

The Ant Shepherd



By Jay Rose

THE ANT SHEPHERD

PART ONE

ONE

When Trey Cooper awoke on Friday May 17th -- the day before his 46th birthday-- it seemed like a very good bet that it would *not* be his last full day alive. After all, less than one percent of people die on their birthday (for all you statisticians, the exact number is 0.27 percent). Plus, given that 99 percent of all 45 year-old American males live to the age of 47, the odds were definitely in Trey's favor of *not dying* on his 46th birthday. Indeed, from a purely statistical standpoint, Trey was more likely to reach the 76 year-old life expectancy of the average American male than to die on his 46th birthday.

But then again, Trey was not the *average* American male... unless average meant angry, frustrated, underachieving, and without dreams. Had the actuaries known Trey explicitly, and factored in the probability that he was just another bad day away from ending his life, they probably would have estimated his life expectancy at 46 years and a few hours. And none of those actuaries would have taken that bet.

As for Trey, he definitely wouldn't have taken the bet.

Not surprisingly, that day before his 46th birthday had been much like the day before-- he rolled out of the uncomfortable twin bed in the stark bedroom of the dilapidated foreclosure his best bud J.W. was forever trying to sell; showered under a weak stream in a dirty tub behind a moldy shower

liner; dressed in rumpled khakis and a blue button down shirt; quickly packed a processed ham sandwich and salty chips; drove to RaceTrac in his dependable 16 year-old Ford 150 for the \$1.49 coffee and doughnut special; arrived at his desk at the Caterpillar sales office in Fairburn, Georgia at 9:05; and spent the next nine hours trying to convince customers that rising interest rates weren't going to derail the economy and, yes, it was a great time to buy another backhoe or excavator.

That sameness, sprinkled with 46 long years of disappointment and the prospect of another 46, was a tried and true recipe for suicide: live every hopeless day the same as the one before, and one day there will be no desire for that next day. And it was a dish usually served cold... and eaten alone.

It was almost unfathomable that, once upon a time, Trey had been the second ranked amateur golfer in the world-- behind only the great Tiger Woods.

At 6 pm, as another commission-less workday ended, Trey's cell phone rang. "What up J.W.?" he answered lifelessly.

"Hey bud, I wanna take you out for your birthday."

"Nah man, thanks though. I think I'm just veg on the couch and watch the Bravos lose again." True to the recipe, that's what Trey had done the night before... and the night before that.

"Oh, come on," J.W. persisted. "You can watch 'em lose with me at Taco Mac. I wanna be the first to wish you happy birthday." He paused. "Geez, 46, right? That sounds old... damn man, you're closer to 50 than 40."

"Yeah. Don't remind me."

"Come on, Trey. I just had an offer accepted on a nice listing... come out and have some fun."

Fun.

The word hung in the air. Trey was thinking of his estranged wife Kristie. She was always on his mind and he missed her. Nothing was fun without her.

“Ah, what the hell,” Trey finally conceded. “Okay.” Anyways, he told himself, it was probably his last birthday.

They were seated at the bar with their eyes on the bank of big screens above the beer taps, where the Braves were down 11-1 to the lowly Rockies. In the background, Boston’s “A Man I’ll Never Be” streamed through the bar speakers as if to drown-out the depressing play-by-play coming from the televisions. Clearly, the owners of Taco Mac knew that food and alcohol sales increased when customers felt happy. That also explained why beer commercials showed endless streams of shiny, happy, smiling people living life to the fullest, instead of depressed drunks slumped over in their barstools.

At the end of the 6th inning, a drunken Trey sighed audibly as he slumped further in his barstool, “Oh man, J.W., I can’t take much more of this.”

“Relax Debbie Downer, the Bravos will get it going. They always start the season slow...”

If only it were the Braves.

“I’m not talking about the Braves... I’m talking about *my life*-- my job sucks, my wife doesn’t seem to care that I’m gone, my son will never live on his own, I live in one of your shacks, my --”

“Dude, chillax. It’ll all work out.” J.W. broke into a weird smile, like a man who knew how to apply just the right of amount of lipstick to make a pig look good, or a realtor who knew how to successfully market a shack. “And for the record, it’s not a shack... it’s a cozy, rustic ranch that just needs a little TLC.”

Trey rolled his eyes. The only TLC that shack needed was Tinder, a Lighter, and Combustion. “Really, man? That’s all you got for me-- chillax... it’ll all work out.”

After some silent reflection, Trey laughed out unexpectedly.

“What’s so funny?” J.W. asked.

“I’m just glad you didn’t tell me God has a plan for me. That’s what Kristie always says.”

“Well, I don’t know about God’s plans, but I do have a birthday shot for you.” J.W. held out a shot glass filled with mahogany liquor. “And I know if you drink enough of these you’ll forget about all your problems.”

“Hah, now that’s a *good* plan... death by Woodford.” Trey took the shot glass and the two friends clicked glasses and downed the Kentucky bourbon.

The shots kicked-in quickly, and like a man suddenly freed by the magic of man-made chemicals, Trey began to sing aloud to the Boston song, “If only I could find a way, I’d feel like I’m the man you believe I am. And it gets harder every day for me. I can’t keep hiding this feeling...”

Near the end of the song Trey was even playing the air organ and smiling carefree, like one of those beer commercial people. The thought occurred to him that perhaps he just needed to be drunk... all the time.

Hmmm. Maybe that’s why those beer commercial people are always smiling...

When the song ended, J.W. offered another shot. “To Boston, the best band ever,” he called out, toasting his glass in the air.

“And to Brad Delp,” Trey called out, “I sure hope to hell he’s resting in peace.”

J.W. nodded in agreement. “Yeah. That was too crazy-- dude’s the lead singer for the greatest rock band ever and he goes off and kills himself. Never made any sense to me.” J.W. thought for a moment, then added, “Plus, it’s not like it was his birthday...”

“What are you talking about-- not his birthday?”

J.W. explained, “Look it up-- more people commit suicide on their birthday than any other day.”

“Really?”

“Un-huh. I guess they decide to go out the same day they came in.”

The words tossed and turned in Trey’s head. He liked the symbolism of it. Evidently, a bunch of others did, too.

J.W. continued, “And it’s not like he killed himself for the insurance money... not that he needed money. New Hampshire’s not like Georgia-- you kill yourself in Georgia and your beneficiary gets the money. Most states you kill yourself and they get nothing.”

New thoughts tossed in Trey’s head-- of Kristie and her silly belief that seemingly every little thing about life was a ‘God-thing.’ Perhaps, Trey reasoned, it was a God-thing that *he lived in Georgia...* where insurance companies didn’t punish suicide.

The seeds had been planted, had taken root, and were sprouting.

Trey spoke out, “And if I remember right, didn’t he tape a big ‘DANGER’ sign on his door warning whoever found him to air out the house before they entered?”

“Un-huh. I respect that. He may have been crazy, but he sure as hell was thoughtful. Great way to go, too-- just go to sleep and never wake up.”

J.W.’s words hung above the bar like odorless, poisonous gas and Trey’s eyes drifted shut as he contemplated how peaceful that sounded. Sleep was one of his few sanctuaries. Eternal sleep sounded great.

They drank until midnight, when J.W. toasted his best friend. “Happy birthday, old man.”

“Thanks bud... no telling how many more of these I’ll have.”

“None of us do. Gotta live everyday like it’s your last-- live like you’re dying, right?”

As he sipped his beer, Trey's drunken mind marinated in J.W.'s lyrical advice. Fact was, Trey didn't fear dying. Nope, not one bit. His fear was that his life had never really begun... and never would. For him, pain and disappointment was all there ever was, and seemingly ever would be. Was that even life? Wasn't life supposed to be at least *a little* like one of those beer commercials?

When J.W. went off to the men's room, Trey had even more time to think about his sad existence.

No doubt the day-after-day drudgery had sucked the life out of him, but it was the absence of dreams that had sucked out the last bit of marrow. Of course, he had dreams when he was younger, and even though they were his father's dreams for him, Trey had nonetheless adopted them. But now, even those adopted dreams were gone. And without dreams, there was no possibility of a dream coming true. And when that happened, life was, at best, no longer interesting. Mostly though, life was pointless.

He was like an out of control plane, in a graveyard spiral, and the more he thought, the more disoriented he became.

His eyes soon found their way onto the plate of buffalo wing bones in front of him. He stared at them philosophically. Lying there so peacefully-- freed from the chicken-- those dead bones felt less pain than he did. That was sad... and enlightening.

Dead bones... peaceful... and free...

Hah! Death was *the answer*. It offered freedom... from all the pain and disappointment of life. Heck, even if death was just cold nothingness, wasn't that better than warm conscious pain? Trey chuckled to himself at that one. Yep, in a weird, drunken sense, death seemed infinitely better than the life he lived.

Thank you, oh great dead peaceful buffalo wing bones. You were not only delicious, but illuminating as well. Be free...

Trey was approaching terminal velocity.

He thought some more.

And death could be attained so easily and so painlessly... just by going to sleep and never waking up. And thanks to Georgia, Kristie would get that half-million dollars in insurance money. It was classic win-win, and in a twisted, tanked-up kind of way, Trey concluded that death was the golden ticket to that Godly plan that Kristie always talked about. The night was beginning to make total sense, the clarity amazing. It *had to be* a God-thing...

Kaboom.

And that's when Trey knew exactly what he was going to do later on.

As J.W. returned, Trey had one more thought: perhaps it was a God-thing that J.W. had to take a piss... it had given Trey just the time he needed to figure things out.

"Alright man," J.W. said a bit later as the Braves grounded into a game-ending double play, "I gotta roll. You have a good B-day, okay my brother?"

Trey raised his beer. "Thanks bud."

"Oh, hey," J.W. called back as he walked away, "I may swing by tomorrow late afternoon and borrow your truck if that's okay. I gotta move a fridge into one of my other cozy, rustic rentals." J.W. was grinning like a man who'd figured out the real secret to life: rental income!

Trey's mind kicked into high gear. *Oh man... that means you'll probably be the one to find me. Geez, I'm sorry, bud. Really... I am. But... I guess it has to be somebody, right? And better you than Kristie. I just hope it doesn't scar you too badly.*

Outwardly, Trey just chuckled and said, "No problem, el' slum Lord."

As he watched J.W. walk out, Trey whispered into his IPA, "Truck's all yours, bud... keep her as long as she runs for you. And take care of Kristie and Nate for me, too. Please."

He took a long pull on the beer. He was gonna miss J.W... and buffalo wings and IPAs.

TWO

As he set his beer down, a woman seated a few barstools away drifted over. She'd been inconspicuously watching Trey and J.W. for the better part of the last hour, hoping one of them would leave, isolating her target. She was a bit saddened when J.W. had been the one to go. He seemed more upbeat, more athletic-looking, more the type she was seeking on this lonely May night in small town Georgia. Plus, he had such a nice, full head of hair. The one left behind had problems written all over his bland, chunky face, not to mention slouching, troubled body language. His receding hairline completed and complemented the middle-aged crisis-look. With her luck, he probably had ED, or HIV, or an STD, or some other bad affliction denoted by an acronym.

“Did your friend leave?” she asked. Her voice was raspy, that of a smoker.

Trey turned and took in the dirty blonde. She had a white-trashy Florida look, and her Clorox-coloring only hid about ninety percent of the grey. His eyes were drawn to her grey roots... all one hundred percent of them. In her late-40s, it was clear she'd seen better days. But then again, he told himself, so had most men or women that age. Trey was the exception—he hadn't seen any better days. And that explained a lot about what was going to transpire in the next four hours.

Trey answered her, “Who? Cinderella? Yeah, it got past his curfew. He’s probably in the parking lot rounding up mice and looking for his carriage.”

The woman chuckled. Maybe the balding sloucher wasn’t so morose. “May I join you?”

He gave her a little credit for using ‘may’ instead of ‘can.’ Perhaps she was from north Florida. “Sure, if you want. But I must warn you, do so at your own peril.”

But then again...

“Oh no, what’s wrong?” She tried to sound like she genuinely cared. Meanwhile, she searched his eyes for signs of TB. They were a drunken, glassy green.

“Ah, it’s a long story,” Trey answered.

He really had no interest in talking with her or anyone. But when his eyes drifted to her inviting cleavage he reminded himself that it was probably his last birthday, and that she might be one of those God-things that Kristie always talked about. He chuckled to himself at that thought.

Outwardly, he feigned a smile. “Hey, you know what, let’s start over, okay?”

The woman smiled back and shrugged at Trey. He looked like a poor man’s version of the actor Woody Harrelson-- chubbier and worn, with sadder eyes and a broader, more crooked nose. He also seemed much too complicated, and she wondered whether he could give her the good-time she was after. But then again, sometimes the more complicated the man, the better the sex. Animal spirits could be a wonderful thing in the dark of night... especially when copious quantities of alcohol were involved. And there was no doubt he was really drunk. Hopefully he could still perform.

Trey channeled a beer-commercial look and perked up on his bar stool. “Absolutely,” he called out rather loudly, “join me, fair maiden. Dilly dilly! The more the merrier... you like Woodford?” He sounded like a drunk Englishman on a Bud Light commercial who’d forgotten his line.

He laughed to himself as he envisioned the director of the commercial shaking his head in frustration and calling out, “*Cut. It’s Bud Light, not Woodford... let’s try it again... from the top.*”

He seemed to be in another world, and she missed whatever he was thinking. And, although a bit odd, he was definitely more interesting than she had expected.

“I like men who like Woodford,” she answered, smiling sexily and winking. She was feeling more optimistic about the rest of the night. She offered her hand. “Suzanna.”

Trey shook it. “Trey.”

“You a third?” she asked as she cozied down on J.W.’s vacated stool.

“A what?”

“A third. You know-- Trey. Usually someone named Trey is the third one with the family name... was your dad a junior?”

“Nah,” Trey grunted like a man who lived in a lonely shack filled with deep, dark, unfriendly secrets. “He was an asshole... and a high-ranking one at that. There wasn’t anything *junior* about him.” In a flash Trey was lost reliving a lifetime of dark memories from his childhood with his drunken dad.

“Hey, you up for a shot?” he asked when he returned from the dark. The more memories, the more the need for shots... either alcoholic or from a gun... whichever was more convenient.

“Sure.”

Introductions complete, they downed alcoholic shots and made small talk-- about her ex, her dead-end job, the house she’d lost in Daytona Beach during the financial crisis, her battle to quit smoking, her asshole boss, her love of 80’s music, her trip to Cancun, *blah, blah, blah*. She had a lot to say with that irritating, raspy voice of hers, and Trey did a lot of listening, nodding, drinking, and grunting. But mostly he did a lot of wondering--

mostly about when she'd stop talking. She had the supernatural ability to move time in sickening slow motion, and in his life experience, the slower time moved, the more pain he endured. He quickly concluded that, except for her pert rack, he didn't like anything else about her.

After a long hour with her, his brain had turned into oatmeal mush, and a painless death like Brad Delp's, followed by peaceful eternal sleep, was sounding more inviting than ever. He had a funny thought that she really was a *God-thing*-- God had put her on that stool next to him as confirmation that death by suicide was the answer. If there was a God.

As she droned on about her travel delays the previous Thanksgiving, last call mercifully came, the bar cleared out, and Trey motioned for the check.

"J.W. settled with me before he left," the bartender responded. "Told me to wish you, 'Happy Birthday'."

Trey nodded, raised his glass and mumbled, "Thanks, Pete."

"You okay, Trey?" Pete asked. "You walk here?"

"I thought it might be a stumble home kind of night," Trey slurred.

The bartender eyed Suzanna. "Can I get you a cab, miss?"

"I'm with birthday boy," she rasped with a drunken, hopeful smile.

Trey shrugged slightly and raised his eyebrows at Pete as if he wasn't quite so sure about that. On one hand, he wanted to leave by himself and get on with his death. On the other, drunk or not, that rack of hers was trophy-worthy. If only the rest of her weren't so damn irritating.

They staggered out the front door together and Trey looked at his watch. "Well, lookie there, Oh Suzanna, I've been 46 for two hours already. Oh don't you cry for me..."

Suzanna grabbed his arm to keep from falling as they stepped out onto the parking lot. "I've been told," she garbled, raising her free hand, "I give really great birthday presents..."

Only if you stop talking and use that mouth for something else.

Trey chuckled to himself. His brain wasn't *all* oatmeal mush. *That* was *a little bit* funny. If there was a God, Trey was sure he'd have laughed at that one.

“Well, dilly dilly, then. Let's go!”

They wobbled across the blacktop like conjoined weebles and Suzanna soon filled the 2 am sounds of silence with a playlist of 80's songs from her phone. Of course she had to sing along, and by the time they reached the dirt road leading up to the cozy, rustic shack-ranch, she'd ruined quite a few of his old favorites with that raspy voice of hers. In fact, when *I Ran* played, he had a fleeting thought to do just that and leave her ass behind in the dust. But, two songs earlier she had guided his hand onto that ass, which wasn't the worst place his hand had been the past eight months, and he continued the unsteady walk while his hand enjoyed the crutch. When he told himself that her ass was a God-thing, his hand was soon rubbing that God-thing and he felt himself becoming aroused. Perhaps God giveth, he thought.

A few songs later, Trey found himself joining in on the 80's singalong. Whether it was the alcohol, birthday spirits, or the feel of a woman's ass after an eight month drought, the net result was wholly positive: his singing drowned out her signing. In fact, he concluded, the louder he sang, the less she annoyed him. And so, by the time they staggered up the dirt driveway towards the dirty shack, Trey was actually singing out at the top of his lungs:

But I Would Walk 500 Miles
 And I Would Walk 500 More
 Just to be the Man (Suzanna laughed and screamed
 “Woman”) Who Walked 1,000 miles
 To fall down at your door.

Reaching for the front door, Trey actually did fall. Clearly, he wasn't a weeble. But he was laughing like one of those beer commercial people, which was something he hadn't done since leaving Kristie eight months ago.

Suzanna reached down and grabbed Trey's arm to pull him up. "You gonna get up... or you want your birthday present right here?"

Hmmm? Tough question. He hated tough questions... especially on weekends... especially when he was drunk. What to do... what to do? Of course, he thought of Kristie. She'd know how to handle this one. He heard Kristie's voice-- "whenever I don't know what to do, I just ask myself, 'what would Jesus do?' And I do that."

And on that splintering front porch of that dirty shack, Trey wondered what Jesus would do.

Of course, it really wasn't a fair question. Jesus was a bachelor... and the son of God. Trey, on the other hand, was still technically married... and the son of a drunk who'd ruined his life. Big diff. Never having turned water into wine or walked on water, it wasn't easy for Trey to know what Jesus would do. Trey turned beer into piss and sank like a rock on the water. And Trey was also pretty sure he wouldn't be rising from the dead, either. That would mess up that peaceful eternal sleep.

But he knew one thing-- he now had a good response to Kristie whenever she invoked that WWJD platitude. He'd say, "How am I supposed to know what Jesus would do... he was the son of God... I'm the son of a drunk asshole..."

He could almost hear her answer-- "You're the son of God, too, Trey. You just need to find God, and then you'll know what to do."

Sadly, he knew he'd never use that response. It was too late for him and Kristie. It was too late for a lot of things. It was too late for everything... except maybe one last time with a woman.

He returned to the tough question before him now...

A part of him wanted to stay down, as if it wouldn't be cheating on Kristie if Suzanna gave him a raspy quickie outside on the splintering deck. With his luck, however, some cop would just happen to drive by the lonely shack in the woods and arrest Trey for indecent exposure. And that would ruin his plans for the rest of the night. Suddenly, the decision was easy.

Trey stood up on his unsteady feet and decided to take the party inside... like a horny, paranoid, drunken Jesus would. He pushed the front door open and stumbled inside. Had he been sober, he never would have been with Suzanna, he knew. But he wasn't sober.

Once inside, he gave into the alcohol and testosterone flowing through his veins and began kissing her. Even though her mouth tasted old, at least it had taste. Thankfully, he could taste a little Woodford. When he reminded himself that it was probably his last birthday, and his last time with a woman, and that she was a God-thing, he kissed her harder and wilder. If Jesus ever kissed a woman, Trey was sure it would have been passionate and wild like this.

Love one another... lust one another... at 2:40 in the morning they were pretty much the same thing... right?

Suzanna responded by kissing back harder.

Now conjoined by the mouth, Trey steered them down the narrow hall, bumping the walls like human pinballs, then into the bedroom, and down onto the twin bed. As things heated up, clothes and even some jewelry were flying from the bed, through the air, and onto the bedroom floor. His heart was racing when Suzanna found his belt and unbuckled it. That's when it felt too real... and too wrong. Kristie was the only woman who'd ever depantsed him. That's when Trey pushed himself away from her and abruptly stood up.

"I can't do this," he announced as he nervously re-buckled the belt, "Sorry." He was breathing hard, nearly hyperventilating, and could taste the alcohol in his breath. Deep down, he liked being stronger than the chemicals and testosterone in his veins. On the flip side, however, he could have used a little something. It had been a looooong eight months.

"Relax, Birthday Boy," Suzanna called up reassuringly from the bed. "It happens. Trust me, once I get going on you, you'll be fine."

"It's not that." He hesitated as his breathing slowed and his moral compass re-engaged and pointed to Kristie. "It's... I, uh, I can't do this to *my wife*," Trey announced. His shirt was back on, and it was clear he was done with her.

Suzanna sat up in the bed as if a spring in her back had been released. “Your wife?” she scoffed. He should have been wearing a wedding ring, and she was quickly pissed for investing two hours of her life on this balding chump. “Jesus Christ. You think maybe you could’ve mentioned you had a wife back at the bar?”

I might have... if you had stopped yapping for long enough.

Trey tossed Suzanna her blouse, but took one last look. *Damn, her titties did look nice.* “Sorry.”

“God, I hate you middle-aged men with all your problems,” she spewed as she buttoned her top. “Wives, ex-wives, ED-- it’s always something.” She shook her head in disgust. “Ugh, no wonder all my friends are cougars.”

‘Blah... blah... blah... cougars’ was all Trey heard. He just wanted time to move fast and for her to be gone. “Come on. I’ll drive you back to your car.”

Back at the bar parking lot, Suzanna exited Trey’s truck with a menopausal anger that scared him, and he wondered whether she carried a gun. “Oh, and by the way,” she screeched as she slammed the truck door, “you live in a freakin’ dump... *you loser.*” She stumbled toward her car and fumbled in her purse. Hopefully she was just looking for her keys and not a .45.

“It’s a cozy, rustic ranch,” Trey yelled back. “Bitch,” he added under his breath. He pushed hard on the gas pedal, quickly pulled away, and scrunched down a bit as he listened for gunshots. He was glad he’d never see her again. She sure as hell wasn’t a *God-thing*.

It was just a quick two-minute drive back to the shack, but during that short trip a lot happened... most of it in Trey’s mind. He was certain a cop was waiting up ahead, hiding behind the cluster of pines, to pull him over. They always seemed to be waiting there. He wasn’t worried about another DUI though. What worried him was getting arrested, which would interfere with him getting home and killing himself. He hated cops and was quickly annoyed.

What would Jesus fucking do?

He chuckled at that acronym... *WWJFD*.

If he were Jesus he would have turned the cop into a pile of salt. But he wasn't. So, instead, he slowed down to the speed limit, sat up a little straighter, and rehearsed what he'd say to the officer: "Bless you, my son... live like you're dying... love one another... and be fruitful and multiply..."

All that made him chuckle. Obviously, he'd never taken Kristie's advice and read the good book.

But when he hit a pothole, he became quickly annoyed again, and he let fly an angry message to Jesus' dad-- "Fuck you, God," as if God were responsible for road maintenance.

The heavens answered his curse with flashes of lighting and rumbles of thunder. Then the rain came, in torrents, as if God and his mighty army of angels were spitting down on Trey. And in that rain, Trey was sure he heard God's voice: 'Happy birthday, loser. Go ahead and kill yourself... see if I fucking care.'

Sadly, that might have been the nicest thing any father of Trey's had ever said to him...

Now more than halfway home, and past the spot where any cop might be, he felt safe. Of course, as long as he was alone, he was never safe.

As he turned into the shack's now-muddy driveway, a lightning bolt crashed just off to his right, perhaps a quarter mile away. It got Trey's attention and he scrunched down again in the driver's seat. That certainly didn't look like a peaceful way to go. Within seconds, a second bolt erupted to his left. This one was closer, maybe 200 yards.

That fucker in heaven seemed to be zeroing in on him, and Trey could almost hear J.W.'s voice: "Look it up-- more people are struck by lightning on their birthday after cursing at God than any other day..."

Trey was sure there would be a third bolt. Bad things always happened in threes-- that was his version of the trinity.

A bit scared now, Trey stopped abruptly in the driveway, quickly turned off the truck, and decided to make a break for the shack. He wasn't about to wait and see where the third bolt might land. Dodging sheets of heaven's expletives, he ran as fast as he could into the shack, the whole time knowing he wouldn't hear the thunder until after the lightning bolt struck him. Lightning was way worse than gunshots...

But there wasn't a third bolt.

Once inside, Trey caught his breath, changed out of his wet shirt, and grabbed a Bud Light from the fridge. "Hah, you missed me, God," he called out as he walked into the small living room.

Some God you are... can't even hit an overweight 46 year-old loser jogging from his driveway into his shack.

Or did you miss on purpose?

Hah!

He couldn't fathom that yet another God-thing had just happened.

He plopped down on the couch and kicked his feet up onto the coffee table. Lying in the middle of the table was the ever-present faded scorecard from the 1993 PGA Qualifying school, and like a mangled train wreck, Trey couldn't help but stare at it. It was the demarcation point in his life-- that watershed moment that separated the winner and the loser-- the same way BC and AD marked the world before and after God's supposed son, Jesus. Indeed, for Trey, everything before the age of 23 had led up to that pivotal moment... and everything from 23 to this moment was a result of that pivotal moment. And now, on his 46th birthday, the sight of that scorecard, and all that it represented, just might push him over the edge.

In the lonely dim light, Trey picked up the scorecard and stared at it. As he did, he let loose a deep breath, closed his eyes tightly, and remembered the torturous path that had led to that dark watershed day in 1993.

THREE

The year was 1982, and 11 year-old Trey was hitting golf balls on the driving range at Flat Creek Country Club as his father, Jace, a hulking 5 foot 11, 200 pound man with a tight crewcut and a crisp Eastern Airlines pilot's uniform, loomed over him. Tired and clearly frustrated, Trey hit an errant shot.

"Dammit, Trey. Concentrate. I've seen rusty gates swing better than that."

"I'm trying. But I'm tired. And my hand hurts." Trey held up a blistered and bloody right palm.

"Jesus Christ, I go away for two days and my 11 year-old son turns into a whiny 3 year-old girl." The old man held up the back of his hand, clenched his teeth, and glared at his scared son. "Pull up your panties and do it again. And this time, do it right."

Trey nodded meekly. "Okay."

"Put a sir on it," the former Marine responded, shaking his head in utter disgust. "I tell you what, little girlie, let's just save time-- drop and give me 20."

“Yes, sir.”

Trey dropped down and began doing push-ups on the driving range grass. After the tenth one, Jace pressed his shoe on Trey’s back to increase the resistance.

From afar, the driving range worker saw what was happening. “Hey buddy,” he called out as he walked over to them, “take it easy on him there.”

