

Through tears of peace and joy, Jeremiah looked out with diamond-vision at Deanna, Sophia, and Ángel, who flanked God. The kids held Sparky and Sparky Junior, and they were all smiling wide, singing out as loudly as their voices could.

Jeremiah and God locked eyes knowingly for a long while. Finally, God nodded, winked at Jeremiah, flashed him a thumbs-up sign, and called out, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

THE END...

...Or not The End?

That is the real question.

Because if life on earth is not the end, then “to be or not to be” is trivial, even moot.

Indeed, the end can really be just another beginning. So turn the page and never stop fighting the good fight...

FIFTY ONE

Dill and Captain Jack had been engaged in a spirited game of cribbage when they noticed a shadow moving on the deck below. They sat up in their captain's chairs. As the shadow came out of the darkness and staggered towards the bow, Dill's greatest fear was realized.

"Oh shit. What's he doing out of bed?"

Captain Jack shook his head. "I don't know. But this can't be good."

Dill leaned out the bridge window and called down, "You okay, Scratch?"

Scratch flashed the 'okay' sign.

They watched him intently and heard him yell something out.

"What'd he shout?" Dill asked the Captain.

"I don't know... something about a miracle."

"The only miracle is that he hasn't killed himself... yet," Dill responded.

They continued to watch Scratch.

"Fuck me," Scratch yelled out in pain.

Dill and Captain Jack watched Scratch intently. He seemed to be holding an imaginary conversation.

Strange.

"What's he doing?" Dill asked.

"I don't know. It looks like he's talking to someone."

They watched as Scratch strummed the guitar and looked to the heavens. He was back to that conversation again, nodding and fidgeting, and nodding again and again.

He strummed the guitar a second time.

“He’s still talking to himself. Maybe you should go down there,” the Captain suggested to Dill as they continued to observe Scratch’s strange behavior.

“Yeah. Wish me luck.”

As he approached the bow, Dill saw Scratch nod quickly, nervously.

“You alright, Scratch?” Dill asked as he neared. He saw the welts on his cheeks. “Oh man, what happened to your face?”

Scratch hesitated. “I think I got some bad pot. Probably an allergic reaction.”

“Damn, man. I’ll see if Javier has some cream or something. You sure you’re alright? It looked like you were talking to someone.”

“Just thinking out loud, working on a new song.”

“Okay. You sure? No talking dolphins or anything?”

Scratch laughed nervously. “I was just messing with you.”

Scratch hesitated as if there was something he wanted to say, but wasn’t completely sure.

Finally Scratch looked into Dill’s eyes, and spoke out, “You know, Dill, I’ve never really thanked you for everything you’ve done for me.”

Scratch was visibly choking up and tears welled in his eyes as his voice crackled.

“I hope you know I love you like a father. Really, I do. I want you to have this yacht... you deserve it. Think of it as an overdue bonus.”

“No shit, Scratch? You’re not messing with me again, are you?”

Weirdly, Scratch reached out and mechanically hugged Dill.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Never been better. Go get some paper and a pen so I can put it in writing.”

“Wow! Okay. Thanks! I, uh, I love you, too.”

Dill sprinted back to the bridge. “You got any paper and a pen?” he asked Captain Jack excitedly.

The Captain pointed to a set of drawers. “Yeah. Top drawer. Why?”

“Scratch is giving me this yacht... as a bonus.”

“No shit?”

“I know-- weird, huh? I’ve never seen him like this. He just told me he loves me like a father.”

Minutes later, Dill was flying out of the bridge, pen and paper in hand, amazed at his good fortune. A yell from below stopped him in his tracks, and when he glanced down, he saw Scratch sailing over the railing toward the dark ocean.

“Holy shit, Scratch just jumped overboard!” Dill yelled hysterically to the Captain. Dill ran onto the flying bridge and looked for Scratch in the water below.

“Man overboard, starboard side,” the Captain announced as he whipped the wheel to the right and sounded the alarm.

“Scratch! Scratch!” Dill screamed out in panic.

“Do you see him?” the Captain yelled out.

“No... nothing,” Dill called back.

“Scratch! Scratch!” Dill yelled frantically, his voice disappearing into the quiet night air.

Put to the real test, faith had really won.

THE END

--please turn the page--

A NOTE TO READERS FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed reading “Rock God” and found it both entertaining and inspirational. I loved writing it. I came up with the basic idea for the story early one morning (think 3 a.m., all you other insomniacs) in 2014 as I lay in bed wondering what would happen if a plane crashed and nobody died because God had somehow decided to intervene. Because I have grown to love Christian music, I decided the plane’s occupant would be a rock star who’d run as far away from God as possible. Hence, Scratch, the Goth rapper, was conceived.