Jace was quick to respond, “I’m not your *buddy*. And who the hell asked you anything? You should be working. Do I make an announcement from the cockpit and tell you how to raise your kid?”

The range worker was about six feet away now. “No. But I would never treat my son like that.”

“Good for you. I’m sure he’ll make a helluva living picking up golf balls... just like you.”

The range worker had heard the stories of the asshole pilot, and now knew firsthand they were probably all true. “You should never judge a man unless you’ve walked in his shoes,” he said, glaring at Jace.

“Fair enough,” Jace shot back. “After you’ve walked in a pair of USMC combat boots and these pilot shoes, you can judge me. Until then, hop on your little buggy and give us a target out there.”

The range worker walked away mumbling and judging.

Jace looked down at Trey. “Get up, Trey.” Then he called out to the range worker. “Hey, good luck with that kid of yours, *buddy*.”

He stared back at Trey. “Get your clubs, little girlie. We’re done.”

Trey gathered his golf clubs and followed his dad to the car.

“He’s probably one of those damn Jesus freaks just hoping to be saved,” Jace muttered to Trey as he opened the trunk. He stared into his son’s eyes. “Remember, Trey, God and Jesus and religion are for the weak... for those that can’t make it on their own. If you want something,

you, yourself, need to make it happen. No magical genie in the clouds is going to save you in this life. You need two things, right?"

Trey loaded his clubs and nodded. "Discipline and commitment," he parroted back without conviction.

"Oooh Rah," his dad sang out. "Okay, grilled fish and veggies tonight, running in the morning, and practice all day tomorrow. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Dragged out of bed at 5 am, Trey jogged on the shoulder of Peachtree Parkway like a prize fighter preparing for battle. Next to him, Jace drove slowly in his Buick LeSabre, the flashers on and the windows down. He sang a soulful military cadence in that irritating, self-assured voice of his:

Wooo-oooh can't you see,
 What my daddy's done to me,
 Got me up and got me out,
 Gonna hurt beyond a doubt.
 Wo-wo-wooo-wo,
 Wo-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh.
 Never quit...
 Never quit...
 Never die...
 Semper Fi...
 Never die...
 Semper Fi.
 Oooh Rah Ray,
 Ooh Rah Rah.

After calisthenics, the day usually went something like this: an egg-white omelet for breakfast; four hours of chipping and putting; grilled lean beef and avocado for lunch; two hours on the driving range; two hours of weight training and flexibility exercises; 18 holes under tournament-like conditions; grilled fish and steamed veggies for dinner. The day usually ended with classwork, which consisted of Jace teaching golf tactics, course management, the art of war, or the secrets to mental toughness. Occasionally

he'd lock Trey in the dark pantry for visualization and breathing exercises. "Focus, Trey. Focus."

And they'd repeat that sameness day after day...

On the couch in the tiny shack, Trey opened his eyes and tossed the scorecard back onto the coffee table. He shook his head in disgust-- *Jesus Christ, what a fucked-up childhood. No wonder he was suicidal...*

He wondered how Jesus would have handled that upbringing...

As he chugged the remainder of the beer, Trey realized he was really, really drunk. Sadly, he was nowhere near as drunk as the old man used to get. And certainly not as mean.

Trey closed his eyes again and another round of sickening memories flooded his mind...

It was 1985, and 14 year-old Trey and his girlfriend Kristie were playing Gin Rummy on the couch. Van Halen's 'Running with the Devil' was cranked up and the two 9th graders shared a big bag of greasy Lay's potato chips. Trey was relaxed and happy knowing his dad was away on an overnight trip. Although the old man had enough seniority to schedule his flying so he'd be home almost every night, a few times a month he'd take an overnighter. Those were the best days of Trey's childhood.

The old man was sneaky, though. And he never trusted Trey.

Without warning, Jace burst through the front door of the Peachtree City colonial, startling Trey and Kristie. Visibly drunk and reeking, the pilot staggered into the living room.

"I thought you weren't coming home 'til tomorrow," Trey said nervously as he attempted to hide the bag of chips behind him.

“Well, you thought wrong buddy boy. Always expect the unexpected,” Jace slurred, as if back teaching the troops in Vietnam. “Oh, and don’t think I don’t see those chips.”

“I only had a couple... sir.”

“And turn off that crap,” the old man called out, almost falling as he motioned towards the stereo. He knew Trey would be doing the wrong thing. And he knew why. He turned his suspicious eyes to Kristie. “What’s she doing here?”

Trey got up from the couch and turned off the stereo. It got real quiet real quick, and for some reason, the quiet made him even more scared of the drunken, angry pilot.

Kristie interrupted the quiet, “It’s my fault, Mr. Cooper. I begged Trey to let me come over. And I brought the chips.”

“When I want an answer from you, little girlie, I’ll ask you.” He swayed as he stared at Trey, his eyes focusing in and out. “You gonna let her take responsibility for your actions?”

“No, sir. It was all my fault.”

The old man nodded, then eyed Kristie hard as he continued to sway in the middle of the living room. “Bye, bye Kristie. And don’t ever come over here when I’m not home. You got it?”

“Yes, sir.” She swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, sir. Bye Trey.”

“Bye,” he said sorrowfully.

Kristie sleeked out and was still on the porch when she heard the first drunken yell. “I sacrifice every goddam thing for you and this is how you repay me-- eating chips and hanging out with that skank? Did you practice today?”

“She’s not a skank. She’s my friend.”

“She is a skank, just like your goddamn mother was. So you stay away from her.”

“I told you, she’s my friend.”

“Okay, buddy boy, looks like we need another lesson in respect...”

From the front walk, Kristie heard the sound of the first slaps and Trey’s cries.

She walked away crying and praying for Trey. She didn’t understand God’s plan for them, but she felt one deep in her heart. As she looked up at the stars, she whispered aloud, “Oh, dear God, please help Trey get through this. Please show us Your way...”

Above her, stars twinkled.

She was sure those twinkles were God’s way of telling her that everything was going to be okay... that He had a plan for them.

But stars twinkle every night.

FOUR

On the couch back in the shack, Trey muttered out loud as the memory faded, “I should have fuckin’ run away right then and there. That might have changed everything. I might be on the PGA tour now, with a big house, a beach house with two elevators, and a bunch of kids.”

Jesus would have run away, he concluded. No doubt.

Unfortunately, Trey hadn’t.

He closed his eyes again and another memory kicked in.

It was 1989, and 18 year-old Trey sat at the kitchen table. Even sitting, there was no doubt he was a perfect physical specimen— 6 foot 1, and a rock solid 190 pounds. He wore his brown hair in a close-cropped, serious, military cut that he hated. Anyone who saw him would have known he was a disciplined, elite athlete.

Across from Trey, his stone-faced dad pushed a paper towards him. “Look Trey,” he said, “I know we’ve had our ups and downs, but before you leave for UGA tomorrow, I need you to sign this.”

“What is it?” Trey asked as he took hold of the papers.

“A contract... it makes me your manager when you turn pro. All standard stuff. This is what we’ve been working towards all these years.”

What you’ve been working towards. Trey leafed through the official-looking 5-page document. It was obvious the old man had broken down and enlisted a lawyer to put it together. “What if I don’t sign?”

The old man flashed that stern how-dare-you look of his, his jaw tight, his dark eyes piercing. “I guess we’ll cross that bridge if we have to. Your choice.” He showed his clenched, crooked yellow teeth. “Just remember this: there’s no one in this world who cares about you more than me. I’ll be there for you no matter what.”

Trey didn’t believe that... not after all the years of mental abuse and bruises on his back. That wasn’t care. The only one who truly cared for Trey was Kristie. In fact, she actually loved him.

Nor did Trey want his old man there for him. The drunken pilot always seemed to know how Trey should live his life-- including how Trey should wear his hair-- yet was clueless about his own life. And, except for Trey, he was all alone. Of course, that was his own fault... or choice. When Trey was just three, the old man had ordered away the only woman who might have ever loved him. And nowadays, he drank until he couldn’t stand or feel... but could still swing. Of course, the old man knew better than to take a swing at Trey now.

Trey turned to the last page of the contract. Even though he could kick the old man’s ass if need be, he’d learned the path of least resistance was always best. “Okay. Geez. Whatever,” Trey said as he reluctantly signed the contract and pushed it back across the table. He left the house, counting the hours ‘til he’d be free at UGA.

Of course freedom would not come so easily or quickly.

Four years later, 22 year-old Trey was walking down the 18th fairway of the Atlanta Country Club next to teammate Brad Zemian at the 1993 SEC

Championship. Outside the ropes, Jace kept pace. He was in one of those euphoric manic states of his, and could sense the imminent triumph. Indeed, winning the SEC championship would move Trey to within an eyelash of 17 year-old Tiger Woods in the world amateur rankings.

Jace called out, “Focus, Trey. Focus. Birdie here wins both the individual and team title.”

In the fairway, Z-Man whispered to Trey, “Man, I don’t know how you can play with your old man looming over you every shot, yelling at you like that.”

Trey, the senior captain of the team, shook his head at the freshman, “It sucks, Z-Man. It really sucks.”

Trey hit his shot onto the green, leaving himself a 15-foot putt. As Trey and the other players walked up to the green, Jace called out, “I putted this one last night, Trey. Moves about six inches to the left. And it’s a bit slower than it looks.”

As Trey looked over the putt, an Auburn coach standing by the green quickly walked up to the rules official observing the group. He whispered in the official’s ear, “Hey, he can’t do that. That’s outside assistance.”

The rules official nodded and nonchalantly walked over to Jace. “Excuse me, sir, what exactly is your relationship to these players?”

Jace pointed at Trey, who was standing over his ball about to putt. “I’m his father. Why?”

The official pulled out a rule book from his back pocket and thumbed through it. When he found what he was looking for he looked up and announced, “In accordance with rule 33-8, Mr. Trey Cooper of the University of Georgia is hereby disqualified for receiving outside assistance.”

Trey backed away from his ball.

It took less than a millisecond for Jace to become berserk and start screaming, “What? You gotta be kidding me. You spineless sack of shit.” He

rushed the official, pushed him down, and began pummeling him with a flurry of lefts and rights. A group of coaches rushed in, pulled Jace off, and held him back as blood poured out of the official's nose. Ten minutes later, Jace was in handcuffs in the back of a police cruiser.

On the green, Brad Zemian looked into Trey's faraway eyes. "Dude, your old man is crazy."

Trey nodded. "Un-huh," he responded in disgust. "You should see him when he drinks. I sure as hell would never get on any airplane he's flying."

And Trey could feel his dream dying.

Two months later, Trey was in his UGA dorm room with Kristie. Graduation was three days away and he was packing up his room. He looked so sad.

"What's the matter, baby?" she asked.

"Would you still love me if I quit golf?"

"Of course I would. You know that." She looked deeply into his eyes. "Why? Do you really want to quit?"

"I don't know. If I quit, I'd be done with my dad for good. It's the only thing between us."

"Is this about that stupid contract? Professor Lewis said you can probably get out of that."

"It's not just the contract. Golf and my dad go hand-in-hand. I just think I'd be happier without either of them."

"All I can say is don't quit just to spite him. No regrets... remember?"

“I know. Plus I’ve been playing so bad lately and my putting is horrible... I can almost feel the putter shaking in my hands.” He let out a deep breath. “My heart just isn’t in it.”

“Why don’t you see how Q-school goes this fall? Then you can decide.”

“Yeah, I guess... I’m just really scared about what’s gonna happen to me.”

“Everything’s gonna be okay, Trey,” she said with a soft, reassuring smile. “God has a plan for you and me...”

Trey feigned a smile. He wanted to believe her. “You always say that.”

“It’s true. You just wait and see. It’s gonna be great... I just know it.”

But deep down, he was beginning to doubt her and her God...

On the couch in the shack, Trey re-opened his eyes and stared back at the scorecard. He opened it slowly and saw the big 12 written in the first box next to his name. His eyes scrolled across the other 17 numbers until they reached the final score-- 99.

That was the day his dream had died.

He let out a deep-held breath. “Nice round, Trey. Ninety-fuckin’-nine. Good thing you made that 15-footer on 18.”

Disgusted, he tossed the scorecard back onto the table. “You really *are* a fucking loser.”

And then, in the lonely darkness, Trey sat and drank and reflected on it all. At least that 99 had freed him from his crazy drunken father. Unfortunately, twenty years later, Kristie had brought the crazy old man back into their lives and ruined everything again. He just couldn’t win...

“Great plan, God,” he mumbled, “great fucking plan.”

FIVE

Trey grabbed his final beer from the fridge, returned to the couch, and continued to relive a lifetime of sad memories. Alone in his sadness, those memories unleashed a torrent of desperate and bitter thoughts, and years of bearable pain and suffering and drudgery finally became unbearable. As he took his final swig of that final beer, Trey decided it was time to implement *his* plan to fix his problems... all of them.

This must have been how Brad Delp had felt.

He grabbed a piece of paper and scribbled out a quick note. Somehow, he even managed to amuse himself with the postscript about the shack needing a little TLC. J.W. might even get a chuckle out of that one... someday, maybe... after the scar healed a bit. On the other side of the paper he wrote, 'DANGER CARBON MONOXIDE' in big capital letters.

He walked through the tiny kitchen toward a back room and returned a few minutes later with a dryer hose, some cardboard, and a roll of duct tape.

Hmmm. Perhaps it was a God-thing that he had everything he needed.

In the bedroom, he snaked the hose out the window and tightly sealed it with the cardboard and duct tape. Then, with shaky hands, he taped the 'DANGER' sign to the outside of the front door.

As he walked toward his truck he heard his voice in his head: *I guess this is it. You sure you're really going to do this?*

He answered that voice: *Yeah. Fuck it. Nobody's gonna miss me. There's gotta be less pain on the other side... this is a win-win.*

The rain had stopped almost as quickly as it had begun, and now, under a star-filled night, Trey looked up through the Georgia pines and shook his head in disgust and frustration at the heavens. There was no God and no great plan. He was sure of that.

He got on his knees, not to pray, but to duct-tape the dryer hose to the truck's tailpipe, wrapping it tightly. Then, with his heart racing, he opened the driver's door and slid behind the wheel.

Okay, now just start it up, go into the house, lie down in bed, and go to sleep. Then it'll all be over. Your plan... perfectly executed. No more memories or worries or disappointments or pain... no more being the fucking loser. In fact, lots of people will probably talk about that 'Danger' sign and say how much they respected your thoughtfulness... that's not such a bad way to go out. Brad Delph... you were a crazy, thoughtful genius.

In the cab of the truck, the moonlight streaming through the sun roof provided just enough light for Trey to gaze at the picture taped onto the dash by the radio. It was Kristie and a long-haired teenage boy of 15-- Trey's son, Nate-- and in that dim light, they looked happy enough without him. While that gave him some comfort, it made him sad at the same time.

Trey grabbed the picture and stared into Kristie's eyes. He loved her so much. And she was still as beautiful as ever— a simple Southern beauty, an Ashley-Judd lookalike, with bouncy shoulder-length auburn hair, sweet caramel-colored eyes, and a deep dimple on her right cheek that showed itself every time she moved her mouth. He loved that dimple, and everything else about her. But he knew she was better off without him, which may be the saddest part. At least she'd get the \$500,000.

Tears quickly filled his eyes.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he whispered, “I just can’t do this anymore. I quit... I just quit.”

As he continued to stare at Kristie, he hoped death really was just cold nothingness, because he wasn’t sure he could handle missing Kristie for all eternity. That got his attention.

Oh God, how did it get to this? And why?

Unable to fathom that even this was part of God’s plan, he squeezed his eyes tightly shut and sealed in the tears as another round of memories came...

It was 16 years earlier-- May 2002, and 31 year-old Trey was slumped on a couch drinking a beer at J.W.’s house, watching SportsCenter.

“In golf news,” the anchor announced, “Brad Zemian hung on to win the Fedex St Jude’s Classic by 2 shots. Z-Man shot a final round of 71 and collected nearly \$600,000 for four days of work...”

Trey groaned as he muted the television. “Man, I’m so sick of hearing about *the great Z-Man*.”

J.W. nodded. “I know. Last week I saw him on Cribs, The View, and Jay Leno.”

“The View? Really, dude?”

“Hey, don’t be badmouthing The View, Trey. It’s a lot more educational than some of the other crap on t.v.” He paused. “Did you know Z-Man’s beach house has two elevators?”

“No,” Trey grunted. “Nor do I care. How’s any of that supposed to cheer me up?”

“Well, you know, you played golf with him growing up and then at UGA. I just figured you’d be interested.”

For the record, numbnuts, I didn’t just *play golf* with him... I used to *beat him like a friggin’ drum.*”

“Yeah, well for the record, you’re sitting here on the couch drinking cheap Miller Lites with me and he’s up there”-- J.W. pointed at the television-- “holding that ginormous winner’s check.”

Trey couldn’t contain his disgust or his chuckle. “Touché, Dr. Kervorkian,” he said. “Now it all makes sense— you bust on me ‘til I throw myself off a ledge, or lie down in front of a bus, and you walk away as free as a bird. Well played, Doctor.” Trey nodded slowly in congratulations and clapped his hands.

“And then,” J.W. said, grinning mischievously, “I have my way with Kristie.”

“Really, dude? My wife? Un-friggin-cool.”

“Someone’s gonna need to take care of her...”

“With my luck, she’d probably hook up with Z-Man. I’m sure they’d have a big house, that beach house with the two elevators, and a bunch of kids.”

J.W. chuckled. “You think we would’ve had this much fun if you really were on tour and I were your caddy?”

“You never would’ve been my caddy.”

“Oh yeah? Why not?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Mr. Good News, you have a way of bringing me down... way, way down. I would have needed a caddy who could prevent suicide, not induce it...”

“I bet Dr. Phil would’ve been a good caddy for you,” J.W. shot back with a wry grin. He put on his best Dr. Phil face and began imitating the

television psych. “I need you to get real, Trey. Get in touch with your inner self. Tell us what you were really feelin’ when you made 12 on the first hole at Q-school.”

Trey rolled his eyes. “To Dr. Friggin’ Phil,” he called out as he raised his Miller Lite in toast. “May he someday caddy for the great Trey Cooper.”

J.W. clicked his aluminum can. “And to Z-Man. May he someday wish he were the great Trey Cooper.”

“Hah. That’d be the day.”

They drank for another hour. “Alright,” said Trey as he got up to leave, “I gotta roll. Kristie says she wants to talk to me about something *important*.” He rolled his eyes when he said ‘important.’ “Maybe God’s plan is for her to finally leave my sorry ass. See you, man.” He paused. “Oh, and a word of advice, don’t be late for that job interview at the suicide prevention hotline tomorrow.”

J.W. laughed. “Hah. Later bro. You good to drive?”

“Yepper. Nobody drives drunk better than Trey Cooper... either on the golf course or on the road.”

Ten minutes later, Trey was singing ‘Margaritaville’ in unison with Jimmy Buffet when he saw the blue lights flash in his rear view mirror. “Shit.”

Ten minutes after that, Trey was in handcuffs in the back of a police cruiser-- like father like son.

Nervously, Trey dialed the phone from the county jail. Kristie picked up on the first ring. “Hello,” she said sleepily.

Trey explained.

“Okay, I’m coming,” she said. She hung up the phone. “Dammit, Trey.”

“You should have called a cab... or me,” Kristie said as she pulled her Honda out of the police parking lot.” In the background a Christian song played: ‘Our God is an Awesome God...’

Trey moaned. “Oh God, can you turn-off that crap?”

“I told you, I don’t like that word.”

Trey shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Oh. Okay. Can you *stop playing* that crap?” His glare spewed anger and hatred for life. “There. Better?”

Kristie pulled the car onto the shoulder. “You know, Trey, maybe if you found God, you wouldn’t think your life was so bad and you could let go of all your anger.”

“And... stop the clock.” Trey looked conspicuously at his watch. “Wow, two minutes. Very impressive, Kristie. Vegas had the over-under at five.”

“Why do you always get like this?” she said, utterly frustrated.

“Like what? Like a former All American golfer who sells backhoes now?”

“Oh, come on, Trey, we’ve been over this a thousand times. That doesn’t have to define you. You can still be happy.”

“Oh yeah? And how’s that gonna happen? Is your awesome, powerful God gonna come down from the clouds like the great pumpkin and deposit a bunch of money in our bank account and fill our house with kids? ‘Cause last time I checked we had \$600 in checking and our nest was pretty much empty.”

Kristie had a secret to share, too. But after being arrested, and the mood Trey was in, she knew this wasn’t the moment. “God has a plan for each of us,” she said.

“Yup. You’ve been telling me that since I was 17. I believed you for a while. But it’s gotten a little old... actually, a lot old... really friggin’ old. Did you ever think that maybe this-- right here, what we got-- is His plan?”

“God works on His terms, not ours.”

He looked at her curiously. “You know, I never noticed it before, but sometimes you sound like a robot.” Trey smirked and then took on a faraway robotic look. “God-has-a-plan,” he said in a monotone, robotic voice. “God-works-on-his-terms.” He stared at her again. “Are you sure you’re real?” he asked in his own voice.

She glared back, unamused. “Was there an over-under on me calling you an ass?”

“Nope. Just on finding God.”

“I should have just left you in jail.”

Trey perked up. “Fine with me. Go ahead and take me back if you want to. Tell the officers God told you to put me back in jail where I can’t cause you any more pain.”

She shook her head. “Oh my God, you’re so impossible.”

They sat in difficult, soul-searching silence for another minute.

“You know what I’m going to do?” she finally said.

“Kill me?” he said hopefully.

She rolled her eyes. “No. I’m gonna keep praying for you. Even harder.”

“Hah. Keep wasting your time. I’ll let you in on a well-known secret, Kristie: there is no God.”

“Why? Because you’re not on the PGA tour? You *really* think God cares who makes it on the PGA tour?”

“No. He doesn’t care about anything because He doesn’t exist.” Exhausted by it all, Trey buried his face in his hands. “Jesus Fucking Christ, I hate my goddam life. Nothing ever works out for me.”

Through his hands, he heard Kristie’s muffled cries.

Her crying made him feel even worse. God, he sucked. Why was he like this? It wasn’t her fault.

He uncovered his face and looked at her. “Oh geez, don’t cry. Please? I’m sorry. Look, I didn’t mean all that. You worked out for me.”

“That’s not why I’m crying.”

“Ugh. Why then?”

“This wasn’t how I wanted to tell you,” Kristie said, looking at him through puffy, teary eyes.

He was sure she was going to ramble on about God’s plan for her to finally leave him. No doubt she would cry, too.

He braced and took a deep breath as he thought about how he’d respond. He’d probably just go with the sad nod, and tell her he was sorry and that it was all his fault. And deep down, he knew it was and he deserved it. It was probably best for her, too. He really was a broken human being who needed to be alone and isolated. Maybe jail was where he really belonged?

“Tell me what?” he replied. He was nervous waiting.

She hesitated, then reached into her purse and pulled out a small white garment. She held it up. It was a baby onesie with the words ‘I love My Daddy.’ “We’re gonna have a baby, Trey,” she cried out. As she said it, a stream of tears ran down her face.

Given the last ten minutes, he wasn’t sure if they were happy tears or sad tears, and he didn’t have a pre-planned response for this. “Really?”

“Uh-huh. Dr. Tommy called this afternoon. I wanted to tell you in person. You’re gonna be a daddy.” Now she was gushing.

They were happy tears, he now concluded. “Oh my God. Wow!” He took a deep breath. This was the last thing he expected. After all, they’d been trying for years without success. And they’d had every test imaginable done. Her eggs were fine and he had plenty of mighty-enough swimmers. Yet, it had never happened.

A couple years earlier, Doctor Tommy had suggested in vitro fertilization, but Kristie had quickly nixed that one. “That’s not the way God intends for it to happen,” she had said.

He had thought about responding with some of her ‘God-thing’ logic. It would have sounded something like this-- “You know, Kristie, maybe it’s a God-thing that mankind invented in vitro fertilization, so couples like us could have kids.” But in the end, he just kept his mouth shut and told her he was sorry.

After that, they’d even stopped trying for a while. But, a month and a half earlier, on St. Patrick’s Day, Kristie had nuzzled up to him on the couch and whispered, “I’m ovulating.”

He hadn’t expected that... especially on St. Patrick’s Day. That was the anniversary of her parents’ death, and it was an understandably terribly sad day for her. He had looked deeply into her eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this... today?”

She got teary-eyed and nodded. “I think it’s a sign from God that today is the day. I think it’s His way and my parents’ way of telling me everything’s okay and that life goes on.”

He didn’t have the guts to tell her it was just a matter of time that she’d ovulate on the anniversary of her parents’ death. It was pure and simple math for God’s sake, not a God-thing. Plus, she was looking pretty good, and he was feeling pretty horny, so instead he just smiled and said, “I think you’re right.” He certainly didn’t add what he was thinking: “I think both God and your parents would be happy if I knocked the bottom out of you, honey... maybe twice.”

Back in her Honda, Trey scooted over and hugged her. “Oh, baby, I can’t believe it. I promise I’m gonna make it all up to you.”

And they drove home listening to Christian music without an additional curse out of Trey.

SIX

In the cab of his truck, Trey opened his teary eyes and stared at Kristie in the picture.

He hadn't made it up to her.

Nope. He'd only continued to fail her.

That was par for the course for him. And now, today, on his 46th birthday, he was out of mulligans.

He closed his eyes again and remembered.

Three months after learning he'd be a father, Trey arrived home after work and was standing in the doorway of the den Kristie was converting into a nursery. He watched her paint.

"You okay?" he called out. "You look pale."

"I think I have another urinary tract infection," she replied.

“Beep-beep... turn off alert... turn off alert” He said it in a computer-generated voice with a smiling smirk. “You should go lay down.”

“I will. I just want to finish this first coat. So, you like the colors?”

“Absolutely. Beige with lime green stripes... reminds me of that turkey-jello salad your Aunt Marion made last Thanksgiving. Remember?”

“Before or after you threw it up?”

“Aw, baby, you *do* remember.” He smiled at her. Even pale, she was still so beautiful. Everything *was* going to be alright, he told himself. In fact, things were actually looking up for them. He shared. “Oh, hey, I forgot to tell you-- my lawyer called this afternoon and said the DA is willing to lower the DUI to reckless driving since it’s my first offense.”

“Really? See, things *do* work out for you, jello-boy. I’m just glad it’ll be—” Kristie paused mid-sentence. She looked unsteady, as if she was about to fall.

“You okay?”

Kristie kneeled abruptly and took a few deep breaths. “Oh... whoa... I just got real dizzy.”

Trey rushed over, helped her up, and led her to the bed in their bedroom.

“I guess I should have opened a window in the nursery,” she said softly.

He opened a window in the bedroom, turned on the fan, and looked at her lying on the bed. “Better?”

She nodded, but her worried face said differently. “Un-huh,” she said softly.

“You need anything?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Alright. You just rest here. I’ll go finish painting.”

She smiled weakly.

A half hour later he called out to her from the nursery, “Hey babe, come take a look. It actually looks pretty good.”

There was no reply.

“Kristie?” he called out, hoping she’d just fallen asleep. But he felt anxious. Paint brush in hand, he trotted out of the nursery and into the master bedroom.

When he saw her, she was as white as the sheet, and he was sure she was passed out. “Kristie? Kristie!” He rushed over and instinctively felt for a pulse-- it was feint but racing. He grabbed the phone on the nightstand and frantically dialed.

“9-1-1. What’s your emergency?”

“My wife passed out,” he yelled. “I need you to send an ambulance.”

Fifteen minutes later Kristie was being whisked on a gurney, with Trey running alongside, into the emergency room at Piedmont Hospital. “Blood pressure 90 over 50. Pulse 145,” the paramedic yelled out.

They took her through the double doors, leaving Trey behind, alone. Not knowing what else to do, Trey whispered a prayer to the nonexistent God with the secret plan and untimely timetable.

Please, God. Not this. Please keep Kristie and our baby safe.

The next morning a weak but conscious Kristie sat propped up in a hospital bed, hooked up to a network of tubes and machines. Next to her, Trey nervously held her hand as they listened to Doctor Tommy explain what had happened.

“You were lucky, Kristie,” he said. “Septic shock can be very serious, even deadly.”

“Are you sure my baby’s okay?” Kristie whispered fearfully.

Doctor Tommy nodded and smiled reassuringly. “Whenever a mother’s blood pressure goes as low as yours did there’s always a chance of temporary oxygen deprivation. But I see cases like this at least a couple times a year and 99.99 percent of the time they work out just fine... so don’t worry.”

As he listened, somehow, somehow, Trey was sure his baby would be part of that 0.01 percent. That would track with God’s shitty plan for his shitty life...

Four months later, Trey and Kristie were driving in Trey’s new F-150 on their way to the hospital. It was Christmas Eve 2002 and ‘Oh Holy Night’ streamed softly from the truck’s speakers. Trey glanced over at Kristie. “You okay, baby?”

“A little nervous. But I love that our baby will be born on the same day as Jesus.”

“And we shall name him Emmanuel,” Trey declared loudly in a deep, booming biblical voice. He broke into an ear-to-ear grin. He couldn’t wait to be a father. Everything would be different, everything would be good. Maybe, Trey thought, he’d even have dreams again... if not for himself, at least for his son.

Kristie chuckled. “No. We’ll name him Nathaniel, like we agreed. Nathaniel... the gift of God.”

As Trey pulled into the hospital parking lot, Kristie reached over and took Trey’s hand into hers. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. “Dear God,” she whispered so faithfully, “Thank you for this day. Thank you for giving us your Son Jesus to save us from our sins. Please keep our baby boy safe tonight and every night. In your matchless name we pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” Trey repeated aloud. He felt tears welling in his eyes.

“Wow,” she said with a tender smile, “An ‘amen’ from the non-believer.”

Trey blinked back his tears and smiled back. “Eh, what can I say... a moment of utter and complete weakness.”

Kristie winked at him and smiled sweetly. “See? My prayers are working.”

Six hours later, Dr. Tommy handed the swaddled newborn to Kristie. She stared into her baby boy’s green eyes for a long time, then looked up at Trey. “Look Trey,” she said as happy tears filled her eyes, “He’s so beautiful, so perfect.”

Trey peeked at the swaddled bundle. “Oh my God! He really *is*.”

Kristie gazed at her baby and felt the purest love on the planet. “Hi baby Nate,” she whispered, “I may not know what life has in store for you, but I know God has a plan for you... and I know that it’s going to be great and you’re going to be great. Nate the Great. And you will always be loved.” Tears fell down her face now. “Oh, my sweet baby boy, she mused, “you will always be loved.”

And more tears welled in Trey’s eyes as he whispered thanks to God for the gift of his son, Nathaniel David Cooper... Nate the Great.

SEVEN

Back in the cab of his 16 year-old F-150, new tears welled in Trey's green eyes as he contemplated starting the truck and sending the stream of carbon monoxide into the bedroom of the shack. He stared down at the picture and into Nate's green eyes. That eye color was the only feature of Trey's that he saw in Nate. No matter the color, Nate's eyes had that same faraway, absent look as always-- the look that had worried them when Nate was just 8-months old.

Trey squeezed the tears beneath his eyelids and remembered the day the neurologist had told them the news...

"I'm afraid your concerns were warranted, Mr. and Mrs. Cooper. I have some bad news." The neurologist held up two scans and explained as he pointed. "This is the CT scan of a typical 8-month old brain and this here is your son's. These red blots on the left indicate a fairly significant loss in neural function. Whether it was from the septic shock or something else, we may never know."

"What's that mean for Nate?" Trey asked nervously as he studied the red blots.

“By and large, the left side controls language and analytical thinking. So he’s likely to have limited language skills and struggle with concepts.”

“What? Like conjugating verbs and understanding geometry?”

“Worse, I’m afraid-- probably a limited vocabulary and an inability to understand a lot of basic concepts.”

Kristie had been focused on the other side of the CT scan. “What about those blue blots on the right side?”

The neurologist nodded. “Those blue blots actually indicate higher neural activity. It’s a phenomenon we see in patients who suffer brain injuries. The brain compensates on the good side for a void on the bad side.” He paused. “The right side of the brain is considered the artistic side, so in that sense, Nate may be more sensitive, even more intuitive about feelings and emotions.”

As he listened, Trey put the pieces together and came up with the following composite: his son would not understand much, but would cry a lot and not be able to tell them why he was crying. And when he wasn’t crying, he might be able to sing songs or draw pictures... if he could remember the lyrics or figure out how to hold a crayon.

Trey felt sick to his stomach.

“Is there anything special we should do?” Kristie asked.

“Not really at this point,” the neurologist answered. “Just accept Nate as he is, know that he’ll have some limitations, and push his strengths. Time will tell. The human brain has a way of surprising us.”

“So does God,” Kristie added with a faithful nod. And as she whispered a prayer, Trey rolled his eyes. He was sure she was thinking this horrible diagnosis was a God-thing that would someday show God’s greatness.

He looked around the room for a barf bag.

Four-and-a-half years after that diagnosis, five year-old Nate was sitting on the linoleum floor in the kitchen of their Peachtree City home, captivated by the ants scurrying near the frame of the back door. He giggled in pure delight every so often, but mostly just watched quietly, in innocent contentment. In the background, Kristie stood at the stove, observing her son as she stirred macaroni and cheese.

Trey shuffled into the kitchen after another commission-less day and quickly sized-up the situation. “Is he doing it again?” His voice was chalked with disdain and frustration.

“Un-huh. He’s been sitting there for almost two hours.”

“Geez-a-wheeze. Did you ask Doctor Tommy about it?”

“Yep. He said as long as Nate’s not eating the ants to not worry.”

“It’s weird,” Trey said with a shake of his head as he studied the scene further. “Is it me, or are there more ants today than yesterday?”

“What’s weirder is there weren’t any ants until Nate came in here. They literally came out of the woodwork when he sat down here... like they were waiting for him and it was safe to come out... like their guardian was here.”

“The Ant Shepherd,” Trey proclaimed in utter and complete frustration. He let out a deep breath and slowly shook his head. From across the kitchen, he looked into Kristie’s eyes with desperation. “What are we gonna do, Kristie?”

“What? About Nate?”

“No, about *the ant problem.*” Trey rolled his eyes. “Of course about Nate. He can barely grunt, much less speak, he sits there and stares at ants for hours, he never--.”

She cut him off. “We’re going to love him.”

“I mean long-term. Are we gonna be taking care of him forever?”

“If he needs us to take care of him forever, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Jesus, why can’t we just have a normal kid? Is that really asking too much of *your great God?*”

She didn’t like Trey’s blasphemy, but she let it go. “Nate is Nate, Trey. He may be different from other kids, but he’s sweet and loving and he’s got a beautiful heart. I wish you could see that.”

“All I see is a kid lost in his own little world... down on the floor with the ants. I have no idea what he thinks... or who he is... or even *what* he is.”

“He’s our son. And if you would just look a little deeper, you’d see he’s got a beautiful soul, too.”

“Yeah, right, like I’m supposed to see his heart and soul.” Trey shook his head in frustration. “And I’m sure God has a plan for him, too. Right?”

As Trey stormed off, Kristie nodded softly and prayed. In her heart of hearts, she was sure God had a plan for Nate... and it would be great... *great like Nate.*

Back from the memories, Trey took a deep breath and the air in the 16 year-old truck cab filled his lungs. He hated that oxygenated air... and the old truck... and all those memories. Most of all, he hated that he hated. He was just tired of it all.

He sat for another minute and thought of Kristie’s words from 10 years ago-- “beautiful heart... beautiful soul,” he muttered. “Yeah, right, like I’m supposed to have X-ray eyes and see that... maybe I should drink some of that church Kool Aide, too... is that what gives you the X-ray eyes, Kristie?”

He felt himself getting agitated.

When they were younger, Trey had always loved Kristie’s upbeat optimism. In fact, it was one of the things that had attracted him to her. She

was the exact opposite of his dad, and when she gushed about God's great plans for their lives, he believed her. But, of course, he had dreams back then-- of being a PGA professional with lots of money and lots of kids. Now, those dreams were dead. There was no great God plan. And Kristie's hollow platitudes had become old and annoying.

He was getting more agitated.

"You know what, Kristie?" he mused out loud angrily in the cab of the truck, "maybe if you hadn't brought that drunk asshole back into my life, maybe someday I would have been able to see Nate's beautiful heart and soul."

Trey paused, but his anger was building. "Did you ever fucking think of that?" he yelled out.

He let out a few deep breaths as the words echoed in the early morning air.

Trying to calm himself now, he spoke out in a measured tone, "Yeah, okay Kristie, maybe I wasn't always the best husband or the best father, but you know what? I never did to you what you did to me. You sabotaged me... plain and simple. You knew how much I hated that motherfucker father of mine, yet you snuck around behind my back, even after I told you not to. Why? Because you prayed about it... because that's what Jesus would fucking do." He said that last bit in a mocking way.

Tears were falling from his eyes and he wiped at his face.

After a few seconds, he yelled out. "WWJD... right, Kristie? What Would Jesus Do? That's what your stupid little red bracelet says, right? That's how we're supposed to live our lives, right? Well fuck Jesus. What about me? You ever think about that? You ever think, 'What Would Jesus Fucking Do If He Were Trey?'" He paused as he tried to figure out that new acronym, then yelled out, "WWJFDI... ah, whatever..."

He paused and sucked in another lungful of air.

He calmed a bit, then spoke out philosophically, “That’s a very good question, Trey. What *would* Jesus do if his wife resurrected his drunk-ass motherfucking father to ruin the rest of his life?”

Trey was on a roll now. He answered himself, “I’ll tell you what Jesus would fucking do, Kristie, he’d do exactly what I’m gonna do... he’d kill himself... because he wouldn’t be able to take it anymore, either.”

Trey had worked himself up again.

“So fuck this, and fuck that, and fuck Jesus, and fuck that motherfucking drunk asshole,” Trey yelled out. “Oh, and fuck you, too, Kristie, for bringing that asshole back into my life.”

His heart was racing as he sucked air from the cab into his lungs.

Hmmm... maybe he wouldn’t need that carbon monoxide... a little bit more of this and he might explode right there and then.

In the midst of the meltdown, a funny thought crossed his mind: If he did explode it would be an interesting dilemma for the detectives to figure out. They’d see the hose attached to the tailpipe, the truck would be off, and there would be all these tiny fragments of Trey all over the inside of the cab, but no sign of any explosive material. Just fragments. They’d probably call in the Homeland Security boys for this one... maybe it’s a new type of weapon, some would say... maybe he was trying to develop a new terrorist device, others would suppose. Maybe he just exploded after his wife brought his drunken, homeless asshole dad back into his life. Everyone would probably laugh at that one. That’s ridiculous, the chief would say. And the feds would launch a multi-million dollar study...

Trey reopened his eyes. “Fuck it. I’m done,” he whispered. And he reached for the key and turned it in the ignition.

EIGHT

A short time before Trey was turning the key in the ignition to start the truck and the flow of deadly carbon monoxide, Kristie was tossing and turning restlessly in the lonely queen-sized bed in their modest 3 bedroom 2.5 bath ranch house in Peachtree City, just fifteen minutes away from Trey's shack in Tyrone. Six hours earlier she'd kissed Nate good-night, said prayers with him, and tucked him in, just like she did every night.

It had been one of the best days of 15 year-old Nate's life... and one of the worst nights. He missed his daddy and still couldn't understand why he wasn't home anymore. And she missed her husband. It would be the first birthday of Trey's in more than 20 years that she wouldn't be waking up next to him.

Of course, she couldn't help but blame herself, too. When she did what Jesus would have done, it never occurred to her what Trey would do in response. In hindsight, perhaps she should have asked herself this: 'what will Trey do if I do what Jesus would do?' If she had, perhaps she wouldn't have brought Jace back into their lives.

But she had felt that tug at her heart, and she was sure it was God leading her. She interpreted that tug to say, 'I want you to help Jace, Kristie.'

That is My will... and it's all part of My plan for you and Trey and Nate and Jace.' And in her heart, she knew she would have done the same thing.

She closed her eyes.

Oh dear God, I may not always know your ways, or your whys, but I trust in you and all your goodness. I know you brought Jace back into our lives for a reason. But tonight, Lord, please help Trey. I am really, really worried about him. Please keep him safe.

As she prayed, lightning flashed, thunder rolled, and a torrent of rain fell, as if heaven were crying for her.

And then, as she lay in that bed in the darkened room, she remembered how innocently it had begun...

It was Thanksgiving 2012, and their 18 year-old marriage was at a high point. The Great Recession of 2009 was behind them, Caterpillar sales were up, and Trey had become somewhat content with his place in life and had even grown somewhat accepting of Nate's challenges.

Trey was in the kitchen making one of his famous post-Thanksgiving dagwood sandwiches-- turkey and stuffing smothered in a concoction of cranberry sauce and gravy. The fact that the Falcons were playing in the late NFL game amplified Trey's festive mood.

From the back deck, a chorus of 'meows' echoed out loudly. Trey called out to the living room, "Hey Kristie, the cats are back."

She walked into the kitchen and peeked out the screen door. "Holy cow, there's even more than yesterday."

"You mean, *Holy cat*. Ba-dum," Trey said smiling, drumming in the air. "You better go get Nate. They won't stop meowing until he gives them his blessing."

Kristie walked out of the kitchen, down the hallway, and into Nate's room. It was like another world-- the walls were decorated from floor to

ceiling with ant posters and Nate's colorful paintings, and on the far side of the room a huge, clear ant farm took up the entire wall. It was about three feet tall and six feet long, and in front of it, Nate sat quietly and watched the ants intently. Kristie watched as he tapped the glass three times and moved his finger to a remote area. Like metal attracted to a magnet, three ants crawled through a sandy tunnel and followed Nate's finger.

Nate tapped the glass again, moved his finger on the glass around a sandy oval track at one end of the ant farm. The three ants scurried around the track, as if they'd been given the green flag to race by the starter.

The Ant Shepherd... indeed!

"Nate," Kristie called out, "Daddy wants you to go say 'hi' to the cats before we go to the soup kitchen."

Nate turned around quickly when he heard his mom's voice and his nearly shoulder-length brown hair flew across his face. He brushed it back and smiled at his mom. He always smiled... at her and at everyone and everything. Everything was so wondrous, and he loved it all.

"Nate do," he replied, punctuating his monosyllabic answer with a few quick enthusiastic nods.

She was so proud of Nate. He'd come so far in life. Those grunts at age five had become single syllable words now at age ten, and he could generally understand whatever was being said to him, and could communicate whatever he was thinking. One thing hadn't changed since age five: Nate still loved like nobody else.

Nate followed his mom into the kitchen.

Trey and Kristie watched from the window above the sink as Nate walked onto the deck. His presence made the cats meow louder and louder, and like sinners drawn to Jesus, they quickly gathered around him, almost fighting to be nearest to him, to be touched by him. They rubbed up against his legs and purred furiously.

Smiling gently, Nate knelt down and stroked each of them. Then he motioned for them to leave by pointing to the woods behind the house. One-

by-one they obeyed, walking away in a follow-the-leader line toward the woods behind the house.

“You ever wonder what it is about him?” Trey remarked to Kristie as the last of the cats disappeared into the woods.

“Of course I do. Everyday. Animals love him. Babies stop crying when he holds them. He’s like the horse whisperer, but for all living-things. It’s as if they can all sense his calm.”

“I guess.” Trey paused. “It’s just really weird, I think.”

Kristie shrugged. “Nate, sweetie,” she called out, “Come on, we’re going to the soup kitchen.”

With that wide-eyed wonder of his, Nate obeyed happily.

Smiling innocently, Nate stood next to Kristie on the serving line at the soup kitchen. She bent down and looked into his sparkling green eyes. Even though they had a faraway look, she had convinced herself it was ‘a God-thing.’

Of course.

God, she reasoned, wanted Nate to look beyond this world, to the next--to look at this world the way Jesus had. She just wished Trey could see Nate the way she did. Surely, if Trey saw what a beautiful heart Nate had, he wouldn’t always be wondering what Nate was thinking; instead, he’d be wondering what Nate was feeling in that heart of his... because that’s where the real action was in Nate’s world.

She bent down to get eye level with Nate and spoke slowly, “Okay, Nate, your job is to put one roll on each tray. Can you do that?” She held out a roll as she said it.

“Dad-e Trey,” Nate said.

Kristie smiled at him. “Yes, daddy’s name is Trey, but this”-- she held up one of the laminate serving trays-- “is also called a tray.”

He nodded, but by his squint, the concept clearly confused him.

“So, can you put one roll on each tray?”

Nate nodded rapidly, took the roll, and bit into it ferociously. “Nate like roll.”

Kristie chuckled as he chewed. “No, silly, don’t eat the roll. Put it on the tray.” She demonstrated.

As the line of homeless men began to slowly move down the serving line, Kristie scanned the hopeless faces and felt their pain. Her eyes soon stopped on a worn, but familiar face, and she felt the breath leave her body as her heart raced. Although his hair was long and grey now, and he had a scrubby beard, as she continued to stare, she was sure it was him. So, the rumors were true.

When he stood in front of her, he was still looking down, avoiding eye contact with her and anybody else.

She swallowed nervously and spoke out, “Happy Thanksgiving, Mr. Cooper.”

“Huh?” Jace looked up at her. He wasn’t sure who she was. “Oh... um...”

“It’s Kristie,” she informed him.

He looked into her eyes, still unsure.

“Trey’s wife,” she added.

He finally nodded. It had been almost two long decades since he’d seen Kristie... or Trey.

Kristie looked down at Nate. “Nate. Say ‘Hi.’ This is your grandfather.”

Nate smiled innocently at the old man in the dirty, torn clothes. Nate didn't see old, or dirty, or torn. He saw sad and unloved. He must not have known that Jesus loved him. Nate spoke, "Nate. Hi."

"Hi," the old man said softly, a brokenness to his voice.

When the serving was completed, Kristie carted dishes back to the kitchen. Left alone, Nate grabbed two rolls and eased down without a care in the chair next to Jace. He smiled innocently at his grandfather, even though he wasn't sure what a grandfather was, and held out a roll. "You roll?"

Still hungry, Jace took the offering. "Thanks."

"You sad."

"Nah, I'm fine," Jace replied.

"You sad. Nate see." Nate pointed at his eyes.

"No, really, I'm fine."

"Je-sus love you."

"No He doesn't."

"Yes He do."

"No He doesn't."

"Yes He do."

Jace stared deeply into Nate's green eyes and knew he was fighting a losing battle. "Okay, kid," he said begrudgingly, "you win. Jesus love me."

Nate smiled wide and nodded. "Good."

Kristie walked over and sat down with them. "Been a long time, huh?" she said, not knowing how else to break the ice.

Jace nodded slowly, not making eye contact with her. “Yep.” He paused as if also unsure what else to say. “Almost twenty years.” His voice had an embarrassment to it. He went back to eating the roll.

“Are you okay?” she asked genuinely. She’d heard rumors that he’d been fired from his pilot job and was homeless, and now she knew firsthand.

“Yeah, I guess. I got no one to blame but me.” He wasn’t liking the conversation. Yet he perpetuated it when he asked, “How’s Trey?”

She took a deep breath and her eyes searched. “He’s okay.” She was looking for the right words to explain what Jace undoubtedly must have known. “His life hasn’t turned out like he thought it would.”

Jace knew the feeling. He lived *that* feeling.

“And he struggles with Nate,” she added.

They both looked at Nate, who was holding his index finger in front of his face and slowly moving his head back and forth, as if lining up his finger with the corner of the room. He was playing a game-- parallels-- that his therapist had taught him. It helped keep his mind engaged.

“Is Nate, um, you know, okay?” Jace asked quietly. He tried to say it as nicely as he could.

“He has some mental challenges. But he makes up for it in other ways.”

“Un-huh,” Jace said with a nod. “There’s something about him.”

Kristie smiled gently. “Everybody says that. He has a big heart and a uniqueness about him, like he can sense things that nobody else can... and it makes him so peaceful... and calm.”

“Un-huh. That’s it... there’s something calming about him. What is he, about eleven?”

“He’ll be ten on Christmas Eve,” Kristie answered. “He’s pretty big for his age. And the long hair makes him look older. But he just hates to get it cut, so we let him wear it long. He says it makes him strong, like Samson.”

Jace couldn't help but think back to when Trey was ten and he had forced him to get crewcuts. That seemed like so long ago, another lifetime ago-- a lifetime Jace had ruined. "So what's Trey doing for work?"

"He's in sales for Caterpillar... not glamorous, but it pays the bills."

"Yeah, after what happened at Q-school, I figured he was done with golf."

That seemed like so long ago to her, too. "How 'bout you? Where are you living?"

His eyes actively avoided hers again. "I stay up the road with some friends..." He paused conspicuously before adding, "... under the overpass."

"I'm sorry. Really." The tears in her eyes were testimony that she really meant it.

"Like I said, it's my own fault."

"I can still be sorry," she said, wiping at her eyes.

"I know. I was such a jerk," he mused, his head filled with memories of another life and a stupid, arrogant monster of a man. "I really wish I could do it all over again... and get it right."

It was the first time she'd ever heard Jace sound human. "You can't live in the past."

"I guess."

"But you can change your future," she added.

He wasn't so sure about that.

He remembered that Kristie had been one of those 'Jesus freaks' he used to mock. Today, he was wishing he'd been one of them. Perhaps then, he wouldn't be homeless and constantly trying to deaden his pain with alcohol. Perhaps he could even love and be loved.

He took a deep breath and actually made deep eye contact with her. “Look, I’m sorry I was always mean to you. I was just trying to protect Trey... from distractions. Deep down I always thought you were a nice enough girl.”

She was surprised to hear an apology from him. He definitely wasn’t the same man she remembered from 30 years earlier. Back then she had thought of him as a monster. And he wasn’t different just because he was homeless, either. Now, he was broken... which made him human... *really human*. And right then and there, she felt deep sorrow for the man who used to beat the boy who would become her husband.

“Thank you,” she replied, “I always try.”

Jace stood abruptly. Clearly, the trip down memory lane wasn’t pleasant and he didn’t want any more of it. “Well, I best be going. No need to tell Trey about seeing me.” He smiled as warmly at Nate as he could. “Bye-bye Nate the Great.” He extended his hand to shake.

Nate laughed out excitedly. “Nate... great... you rhyme.” Nate grabbed his hand and shook it hard. “Nate Bye Bye.”

“Wow, he’s really warm,” Jace reacted as he released his hand.

“Un-huh,” Kristie responded. “He always is. The doctors say some people just run warmer, but I think it’s something else...”

Of course that ‘something else’ was a God-thing.

As Jace walked away, Nate smiled at his mom. “Nate great,” he said to her happily.

“You *are* great, Nate,” she agreed enthusiastically as she watched Jace slump out the soup kitchen door. Then, as he slowly disappeared into the great big cruel world, she took a deep breath and wondered if somehow this encounter was going to be part of God’s plan for them. Part of her hoped it wouldn’t be-- things were going better for them than ever and she didn’t want to see things upset. That was the easy answer. Deep within her heart and soul, however, she secretly hoped it would be. Maybe the hard answer

was needed... for Trey to find Jesus and understand forgiveness and grace and love... and to be completely free from his past.

She prayed about Jace that night and every night thereafter, and she and Nate made daily visits to help out at the soup kitchen. As if by destiny, or, yes, some great plan of God's, Nate and Jace became fast friends-- true friends. They'd sit together for hours, eating rolls, playing games like 'checkers' and 'eye spy', and coloring and drawing pictures. They seemed to understand each other and they developed an unexpected connection-- the mentally-challenged boy who just wanted to love like Jesus, and the weathered, broken old man who was sure that Jesus and love didn't exist.

On this particular Saturday afternoon, the two were drawing portraits of each other, and from across the room, Kristie watched Nate work. He was engrossed in his drawing, constantly looking up at Jace, then back down at the picture, drawing feverishly, looking back at Jace, then drawing on the picture, over and over as he added details to his drawing.

When they were done, Jace held up the simplistic picture he'd drawn of Nate. Nate's head was a simple circle with lines down the sides representing his long hair, flattened ovals for eyes, a simple hook for a nose, and a half circle toothless mouth, smiling of course. Jace's picture looked like a 10 year-old had drawn it, and even from afar, Nate's deep belly laugh reaction made Kristie laugh.

Then Nate held up the picture he'd drawn of Jace. It was Van Gogh-like-- raw and rich, with Jace's face drowning and dripping with a lifetime of regret, his dark eyes set back in the deepest pain and saddest sorrow imaginable.

Jace stared at it speechlessly for a while and felt even deeper pain. Before long, tears filled his eyes.

Having watched all this curiously, Kristie finally walked over. "You okay, Jace?"

Jace nodded slowly, wiped his tears, and motioned towards the picture.

As she took in the drawing, Kristie, the former art teacher, felt the air being sucked from her chest. It wasn't just a two-dimensional portrait of Jace, it was four dimensional snapshot of his sad, broken life, as if Nate had somehow crawled into Jace's heart and soul, collected every spec of pain and sorrow and regret, and brought it to life on the paper. Every line on his face was drawn with a purpose, as if carved by regret; and his deep-set, lost, dark eyes were searching, as if looking for good answers that just didn't exist.

As Kristie stared into Jace's eyes on the paper, she saw a broken heart and sad lonely soul. The portrait told a story with more truth and less filters than even Jace's real-life face there before her, and she couldn't help but continue to stare at it. Indeed, it could have easily hung in the Louvre and held its own.

Chilled with goosebumps, she gathered her thoughts. How was this possible? How could Nate-- a 10 year-old who barely knew how to speak-- know all that pain and sorrow that 70 year-old Jace felt so deep within? And how could the boy who spoke in monosyllables tell that story so powerfully, so eloquently, on a two-dimensional piece of paper with just a pencil?

She felt tears in her own eyes. It was a God-thing, she knew. There could be no other explanation. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Dear Jesus, please help me. I feel You, right here, right now. I really do. What am I supposed to do? Please guide Me, Lord. Please. I trust You. Amen.

Her prayer was still in her mind when she felt her soul stir, and a tug at her heart seemed to push her toward Nate and Jace. It almost took her breath away. She took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and made sense of it all. It was the hard answer, she knew, and deep down, right then and there, she knew what she had to do-- she would do what Jesus would do. And she knew she would have to tell Trey, too. Unfortunately, there wasn't any prayer that could help with the reaction he'd surely have.

NINE

Six hours after that heartfelt tug which took her breath away, Kristie was sitting in her favorite chair in the living room, wondering how to tell Trey about her encounters with the man who was at the root of all of the pain and anger and disappointment in his life. She looked over at Trey, who was on the living room floor playing with Nate's remote-controlled car, seeing how fast he could make it zoom around the Christmas presents under the tree. In the background, 'Oh Holy Night' played triumphantly.