The most challenging-- and fun -- parts of the book were writing “as God.” Trying to think what God would say and do was not easy, because I truly believe we are to God as CoCo, the sand crab, is to us. I hope God is as cool as I have portrayed Him in the story. I’m sure He is more loving. And I’m also sure He loves stories of redemption.

My hope is that reading “Rock God” will move you closer to God and Jesus, for as long as we have a breath, we have hope, and it is never too late to surrender, live a better life here on earth, and build a house in heaven. Indeed, if heaven is anything like I’ve described it, I’m sure none of us would want to miss out on a single minute there, not to mention an eternity.

If you enjoyed this book, please tell your friends, relatives, and even enemies. Please also consider making a donation to a deserving charity. Two that I love are: St Jude’s Hospital (www.stjude.org) and Feed My Starving Children (www.fmssc.org). If you didn’t enjoy it, please tell your friends, relatives, and enemies. Oh, and you might want to consider doubling that charitable donation!

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the songs (and the songwriters) that appear in the book: “Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)”, written by Matt Crocker, Joel Houston, and Salomon Ligthelm; “10,000 Reasons (Bless My Soul)”, written by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin; “Keep Makin Me”, written by the band Sidewalk Prophets; “All the People Said Amen”, written by Matt Maher, Paul Moak, and Trevor Morgan; “Lose My Soul”, written by Toby McKeehan, Christopher Stevens, and Michael Ripoll; “Come As you Are”, written by Ben Glover, David Crowder, and Matt Maher; “I Am”, written by Ed Cash and David Crowder; and “Our God”, written by Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, Ed Cash, and Jonas Myrin.

Please listen to Christian music! It really can change your life!

I would also like to acknowledge the book, “I Don’t Have Enough FAITH to be an ATHEIST,” written by Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek. Their insights into the mysteries and greatness of God were helpful in my writing, and several of God’s sayings in “Rock God” come from their book. I encourage everyone to read that book.

This book is dedicated to my wife, Beth. I love you and never want to be away from you. You are my rock, my heaven on earth!

Thank you for reading “Rock God.”

Please visit me at “JayRoseBook.com.”

I would love to hear your thoughts on the book and answer any questions you may have about it. If you find any errors, please also let me know. Unfortunately, I am my own editor.

Never forget: God loves you and it is never too late to ask for his forgiveness. Accept God into your heart and live to glorify him.

--Jay Rose, Peachtree City, Georgia, May 2017--

P.S., I have 3 other books available that I hope you will check out. They are:

The Ant Shepherd

Trey Cooper’s life hasn’t turned out the way he intended. He’s supposed to be a pro golfer living in a big house with a big, happy family. Instead, he sells construction equipment and lives alone in a shack, separated from his wife Kristie and mentally-challenged 15 year-old son Nate, who spends most of his time playing with ants. “The Ant Shepherd,” Trey calls him, his voice filled with frustration. Kristie was so wrong-- there is no God and no great plan for their lives. Now, on the eve of his 46th birthday, Trey is ready to solve his problems once and for all-- he just needs to turn the key and start the flow of deadly carbon monoxide from his truck’s exhaust, through the dryer hose, and into the shack. Fortunately, God does have a great plan for every life, and He loves to use the least to make the most. Best of all, God really loves shepherds.

Four Middies and a Dead Hippie

Just four days before their 1988 Naval Academy graduation, four Midshipman are out celebrating, feeling invincible and on-top-of-the-world. A heartbeat later, the four find themselves staring in disbelief at a beautiful dead hippie inside their VW camper van. Under the best case scenario they will be kicked out of school; under the worst, convicted of rape and murder. But, there’s a way out... it just requires one more unthinkable act...

The secret they share will follow them all the days of their lives. One will be haunted, two will be opportunistic, and three will ultimately die. And the last Middie standing will either be America’s greatest President; a low-life blackmailer; a stuttering, guilt-ridden shell-of-a-man; or a killer. After all, successfully sharing a secret among four is best accomplished if three are dead...

The Devil's Au Pair

From the outside looking in, they are the perfect American family-- the Naval officer husband, the lawyer wife, and the two perfect kids. But on the inside, the MacDonald household festers with hate, blame, and secrets. Husband Jeff hates being stuck in a loveless, passionless marriage. Wife Susan blames Jeff for ruining her dream life. In the middle of their drama is Krista, the family's 18 year-old Swedish Au Pair. Not only does she know all the family secrets, but she has quite a few of her own. Indeed, if the devil ever birthed an Au Pair, her name would be Krista. She'd have a killer body, an erotic attitude that could make any man squirm, and a thirst for money and power. Oh, and she'd know how to set-up a secret video camera, too.