Kristie spoke out softly, trying to hide her nervousness, "I see you bought another present for Nate, that's really for you."

Trey shrugged. "What can I say? Toys are just so much better these days. The only presents I ever got were golf shoes, golf balls, golf gloves, golf blah blah blah."

Still nervous, she decided to broach the taboo subject. "Speaking of presents, do you ever wonder what happened to your dad?"

Her transition didn't sound natural to him. Plus, she knew to never speak of Jace... or anything else about his childhood. Trey eyed her hard but decided to keep things light. "Whoa. Where'd that come from? I don't know about you, but I got my presents from Santa. You know, fat man in the red suit with the flying reindeer and the sled... brings toys to all the good boys

and girls. Brings me those ‘Kristie coupons’ now.” He feigned a smile and winked.

Kristie rolled her eyes. “Come on, Trey. Don’t you ever wonder what happened to him?”

“Nope.” The rumors that the old man was homeless were good enough for Trey. But something was up, he knew. He locked eyes with her. There was no dancing around this one. “Oh geez, please, no,” he said with resignation, “I know that look. What happened?”

She hesitated. “I saw him.”

Trey didn’t like the sound of that. “I hope you’re talking about Santa.”

She shook her head sideways. “Your dad.”

“Oh God, no.” He paused and took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll bite... where?”

“At the soup kitchen.”

He nodded as he made sense of her answer. “Huh,” he grunted, “imagine that-- drunk crazy dude ends up at soup kitchen, homeless no doubt. Mystery solved, detective. Great work. Come see me Monday morning about that promotion.”

He stood and began pacing. He locked eyes with her again. She had those Christian eyes going--sad and pleading and all gooey with sugary love for one’s fellow man. He felt his stomach churn, like he was going to throw up.

Jesus. No. Not this...

“Alright,” he finally added, “let me guess-- God, or Jesus, or some cloud in the sky that looked like Saint F-Trey-Up-The-Giggly told you to help that drunk.”

She was actually proud of Trey’s restraint. At least he hadn’t thrown out the full f-bomb... and ‘giggly’ was a nice way of saying ‘ass’, too.

“Yeah, sort of.”

He stood up now, clearly serious. “Absolutely not, Kristie,” he said firmly, his eyes ablaze. “As your bible says, he’s reaping what he sowed. Have you forgotten everything he did to me?”

She stood up, now face-to-face with him in front of the Christmas tree. “Of course I haven’t forgotten. I guess I was just hoping that if you could forgive him, you might be able to let go of your anger and move on.”

Trey shook his head adamantly. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to make him feel better by forgiving him. He deserves to rot-- here on earth and then in hell. That’s God’s great plan for him.”

Trey had missed her point-- she wanted Trey to forgive Jace for Trey’s sake more than anything. She knew that forgiveness frees the forgiver more than anything. She countered, “He’s different now, Trey-- almost meek. You wouldn’t believe he’s the same person if you saw him.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Trey’s blood was approaching the boiling point, but he told himself to try and stay calm. He was doing everything in his power to not yell and curse.

Quickly, he searched for a way out. That’s when he decided to use her great and powerful Oz-- er, God-- against her. “Let me pray about it,” he said, using the same measured words he’d heard her say so many times.

He closed his eyes dramatically and slowly moved his lips as if whispering a prayer to the great powers above. After a few seconds he reopened his eyes and locked onto hers. “Look, I’ll tell you what,” he said in another measured tone, “if God appears in a burning bush and tells me to make peace with that crazy drunk, then I’ll do it-- no questions asked. But it has to be God, not some surrogate angel. And it has to be an azalea bush... and a white one at that.” There was no slack in his tone. He was proud of himself-- not only had he not cursed or yelled, he’d actually turned the God-thing around on her.

His words were still echoing when they heard Nate coming from the hallway. Trey hid the remote control car behind his back and they watched

Nate, dressed as a shepherd and holding a shepherd's crook, walk into the living room. Without saying a word, Nate walked passed them and stopped about a foot away from the Christmas tree. He stared directly at the shimmering ornaments and lights, as if searching for baby Jesus in all those twinkles.

“Oh baby,” Kristie gushed, “turn around. You look so beautiful.” She wanted to change the subject away from Jace. “Look at him, Trey, doesn't he make a perfect shepherd?”

Trey was still upset at the news of Jace. He had a bad feeling about things. “He should,” Trey barked, “he attracts animals like you attract broken souls.”

She let the dig go, like she let a lot of things go. “I wish you'd come to church and watch the play.”

“You're videotaping it, right?” he growled.

“Un-huh. But it's not the same as seeing it live. I bet Nate would like you to see him.”

“Really? Did his cat posse tell you that? Or did the herd of ants?” Trey was in a nasty mood now and Kristie was almost regretting having told him about Jace. But, she knew God's plans didn't always involve the smoothest paths of least resistance.

She responded, “You should see him on stage. He's so cute... and the other kids love him so much.”

“Great. Maybe they can take care of him when he's 30.”

She rolled her eyes and took Nate's hand, “Come on, Nate, time for church. We need to pray extra hard for daddy.”

Oblivious to all the drama that had just transpired, Nate smiled and nodded, “Nate love church.”

Once Kristie and Nate left, Trey grabbed a beer, put in a DVD, and settled onto the couch. A golf announcer's voice streamed from the television, "And the story of this first day of PGA Q-school qualifying is Trey Cooper, the All American from UGA. Unfortunately, this is not a happy story. After opening with a 12-- yes a 12-- on the first hole, he carded a whopping 99. It's obvious he's got some demons in his head."

From the couch, Trey emitted a scary demonic laugh. "Hah. You got that right, Johnny Miller. I definitely got a demon... and Kristie better not even think about bringing him back into my life..."

He continued to watch, almost masochistically. Two beers later, Trey's phone buzzed with a text: 'I luv u. Please come to church. I have special Kristie coupon for 2nite if u do.'

So much for the God card. He'd been trumped-- she was playing the sex card now. "Oh, Jesus Christ," Trey muttered. Talk about unfair. Begrudgingly, he grabbed his coat and left the house.

Ten minutes later Trey was in the back of the church, scanning the crowd to find Kristie. When he finally found her, he sat down, leaned into her, and whispered, "I know it's been a while since I've been to the House of the Almighty, but when did God start approving of women sending sexually suggestive texts in His house?"

Kristie smiled softly and winked, "He knew that would get you here." She loved that she could manage Trey so well. It took a lot of energy, but God's greatest plans were like that, she knew.

She pointed at the right side of the stage, where Nate was standing. "Look. Isn't he cute?"

Trey nodded, but was actually wondering how much longer the play would last. He was thinking of the post-play sex.

A bit later, near the end of the play, the narrator solemnly declared, "And the angel of the Lord appeared and said, 'Do not be afraid, I bring you great tidings of joy, for unto us a Savior is born, and it is Christ the Lord'."

The play ended with a torrent of applause as Nate and the other shepherds were herded off stage. As he walked off, Nate's eyes locked onto the lonely narrator's microphone in the middle of the stage. He detoured towards it, while off stage, the director motioned frantically for Nate to come to her.

But Nate had his own plan. Or maybe it was God's plan... or a God-thing.

Now at the microphone, Nate looked out at the big crowd, cleared his throat, and took a deep breath. Unsure what was happening, and knowing this was not part of the play, Kristie and Trey froze as the director scurried towards Nate. But before she could reach him, Nate was singing out.

"Oh Ho-wy Night!" Nate sang out tenderly. "Da stars are bwight-ly shi-ning. It is da night of da dear Sav-or's birt."

His precious innocence and sweet voice stopped the play director in her tracks and a solemn tranquility filled the church. All eyes were on Nate and everyone had the same thought: this special needs 10 year-old boy with the long hair was so beautiful, so genuine, singing what he felt so deeply in his heart and soul.

"Long lay da world, in sin and hmmm- mmmor-hmmm-mming. 'Til He ah-heered and da soul felt it wert."

It was a beautiful moment and tears streamed down Kristie's cheeks. Even Trey was choking up. It didn't matter that Nate didn't know all the words. What mattered was that he felt the meaning and the spirit of the song, and his voice was truly angelic. It was a Charlie Brown Christmas moment, only real and more meaningful.

Not knowing the next set of words, Nate had backed away from the microphone and had stopped signing. But the congregation picked up where he'd left off, and soon the entire church was singing in sweet, heartfelt harmony.

A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new glorious morn

Fall on your knees
O hear the angels' voices
O night divine
O night when Christ was born
O night divine o night
O night divine.

As the song was ending, Kristie and Trey made their way onto the stage and hugged Nate as the congregation stood for a tear-filled ovation.

Kristie bent down and looked deeply into Nate's eyes, "I didn't know you could sing like that."

"Nate love sing," he said proudly. "Nate sing in head lots." He poked an index finger at his head repeatedly.

Trey looked at Kristie curiously. "Did you know he was going to do that?"

She wiped her eyes. "No. His speech therapist said they were singing to help him form words. But I didn't know he could sing like that."

Still smiling proudly, Nate looked up at Trey. "Nate good?"

Trey smiled back. "You were great, Nate. Great. Nate the great."

Nate laughed. "Nate... great... dat rhyme."

"Aren't you glad you came now?" Kristie asked.

"That was beautiful." Trey fought back the tears in his eyes.

"See what happens when you go to church?" she said happily. Indeed, the uproar about Jace seemed like a distant memory.

"Un-huh. Plus, don't forget, I get a special Kristie coupon, too."

She nodded and smiled at him, knowing that things were going to be okay. She just needed to manage Trey.

Two weeks later, on Christmas Eve, Jace was eating at the soup kitchen when Kristie and Nate sat down next to him. Even though Trey told her to stay away from Jace, she was fixated on doing what Jesus would do... what her heart implored her to do.

“Merry Christmas, Jace,” Kristie said with a big smile. She had a surprise and couldn’t wait to share it with him.

Jace smiled back at her and especially at Nate. He always felt better when Nate was around. “Merry Christmas. Hi Nate. Happy Birthday.”

Nate held out his arms. He was holding a present. “Nate gift you.”

Jace unwrapped the present to find a picture Nate had undoubtedly painted-- it was a fantastic display of dotted colors and swirls, and from up close it was hard to make out the scene. But as Jace held the painting out, further from his eyes, he could see the genius in it. All those small white dots and swirls in the middle made up a big white farm house. There was even an inviting front porch. He noticed some tiny letters on a little sign on the front porch. It read, ‘Jace Place.’

“Dat you house,” Nate said.

The old man swallowed hard. He wished. His house was a blue tarp held up by a rope. “It’s beautiful, Nate,” he replied.

“And I have a present for you, too,” Kristie said.

“Oh, you don’t have to, Kristie. You and Nate already do so much for me now.”

“It was Nate’s idea,” she said. “It’s what he wanted for *his* birthday.” She swallowed hard and fought back tears, awed that her mentally-challenged son knew more about giving than just about anyone else on God’s great earth.

She continued, “Last week he asked me if he could go to your house to see you. When I told him you didn’t have a house, he said we needed to

help you get one.” She collected herself and then made known the surprise. “We want to help you get off the streets. Would you like that?”

“Really?” The old man swallowed hard.

Kristie nodded as a tear fell down her cheek. “Our church has a small apartment and I talked with our pastor-- you can live there if you want. It would only be temporary.”

“Is Trey okay with you helping me?”

She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “Not really. But that’s my problem. Believe me, I’m torn over this. But I’ve prayed over it every day for the past month-- ever since we found you on Thanksgiving-- and it’s what I want to do... what I need to do.” She eyed him hard. “There’s one condition though: there can be absolutely no alcohol.”

“I know, Kristie. I want to stop. I really do.”

“You’d also have to meet with our pastor daily. Would you do that?”

“I’ll try anything, Kristie... really. I know I need help. I know I can’t do it alone.”

An hour later, Kristie pulled her Honda CRV onto the shoulder near a highway overpass south of the Atlanta airport. Beyond the overpass, the area was dotted with makeshift tents and tarps, with groups of homeless men keeping warm around 50-gallon drums emitting wisps of black smoke. It made Kristie nervous, but after a few minutes, Jace emerged from behind the concrete pillars. He was pushing a rusted shopping cart filled with plastic bags. Surprisingly, he lugged a set of golf clubs over his shoulder.

“Golf clubs?” she asked as he piled his things into the back of the SUV.

He smiled at her. “I could never part with them. Guess I was always hoping I’d play one day again.”

As she drove Jace to the church apartment she hoped she was doing the right thing. She whispered a prayer. And when her eyes found the red bracelet on her left wrist with the 'WWJD' letters, she knew she was.

But the bigger question was: 'WWTD'-- 'what would Trey do'-- if he found out she was helping Jace.

TEN

The apartment was just a single room above the church office with a mini-fridge and microwave, a single bed, and a curtained-off area with a sink, toilet, and small shower.

“I stocked the cupboard,” Kristie said, as she and Nate showed Jace the space. “And I can bring meals for you once in a while.” She motioned toward a pile of neatly folded clothes on a table next to the bed. “And there’s some clean clothes for you. I hope they fit.”

Tears welled in Jace’s eyes as he stared at the bed and the ceiling above it. It had been three years since he’d slept in a bed with a real roof over his head. And the thought of a shower and clean clothes nearly sent those tears down his face. “Thank you, Kristie. You really are an angel.”

“Thank you.” She looked at Nate. “Come on, Nate, we should let PaPa get settled.”

Jace looked at her surprised. “PaPa?”

Kristie explained, “Nate didn’t know what to call you. I hope you don’t mind. It’s what I called my grandpa.”

“No. It’s fine. I kinda like it.” He couldn’t hold back the tears any longer and they fell down his cheeks.

Nate spoke, “Nate stay Pa-Pa?”

Wiping his eyes, Jace looked at Kristie hopefully. He loved being with Nate. His peaceful innocence and perpetual smile made everything better. Indeed, Nate made the world seem like such a nice place, where there was love. “Okay by me, if it’s okay with you,” Jace said softly.

Kristie hesitated. “I guess that’d be okay. I’ll pick up some last minute stocking stuffers and be back in an hour. Okay?”

“Great.”

Jace held up the painting that Nate had given him. “Okay, Nate, the first thing we need to do is find a place for this painting you made for me. Where should we put it?”

Nate pointed to the wall above the bed. “Pa-Pa see dare. Pa-Pa dream ‘bout house like Nate do.”

An hour later, Kristie picked up Nate. “Did you have fun with PaPa?”

Nate nodded excitedly. “Nate putt.”

She became immediately worried. “You putted?”

Nate nodded again. “Hit ball stick. So fun. Nate great.”

She took a deep breath. Keeping the secret about Jace from Trey could be harder than she expected. “Remember what we talked about,” she said, “you can never mention PaPa to daddy, okay?”

Nate smiled and shook his head sideways. “Nate no say Pa-Pa dad-e.”

“Good boy, Nate. Okay, let’s go home and have that ice cream cake you wanted for your birthday.”

“Awe-some. Danks mom.”

Two weeks later, Nate was with Jace in the one-room apartment.

“I got you a birthday present,” Jace said, holding a long present wrapped crudely in newspaper. “Better late than never, right?”

Nate didn’t understand what that meant. He took the gift. “Danks.” Wide-eyed, he unwrapped it and held an old putter.

“It was your dad’s when he was a kid. I want you to have it.”

As Nate cradled the putter, the old man put a golf ball down and motioned for Nate to try out the flat stick. Nate made a smooth stroke with the putter and the ball rolled ten feet across the threadbare carpet straight into a clear glass on its side.

Nate’s face lit up. “Nate love dis. Danks Pa-Pa.”

Nate continued to make putt after putt with Jace sitting on the floor by the glass, returning the ball. Strangely, Nate never missed.

A month later, Kristie, Nate, and Jace were sitting next to each other in church on Sunday morning, listening to the pastor.

“We all go through times when we think God is absent. Take comfort in knowing that God is always there and has a grander plan than you or I could ever imagine. Take the story of Lazarus. As he lay dying, his family prayed that Jesus would come and heal him. Of course, as we know, Jesus did not come, and Lazarus soon died and was embalmed and entombed. Naturally, Lazarus’s family wondered why Jesus did not answer their prayers, why he allowed this to happen. And they were understandably angry at Jesus.”

The pastor paused to let the congregation chew on that. It was man's nature to be angry with God when prayers were not answered. But that anger was often short-sighted. For God works on terms that no man can truly comprehend... until afterwards. And God's plans are often grander than man can ever imagine.

The pastor continued, "But as we would learn, Jesus had a much grander plan than healing Lazarus from sickness. Jesus' plan was resurrection, not healing. But, of course, it took Lazarus dying for that grander plan to be made known. And so, when bad things happen, do not think that God is not there, does not care, or does not love you. *God is doing what God needs to do, on His schedule.* Know that God has a grander plan than you or I can ever conceive. Trust in God and follow Him, and you will never be lost."

As the sermon ended, the band began to play 'I Will Follow' and the congregation rose. The band and congregation sang,

All your ways are good,
All your ways are sure,
I will trust in you alone.

Higher than my side,
High above my life,
I will trust in you alone.

Where you go, I'll go,
Where you stay, I'll stay,
When you move, I'll move,
I will follow you.

Who you love, I'll love,
How you serve I'll serve,
If this life I lose,
I will follow you,
I will follow you.

Jace looked around at the worshipers-- many with their arms raised up to the heavens. He felt a tingle as his heart stirred in his chest. Then he could have sworn he heard something. A whisper filled his heart, "You were made

for something more, Jace. Surrender to me and I will fill your heart with love. I know the plans I have for you.”

It was the voice he'd heard for years and years, and though he'd spent years and years ignoring that voice and pushing away his feelings, or drowning them out with alcohol, the voice and the stirring never went away. God's love was truly relentless.

Jace gulped for a deep breath as tears filled his eyes. Perhaps, he thought, it was time to stop fighting the feelings...

When the song ended, he turned to Kristie and whispered, “I never thought I'd say it, but I love coming to this church. It just feels right.” He swallowed hard. “Someday I hope I can raise my arms to heaven and sing out.”

Kristie smiled at him. “I hope so too, Jace.” And she was so happy, certain she was doing the right thing. Trey would think so, someday, too, she knew. But for now, she didn't like sneaking around behind her husband's back waiting on God's great plan. But, she really didn't have a choice. Sometimes, God's work was like that.

And so, she continued to sneak.

Two weeks later, Kristie was sitting in her car in the parking lot of the Flat Creek Country Club. Jace, looking spiffy with a fresh haircut and shave, smiled wide as he walked out of the golf cart barn toward her. He was dressed in khakis and one of Trey's old polo shirts.

She called out, “How'd it go?”

“Great. I start tomorrow. I'm gonna be picking up balls in that buggy over there.” He pointed toward the driving range at the contraption that picked up golf balls. As he waited for her response, he remembered back to the day when Trey was 11, when Jace had cursed the driving range worker on this very driving range. Now, 30 years later, Jace was wishing he could find that driving range worker and apologize to him. That's when Jace knew something was really different inside of him.

“That’s great,” Kristie responded.

“Yeah, I guess if I could fly a 737, I can drive that thing.” He started to choke up. “Thanks for helping me, Kristie. You really are an angel on earth.”

“I’m proud of you,” she said.

Jace fought back tears. “You know, 20 years ago if someone had told me I’d be living in a one-room church apartment, picking up golf balls for a living, and that I’d be happier than ever, I’d have said they were crazy. But here I am, and it’s true. I feel so blessed right now... so peaceful. And I owe it all to you... and Nate.”

“It’s not me, Jace... or Nate. It’s Jesus. We found you and you found Him. That’s the peace you feel.” Kristie was bursting with happiness-- God’s great plan was working.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t see the storm that was brewing. And she would never be able to fathom how even that was part of God’s great plan.

ELEVEN

Pirate's Cove Putt Putt was overflowing as it hosted three birthday parties at once, and swarms of kids ran around the grounds, happily screaming as they chased colorful little golf balls. At one of the parties, Luca's dad Donny was frantic as he looked around. "Where's Ben and Jack and Declan?" he cried out. Frustrated, he glared at his wife Kelly. "I told you having a birthday party here was a stupid idea."

Kelly pointed in the direction of a pirate ship. "I see them. They're playing on the jungle gym by the pirate ship."

"Okay," Donny said. "Look, we need to divide and conquer. I'll take Luca and Nate, and you keep track of the other three, okay?"

Kelly nodded.

"Come on, boys," Donny said, shaking his stressed-out head, "Let's go putt."

They walked to the first hole and Donny demonstrated the art of putting to Luca and Nate. "Okay boys, watch how I do this. You hold the putter like this and take it back nice and slow and then straight through the ball. See?"

As Donny retrieved his ball, birthday-boy Luca set his ball down, took a mighty swing, and whacked it by his dad, ten yards past the hole and into the bushes. Luca ran after it laughing and swishing his putter around like a pirate sword.

Back at the tee, Donny took a deep breath and looked at Nate. Although Nate seemed to be in his own world most of the time, with that faraway look, Donny liked Nate. He was always smiling and so much calmer than Luca's other hyped-up friends. Still, when it came to putt putt, his expectations were low for the 10-year old boy with the learning disabilities.

“Do you want to try, Nate?”

Nate nodded enthusiastically. “Nate putt.”

Donny watched as Nate set his ball down carefully and stared intently at the hole. He held up his index finger and slowly moved his head back and forth, as if lining up the track of his ball. Then he made a smooth, effortless stroke. The ball went right in.

Donny laughed out, “Wow! A hole-in-one. Great job, Nate.”

“Nate love putt.”

While Luca continued to search for his ball in the bushes, Donny and Nate moved on to the next hole.

Donny looked down the long green carpet toward the hole. “Okay, on this one,” he said to Nate, “you want to hit it off this left side”-- he pointed to the left rail-- “and the ball will go toward the hole.”

Nate studied the hole, did that finger-eye thing of his, and lined up toward the right side.

“Hold on, Nate,” Donny said. “Aim here.” He pointed to the left rail again.

Nate shook his head. “No make dat way.”

Nate realigned toward the right side and putted the ball off the right rail, over a slight hump, and into the hole. Nate ran after his ball and retrieved it from the hole.

Back at the tee, Donny re-examined the hole and realized the putt would never have gone in off the left rail. “Hmmm,” he mused, “I didn’t see that little hump.”

Nate smiled at him. “Nate see.”

On the 18th hole, Nate hit his ball across the narrow pirate ship gangplank, through a cannon opening, around a squawking parrot, and into the hole. A cannon blast sounded and a flag rose up the pirate ship mast, signifying a hole-in-one. Nate had won a stuffed pirate.

As Donny handed Nate the prize, he asked, “Who taught you to putt like that?”

“Pa--.” Nate hesitated, and didn’t finish answering. He remembered his mom’s words to never tell anyone about Pa-Pa.

Trey was mowing the front yard when Donny dropped off Nate after the party. Nate jumped out of the car clutching his stuffed pirate. Excited to show his mom his prize, he ran right by Trey into the house.

Trey smiled at his neighbor. “Hey man, how was it?”

“Truthfully? Like herding cats.”

“Hah. In that case, Nate would have been helpful.” Trey chuckled to himself. “I told Kristie you’all were crazy taking five kids to mini golf. Was Nate okay?”

“Okay? He was awesome. He’s a natural with a putter in his hands, too-- made 12 hole in ones.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No. Seriously. Most of the others lipped out. He said you taught him how to putt.”

“Now I know you’re messing with me.”

“He said his Pa taught him. That’s what he calls you, right?”

Trey hesitated, then nodded. His mind kicked into gear. “Well, I’m just glad he wasn’t any trouble.”

“No trouble at all. He’s really chill.”

Nate was sitting with Kristie at the table in the kitchen eating a bowl of Lucky Charms when Trey walked in. The pirate was on the table watching Nate eat.

“That was weird,” Trey mused as he walked to the fridge and retrieved a post-mowing beer.

“What?”

“Luca’s dad said Nate made 12 hole in ones.”

Kristie felt anxious at once. “Really?”

“Yeah. And supposedly his Pa taught him how to putt.” Trey paused conspicuously and eyed Kristie hard. “Since he never calls me Pa, I’m wonder who this Pa person is?”

The silence was uncomfortable.

Trey continued to probe. “Is there something you want to tell me, Kristie?”

She looked past him. “No.”

“Then I’ll ask Nate.” Trey stared at Nate. “Hey Nate, who --”

Kristie cut him off. “Okay, already. It’s your dad. I’ve been helping him. He taught Nate how to putt.”

“Jesus, Kristie,” Trey fumed quickly. “I knew it. I knew you were sneaking around behind my back, up to something. All those extra trips out... all that silence when I knew you were thinking about this. Why are you doing this? Why are you helping the man who ruined my life?”

“I felt sorry for him. Okay? I prayed over it and did what I had to do... I did what Jesus would do.”

Trey was getting hot. “I guess what I want you to do doesn’t matter, does it? You just sneak around and do what you want... all because of God or Jesus or whatever else is convenient for you. That’s just plain wrong. Whatever happened to honor your husband?”

She decided to stand up for love, for doing what Jesus would have done. “It’s trumped by love thy neighbor.” She let out a deep held breath. “I just wanted to help him. That’s all. He’s a person, too.”

“He’s an evil person. And I told you ‘no.’ And when I say no, I mean no.” He began to yell, “I don’t want you to help him, you got it?” I don’t think even Jesus would love that man.”

“You wouldn’t know what Jesus would do because you don’t know Jesus,” she shot back. “And I don’t have to answer to you.” She was angry now. “If I want to help someone, I will. You got that?” It was one of the few times she’d ever yelled back at Trey.

Nate was looking up from his cereal now, visibly shaking from the yelling. His mom never yelled or raised her voice. He rushed to Kristie, melted into her, and began to cry.

“It’s okay, Nate. It’s okay,” she whispered as she rubbed his back and caught her breath.

“No fight,” Nate pleaded, his eyes tightly shut as he hugged his mom.

Trey spoke, “Listen to me, Nate. That man you call Pa is a bad man... a very bad man.”

Nate shook his head violently against Kristie's bosom. "No. Pa-Pa good. Pa-Pa nice. Nate love Pa-Pa."

Trey became enraged. "No more PaPa. Ever." He glared at Kristie. "You tell him. You did this."

She decided to continue to take a stand. "Just because you have a problem with your dad doesn't mean Nate has to. They do lots of things together. Maybe if you spent some time with Nate, you'd understand."

And that's when Trey stormed out.

Two hours later, Kristie and Nate were standing on the driving range at Flat Creek watching Jace pick up range balls in the caged contraption. Nate watched curiously at the line of golfers hitting balls. They seemed to be aiming at Pa-Pa. Why? Why would anyone want to hit Pa-Pa?

As they waited for PaPa to drive in, Nate began to imitate the golfers' swings with an imaginary club.

Jace drove back to the tee. Once safely out of the line of fire, Jace got out of the caged contraption and walked over to Kristie and Nate. He noted the worry on Kristie's face immediately.

"You okay?"

"Not really. Trey found out I've been helping you."

"What happened?"

"He got mad and took off."

The old man's heart fell. "Oh geez, I'm sorry, Kristie. Look, I deserve it, you don't."

"He thinks I betrayed him."

Jace shrugged. "I get that." He paused as he thought of potential solutions. He'd already ruined his son's life once. He didn't want to ruin it again. "Look, I don't want Trey to be mad at you. I can just disappear if you think that will help."

Kristie shook her head. "No. That's not a solution. Plus, it would break Nate's heart." God hadn't brought them to this point for Jace to just disappear now, she reasoned. *That* couldn't be God's plan.

The old man took a deep breath. "Deep down I'm glad you said that. In my heart of hearts, I feel like I'm supposed to be with Nate... like there's some great plan for the two of us..."

She smiled at Jace. "I wish Trey could feel that."

"So what are you gonna do?" Jace asked.

"Right now, I'm going to go find him. He won't answer his phone, but I have a pretty good idea where he is." She winked at Jace.

Jace looked over at Nate. "I'm done for the day. If Nate wants to stay with me, I can show him around."

"I was hoping you might say that."

"Done."

Jace watched as Nate continued to watch the other golfers and make imaginary swings. "Would you mind if I let him hit some balls?"

"I think he'd like that." She hesitated. "Just go easy with him, okay?"

"I would never do anything to hurt Nate." The old man paused and felt emotions welling from deep within. Quickly, tears that he'd held in for way too long made their way into his eyes. "I love Nate," he said, unleashing those tears down his cheeks now. It was the first time in more than 20 years that he'd felt deep love, much less voiced it. It felt so good.

Kristie smiled at Jace. Seeing his tears and the love deep within his heart reaffirmed what she was doing. She was sure she could manage Trey

until it all worked out the way God intended. As she walked away, she turned to see Jace showing Nate how to grip a golf club and swing.

She knew Trey was at Taco Mac, and found him slumped at the bar with a beer and empty shot glass in front of him. Kristie snuck up behind him.

“Hey there good looking,” she said in a disguised voice, “you wanna buy a pretty lady a drink?”

Trey didn’t bother to look up or even turn toward her. “Can’t. I’m married.” He held up his left hand to reveal the gold band.

“Then do you wanna buy your wife a drink?” she said in her own voice, a little flirty.

Trey turned to look at her. His eyes said he was drunk, very drunk.

“Too robotic?” Kristie asked coyly.

“What’re you doin’ here?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“I’m gettin’ drunk.”

“And that’s gonna solve your problems?”

“Temporarily.” He stared at her, trying to understand her. “After all he did to me, why do you have to help him.”

“Well, I didn’t do it to hurt you.”

“Well, you did. A lot.”

“Can I make it up to you?” she said sexily.

“Oh, geez, why do you always have to go there? You think that fixes everything?”

She smiled like a wife who knew the secret to keeping her psychotic husband from jumping off ledges. “Actually,” she chuckled, “with you, it works pretty well.”

She gathered her thoughts. “Listen, Trey, I just want you to be happy. You must know that. We’ve been together since high school, and we’ve been through a lot. We’re supposed to be together. I just know that.” She touched her heart.

“I know, I know,” he conceded. “I just thought that drunk crazy dude was out of my life forever. *That* was supposed to be God’s plan you always talk about.”

“Come on home, baby. Please.”

Under his breath he cursed God and His great plan. “Okay,” he said aloud, then paid the bill, and they left.

The sex calmed Trey and afterwards he and Kristie cuddled in bed and talked. “I’m sorry, baby. I know you weren’t trying to hurt me,” he acknowledged.

She always marveled at how quickly sex could calm Trey, and she felt like a wonder drug. “People change, Trey. I know he’s sorry for what he did.”

“I guess. Maybe. I just have trouble thinking of him as anything but a supreme drunken asshole who bullied me and hurt me all my life... he broke me.”

“I know, I know,” she agreed. “Look, I know you don’t want Nate to see him, but I wish you’d at least think about it. He’s changed so much. He really has. I think he’s good for Nate.”

“I don’t know about that. But I know you’re a great mom.” He paused as he considered what he was thinking of saying next. He couldn’t believe the words were going to come from his mouth. “As long as I don’t have to see him or hear about him, I guess that’s okay.” He thought about what he’d just said. “Geez, I never thought I’d ever say that.”

She felt like God’s plan had taken a major step forward. “You ready to go again?” She winked.

“I think I’m just gonna roll over and rest a bit, if that’s okay.” And within minutes he was snoring.

Kristie dressed, kissed him on the cheek, and left. While she was thankful God had given her the capability to get him off the ledge with her body, a small part of her felt cheap and dirty. But when she reminded herself it was all part of God’s plan, it felt okay again.

Truly, God’s work was not always easy.

The sun was just setting when Kristie walked up to the driving range to pick up Nate. The range had cleared out except for Jace and Nate, and when he saw his mom, Nate became super excited.

“Nate hit ball,” he exclaimed, nearly bursting.

“He’s unbelievable,” Jace said to her. “Show your mom, Nate.”

Nate took his stance like Jace had showed him, looked down to check his grip, saw that the ball was positioned correctly, and made a natural flowing swing. The ball rocketed off his club and flew far into the pink and purple sunset.

It almost took Kristie’s breath away. “Oh, wow! Look at that.”

“I’ve known guys that have played for years that would kill for that swing.”

Nate looked at him. “No kill Pa-Pa.”

Kristie smiled at Nate. "PaPa meant you have a nice swing."

"Nate do Pa-Pa say. Hit ball. So fun." Nate was bursting with excitement at the new-found wonder.

"How's Trey?" Jace asked.

"Working through things." She shrugged. "He'll be okay." She looked at Nate. "Hey Nate, we need to get home. We'll see PaPa tomorrow." She smiled at Jace. "Is it okay if Nate comes to see you?"

"Okay? It's great. I'll be right here." Even though Nate hadn't left yet, Jace couldn't wait to see him again.

As Kristie and Nate walked away, she looked back and saw Jace hitting balls into that beautiful sunset on God's great earth. He was at peace, and she felt so very good about God's great plan.

TWELVE

Back in her bed in Peachtree City, Kristie mused about the five years that had passed since that day on the driving range, when she had felt so very good about God's great plan. Managing the complex dynamics of a dysfunctional family had created the most challenging, most stressful years of her life. In resurrecting Jace and reintroducing him into their lives, she had created two separate worlds for herself and Nate-- one with Trey and one with Jace. And while the worlds knew of the other, they were never supposed to hear of the other, and certainly never supposed to meet.

The world with Trey was filled with stress and anger and a backdrop of pointlessness, and Kristie found herself constantly walking on eggshells to keep their fragile family relationships from cracking and running every which way. Although Trey accepted her helping Jace, he was nonetheless vehemently against it. Fortunately, it only caused friction when something else was bothering Trey. Unfortunately, something else bothered Trey all of the time. And that 'something' was usually Nate.

When it came to Nate, Trey had become even more distant and disinterested, as if resigned to the fateful fact that Nate would be with them forever-- a liability for them to care for and support all the days of their lives. With an IQ of 50, Nate was considered to have 'mild-to-moderate' mental retardation, and that test score all but sealed Nate's fate forever with Trey. In Trey's small mind and cynical heart, Nate would be, at best, only

capable of performing some charitable, rudimentary job, and Trey obsessed thinking of jobs for him-- a grocery bagger at Kroger, a table cleaner at Chick-fil-A, or a window washer at the local car wash.

To Trey, Nate's destiny was set in stone-- he would grow-up to be nothing more than a freak of a man, the object of stares and points and whispers of small children. "Mommy," they'd say, "why does that man talk so funny?" or "Why is that man talking to those ants crawling on his finger?"

"What's the point?" Trey would bemoan to Kristie almost daily. "I mean, he's never gonna be able to take care of himself, never support himself, never find a wife, never have a real life. It's just pointless."

Her replies-- about God and Jesus, love and faith, and God's great mysteries and plans-- were just as pointless to Trey. But she never stopped replying... or praying.

While it bothered Kristie that Trey didn't (couldn't?) see Nate's caring soul, his happy heart, or the wonder in his eyes, the worst thing was that she wasn't even sure Trey loved Nate. He never said so... and he certainly never showed so. It was sad, just so sad. Thankfully, Nate didn't see or sense any of this. He just saw the positives in life. No matter what, or how much, to Nate, every glass was overflowing with wonder and God's gifts.

With respect to Trey, it didn't help that, after Nate's diagnosis, Kristie had made the difficult decision to leave elementary school art teacher job to care for Nate. She was sure that's what Jesus would have done. And when she told that to Trey, and told him she was investing in Nate's future by being there for him full time, he just rolled his eyes and shook his head. "What future?" he barked. To Trey, her investments were wasted efforts that further pressured the family precarious finances.

Given all this, it would have been understandable if she had loved Trey a little less every day. But she didn't. In fact, she loved him more. She felt so sorry for him. He was such a broken human being-- unable to love his own beautiful son-- and she knew part of God's plan was for her to fix Trey. And so, the more broken Trey was, the greater her purpose.

Indeed, the three men in her life gave her a high purpose, each in their own way. Trey needed to be fixed emotionally and spiritually. Jace needed to be fixed physically and spiritually. And Nate, the one with the IQ of 50, needed no fixing. He just needed to be mothered.

In complete contrast, the world with Jace was filled with peace and calm and hopefulness. Truly, Jace had been resurrected, and Kristie watched proudly as he turned to Jesus for salvation. It was so true-- "starting with nothing, you have nothing to lose." That was Jace when she found him in that soup kitchen. And she knew Jesus loved souls like that.

She also relished in Jace's relationship with Nate. They were perfect together-- like peanut butter and chocolate, and it was the kind of relationship Kristie had always wished for Nate and Trey. Jace spent as much time with Nate as he could, most of it on the golf course. Golf was their sanctuary, and they'd practice and play almost every day.

Sadly, the polar worlds created a zero sum world for both her and Nate-- as relationships with Jace blossomed, relationships with Trey withered. The better one world, the worse the other, and it became inevitable that one world would die as the other flourished. The fateful climax came eight months earlier, when the two worlds had collided like asteroids in the galaxy.

She closed her eyes and remembered that fateful day.

It was mid-September 2017, and as the Braves fought to make the playoffs, the world of professional golf descended on Atlanta for the annual end-of-year tour championship. As a country club employee, Jace had been given free tickets to the big tournament, and was excited to take Nate to watch the pros play. Nate was getting pretty good at the game, and Jace wanted to show Nate just how good the pros were.

Grandfather and grandson walked through the entrance gates of East Lake Golf Course beneath a proud banner: "Welcome to the 2017 FEDEX Championship." Because Nate loved to putt more than anything, they made a beeline to the putting green to watch the tour pros practice.

Nearest to them, maybe 10 yards away, Brad Zemian was putting next to Rickie Fowler. Jace pointed at Z-Man and spoke softly to Nate, "See that guy in the yellow pants? He and your dad played golf together."

Nate watched Z-Man's putting stroke intently. "Putt bad," he said.

"Un-huh," Jace responded, "He's been putting terrible all year."

Out of the blue, Jace called out to the players on the putting green, "Hey Bravo Zulu."

Instinctively, Z-Man turned around. To the surprise of the other spectators watching, Z-Man gave a little wave to Jace. Then he walked over.

Jace smiled and called out, "Hey, BZ, remember me? Jace Cooper."

Z-Man chuckled aloud as he stopped in front of Jace and Nate. "Hah. I thought that was a voice from the past. Nobody else has ever called me Bravo Zulu."

"I didn't want to bother you. But I wanted my grandson, Nate, to meet you."

"No worries-- that's one of the best things about coming back home to play."

Z-Man looked at Nate for a while. The shoulder-haired teen was dressed weirdly, in a loose-fitting, long cream colored cotton shirt that extended below his khaki shorts--almost like a tunic. And he wore sandals. Indeed, he looked like a character from the bible, as if he'd walked the earth with Jesus. He certainly stood out from the other kids who were dressed in their tucked-in colorful golf polo shirts. And he had a faraway look-- a special needs look-- as if he wasn't fully there. That probably explained his funky outfit, Z-Man concluded.

"So... this is Trey's son?" Z-Man said to Jace.

Jace nodded.

Z-Man looked into Nate's faraway eyes. "Hey there, Nate, you like golf?" He spoke slowly, almost condescendingly.

Nate smiled and nodded like a bobble-head. "Nate love golf."

Now hearing him speak, Z-Man knew beyond a doubt the teen was special-needs.

Jace spoke out, "He started playing five years ago and already is a scratch handicap. The kid can really putt."

It sounded like hyperbole and elicited a chuckle from Z-Man. "Well, I could sure use a lesson."

Nate didn't understand the tour pro's sarcasm. Speaking in staccato fashion, he gave his best advice, "Bend much. Putter no out. Ball no up."

Jace translated. "He says you're bending over too much and taking the putter outside. And you've got the ball too far forward in your stance."

Nate nodded, took a putting stance, and made an imaginary putting stroke as if to show the pro the proper way to putt.

The Z-Man chuckled again. Inside his head, he was rolling his eyes. "Well, I've tried everything else. Hey, I've only got a few minutes before I tee off, let me go stroke a few."

Before walking away, Z-Man grabbed their program, found his profile page, and scribbled his autograph with a sharpie. He pulled a golf glove from his back pocket, signed it with his trademark 'Z', and handed it to Nate.

"Have fun today," Z-Man called out as he walked away. *Stupid ass kid.*

As he reached the putting green, Z-Man turned, waved, and called back. "Hey Nate, thanks for the putting tip." He winked sarcastically and rejoined Rickie Fowler.

"Wel-come," Nate called back.

“What was that all about?” Rickie asked.

Z-Man chuckled as he shook his head. “Father of a guy I used to play with at UGA. Crazy old man. My freshman year he got arrested for assaulting a rules official at the SEC championship... ended up costing us the title. His son Trey was captain of our team-- good player, but f’ed up in the head... mostly because of his a-hole dad. Had a huge meltdown at Q-school back in ‘93-- had like 56 putts his last round.”

Z-Man pointed at Nate and continued explaining. “That kid dressed like Jesus is Trey’s son. Pretty funny that *his kid* just gave me a putting tip.”

Rickie chuckled. “Why does everybody think they can play this game better than us? It’s crazy.”

“Yeah. Supposedly I’m bending over too much, taking the putter outside, and I’ve got the ball too far forward.” Z-Man laughed out. “Like some special-needs kid who can barely speak knows more about putting than Dave Stockton.”

Z-Man stroked a putt and missed it to the right.

“Hey, try one like the kid said,” Rickie suggested.

Z-Man adjusted himself like Nate had said and made the next putt. He repeated this two more times. “Huh. That actually felt pretty good.” He looked at his watch, then at Rickie. “Hey, we better get going, we’re next up on the box.

Five hours later, Z-Man was being interviewed by Jimmy Nix, the NBC golf reporter.

“Congratulations, Z-Man. A stunning 65 today. A great round today in front of your hometown fans.”

Z-Man smiled wide. “Funny game, Jimmy. You just never know. I’m as surprised as anyone.”

“You’ve struggled with putting all year, but not today. What changed?”

“I gotta thank Rickie Fowler for that. On the putting green before the round, he noticed I was bent over more than usual and had the ball too far forward. I made the adjustments, took the putter a little more inside and what do you know, everything just clicked.”

As that interview was occurring, some twenty miles away Jace was dropping Nate off at his house in Peachtree City.

Nate opened the passenger door of Jace’s late model Mazda. “Danks Pa-Pa. Dat fun. Nate love you.”

“Bye Nate. I love you, too.”

Nate waved goodbye and trotted happily into the house as Jace drove away.

In the living room, Trey was watching the Braves game, hoping for a rally, while Kristie scrolled through her I-Pad.

“Look,” Nate called out excitedly. “Nate get dis. Meet golf-er. Dad know.” Nate held up the golf program and golf glove.

Trey saw Z-Man’s unmistakable Zorro-like autograph on the golf glove. He shook his head, but said nothing.

“Pa-Pa say Nate golf t.v. one day,” Nate said excitedly.

Now Trey didn’t hide his anger. “He said that?”

Nate missed the anger, and nodded proudly. “Be golf-er job. Nate like dat.”

Trey turned toward Kristie. “Jesus Christ, I told you we shouldn’t let him be with Nate. He’s doing it again, just like he did with me.”

He stood and began pacing in the room. With each pace he’d worked himself into a boil. From across the room, he glared at Kristie and barked, “You tell me where he is. I’m going to put a stop to this once and for all.”

“Let it go, Trey. It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine,” Trey shot back. “Now tell me or I’ll find out myself.”

“Please don’t.” She paused. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“I’m not gonna hurt him. But I am gonna put an end to all this nonsense.”

The inevitable had finally arrived, and Kristie gave in. “He lives in that apartment complex off Peachtree Parkway, down by the Braelin shopping center. Number 120.”

Twenty minute later, Trey parked his truck, found Jace’s apartment, and banged on the door.

“Who is it?” Jace called out from behind the door.

“It’s Trey. Open up.”

Jace opened the door and Trey looked into his father’s eyes for the first time in more than 20 years. He sized up the old man. Kristie was right about one thing-- he definitely looked like a shell of the hulking Marine who dominated Trey’s memory. He was old and worn and shrunken, maybe 150 pounds. Trey was no longer intimidated.

“No beer in your hand?” Trey finally said directly, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“I’ve changed. And I don’t drink anymore. You want to come in?”

“Not really. But I will.” Trey stepped in nervously. He never liked being alone with the old man before, and that hadn’t changed.

“You want to sit?” Jace motioned to the worn couch.

Trey shook his head and remained standing. His eyes darted around the room before stopping on the Bible lying on the coffee table. Many of the pages were dog-eared. Trey picked it up. “Hmmm, let me guess, you found Jesus, right?” Disdain filled his voice.

“I have. Really.”

“Huh. And I thought God and Jesus and religion were only for the weak. Isn’t that what you always told me?”

“I was wrong, Trey. Okay? Look, I was stupid and arrogant and just a pitiful mess back then.”

“Was?”

“I told you, I’ve changed. Really. I wish you could believe that.” He paused to set off those words and the ones that followed. “I wish you could forgive me.”

It was the first time Trey had ever heard his father speak of being wrong, of being sorry, or of forgiveness. He definitely didn’t look or sound like Jace Cooper, the Marine, the pilot, the drunken domineering ass.

Trey didn’t let his guard down. “Let’s get one thing straight-- I will never forgive you. You are dead to me. And you always will be.” Trey shifted on his feet as his heart boomed in his chest.

A voice in his head told him to get on with the reason for the visit. “Look, I’ll say what I need to say and leave. I want you to stay away from Nate. You’re not gonna screw up his life the way you screwed up mine. He’s not gonna be any part of your stupid drills, or your regimented bullshit, or any of your psychological exercises to get mentally tough. He’s not gonna wake up at 5 am to run, or hit balls until his hands bleed. That doesn’t work.”

“I know. I wish I could make it up to you.”

Trey looked at his watch. “It’s about 30 years too late for that. But if you really want to do something for me, stay away from me... and stay away from Nate.”

“Nate’s special, Trey. Really special.”

Trey rolled his eyes. “I know he’s *special*. I see him get on and off the short bus everyday with all the other *special* kids. I’ve talked to all the doctors and the special ed teachers. I don’t need you to swoop in off the streets and tell me *he’s special*.”

Jace responded, “Not special like that-- special in other ways. When he’s got a golf club in his hand it’s pure and natural, like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

Trey felt himself becoming tense and angrier. “Oh, Jesus Christ. Really? I seem to remember you telling me crap like that. Or have you forgotten all that, now that you’ve found Jesus and been saved?”

“You *did* have a pure swing. But I screwed you up pushing you the way I did. Part of me thinks God is giving me a second chance to do it right with Nate.”

Trey shook his head in disbelief. “Oh my God, you really are a certifiable nut case. First there’s no God, and now, not only is there a God, but He’s giving you a second chance. Jesus Christ. Look, just stay away from Nate... okay? He’s my freak son, not yours. And FYI, Mister I Found Jesus, he’s not going to be a pro golfer-- he can barely speak.”

Jace responded, “Maybe if you saw Nate on the course you’d change your mind. He’s you... but without all the mumbo jumbo mental crap I messed you up with. He sees the ball and swings and hits it pure... every time. He lines up his putt and strokes it. He doesn’t think about water hazards, comeback putts, or whether he needs to make a birdie. He’s just pure and simple... and great.”

Trey rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Look, I said what I needed to say. I want nothing to do with you. Just stay away from me and my family.” Trey tossed the bible back onto the table and turned to walk out.

As Trey walked towards the door, Jace called out, “Did Nate tell you about the putting tip he gave Z-Man today?”

Trey stopped in his tracks and turned around. “Oh God, what now? What are you talking about?”

Jace turned on the television and began searching on the DVR menu for the recording of the tournament. He fast forwarded to the end of the recording. “Watch.”

“Wow, you’re living large-- a t.v. *and* a DVR.”

Jace shrugged. “It’s included in the rent.” He motioned to the t.v. “Seriously. Watch this. Please.”

The t.v. lit up with the interview of Brad Zemian from earlier in the day. Z-Man spoke, “...I gotta thank Rickie Fowler for that. On the putting green before the round, he noticed I was bent over more than usual and had the ball too far forward. I made the adjustments, took the putter a little more inside and what do you know, everything just clicked.”

Jace paused the screen and stared into Trey’s eyes. “It wasn’t Rickie Fowler who told Z-Man what he was doing wrong... it was Nate. I’m telling you, he sees things the rest of us don’t.”

Trey just shook his head, “Oh yeah? Well I think you’ve spent too many drunken nights on the streets. You really are frickin’ nuts.” He glared into his father’s eyes. “Like I said, just leave us alone. You got it?”

And Trey left with a slam of the apartment door.

Back home, Trey stormed through the front door to find Kristie sitting in her favorite chair, nervously waiting to hear about the confrontation.

“Done. No more crazy dude in our lives,” Trey announced as he sat down on the couch facing her.

Her response shocked him. “I don’t know what’s worse... a dad who pushes his son and rides him hard or a dad who’s just completely indifferent and absent from his son’s life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You think I’m worse than him?”

“At least a dad who pushes his son shows *some* interest.”

“Now *you’re the one* who’s frickin’ nuts,” Trey shot back. “How can you compare me to him?”

“You make it pretty easy.” Her eyes were ablaze.

“What do you want from me? You want me to push Nate?” Trey was becoming angrier by the minute. No matter what he did, it seemed, he just couldn’t win. It was the story of his life.

“No. I want you to *love* Nate. Even your dad does that much.”

“I *do* love Nate.” Although he said it, Trey wasn’t really sure about that. And he hated himself for it.

“Oh yeah? When’s the last time you told Nate you loved him?”

He didn’t know, and his silence spoke volumes to her. She couldn’t have been more disappointed in him. She spoke, “I’ve never once heard you tell Nate you love him... and that’s just sad... so very sad.”

Unable to defend himself against that one, Trey turned the conversation. “Oh yeah? Well at least I recognize the fact that he’ll never be able to fucking take care of himself.”

When she heard the f-bomb she knew it would end badly. But she was tired of backing down, and tired of Trey’s disinterest and sense of pointlessness.

“So? Is that why you do next to nothing with him?” she shot back. “Are you *pacing yourself*?” She scoffed the words.

“No, I’m not fucking *pacing* myself,” Trey shouted back.

“Then why can’t you get close to Nate? All he wants to do is love and be loved. A billion parents would love to have a kid like Nate.”

Trey told himself to calm down. “I get all that. But what’s the point? When we’re 80, we’ll still be here taking care of him.” Frustrated, Trey tried to think of yet another angle. “A parent’s job is to prepare their kids to take care of themselves.”

“No. A parent’s job is to love their kids and teach them to be like Jesus,” she refuted quickly. “I don’t know any kid more like Jesus than Nate.” She let those words sink in. “You just don’t get it, do you? Nate gives all that he has with what God gave him. I wish I could say the same for you.”

Trey shook his head in frustration. “I think you’ve been reading that stupid ‘Giving Tree’ book to him for too long.”

“Yeah, okay, right, Trey, it’s my fault that I love Nate... it’s my fault I teach him about giving, and helping others, and love, and all the other things that make life worth living.” Though angry, she fought back tears.

She continued, “You are just so *goddamn*ed consumed with your failure to leave a mark on the world that you don’t leave any marks on your own son. All you see are *issues* with Nate, instead of *gifts*.” She never cursed.

“Are you finished dumping on me?”

“And the truth shall set you free,” Kristie stated passionately.

The word ‘free’ tossed in Trey’s head and he was thinking of a million different responses. He chose the brashest one. “Oh yeah? You want to see me set free? Watch this.” Trey rose from the couch and made a beeline towards the bedroom. Kristie followed.

He pulled his suitcase from the closet, opened it on the bed, and began shoving clothes from his dresser into it. He looked almost possessed as he gathered some toiletries from the bathroom and tossed them on top of the clothes. From the outside looking in, it looked like a middle-aged man running away from home.

“Oh come on, Trey. Where you going?” Kristie asked, exasperated.

“Anywhere but fucking here.” He refused to look at her. “J.W. manages a foreclosure that he said I can live in.”

“So that’s the solution to all your problems-- running away?” She thought about what was happening and what he’d just said. “It sounds like you’ve been thinking about this for a while.”

Trey nodded angrily. “Yep. Ever since I found out you were helping that crazy drunken asshole.” He zipped up the suitcase. “I tried to give it a chance, Kristie. I really did.”

He finally looked at her, with blazing eyes. He took off his wedding ring and dropped it dramatically onto the bed. “Here. I’m done.”

Her heart almost stopped. But her mind was racing. She had one more thing to say to him, and she didn’t mince words. “You’re just a coward, running away from your wife and son like this. What are you afraid of-- that Nate will love you? That you will love him? Or maybe that you won’t love him?”

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. He didn’t know the answer. He had to get away.

Choosing the path of least resistance, he picked up the suitcase and walked passed by her and out the bedroom. As he made his way down the hallway and into the living room, he called out, “And don’t come looking for me this time. Good luck, Mother Fucking Theresa.”

He was almost out the front door when he called out again, “Oh, and by the way, yes, it’s a God-thing that I’m leaving... all part of God’s great plan.” Then he laughed a scary laugh and was gone.

And it *was* all part of God's plan...

THIRTEEN

Although Trey had left just eight months ago, it seemed like eight years, and now today, Kristie was alone in bed at 3 am on Trey's 46th birthday, fearing for him like never before. She was sure something bad was going to happen. And she was trying to understand how even that could be part of God's plan for them.

That got her to thinking about her parents. They'd died in 1996, two years after she and Trey had married. Driving home from a St. Patty's Day party in Atlanta, a wrong way drunk driver had plowed into them, killing them instantly.

In hindsight, it was almost too much to handle. Kristie's hands were already full trying to manage Trey, who was depressed at the realization that he was not going to be a PGA professional, that there would be no ginormous checks, no resort lifestyle living, and no flying first class or on private jets. On top of that was their inability to conceive.

The tragic loss had shaken her to the core, to the point of doubting God. How could anything so horrific be part of God's plan for her life? What kind of a God allowed such horrible things to happen to good people like her parents?

In the weeks that followed the death of her parents, however, through the love of friends and her church small group, Kristie slowly healed. And in

that healing, she found those God-things that had always given her comfort...

...At least they had died without any suffering, perhaps saving them from some horrible, slow, more painful death. And they had died together, not leaving the other behind, to die alone of a broken heart.

Indeed, in the years since their deaths, Kristie continued to find God-things in their tragic loss. Most importantly, Nate was conceived because of their deaths. She knew Trey thought *that* was stupid, that even *she* was stupid. Of course, she knew a day would come when she would ovulate on the anniversary of her parents' deaths. She understood math and statistics.

But the fact was, Nate was indeed conceived on that date. And after years and years of not conceiving, if that wasn't a God-thing, then what was?

Her relationship with Jace had also sprung from their deaths. It had always bothered her that Nate had no extended family. And so, when she found Jace, she was sure that God intended for Jace to become part of Nate's life. Finding Jace in that soup kitchen was a God-thing.

Kristie knew she wasn't crazy in believing that God had great plans for them. In her heart of hearts, she was sure God wanted mankind to live like that-- with great faith in a God that had a plan for everyone.

No, Kristie wasn't crazy... she was a God-thing... like the rest of us... only she believed it and lived it.

As she returned from the memories, her thoughts returned to Trey and her fears for his safety. Indeed, her feelings were so strong that she almost called Jace to stay with Nate so she could go to Trey. In the end, however, because it was 3 am, she decided to wait until morning, when she would take Nate to see Trey, to surprise him with a birthday breakfast in bed. What could happen between now and then?

Not knowing what else to do, she got out of bed, walked across the hall into Nate's room, sat on the edge of his bed, and watched him sleep.

Watching Nate sleeping peacefully brought Kristie peace, and with his every breath her worries for Trey faded. Nate made everything better, just by being Nate-- the 'Nate affect', she liked to call it.

After a while, her eyes strayed to the wall above his bed, to the framed, cross-stitched prayer she'd made for him. It was the prayer they recited together every night before bed:

Dear Jesus, Thank you for your good plan for our lives. Help us to obey you and love you more and more. When we awake in the morning, put a smile on our face and your purpose in our hearts, ready to start a new day. We love you.

She loved that her son, with the IQ of 50, understood that prayer, and lived it, better than just about anybody on God's great earth. And she was never more proud of him than she'd been on this day.

She closed her eyes and thought about what a wonderful day it had been.

The driving range at the Flat Creek Country Club had been converted into a carnival atmosphere, with moon bounces, dunk booths, basketball hoops, hula hoop contests, games of chance, food trucks, and a DJ. And a festive crowd of several hundred was enjoying the charity event dreamt up by the boy with the IQ of 50. The event had caught fire on social media and had become such a big deal that Atlanta's Channel 2 had sent human interest reporter Mackenzie Rohn and a news crew to cover the feel-good story.

"Good Afternoon," Mackenzie said smiling into the camera, "We're live in Peachtree City at the 1st annual 'Putt for the Poor' charity event. I'm with Kristie Cooper, mother of 15-year old Nate Cooper who not only dreamed up this event, but helped organized it, and is actually the star of it. Tell us about it, Kristie."

Kristie smiled nervously as she spoke into the camera, “Well, my son Nate wanted to do something to help the poor, so he prayed over it, and dreamed up with the idea of a putting challenge. Merchants donated items and people are paying \$20 for a chance to win those prizes if they can out-putt Nate.”

“And your Nate is quite a great putter, right?”

“God gave him a gift,” she answered humbly, “and he’s using it as best he can to help others. We always give all glory to God.”

The camera panned around to show the putting green and a long line of folks, putters in hand, waiting their turn. In the foreground, Nate stroked his putt and, as the ball disappeared into the hole, the crowd roared.

“That’s 22 in a row,” the official judging the event called out.

Mackenzie continued her reporting, “Thank you, Kristie. Just a wonderful story here in Peachtree City. Make sure you watch at 10 and I’ll let you know just how well Nate did today. Right now, he’s made 22 putts in a row.”

As she was about to sign off, another roar from the crowd filled the air.

“Make that 23,” she laughed. “For Channel 2 Action News, I’m Mackenzie Rohn in Peachtree City.”

Later that night, as Trey was sharing shots with Suzanna at Taco Mac, Kristie was sitting in Nate’s bedroom, sharing love with her son. “I am soooo proud of you, Nate,” she gushed. “You raised over \$7,000 for the poor today. That’s a lot of money and will help a lot of people.”

“Nate miss two,” Nate said sadly as he stepped into his superman pajamas.

“But you made 98. That’s amazing. Remember, nobody’s perfect.”

“Je-sus is.”

Kristie smiled at Nate. “True. But I bet even Jesus would be happy to make 98 out of 100 putts. I know Superman couldn’t make that many. Why don’t we say our night-night prayer and get into bed.”

Nate crawled under the covers, sat up, and folded his hands in prayer. Seated on the edge of the bed, Kristie placed her hands around his. She whispered with him, as Nate prayed aloud, “Dear Je-sus, Dank you good plan life. Help o-bey you, love you more and more. When wake da mor-nin, put smile on face and pur-pose hearts, rea-dy new day. We love you.”

Kristie loved that he believed every word of that prayer, and lived that way. She smiled at him. “Amen. Good job, Nate.”

But Nate wasn’t ready to lay his head down yet. He closed his eyes and spoke to God directly from his heart, “Dear God, Bwess mom dad Pa-Pa. Oh... and dank you golf.”

“Amen,” she said.

But Nate still wasn’t ready to close his eyes. He looked into his mom’s eyes, almost pleading. “When dad home?”

Her heart sank. She missed Trey, too. “I don’t know, baby. Hopefully soon. All we can do is pray for him.”

Nate closed his eyes tightly and scrunched his face. It was how he prayed hard. “Pwease dad home. Pwease.” When he opened his eyes, tears burst from them.

Kristie hugged him tightly as he sobbed into her shoulder.

“Oh, baby, it’s okay,” she said softly, rubbing his back. She wished she could take away his pain. He felt so deeply and loved so completely. And he just couldn’t understand why his daddy wasn’t there with them.

As he sobbed into her, she came up with an idea. “Hey, tomorrow’s daddy’s birthday. Why don’t we surprise him with breakfast in bed like we always do?”

The idea stopped Nate's crying. He wiped his eyes and smiled at his mom. "Dat great." She always knew the right thing to say or do.

"And the Braves are playing at home tomorrow. Do you want to take him to the game, too?"

"Dat great."

Kristie was proud of herself as she watched her son close his eyes. He had an excited little smile on his face.

Now, six hours later, as she watched him sleeping, Kristie knew he was dreaming. Indeed, it had been one of his dreams that set in motion the Putt for the Poor charity event. About a month before he'd woken up super excited. When she asked him why, he explained, "Nate dream. Make putts. Give money poor."

And from those seven monosyllable words, she and Nate figured the rest of it out and raised over \$7,000 for the poor-- not a bad ratio of charitable money to syllables spoken. Though his I.Q. may have been 50, his love was off the charts. Indeed, if the rest of the world were so efficiently eloquent, it truly would have been a wonderful, wonderful world.

If she had to guess, she would have said he was dreaming about the wonderful day he was going to spend with his dad.

Kristie watched Nate sleep for a few more minutes before returning to her bedroom. As she laid down, thoughts of Trey began to echo in her mind again, and she felt the anxious feelings quickly return. She glanced over and saw her cell phone lying on the night table. That's when her breathing slowed.

Aha!

She picked the phone up and opened the Life 360 App. Being the most tech-savvy in the house had its advantages, most notably by allowed her to keep tabs on the whereabouts of her lost husband's cell phone, which invariably led to the whereabouts of her lost husband. She didn't do it to spy on him or because she didn't trust him; rather, she did it because she loved him... and because she knew he needed her. The App allowed her to know what ledge to find him on when she needed to talk him down.

In a few clicks, she was reviewing Trey's travels from the past day. He'd left the little house in Tyrone at 8:30 am, just like he did every day. Ten minutes later he was at Racetrack... for coffee... and probably a doughnut. That made her smile-- he could never have coffee without a doughnut. He arrived at work at 9:05, stayed there until 6, and then drove home. Typical Trey on a typical workday.

The App displayed Trey's next movement at 8:05 pm, which turned out to be a 25 minute trip from the little house in Tyrone to Taco Mac. Twenty-five minutes to go just over a mile-- she knew that meant he'd walked, which meant he intended to get drunk. At least, she reasoned, that DUI scare from 15 years earlier still stuck with him.

Kristie scrolled further down. Trey had closed down Taco Mac at 2 am, which was also par for the course for him, and the App showed a 30 minute walk back home. That made sense, too-- a few stumbles always made the return trip a few minutes longer than the arrival trip. Of course the App didn't show that he wasn't alone on that walk, or that his hand was riding on some other woman's ass.

She expected that to be the last trip, but when she scrolled down again, it got weird. The App showed Trey leaving his house at 2:50 am and re-arriving at Taco Mac two minutes later. No doubt he'd driven-- he couldn't run a mile in anything under 10 minutes. She tried to understand what that meant. Perhaps, he'd left something at the bar and had driven back hoping to retrieve it before the closing shift left. And he was only at Taco Mac for a minute, than back home at 2:55 am. She was thankful that was the last trip, because it appeared that he was safely back home now.

Unfortunately, there was no App for detecting carbon monoxide in the vicinity of his cell phone.

She whispered a final prayer, asking God to give her strength, and closed her eyes. Perhaps, she hoped, Trey would feel better after spending a fun birthday with Nate.

FOURTEEN

The 21st century world had become a mean and angry place-- man killing man with smart bombs, and dumb bombs, and every other type of bomb on battlefields all around the globe; with machine guns at concerts and churches and in the workplace; and with every other conceivable weapon everywhere in between. Even innocent kids in schools were targeted.

Life was just so sad and hopeless and filled with hatred.

Perhaps worse, very few of God's creations really cared. Oh sure, most made it *seem* like they cared. After each horror du jour, condolences and prayers would be posted, posts would be shared, and thumbs-up would be given. This would be followed by finger-pointing and talk and talk and talk. But there would be no real actions and nothing would change for the better. In fact, things got worse. After a few days or weeks, another atrocity, usually bigger than the last, would occur and the cycle would repeat.

Mankind had become desensitized, preoccupied, and obsessed... pursuing money, power, fame, Facebook followers, and likes.

Above it all, God shook His head.

And he would inspire millions around the world.

And he would do it all in the next month.... with a club that looked like a 21st century shepherd's crook.

PART TWO

FIFTEEN

On his dad's 46th birthday, Nate awoke early-- 6:13 to be exact-- and by 6:53 he'd finished making a birthday breakfast of French toast with strawberries and homemade whipped cream. He was excited. It was his dad's favorite.

For someone whose diet consisted exclusively of Chick-fil-A sandwiches, macaroni and cheese, and Lucky Charms, Nate was somewhat of a whiz in the kitchen. Perhaps it was from watching endless hours of food network, or perhaps cooking really is more art than science. Whatever the reason, Nate had more than enough skills to succeed as a Waffle House line cook, which was one of those menial jobs Trey considered attainable by his mentally-challenged son.

As Kristie entered the kitchen, Nate was strategically placing a few basil leaves on the plate for color and presentation.

"Wow, nice plate, Nate," she reacted.

He laughed. "Plate. Nate. Mom rhyme."

She kissed his cheek. "I love you, Nate. You ready to go see daddy?"

Nate nodded excitedly. He was sure it would be a great day for him and his dad-- after breakfast they'd go to Piedmont Park and throw the Frisbee, feed the ducks, play with dogs, get ice cream, go to the Braves game, and top it off like whipped cream with Saturday night church service.

Kristie was as excited as Nate... and hopeful, too. In her heart, she couldn't help but think that things were going to work out, and that Trey was just one good day away from figuring things out and coming back home. Perhaps today-- his birthday-- would be that day.

As they hopped into the CRV for the quick ten minute drive to Tyrone, the thought never occurred to her that Trey was just one bad day away from killing himself... or that such a bad day had occurred yesterday.

It was a glorious daybreak, and by the time Kristie turned onto the dirt driveway, the morning sun had peeked over the horizon and was filtering through the Georgia pines, bathing the shack in a soothing golden hue. It looked like God was shining His light on the little house.

It really wasn't such a bad place, Kristie thought, as she took in the scene. She had the flashing thought that, with a little TLC, the dirty shack could be a cozy rustic ranch. Perhaps, Jace should look into buying it, she considered further.

Her heart was full-- she was so hopeful about so many things.

It wasn't until she'd stopped behind Trey's truck that she noticed the hose leading from the truck's exhaust pipe into the side window of the shack. She knew immediately what that was and her heart skipped a beat, then began double-timing. She felt herself sucking for air.

Oh, my God, please, no... not this.

She took a few deep breaths, reached over, and grabbed Nate's hand. "Stay here, Nate," she tried to say calmly, "I'll go make sure daddy's awake. I will be right back."

He didn't sense any nervousness in her voice. "Nate stay," he said, nodding. He stared down at the beautiful breakfast plate in his lap. He couldn't wait for his dad to see it. He knew his dad would be so happy.

Kristie jogged nervously toward the front door and saw the ‘DANGER CARBON MONOXIDE’ sign. Her fears amplified, she pulled the sign down and read the note: “To whoever finds this note: air out this shack before you enter. P.S., this shack just needs a little TLC, just like me.”

Oh God, no.

As she reached for the door knob, her hand was shaking and a million fearful thoughts flashed in her head. She didn’t want to open the door for fear of what was on the other side. But she knew she had to, and so she slowly turned the knob, pushed nervously. The door creaked open. Dark inside, she could almost sense the invisible poisonous gas filling the shack.

Please God give me strength.

She sniffed instinctively, but smelled nothing... except maybe death. She was sure Trey was somewhere inside, lying dead on the couch or bed. His cell phone was definitely in there.

“Trey? Trey!” she called out hysterically through the small cracked open door.

She listened carefully, but heard only eerie quiet. That was the worst sound in the world right then. She froze. Now what? She didn’t want to step into that shack.

Oh. God, please help me. What am I supposed to do?

The eerie quiet only got louder... and she knew she had to go in.

She took a deep breath of the fresh morning air outside the shack, hopeful for some courage in it, pushed on the door, and rushed inside. Although sunlight bathed the outside of the tiny house, with only two small windows, the inside was creepily dark and shadowy, and she could only see a few feet in front of her. But that was enough to see the couch. It was empty. That was good-- because Trey’s dead body wasn’t on it; and bad-- because Trey’s dead body was probably somewhere else for her to find.

She saw the coffee table filled with beer cans. That was definitely bad-- the more Trey drank, the more he hated his life. She could almost envision him sitting there hours before, drinking, remembering, hating, and finally giving up. She wished she had trusted her feelings and come over when she'd been so scared for Trey.

Still holding her breath, her fears grew with each step as she felt her way down the short hallway toward the lone bedroom. Each step was a step closer to the horror of finding Trey's lifeless body, and she felt tears in her eyes. When she reached the doorway, she saw his mass, on the mattress, his back towards her, not moving. She thought about screaming out, but decided to conserve the air in her lungs. Her mind was going crazy.

How could she explain this to Nate? He wouldn't be able to take it. When ants died, he cried and cried. How would he react to his dad's death?

Her tears were falling now.

Certain Trey was dead, she rushed over and collapsed down by the bed. Her heart was racing as she reached out to shake him, but her hands stopped just short. She'd never touched a dead person before and her hands didn't want to now.

What was she supposed to do after that? Call 911?

Almost out of breath now, she finally summoned the courage and pushed on him.

When he didn't respond she quickly took her hands off him.

Oh, God... no!

She reached out to push him a second time. As she touched him a second time, she felt him startle. Then he rolled towards her.

He wasn't dead...

She let out her breath and took in new air, quickly assuming it was okay to breath.

“Oh my God. I thought you were dead,” she gasped.

“Huh? What?” He was groggy. “Oh, Jesus. Yeah, um, sorry.”

Sorry? You almost gave me a heart attack. Sorry?

She took some more quick breaths and gathered her thoughts as her heart slowed. She whispered a quick prayer, then eyed Trey hard. “Please promise me you’ll never do that.”

“I thought it’d be better for you if I was dead. Figures I couldn’t even do that right.” His grogginess was fading.

Her heart and mind had slowed down and she was breathing normally again. She sat down on the edge of the bed and, through her tears, looked into Trey’s troubled eyes. “So why didn’t you?”

“Truthfully?” he asked hesitantly.

She nodded and wiped her eyes.

“My truck wouldn’t start.”

“So if your truck would have started I would have found you dead?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. But maybe not.” He shook his head. “Oh geez, I don’t know.”

“Maybe God didn’t want you to decide. Did you ever think of that?”

He rolled his eyes without actually rolling them. Of course she thought God was involved. “I don’t know,” he grunted. “Look, nothing really makes sense to me anymore.” He sat up a bit in the bed. “What’re you doing here anyways?”

“Nate wanted to surprise you on your birthday. He made you breakfast and has a whole day planned.”

“Oh, Jesus, I’m sorry. Really.”

Tears filled her eyes again. “After all you and I have been through... do I really mean that little to you?”

“I said I was sorry. Okay? I was drunk. You know how I get. It was stupid.” He hated making her cry.

Although happy he was alive, she was disappointed in him. That disappointment grew when she noticed something shiny on the dirty pine floor by the side of the bed. She bent down, picked it up, and held up a hoop earring for him to see.

Trey answered before she could ask. “Nothing happened, I swear. I couldn’t do that to you.”

“I don’t get you,” she said, shaking her head in disgust. “You couldn’t do that to me, but you could kill yourself?”

“I didn’t think killing myself would hurt you. There’s a big difference.”

“That’s the worst thing you could ever do to me. I can’t fix you if you’re dead.” She refocused on the earring. “And for the record, just because you moved out eight months ago, I’m still your wife.”

“I told you, nothing happened.”

“Yeah, well, while you were out getting drunk and doing *nothing* with some other woman with hoop earrings, and then trying to kill yourself, I was watching our son at the charity event he dreamed up. And then I was congratulating him for raising \$7,000 for the poor. Seven thousand dollars Trey. Not too shabby for a 15 year-old with an IQ of 50. That’s \$7,000 more than you’ve ever raised for the poor. And later on that night, when he was missing his daddy, I was talking him down off the ledge and arranging this day.” Her eyes were blazing now, her tears long gone.

He felt ashamed... and an even bigger failure. Would his pain never end?

She continued, "So when you say nothing happened, you're right-- nothing did happen... at least with you... and nothing that made you a good father, or a good husband, or a good man."

She took in a lungful of air and let out a deep breath. She was emotionally exhausted. "Okay, I'm done with this for now. I'm going to get Nate. Before I come back, I want you to get rid of that hose, get back in bed, and pretend to be asleep. You got it?" There was no slack in her tone.

Trey did as he was told and Kristie soon returned with Nate, who was beaming proudly as he walked into the bedroom.

"Hap-e Birt-day dad," Nate called out in that ever-cheerful voice of his.

Trey rolled over as if he were just waking. "Huh? Oh, hey buddy!" He saw Nate proudly holding the tray of food.

"Nate make brek-fist."

"Oh wow! My favorite. Thanks buddy."

"And Nate has the whole day planned for you two," Kristie chimed in as if everything were great. "He's gonna take you to Piedmont Park and then to the Braves game."

"And church," Nate tacked on.

"Right. And church." She cast a firm look at Trey. "I bet daddy can't wait for that."

"They have church on Saturday?"

"Un-huh," Kristie answered. "They added a 5 pm Saturday service because so many people love church and God. Right Nate?"

Nate smiled and nodded. "And Je-sus."

“Awesome,” Trey responded. He looked into Kristie’s eyes as if trying to apologize. There was some silence before Trey added, “Umm, I’m going to need to borrow your car, if that’s okay?”

“Sure. Something wrong with your truck?”

He didn’t respond.

And on that tiny bed in that tiny shack, where he had intended to die, Trey ate the most delicious French toast and strawberries and whipped cream, sharing it with the wife and son who would love him ‘til the day he died.

And one day, Trey would never forget the best meal of his life.

SIXTEEN

Ten hours later, Trey pulled the Honda CRV back into Kristie's driveway. She was sitting on the porch swing, waiting.

"Did you boys have fun?" she asked as she slid into the passenger's seat.

"Best day ev-er," Nate called out excitedly. He was grinning in the backseat.

"Un-huh. We had a blast. Nate even caught a foul ball."

Nate held out the baseball he was cradling. "And Braves win."

Kristie looked into Trey's eyes. "So, are you really coming to church with us, birthday boy?"

Trey nodded. "Sure."

Nate grinned even happier.

Trey stood between Kristie and Nate as they listened to the band play the opening song of the service.

Into the darkness You shine,
 Out of the ashes, we rise,
 There's no one like You,
 None like You.
 And if our God is for us,
 Then who could ever stop us,
 And if our God is with us,
 Then what could stand against?

Trey took hold of Kristie's hand, leaned into her, and shamefully whispered, "I love you. I'm so sorry."

"I love you, too, Trey. I hope you never forget that we are meant to be together." She squeezed his hand and touched her heart.

And Nate smiled.

Our God is greater, our God is stronger
 God You are higher than any other
 Our God is Healer, awesome in power

Our God, Our God

Our God is greater, our God is stronger
 God You are higher than any other
 Our God is Healer, awesome in power

Our God, Our God

And if Our God is for us,
 then who could ever stop us?
 And if our God is with us,
 then what can stand against?

As the song ended, the pastor looked out from the pulpit at the worshipers and began to preach. "Many of us think of God as stoic and reserved, weighed down by sin and the forces of evil. Nothing, my brothers

and sisters, could be further from the truth. God is joy, perpetual joy. And as Luke said, nothing makes God shout out with greater joy than when the lost are found.”

Trey, the most lost of them all, sensed all eyes on him.

The pastor continued, “Just as a shepherd leaves 99 sheep to find that one lost sheep, and celebrates when he finds him, so it is with God. Just as the Father celebrates when his prodigal son-- the one who squandered everything and died-- is found and comes back to life, so it is with God. For those of you who are lost, think what it must feel like to know that your God shouts out with joy when you are found or when you return to your loving father. God loves you. Come home.”

Trey felt his heart stir. It were as if the preacher had penned the sermon just for him.

“And so,” the pastor continued, “instead of seeking fortune or fame, seek God. God does not care how much money you have, what country club you belong to, or whether or not you won a shiny trophy. God cares about you. Stop fighting Him, raise the white flag, and surrender to Him. Give glory to His name and you will hear the joyful shouts from heaven. And when you do, He will fill you with a joy that money and trophies never will.”

The band broke out into song-- *Mighty to Save*-- and the congregation rose.

Take me as you find me,
 All my fears and failures,
 Fill my life again,
 I give my life to follow,
 And everything I believe in,
 Now I surrender,
 Yes I surrender.

As he listened, tears welled in Trey’s eyes. To think he would probably be dead if his truck had just started... like it always did... every day... for 16 years and counting. And even though nothing had really

changed with his life, everything had changed. For in that moment, he was happy to be standing in that church, flanked by Kristie and Nate.

Savior, He can move the mountains,
 My God is mighty to save
 He is might to save,
 Forever, Author of Salvation,
 He rose and conquered the grave,
 Jesus conquered the grave.

Trey looked around the church. Perhaps this was one of those God-things that Kristie always talked about...

In the back of church, out of sight from Trey, Jace felt that voice in his heart again-- "you were made for something more, Jace. Surrender to me and I will fill your heart with love. I know the plans I have for you."

As the voice trailed off, tears welled in Jace's eyes and he felt free, like a bird. He reached up and out with his arms to the heavens, spreading his wings, surrendering all of himself. As he did, the walls around his heart came crashing down and a deep peace and freedom enveloped him and pulsed through his veins. If he could have seen his face, he wouldn't have seen a bird, but rather a sheep, safe and secure in the arms of the shepherd.

Normally reserved, Jace began to sing out loud with the band,

Shine your light and let the whole world see,
 Singing, for the glory of the risen king,
 Jesus, Shine a light and let the whole world see,
 Singing, for the glory of the risen king.

And in that moment, Jace knew he was redeemed... and home. And, somehow, someday, he was sure God had a great plan for him. He felt it... in his heart.

Kristie, Trey, and Nate drove back to Trey's shack after church and were saying their goodbyes at the front porch.

“Oh, I almost forgot, Nate has a present for you,” Kristie said. “Nate, will you get it, please? I put it in the back of the car.”

Nate nodded excitedly. “Nate get.”

A minute later, Nate was holding the framed painting before his dad’s eyes. “Nate paint dis,” he said proudly.

Trey took a look but quickly turned his eyes away. It was a sunrise, and the colors were blinding, as if the canvas were a light source. The yellows were especially dazzling, as if Nate had collected the sun’s rays and concentrated them on the canvas and found a way to project them out. Trey relooked at the painting, now prepared for the color-attack. Looking past the dazzling sun’s rays, in the background he saw three golfers and a woman walking away from the painter, into the canvas. Beneath their feet was lush perfectly manicured green grass. In the distant, the distinctive Royal and Ancient Clubhouse of St. Andrews, Scotland rose majestically.

“Dat dad mom Pa-Pa Nate. Best four-some ev-er,” Nate said excitedly, identifying the walkers.

It was magnificent in every detail, and Trey could almost feel the Scottish sun shining on his face as he stared at the painting. It was life-affirming, and as he stared at his son’s brilliance, Trey felt tears filling his eyes.

“It’s beautiful, Nate,” he said, “just beautiful. I’ve never seen colors jump out of a painting like this. Thank you.” Trey hugged his son like never before, and the embrace sent a wave of love through his body. Indeed, in that moment, he felt three things: love and peace and hope. And for a moment, he was certain the people in those beer commercials had nothing over him.

The thought of almost missing that hug-- and the great day they’d had-- was too much, and soon tears were streaming down Trey’s cheeks. He gulped air and held the hug as his chest heaved and he cried onto his son’s shoulder.

Kristie watched the powerful moment in awe. Though hard to believe, she’d never seen Trey cry before, and soon she was crying, too.

“Why all cry?” Nate asked, still hugging Trey.

“We’re just so happy right now, Nate,” Kristie explained. “Happy tears.”

It was a new concept for Nate. Tears had always meant sadness. He smiled at his mom and patted his dad’s back the way his mom always patted his. “Dat good. Dad hap-e. Dat good. Dad come home.”

Nate’s words brought a new round of tears down Trey’s cheeks. Finally, after another minute, Trey released himself, backed away a step, and looked into his son’s eyes. He hadn’t looked into his son’s eyes like this for more than a decade. In fact, after Nate’s diagnosis, he barely made eye contact with his son. He knew he wouldn’t like what he’d see and figured it didn’t matter anyways.

But now, in the fading daylight, as he stared deeply into Nate’s green eyes, Trey became almost mesmerized. For once Nate’s eyes didn’t look mentally-challenged; rather, they twinkled like green stars that knew out-of-this-world secrets, and Trey could only imagine how those eyes saw this world and everything in it. No doubt they were the reason Nate painted so boldly, with rich colors that jumped from the paper, and with emotions that transcended a two-dimensional canvas. *Nate was indeed special*, Trey thought... *special in a great Nate-kind-of way*.

“We golf dare some day,” Nate said, pointing back at the painting.

Trey swept away his remaining tears and returned to the moment. “Really?”

Nate nodded excitedly. “Nate dream dat.”

“I’d like that, Nate. I really would.” And more tears welled in Trey’s eyes.

“You so hap-e.”

Trey wiped his eyes again and nodded.

“Nate,” Kristie said, “can you go to the car, please? I need to talk to daddy alone.”

Nate nodded excitedly. “Nate go car.” He smiled at his dad. “Happy birthday dad,” he said as he waved goodbye. “Nate love you sooooo much.”

“I love you, too, Nate. I really do.” Trey said it without reservation. And it felt good.

Kristie and Trey stood at the front porch and watched their innocent 15 year-old son with the eternal heart trot to the car. Then Trey looked into Kristie’s eyes. It was hard to believe that less than 24 hours earlier, he’d fallen down drunk on this same porch, all but cheated on Kristie, and then tried to kill himself. It seemed like a blurry dream now and he wondered if he should pinch himself. He took a deep breath and felt the fresh evening air fill his lungs. He tasted spring and life in the air.

Kristie took Trey’s hands into hers and looked into his eyes deeply. “Good birthday?”

He nodded shamefully. He didn’t deserve her... or Nate.

“You know, Trey, you can come home if you want to... Nate wants you to... I want you to.”

He swallowed hard and fought back another round of tears. He looked down. “Thanks.” He paused and made eye contact again. “But I think I need a little more time.” He swallowed hard. “Is that okay?”

“Okay,” she said with resignation. She didn’t like his answer. “But you have to promise me you won’t do anything stupid to yourself. Okay? In case you haven’t figured it out, we need you in our foursome.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

Kristie hugged Trey tightly and whispered in his ear, “It’s okay to forgive yourself, Trey. I forgive you.”

Trey held the hug and took in her scent. God, he missed her and her sweet smell. “I know.” He couldn’t hold back the next set of tears any longer. “I want to,” he sobbed into her, “I really do.”

She held him for a long while. “I love you so much, Trey. And Jesus loves you, too.”

He continued to cry into her. And a small part of him believed that maybe there really was a Jesus who loved him.

In that moment, at least, he hoped there was.

She ended the day with the words that she’d said a thousand times to him, “God has a great plan for us, Trey. Just wait and see.”

As he watched her walk away, he was beginning to believe her once again.

And that felt so very good.

SEVENTEEN

As Kristie drove away, Trey turned to walk into the little house, but before he could make it inside, he heard a car pulling into the driveway. He turned around and saw J.W.'s beemer.

“Yo, bud,” J.W. waved and called out as he pulled up next to Trey’s truck on the driveway. “Happy B-Day. Can I borrow your truck to move that fridge?”

Trey took a deep breath and gave a little wave. “Good luck with that. It died last night. I think the starter’s kaput.”

“Hmmm, let me take a look,” J.W. said as he walked toward Trey. When not selling cozy rustic ranches, or renting shacks that needed a little TLC, J.W. was a motor-head forever tinkering with cars and trucks and motorcycles.

“Keys are in it,” Trey called out.

J.W. climbed into the cab and spotted the problem immediately. He pushed the gearshift into ‘P’, turned the key, and the truck roared to life, spewing carbon dioxide out of the tailpipe and into the twilight air.

Smiling, J.W. called out to Trey, “Starter’s not kaput, Herr Dumkopf. But it won’t start if you leave it in gear.”

All at once, Trey felt a chill go through him. He let out a fake little laugh. “Thanks bud,” he said. “Hey, you keep her as long as you need to.”

After J.W. drove away, Trey walked into the house where he’d almost died and laid down on the lonely twin bed where he’d expected his body to be found. The sun had just about set and final soft shadows from the trees branches snuck through the tiny window and into the bedroom. The shadows looked like tender hands trying to reach out and hold him. And he needed to be held, because he was shaking in fear. The realization that he was only alive now because he’d hurriedly turned off the truck before pushing the gearshift into park during the thunderstorm attack was almost too much for him to handle.

He thought about that for a long time. When he had turned the keys in the ignition to start the truck to kill himself, nothing had happened. The lights worked, and the wipers worked, so he knew it wasn’t the battery. It had to be the starter, he concluded.

At the time, he thought that was weird. After all, it had started when he took Suzanna back to the bar. But... that’s how starters are, he had told himself-- they worked until they didn’t.

Now, a million thoughts went through his head, most centered on Kristie... and God-things.

Could Suzanna really have been a God-thing? After all, if he hadn’t met her and walked back to the shack with her, he never would have driven her back to the bar. And if he hadn’t driven her, his car would have started when he had wanted to kill himself.

And then there was the drive back to the shack and those frightening lightning bolts. They were the reason he turned off the truck so abruptly and left it in gear. Could that have been a God-thing?

Was Kristie right? Could there be a God with some great plan for them?

It was all too much to think about and wrap his head around. Exhausted, he curled up into a fetal position on the bed and began to wimper, then to cry. Soon that crying had morphed into wailing-- the uncontrollable emptying of the last bit of emotion from a man who'd been saved from the worst, and last, decision he would have ever made. And when he thought about what this day would have been like for Kristie and Nate had he pushed the gearshift into park, his wailing grew louder and deeper. His desperate cries echoed off the walls and filled the little shack, and to someone listening from outside, it would have sounded like an exorcism.

After a while, Trey exhausted himself from the emotional catharsis. He sat up in bed and took a few deep breaths. Something was different-- he felt free and unusually light, as if all those tears held inside had been weighing him down all these years. Maybe, he concluded, man was meant to cry... and maybe regularly... and maybe fiercely. In any event, he didn't feel like the Trey of 24 hours earlier... and he liked that.

Emotionally drained, Trey fell into a deep sleep and soon was dreaming...

Trey and J.W were ants, living in the ant farm in Nate's bedroom.

J.W. crawled up to Trey. "Dude, you look like you just saw an anteater. You okay?"

Trey shook his antennae sideways. "Kristie and I just had a big fight."

"About what?"

"Take one guess," Trey grunted, then rolled his eyes. "My dad, of course. She's helping him get settled into that new tunnel she found for him." He kicked a bit of sand in disgust. "I thought I was through with that ant-hole forever."

After a long silence, Trey added, “Kristie said she’s just doing what the Ant Shepherd would do-- love first.” Trey kicked at the sand again. “Ant, I am so sick of all her platitudes...”

J.W. shrugged.

“I’m so sick of her talking about the Ant Shepherd and all his great plans for us ants. Look around-- we live in this crummy, sandy world and we work all day, every day, moving sand, making tunnels. And he just sits there and paints pictures. What’s the purpose?”

“I don’t know, ant,” J.W. replied. “All I know is the Ant Shepherd gives us food and water and keeps us safe.” J.W. moved a clump of damp sand towards Trey. “Here. Drink some of this... it’ll make you feel better.”

“What is it?”

“Fermented apple juice.” J.W. winked. “I got a secret stash I keep.”

Trey sucked hard on the clump and extracted the juice from the sand. “Next time the lid’s open, I’m making a crawl for it. You want to come with me?”

J.W. shook his head. “No way, ant. I like it here.” A funny thought crossed J.W.’s mind. He voiced it. “Hey, if you don’t come back, you wouldn’t mind if I hooked up with Kristie, would you?”

“Really, dude? My wife?”

“Hey, you’re the crazy one for leaving. You know how much I love her thorax. Someone’s gonna need to comfort her after you’re gone.” J.W. looked into Trey’s big, sad eyes. “And by the way,” he added, “I think the Ant Shepherd would miss you if you leave.”

Trey grunted. “I bet the Ant Shepherd doesn’t know me from Adam Ant.”

“Sure he does. He’s a super genius. Supposedly his I.Q. is 50. Fifty! I can’t even fathom that. That’s more than a million times higher than any ant.”

A little later, Trey heard the ant farm lid open. Without hesitation, he crawled quickly to the top and snuck out.

It wasn't long before Trey learned that life outside the ant farm could be dangerous— first, a fly tried to eat him; then, he got sprayed with bug killer; and finally, he almost got stuck in sweet, sticky tape. After a few hours, he was tired and hungry and sad and lonely, and as evening fell, he found a safe spot and slept restlessly under a smelly, rotting leaf. He didn't feel free and safe, and he missed Kristie.

In the morning, Trey was crossing a concrete river searching for food when he heard loud shouts. He looked up towards the heavens and saw two giants. The concrete river provided no cover for him and they quickly spotted him.

“Get that one,” one of the giants yelled.

The other giant reached down with his giant fingers and grabbed Trey. Seconds later, Trey was imprisoned in a Tupperware box with some other ants he didn't know.

“What's going on?” Trey asked one of the ants.

“Not sure. I heard one ant said he thinks these two giants may be trying to start up a new colony.” He looked hard at Trey. “Hey, where you from?”

Trey answered. “A little colony over that way.” Trey pointed in the direction of Nate's house. “You've probably never heard of it. The Ant Shepherd colony.”

The other ant's face lit up. “Are you kidding? Everyone's heard of the Ant Shepherd colony. Is it as great as they say? Oh, ant, I would love to live there. They say the Ant Shepherd is the best.”

Sadly, Trey was now understanding that.

Unsure of his fate, Trey stared through the cloudy box at the two giants. One of the giants was holding a wooden handle with a thick round

piece of glass attached at one end. He held it up as if trying to capture the sun. The sun's light beamed through the glass into a concentrated ray, like a laser. The giant focused the beam on a leaf lying on the concrete river and soon the leaf was smoking. Seconds later, it burst into flames. The two giants laughed as they stomped out the leaf fire.

"Let's fire up some ants," the giant with the glass called out excitedly.

Then the ants heard the box lid open.

"Oh, my God," an ant screamed out. "We're all gonna be fried."

With these words, Trey and the other ants began to scurry around frantically. Sadly, there was nowhere to run. As the giants laughed above, Trey whispered a hurried prayer. "I wish I was in the ant farm. I wish the Ant Shepherd would save me."

Trey had barely finished praying when he looked up to see the beam of blinding, fiery light coming from the round glass. Instinctively, he ran toward a corner of the box. The beam quickly followed him. Trapped in the corner, he watched as the beam got closer and closer. He could feel the heat.

"Please, Ant Shepherd, please save me," he screamed out, now cowering, hiding his eyes from the laser. "I surrender to you, I surrender."

His words were still echoing when he heard a loud voice call out, "Stop dat."

Trey recognized the voice-- it was the Ant Shepherd... *his* Ant Shepherd!

The giant with the magnifying glass turned toward the Ant Shepherd and the beam turned off.

"No," the giant with the beam replied.

"What if I do dat you?" the Ant Shepherd said.

"They're just stupid little ants," said the other giant.

Trey uncovered his eyes and watched as the Ant Shepherd whispered a prayer to the heavens. Seconds later, he morphed into a powerful, mighty giant and the world around them darkened beneath his shadow. Wide-eyed, Trey watched as the Ant Shepherd snatched the magnifying glass and held it up to the sun. A blinding beam flowed through the glass. The Ant Shepherd focused that beam on a bush next to the two smaller giants until the white azaleas started to smoke. Then the bush burst into flames.

The Ant Shepherd cried out in a booming voice, “Love one a-nud-er.

The words were still echoing in the air when the two other giants ran away screaming for their mommies.

The Ant Shepherd leaned down and peered into the Tupperware box, searching. His eyes stopped when they found Trey. “Dare you are, Trey. Nate look all o-ver you. Come home. Come home. Nate love you, Trey.”

Then the Ant Shepherd tenderly picked Trey up and carried him back to the ant farm, where he was loved.

And Trey, the Ant, cried in happiness the entire way home.

Back on the lonely twin bed, Trey, the human, woke up breathing hard and sucking oxygenated air. The room was completely black now, and he touched at his face to make sure he was still human... and alive. What a 24-hours it had been.

He reached over, fumbled a bit, and turned on the little lamp next to the bed. In the light, three ants crawled frantically on the table as if they'd been discovered. Snacking on some crumbs left from a Butterfinger bar, they quickly crawled down the side of the table before finally disappearing to safety in a flooring crack.

Alone again, Trey replayed the dream over and over in his head. As he did, he remembered his words to Kristie the day she told him about her encounters with Jace at the soup kitchen. “Look, I’ll tell you what,” he had said, “if God appears in a burning bush and tells me to make peace with that crazy drunk, then I’ll do it-- no questions asked. But it has to be God, not

some surrogate angel. And it has to be an azalea bush... and a white one at that.”

Had this dream been one of those God-things Kristie always talked about? Or was this just his sub-conscious messing with him?

Of course in the dream it had been Nate and not God. And Nate never said for him to ‘make peace’ with Jace. Rather, he said, ‘Love one a-nud-er.’ So, technically, Trey reasoned, he had a few outs.

He closed his eyes and thought hard.

Deep down, in the recesses of his heart, he didn’t want any outs. He wanted to believe it was a God-thing and there was a great plan.

He thought some more... mostly about Nate...

As he thought about Nate, the word ‘attitude’ rolled through his mind like a never ending wave. So many things in life are beyond man’s control-- where we are born, to whom we are born, our looks, our I.Q. But attitude is the one thing each of us can control. And from that attitude, everything emanates. By our attitude we choose to love or to hate; to forgive or begrudge; to help or hurt; to become free or remain chained; to believe in God and Jesus and great plans or not believe.

Trey had spent 46 years hating, begrudging, hurting, imprisoned, and not believing... and that hadn’t worked out too well for him. Perhaps, he reasoned, it was time to take a walk on the other side... to see what 46 years might be if he took the other side of the bet.

He smiled at the idea. It felt right. It felt like something Nate would do. And after 46 years, this was the bottom, he told himself.

And he believed that.

He closed his eyes and whispered aloud, “Okay, God, I don’t know what you want of me, but I am going to trust in You... I am going to be like Nate. I am going to choose to love, to forgive, to help, to be free, and to believe in You and Your Son...”

His heart was racing. “I surrender to you, God. I surrender...”

And then he turned off the light and cried himself back to sleep.

In the darkness, three ants crawled back onto the table and celebrated the finding of the Butterfinger crumbs and the surrender of the Ant Shepherd’s dad.

EIGHTEEN

A few days later, Trey was sitting on the steps of the splintering porch, eating a sausage biscuit, waiting for Kristie. He'd purposefully dropped a few crumbs of the biscuit in order to watch the ants that emerged from the dilapidated wood. He was so engrossed that he didn't hear Kristie pull into the driveway.

She parked and walked up to Trey. "Something interesting down there?"

He startled, then looked up, smiled, and nodded. "These three ants," he said, pointing, "are moving some crumbs I dropped from here to there. But this one ant over here wants nothing to do with any of it. He seems like a loner."

Kristie smiled back. "Hmmm. Maybe his name is Trey."

"Touché, Kristie." He winked.

"Thanks for agreeing to come help us," she said. "It shouldn't take too long."

Trey was actually looking forward to helping out with the landscaping project at the church. Mostly though he was looking forward to spending a

few hours with Kristie. “Not a problem. Plus, I would never miss a chance to watch you do manual labor in your yoga pants. You know they’re see-through, right?”

She smirked. “Ha-ha. I got rid of that pair.” She looked at his truck. “Can we take your truck? They said we might have to move some mulch.”

“Sure. Hop in.” He hesitated. “It starts again.”

“Maybe God wants it to start now.” She was smiling.

As Trey started the truck, the Christian song ‘Mighty to Save’ came blaring from the speakers.

Kristie furrowed her brow and stared at Trey curiously as he turned the volume down. “Is that Christian music coming out of Trey Cooper’s truck speakers?”

His eyes met hers as he thought of a plausible response, “Would you believe I lent J.W. my truck and he changed all the pre-sets?”

“Maybe. But J.W.’s not exactly the Christian-music type. Plus, I wouldn’t believe you forgot how to change them back.”

Out of the blue Trey’s chest began to heave, and within seconds tears filled his eyes and were falling down his cheeks. He looked like he’d burst a pipe in his tear ducts. Embarrassed, he buried his face in his hands and the crying intensified.

Whoa! Kristie wasn’t expecting that. She quickly scooted over on the bench seat and rubbed his shoulder as he sobbed. He was shaking so hard. “Oh baby, what’s wrong?” she asked as his sobs began to subside.

He wiped his face and looked into her eyes. “This song makes me cry... ever since I heard it at church with you and Nate... on my birthday.”

She leaned in and hugged him. “It’s okay to cry, Trey.”

“I know.” He began to cry even harder.

Oh, my poor, poor husband... I'm here for you, baby. She pulled him even tighter.

After a bit, he released himself and looked at her without any reservations. "I decided to stop fighting God, Kristie," he said honestly. "I surrendered."

"Oh my God, Trey, that's great." They were the most beautiful and courageous words she'd ever heard come from Trey-- the answer to her most important prayers.

"I don't understand it," he explained as he sniffled and regrouped and looked into her eyes, "but maybe we're not supposed to. All I know is I can't do this by myself anymore. I need help... I need something more... I think I need Jesus." When he said 'Jesus' he burst out crying again.

Now tears were falling down Kristie's cheeks. "Oh baby, this is what I've been praying for all these years." She processed it. "Does this mean you're coming home?"

"Soon. I think I'll know when."

"I'm proud of you, Trey. Really proud. Everything's going to be okay. You'll see. God really does have a plan for us."

Trey chuckled through his tears. "I knew you were gonna say that..."

"I love you, Trey."

"I love you, too, baby. I'm so sorry."

"I forgive you."

NINETEEN

A few days later, Trey was sitting alone at the Kedron Chick-fil-A having a quick dinner. He'd snuck out of work early to do something he never expected to do-- he was going to surprise Kristie and Nate and attend Monday evening church services with them. As he sat in his booth eating his chicken sandwich, his eyes were down, on his phone, reading an email from a customer.

The manager cruised by his table and saw his near-empty cup. "Can I get you a refill on your drink, sir?"

Trey looked up from his phone. "Huh? Nah, I'm fine. Thanks though."

The manager noted Trey's 'Titleist' hat and figured he was a golfer. It was, after all, Peachtree City, and seemingly every able-bodied man, and most of the woman, in the town were golfers. He decided to engage Trey in conversation.

"You a golfer?"

Trey shrugged. "I used to be. Not anymore."

“Well, check this out,” the manager said as he turned his cell phone to show Trey. “This kid from Peachtree City is in a playoff to make the U.S. Open.”

Trey fixed his eyes on the I-Phone screen.

“Maybe,” Trey heard a studio commentator say, “one of the most compelling stories on this, Golf’s Longest Day, comes from Atlanta, at the southeastern qualifier. Let’s go live to Bob Murphy who’s watching the action live at the Atlanta Country Club.”

The screen now showed a portly golf announcer standing beside a green. He spoke into the camera, “Thanks, Tod. We’re in a playoff, with 4 golfers competing for the final spot from this sectional qualifier. And the big story is 15-year old Nate Cooper, who will become the youngest qualifier in U.S. Open history if he can make this putt.”

When Trey heard Nate’s name he felt a chill run through his body. “Oh, my God,” he uttered in complete disbelief, “That’s my son.” Trey leaned into the phone to get a better look, his face just an inch away.

The Chick-fil-A manager looked at Trey like he was crazy. “For real? What are you doing here?”

Trey took a deep breath but kept his eyes glued to the screen. “It’s a long story.”

Nate was on the screen now and Trey felt himself going faint as Nate lined up the 15-foot putt.

The golf announcer spoke, “And if that weren’t enough, consider this: Nate Cooper is mentally-challenged. So this will be quite a historic moment if this putt were to go in.”

Trey’s heart was racing, and as Nate stroked the putt, Trey held his breath and watched the ball rolling.

“It’s got a chance,” the announcer called out as the ball took a few final turns toward the hole. Then the ball disappeared. “He’s got it! Wow!”

Trey was in disbelief. Had that just happened? He leaped five feet into the air and high-fived the manager. “Yes! Yes!” he yelled out as he returned to earth. He hugged the manager. “Oh, my God... yes!” He released himself. “I gotta go.”

He ran out of the restaurant and quickly dialed Kristie’s phone.

She didn’t answer.

“Kristie,” he yelled excitedly into her voicemail, “did you hear? Nate just qualified for the U.S. Open. Oh my God!”

Ten seconds later, Trey was driving twenty miles above the speed limit to Kristie’s. He wasn’t worried about being pulled over by a cop.

“Kristie! Kristie!” Trey yelled out as he banged on the front door.

There was no answer.

Trey unlocked the door with his key and heard the shower running in the master bathroom. He banged on the door. “Kristie! Kristie!”

The shower quickly turned off and Kristie opened the bathroom door. She was wrapped in a towel, and came out looking scared-- something had to be wrong for Trey to be there banging on the door at 5 p.m. “What? What is it? Is Nate okay?”

Trey broke out into a wide smile. “You’re not going to believe this, but Nate just qualified for the U.S. Open.”

She looked at him like he had two heads. “What are you talking about?”

“I told you, Nate just qualified *for the U.S. Open*. You didn’t know that’s what he was doing?”

“No. Your dad picked him up early today... all he said was that he and Nate were going to some golf tournament.”

Trey sat down on the bed. “Oh, my God, I’m shaking.”

Trey clicked on the t.v. in the bedroom to make sure it wasn’t a dream or cruel trick. He punched in the number for the Golf Channel. There, on the 42-inch screen, was Nate. He was being interviewed.

“It’s Nate,” he called out to Kristie, who was back in the bathroom toweling dry. She put on her robe, rushed over, and sat on the end of the bed next to Trey.

Nate smiled into the camera and answered the question. “Nate see hole. Putt ball in. Dat all.”

Classic Nate.

The golf announcer spoke next, “Well, congratulations, Nate. We’ll be looking forward to seeing you at East Lake for the 2018 U.S. Open in two weeks.”

It was true-- Nate was going to the U.S. Open.

“Danks.”

“One last question, Nate. How are you going to celebrate tonight?”

“Nate go church.”

When the station returned to the studio, Trey hit the rewind button on the remote so they could watch the interview in its entirety. “This is so unbelievable,” he remarked, nearly breathless, as he found the beginning of the interview.

Kristie replied, “Your dad did say Nate was getting good.”

“Good? You don’t qualify for the Open by just being *good*. Oh my God, my dad was right. Nate really must be great.”

Trey had paused the DVR with Nate’s face on the screen. There, staring at them, was the youngest player to ever qualify for the U.S. Open!

Trey stared at Nate and, for the first time since that awful diagnosis, he saw a bit of himself in Nate... in *his son*, Nate. No longer would Trey think of him as mentally-challenged or a long-term liability or anything else. The hair on Trey's neck stood up and he felt himself shake with pride.

His son!

That was his son on the t.v.!

Mixed with his pride was a sense of shame as Trey remembered all the times he'd distanced himself from Nate... he never volunteered that he had a son to anyone who didn't already know; he sometimes walked further ahead of Kristie and Nate at Target or Kroger; and he always preferred a booth in the back of the restaurant.

How horrible was he?

As the magnitude of it all sunk in, Trey began to cry.

When she heard Trey's cries, Kristie turned her eyes from the t.v. and looked at Trey. "What's wrong, baby?"

"I missed it," Trey uttered sadly, "all of it...everything. And I've been such a bad dad..."

She took his hands into hers. "He's only 15, Trey. You still have time. And you're not a bad dad... Nate loves you and he knows you love him... even if you don't always say it." She tried to think of something that would help. "Plus, Nate will be with us *forever*... remember?"

Trey smiled through his tears and slowly regained his composure. "I used to dread that thought. But now it feels good to hear it... so good."

Still in disbelief, but overflowing with pride, Trey looked into Kristie's eyes and said, "You were right... all along."

"About what? About Nate being special?"

“Un-huh. And about God... and His plan for us...” Trey started to cry again.

She pulled him close and held him tight. “Life’s not easy, Trey,” she whispered. “Believe me, I know. That’s why we all need to believe in something more, something with real meaning. That’s why we all need Jesus.”

She stroked his head and he never wanted the moment to end. More than that, he wanted a faith like hers.

After a bit, he pulled away and looked into her eyes. “I promise I will never fail you or Nate again.”

She knew that. “I love you,” she said. She walked to his nightstand, returned with his wedding ring, and held it out to him.

He put it on his finger and knew he’d never take it off again. They would be together forever, he knew-- for all eternity. And he never felt so good.

A while later they heard the front door open and Nate’s familiar call out, “Nate home.”

Trey and Kristie held hands as they walked into the living room. Nate had a half-eaten Chick-fil-A sandwich in his hand.

“Dad!” Nate cried out excitedly.

Trey smiled wide and hugged his son.

Nate backed away. “Nate do good golf. Nate t.v.” He was beaming.

“I saw,” Trey said, nodding. “I am so proud of you, son.” He swallowed hard as tears filled his eyes. “And I want you to know that I am home to stay forever. Okay?”

“Dat great. Nate pray dat.”

“And there’s something else I want to say... something I can never say enough... I love you, Nate.”

Nate’s face brightened. “Nate know dat, dad. Nate love you.”

Trey wiped his tears.

Kristie was so proud of Trey. It was a moment she would never forget. “Where’s PaPa?” she asked Nate.

“Pa-Pa ti-erd. See at church.”

Just then the phone began to ring... and ring... and ring, and it didn’t stop until they left for church an hour later.

Flanked by Kristie and Nate, Trey was looking around the congregation, searching for his dad. He was so focused on finding his dad that he barely heard the opening song the band was playing.

Are you hurting and broken within?
Overwhelmed by the weight of your sin?
Jesus is calling.

Have you come to the end of yourself
Do you thirst for a drink from the well?
Jesus is calling.

O come to the altar
The Father's arms are open wide
Forgiveness was bought with
The precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Leave behind your regrets and mistakes
Come today there’s no reason to wait
Jesus is calling.

Bring your sorrows and trade them for joy
From the ashes a new life is born
Jesus is calling.

O come to the altar
The Father's arms are open wide
Forgiveness was bought with
The precious blood of Jesus Christ.

As the song ended, the congregation sat and the pastor began preaching from the pulpit, “As they nailed the spikes through his hands and feet, they spat on him and mocked him. They knew his death would be gruesome, and so did He. And what did Jesus do? He did the unexpected... he forgave. ‘Father,’ Jesus implored, ‘forgive them, for they know not what they do.’”

“He did not curse them or condemn them or hate them, although I am sure that’s what any of us would have done. No. In that gruesome, painful moment, He chose to forgive. And in doing so, he freed them and freed himself... and most importantly, he freed us. He freed us from hate and freed us to love. What did Jesus do? He loved, first and foremost... and in order to love we must forgive. For to forgive is to be free...”

The words echoed in Trey’s mind for a while.

“If Jesus could forgive the men who nailed him to a cross and spat on him and mocked him, can’t we forgive the ones who hurt us? I submit to you that we can... we can and we must... we can and must do what Jesus did. Forgiveness was indeed bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ.”

Trey looked around the congregation for his father but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Tonight,” the pastor continued, “we have a very special baptism, so please direct your attention to the screens on either side of the stage.” The pastor motioned to the two large t.v. screens flanking the stage.

The t.v. screens showed the back of an old man walking slowly toward a solitary chair in the middle of a room. He had close-cropped white hair. He turned, sat down, looked directly into the camera, and began

speaking, “Hello, my name is Jace Cooper. And for most of my life, I lived without Jesus Christ. I was a United States Marine, a fighter pilot, and I was strong. I didn’t need Jesus. I thought Jesus was for the weak. After the Marines, I became a commercial pilot, got married, and had a son. I was hard on my wife and one day I ordered her to leave. She couldn’t wait to be out the door and away from me. And she never came back. But I was even harder on my son. Instead of loving him, I pushed him and punished him. I was obsessed with making him into a pro golfer. I didn’t care what he wanted or what the costs would be.”

As he watched the drama unfolding, Trey took quick breaths as he relived a million memories.

“As the years went on,” Jace continued, “my drinking and anger got worse. I even assaulted a man at one of my son’s golf tournaments. Then, one day before a flight, my co-pilot smelled alcohol on my breath. He called security and I was led off the plane. I was fired and my life spiraled down. I lost all contact with my son and drank until I was homeless. For more than a decade I lived on the streets, begging money to buy booze.”

The congregation listened intently.

“But then,” Jace continued, “six years ago, I met my son’s wife Kristie and my grandson Nate for the first time. They were serving meals to the homeless in a soup kitchen, and they were kind to me even though I didn’t deserve it. Kristie taught me about the bible and about Jesus and faith and love. And she found a place for me to live and helped me find a job. I taught Nate how to putt and play golf. Nate taught me how to love. And he taught me that love is what makes life worth living. And because of Nate, and everything he taught me, I love Jesus and I love all of you.”

Tears were streaming down Jace’s cheeks and many in the congregation wiped at their eyes. Trey was breaking down, shaking. Just two weeks ago, he had tried to kill himself. And had he succeeded, he would have missed all of this...

Jace continued, “I haven’t had a drink in six years and my life has never been better. I have a little apartment, a job that pays the bills, the greatest relationship with my daughter-in-law and grandson that a man could ask for, and a relationship with Jesus that gets better every day. I know I

have a long way to go, but I love the journey of faith I'm on today. I know God has forgiven me, but today, as I publicly profess that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, I ask my son Trey to forgive me."

Up on the screen, Jace rose from the chair and walked off camera. As he did, a curtain above the stage opened and Jace appeared in real life. He was standing waist-deep in a large baptism pool next to the pastor.

The pastor looked out at the congregation, then into Jace's eyes. "Jace," he announced for all to hear, "your courage to tell your story and profess your faith and love in Jesus Christ is an inspiration to all of us. It is not how we start the race that counts, it's how we finish it. Jesus loves you, all of the people here today love you, and I am so proud to baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord."

The pastor dunked Jace into the baptism pool and the congregation stood in unison and broke into applause. Tears continued to fall down Trey's cheeks.

"You may be seated," the pastor announced as he and Jace stepped out of the pool and toweled off.

While the rest of the congregation sat, Trey hesitated and remained standing. He wiped the tears that just wouldn't stop coming, and in that silent church, all eyes were on him as he eyed his dad.

All the bad memories-- all the disappointments and pain of the past-- didn't seem to matter anymore. In fact, this very moment in time was so very glorious because all those things *had* happened. And, hard to believe, all the disappointments and pain seemed worth it now.

Life is a God-thing...

As he made sense of it all, Trey swallowed hard and tried to compose himself. "I forgive you, dad," Trey called out tearfully.

With the words still hanging in the air, the congregation around Trey stood and erupted into a resounding round of applause. Amidst the applause, Trey walked to the stage and met his drippy father.

And for the first time in their lives the father and the son hugged.

“Thanks for being there for Nate,” Trey said as he held his father tight.

Jace released and looked into his son’s eyes. “I’m just sorry I wasn’t there for you, Trey. I love you, son.”

“I love you, too, dad.”

Only a God, with a greater plan than mankind could ever have conceived, could have known that Trey would ever speak those words.

TWENTY

It was June 17th, and one month earlier, Trey had tried to kill himself by filling the little shack in Tyrone with carbon monoxide. Today, he was sucking oxygen in his Peachtree City home as he paced nervously around the living room. The first round of the U.S. Open was about to start, and although it was taking place just 30 miles away at the East Lake County Club, Trey's nerves wouldn't let him attend in person.

Across the room, the big screen lit up as coverage of the tournament kicked off. As the faces of the announcers-- Jim Nantz and Nick Faldo-- filled the screen, Trey whispered a prayer, "Dear God, whatever happens today, please keep Nate safe out there..."

The longest of all the long-shots, Nate had been given the first tee time, and a huge and curious crowd had come out in full force to see the local 15-year old. As Nate stepped onto the first tee box, the gallery erupted with uninhibited applause and hoots and hollers. Indeed, before he'd ever hit his first shot in a PGA tournament, Nate was already a crowd favorite.

Nate looked completely relaxed in his simple white polo shirt, khakis, and his characteristic sandals. Jace had tried to get Nate to play in golf shoes once, but he'd said they hurt his feet. The sandals, it turned out, worked just

fine. And anyways, Nate told his Pa-Pa, “Je-sus wear san-dal.” And if they were good enough for Jesus, they were good enough for Nate.

Dressed in his caddy-white jumpsuit, Jace was also relaxed as he stood next to Nate’s golf bag and took in the scene. He was just happy to be inside the ropes caddying for the grandson he’d grown to love so very much... and happy to have a bed under a roof to lay his head at the end of the day... and happy to have been forgiven by his son... and Jesus.

As they waited for the starter to introduce Nate, Jace smiled at Nate. Trey had been right about one thing-- Nate was definitely a freak... a freakish talent that comes about once every 2018 years. Indeed, if anyone ever wondered how Jesus would play golf, the answer was easy: He’d play like Nate-- peacefully; effortlessly; long, but not wild; and with a killer short game and deadly putting stroke that would leave opponents shaking their heads and mumbling things like, ‘How’s he do that?’ and ‘How can we be like him?’

Knowing that, Jace sensed something special was going to take place.

With his shoulder-length brown hair framing his face, Nate smiled at the crowd. Although just 15 years-old, he had all the strength of a grown man. Back when Jace was growing up, before political correctness, some folks would have said that Nate had ‘retard-strength.’ Today, Jace knew different-- Nate had the strength of Jesus within him. And with Jesus, Jace was convinced Nate could do anything.

He would bet every cent he had on that one.

A white bandana across Nate’s forehead held his hair back, out of his eyes. Embroidered in green on the bandana were four simple letters—HWLF. Most in the crowd wondered what the letters meant.

Nate had come up with the idea for the bandana the night of Jace’s baptism. As they were leaving church that night, Nate pointed at Kristie’s red ‘WWJD’ bracelet and said, “Nate know what Je-sus do.”

Kristie looked at him curiously.

“He-would-love-first,” Nate said.

Her heart leaped-- yes, that's exactly what Jesus would do!

Her mind kicked into gear. "Hey," she said smiling at him, "we should make you a bracelet that says 'He Would Love First'... 'HWLF.'"

Nate nodded excitedly. "And head-band."

And since that day, Nate wore a bracelet and headband with those four letters. Like Nate, it was simple, and powerful, and so profound.

"Let's go down to the first tee," Jim Nantz said into the camera.

Trey was hyperventilating as the tournament announcer on the tee box called out, "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the 2018 U.S. Open at East Lake County Club. Please welcome to the first tee Mister Nate Cooper from Peachtree City, Georgia."

A huge roar erupted and Nate smiled innocently at the crowd. He locked onto Kristie's eyes, who stood proudly in the front row of the swelling crowd. Then he winked at her like he knew a secret and smiled wide.

Back in Peachtree City, Trey felt his heart swell. He could have died right there and then and been happy. His 15 year-old son was playing in the U.S. Open!

His son!

Nate took the driver Jace handed him, took aim, and made a smooth, effortless swing. The ball rocketed high into the air, almost out of sight, before landing in the middle of the fairway. The perfect shot nearly took Trey's breath away and he fought back tears as Jim Nantz described the action, "Well, Nick Faldo, young Nate Cooper certainly looked relaxed on that first swing."

Faldo answered, "Yes, he did Jim. Good to see. We'll have to wait and see how he holds up under these tough conditions though. Not the easiest thing playing the U.S. Open as your first PGA tournament."

Down the fairway, Nate stood calmly over his ball and hit a perfect wedge onto the green. When he rammed the 10-foot putt in, he was quickly leading the U.S. Open.

“Take a picture of that leaderboard young Nate Cooper, because your name is on top at the U.S. Open,” Nick Faldo called out enthusiastically. Of course, neither he nor anyone else expected that to hold up for long.

Back in his living room, Trey snapped a picture of the t.v. screen showing the name ‘N. Cooper’ atop the leaderboard. Tears filled his eyes.

“Thank you, God,” he whispered as he wiped his eyes. No matter what else happened, he knew he would die happy.

Two and a half hours later, Nate was lining up yet another birdie putt on the 9th hole. Back home, Trey watched nervously as he listened to Jim Nantz describe the action.

“Just a gorgeous day and ideal playing conditions-- light winds, 84 degrees, with low humidity. If you're just joining us, the story of the day is 15-year-old Nate Cooper. None of us really knew what to expect when young Nate stepped on the first tee, but we know now. The Atlanta amateur is putting on a show for the hometown fans. He's hit all but one green in regulation and is 2 under par through 8. Sir Nick Faldo, what do you make of this young phenome?”

“What can you say, Jim? We heard he was a great putter, but nobody expected that he was this good. I've never seen a player who can read putts the way he can. And he's only 15 years old. The kid's making this opening nine look too easy. This isn't a local qualifier on an easy muni. This is the U.S. Open on a very difficult layout.”

“And he looks so calm.” Nantz added.

Faldo was quick to respond, “Bobby Jones said it best, ‘You swing your best when you have the fewest things to think about.’ And after watching Nate this opening nine, I'd say that's exactly what he's got... he's out there playing like it's a walk in the park and he doesn't have a care or negative thought in the world.”

Trey remembered his dad's words the night Trey had told him to stay away from Nate-- "He sees the ball and swings and hits it pure... every time. He lines up his putt and strokes it. He doesn't think about water hazards, comeback putts, or whether he needs to make a birdie. He's just pure and simple... and great."

It was, it seemed, all true.

Trey watched as Nate drained the 25-footer on the ninth hole to move to three under par. "Yes," Trey screamed out excitedly.

As Nate walked off the ninth green, Nantz said, "I know a lot of viewers are wondering about the headband that young Nate's wearing. Let's go down to Gary McCord for that."

The announcer who was following the group spoke into the camera, "Thanks Jim. Most of us have seen those bracelets with the letters 'WWJD', and I think we all know what that means. Well, it seems that Nate Cooper came up with the answer, and that's what those four letters on his headband represent— HWLF... He-Would-Love-First. Pretty good answer, I'd say. Back to you Jim."

"He's a very religious young man, Nick."

Faldo nodded into the camera. "Refreshing to see a player who isn't just a billboard for corporate advertising."

"He's promoting something more than money," Nantz injected.

Back in Peachtree City, Trey smiled. Oh, how he loved his son in that moment. He couldn't wait to spend the next 46 years with him.

The round continued to go smoothly for another two and a half hours. As Nate was in the fairway, lining up his approach shot to the 18th green, Trey was nervously pacing in the living room. "Come on, Nate," he said aloud, "just hit it safely onto the front right. Water's left and long. Come on, son, I know you can do this."

The camera followed his shot. The ball seemed to carry forever in the air and as it began to descend Jim Nantz called out, “Uh-oh. That needs to stop.”

The ball landed just past the pin and caught the downslope. Then it rolled off the green and crept down the bank. In sickening slow-motion the ball trickled down and plunked into the water hazard behind the green. The crowd released a collective groaned.

“Oh, big mistake there,” Nick Faldo reacted.

Once up at the green, Nate stared down at his ball in the water hazard. Jace knelt down and took a close look at the situation. He whispered something to Nate, who looked back down at the ball, and nodded. Seconds later, Nate was sitting down on the bank unclasping his sandals.

Trey was a nervous wreck as Jim Nantz described the situation. “It looks like he’s going to try and play it from the hazard, Nick.”

“That might be another mistake, Jim,” Faldo shot back. “Might be better to just take his medicine-- take a drop and chip it up. If he makes the putt he escapes with bogey.”

“We’ve seen some miracles from this kid, already. Maybe he’s got one more.”

As Nate was about to step into the water hazard, Jim Nantz mused aloud, “I bet you’re wondering if he’s going to walk on that water, aren’t you, Nick?”

Faldo chuckled. “The thought had crossed my mind, Jim.”

As Nate stepped into the hazard, the camera zoomed in to show his bare feet touching the sandy bottom. “Nope-- it appears he really is human-- his feet just sank down,” Nantz observed.

“Come on, Nate, You can do it,” Trey implored as he watched the drama unfolding on the t.v. He knew it was a pivotal moment and his heart was racing.

Faldo explained the situation for the t.v. viewers, “He wants to play this just like a bunker shot. Hit about an inch behind the ball and accelerate through it.”

As if he’d heard the advice, Nate settled into the shot, concentrated, and made an aggressive swing. The camera showed a huge splash and a wall of water, but no ball. Trey’s heart stopped. Had Nate somehow left it in the water? he wondered.

Suddenly, as the water dispersed and parted, the ball became visible. It was flying toward the pin. It bounced two feet in front of the hole, popped up, hit the flagstick squarely, and fell down into the hole for a miracle birdie. The crowd erupted.

“Wow!” Nantz cried out excitedly. “He jarred it... from the water! He jarred it! That may be the greatest shot I’ve ever seen, Nick. Just wow!”

Faldo laughed out. “I tell you, Jim, there’s something special about this kid.”

Trey was jumping up and down in his living room as he remembered Jace saying the same thing nine months ago.

Nate was all but oblivious to the outcome of the miracle shot. Instead, he’d been watching the tsunami of water he’d created. It drenched two tour officials who had been observing the shot. When Nate realized what had happened, he quickly grabbed the towel from his golf bag and rushed over to the tour officials and began to wipe them dry, all the way down to their shoes.

“Look at him. He’s doing everything but wash their feet,” Nantz commented.

“Unbelievable,” Faldo echoed. “When’s the last time we saw a tour player show that kind of concern for a tournament official. Great to see.”

Nantz said, “And so, Nate Cooper posts a brilliant five under 67. Wow. This is great.”

Faldo said, “You wonder what the kid’s going to do tonight, potentially leading the U.S. Open.”

At 9 p.m. Nate was lying in his little twin bed, listening to Trey, who was sitting on the edge of the bed reading ‘The Giving Tree.’ Kristie sat across the room in the rocking chair, listening and smiling and thinking about their great God with His great plan.

Although he’d heard Kristie read bits and pieces of the book to Nate at bedtime, it was the first time Trey had actually ever read the book in its entirety, and certainly the first time he’d ever read it aloud to Nate.

Trey read, “I don't need very much now, said the boy, just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired. Well, said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down... sit down and rest. And the boy did. And the tree was happy.”

Trey took a deep breath as he thought about that tree that had given everything. *His son Nate was that giving tree.* Tears quickly filled his eyes and soon they were falling down his cheeks. He let the book down on his lap and tried to recompose himself before saying good-night to Nate.

Nate sat up in bed and scrunched toward his dad. “No cry dad. Tree give all. Tree hap-e.” Nate reached out and hugged his father. “I love you, dad.”

“I love you, too, Nate.”

There was a wonderful silence.

“Can we go mov-ie to-morr-o?” Nate asked, breaking that silence.

“Um,” Trey responded, “I’m not sure we can. You still have that golf tournament.”

Not look at him confused. “More golf?”

“Un-huh. It’s a 4-day tournament.”

“Oh. O-kay. Dat fun too.”

TWENTY ONE

It was day two of the U.S. Open and tee times had been reversed from round one, meaning that Nate was teeing off in the afternoon pairings. That also meant Trey had been a nervous wreck for more than eight hours as he waited for Nate's tee time. Now, three hours into that round, Trey was once again in the living room, pacing nervously, as he watched CBS's broadcast of the afternoon action.

"Welcome back friends," Jim Nantz said. "The air is thick, the heat index is approaching 120, and we've got heavy thunderstorms in the forecast. More typical of the conditions in Hotlanta than what we had yesterday. Let's go out to Gary McCord, who's been following young Nate Cooper."

Gary McCord looked into the camera, "Jim, the heat may not be affecting 15 year-old Nate, who's even par on the day through 12, but it's definitely taking a toll on his grandfather and caddy, Jace Cooper. He's 75 years old, and you can tell he's really struggling out here today."

The camera panned around to show Nate walking up the fairway toward the green. A few steps behind, Jace labored visibly with each step, the golf bag like a wooden cross weighing him down. As he stepped on the slope leading to the elevated green, he suddenly fell to ground.

“Uh-oh. Jace Cooper is down,” Gary McCord announced as the camera zoomed in on the crumpled old man lying on the bank.

Nate rushed back to help him up. “Pa-Pa o-k?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” Jace responded as he pushed himself up and teetered on one knee on the sloping grass. His face was flushed, his eyes glassy.

A tour official rushed over. “Are you, okay? Do you need assistance?”

Jace shook his head. “I’m fine. Just lost my balance. I just need a second to catch my breath.”

Laboring with each breath, Jace caught his breath and took a long drink of water.

“Nate carr-e bag.”

Jace shook his head. “No. You play. I got ‘em.”

Jace managed to stand, and as grandfather and grandson walked onto the green, a huge ovation broke out. As Nate walked ahead to mark his ball, he heard a collective gasp. Nate looked back to see that Jace had fallen again.

Nate rushed over, helped him up, and Jace stood momentarily. He took a few steps toward the flag, but fell for a third time. Now screams emanated from the concerned crowd. Nate and several tour officials rushed to Jace.

“Call for an ambulance,” one of the officials called out frantically.

“Pa-Pa! Pa-Pa!” Nate cried out.

By now Kristie had ducked under the ropes, rushed to the green, and was kneeling next to Jace. He was lying on the green flat, his eyes closed, his chest heaving as he struggled to breathe. In the distance, an ambulance siren could be heard.

Back in Peachtree City, Trey watched the drama helplessly.

“Play has stopped,” Gary McCord reported, “as they attend to Jace Cooper. I hate to speculate, but let’s hope it’s just heat exhaustion.”

“Amen to that, Gary,” Nantz responded.

They were soon loading Jace onto a stretcher. That’s when Nate began to cry. He looked into his mother’s eyes. “What wrong Pa-Pa? What wrong?”

“I don’t know, baby,” she responded. “He’s probably just too hot. They’re going to take him to the hospital.”

Nate and Kristie walked alongside the stretcher as it was wheeled off the green toward the waiting ambulance. “Nate go hos-pi-tal.”

Kristie crawled into the back of the ambulance and held Jace’s hand. She looked into Nate’s eyes, “You stay here, baby. Keep playing. I’ll go with PaPa. He’s going to be ok.” But by her look, she was not so sure.

“Nate go hos-pi-tal.” By now, tears were streaming down his cheeks.

Kristie didn’t know what to do. She hated leaving Nate alone. But she had to stay with Jace, too. She did the only thing she knew to do-- she whispered a prayer. Just then, her cell phone vibrated with a text. It was from Trey-- *on my way to course. You go with my dad. I luv u.*

Kristie looked into Nate’s eyes as one side of the ambulance doors were shut. “Nate, daddy is coming to be with you. You stay and play. That’s what PaPa would want you to do, too. And pray.”

The other door closed and the ambulance drove away. Amidst a gallery of 40,000, Nate was now suddenly alone... and scared.

He remembered his mother’s last word-- pray. He fell to his knees, knelt down on the green where Jace had been lying, folded his hands tightly, and lifted his eyes to the grey, menacing clouds above. The gallery looked on in stunned silence as Nate’s lips began to move in stunning slow-motion

emotion. It was a scene that would be replayed on every news channel that night-- the 15 year-old mentally-challenged golfing prodigy praying with every ounce of energy for his fallen grandfather to be okay.

After an agonizing minute of praying, Nate finally stood up. He looked the way he felt-- drained and scared and alone. Sensing this, the gallery encouraged him with claps and yells. "You can do it, Nate... stay strong, Nate... we love you, Nate."

Nate fought back tears as he walked over to his ball on the green.

"We can get another caddy, if you want," a tour official informed Nate.

Nate wiped his tears and shook his head. "Nate do. No dank you. Nate dad come."

On the green, Nate stood over his 30-foot putt and lined it up. When he looked at the hole, he did a double-take. Something was wrong. Very wrong. The hole no longer looked so big. In fact, it looked like tinier than an ant hole. And it looked so far away now. Indeed, it didn't seem possible that a golf ball had enough room to go into that tiny little hole.

Nate was shaking. He took a deep breath and made his stroke. The ball trickled off his putter and barely made it halfway to the hole. Not surprisingly, he missed the next putt... and barely made the third one.

Trey was zooming up route 74 towards the interstate, listening to the tournament on satellite radio.

"You gotta believe that 3-putt was the result of what just happened to his grandfather, right Nick Faldo?" Jim Nantz commented.

"No doubt, Jim. That's his first 3-putt of the tournament and it's no coincidence it happened right then. He certainly doesn't look comfortable over the ball anymore."

“That’ll drop him to 4 under, one shot behind Brad Zemian, who’s in the clubhouse at 5 under. Gary McCord, what’s young Nate need to do to regain his composure out there?”

Gary McCord responded, “Well, he really needs to hit a solid shot on the Par 3 14th. But I have to agree with Nick’s assessment, he doesn’t look the same out here. I hate to say it, but I don’t think this is just a fun game for him anymore.”

“It can’t be,” Jim Nantz responded. “He just saw his grandfather and mentor carted off on a stretcher in the back of an ambulance. And now he’s all alone out there-- he looks scared.”

“Fear is the worst hazard on a golf course, Jim,” Nick Faldo chipped in.

As he envisioned poor Nate all alone out there, Trey mashed the gas pedal down and sped up I-85 at 100 miles per hour toward East Lake. His mind was racing and his heart was praying.

Nate needs you, God... please help him.

On the 14th tee box, Nate looked toward the green, but his eyes soon drifted toward the dark water on the left. Yesterday, he hadn’t even noticed water out there. But now, that water looked like a black hole that would suck anything and everything into it.

On the tee, Nate waggled over the ball and took several deep breaths. He tried to start his swing several times, but froze before he could get the club going back. After a bit, he backed away. His hands were sweating and shaking and the club felt like a wet noodle.

He readdressed the ball and finally managed to make a swing. The ball took off toward the black hole. As it plopped into the water the crowd groaned.

From the drop area, Nate tried to focus on the green but plunked another ball into water.

“This is getting hard to watch.” Jim Nantz commented as Nate dropped another ball in the drop area.

He finally hit his next shot onto the green but missed the putt.

“A disastrous 7. That quadruple bogey will drop Nate Cooper to even par,” Jim Nantz summed up.

On the interstate, Trey yelled at his radio. “Hang on, Nate. I’m coming.” But he was still ten miles away.

Rush hour traffic in Atlanta on Friday afternoon is bad enough, but the U.S. Open had created a parking lot on the beltway. Stuck in that traffic, Trey pounded the steering wheel as he thought of poor Nate alone on the course at East Lake.

“Come on, dammit. Move,” he yelled as he honked wildly. He was greeted with angry faces and flashing middle fingers.

Amidst the honks, he heard Jim Nantz’s voice, “Nope, he missed it. And that double bogey on 15 will drop Nate Cooper to 2 over for the tournament.”

“Dammit,” Trey yelled.

Just two exits away, he wondered what Jesus would do.

Then he pulled the truck onto the shoulder and floored it.

A half mile later he slammed on his brakes. A police car was stopped on the shoulder and Trey skidded to a stop with just a few feet to spare.

The officer was soon out of his car, walking towards Trey’s truck.

It was the first time in his life Trey was happy to see a police officer.

TWENTY TWO

Before the officer reached the truck, Trey's head was poking out the driver's window. "I'm sorry, officer," he hurriedly explained, "but it's an emergency. I need to help my son. He's all alone."

The burly officer had heard that one before. He lumbered up to the driver's side door. "Oh yeah? How old is he?"

"He's 15." Trey hesitated. "He's Nate Cooper, the golfer." Trey reached his hand behind him to get his driver's license.

"Hold it. Keep your hands where I can see them," the officer shot back.

Trey held his hands up in plain view. "I'm just getting my driver's license."

"Okay. But I need you to move slowly."

Trey reached back slowly and offered his wallet. The officer opened it. As he studied the license, his demeanor changed immediately. He sprang into action like a television action figure.

“Leave your truck here and get in,” he said motioning to his police car. “I’ll get you there. I’ve been listening.”

The officer turned on his siren and floored the police car. “You got quite a boy there,” the officer said to Trey as they sped up the shoulder.

“Thank you, sir. I just hope I’m not too late.”

They heard Jim Nantz’s voice through the speakers,

“That double bogey at 16 will drop Nate Cooper to 4 over par for the tournament.”

“Damn,” Trey reacted.

The officer pushed down on the accelerator further as they turned off the exit. “I’m doing my best.”

Trey nodded. “I know. Thank you.”

They heard Jim Nantz speaking again, “This is unbelievable folks, maybe one of the most difficult things I’ve ever had to broadcast. Young Nate Cooper has dropped 8 shots over the last 4 holes since his grandfather was carted away in an ambulance. It’s obvious he’s playing with a heavy heart, thinking about his grandfather and not golf.” Toward the end, his voice got emotional.

There was a long pause as Nantz regrouped.

Nantz spoke again, “Friends, I don’t normally bring religion into the booth, but I need to say this.” His voice was cracking with deep emotion. “If you’re out there,” he implored, “and feel compelled to, please say a prayer for young Nate Cooper and his grandfather.”

Nantz was breaking down completely.

“Please,” he sobbed. “Pray for a miracle.”

The solemn silence said more than any words could ever have said.

Trey closed his eyes and whispered a prayer. When he reopened his eyes, he saw the policeman whispering, too.

Nick Faldo spoke, "Well said, Jim, well said."

More silence ensued, as if neither of the broadcasters could speak.

Faldo finally spoke, "I know Nate's not thinking about it, but the cut line is starting to loom large. With Z-Man in the clubhouse at 5 under, Nate needs to get in at no worse than 5 over to assure himself of making the cut."

"Let's hope those prayers work because he's got two difficult holes remaining," Nantz managed to say.

In the police car, Trey was envisioning the scenario as they zoomed towards the course. They were still ten minutes away, and it would probably take another ten minutes to get onto the course and make it out to where Nate was. It was probably going to be too late.

Trey did the only thing he could do-- he continued to pray.

It wasn't supposed to end like this, was it?

Five long miles away from Trey, Nate stood on the 17th tee box, waiting his turn to hit. Having never played a multi-day tournament before, he certainly wasn't thinking about missing the cut. Truth was, he didn't even know what a cut was.

But he knew he was on the 17th hole and that meant he would be done soon. That gave him some comfort. He wanted to be with his mom at the hospital with his Pa-Pa.

He took aim at the difficult par 3 and pushed his iron to the right, behind the pines and thick azalea bushes that guarded that side of the green. Nate was in jail, in the worst possible spot. As he walked to his ball, he was thinking his Pa-Pa would know what to do. But poor Nate didn't.

Had he known what a cut was he would have punched his next shot back to the left, chipped up from there, and probably make bogey. But he didn't. Instead, he tried a miracle shot through the tree. Nate swung and the ball shot forward. Thwack! It hit a tree limb squarely and careened back towards him.

Trey and the officer heard Jim Nantz describe it this way, "Oh, just caught the tree and ricocheted back. Is he out of bounds, Gary?"

Gary McCord answered, "Afraid so, Jim. He'll be dropping again and hitting his fourth. He's going to need to get it up and down and then make birdie at 18 just to make the cut."

Nantz said, "That's a tall order, Gary. We haven't seen a birdie here at 18 all day."

As the police car turned down the road that led to the clubhouse, Trey knew it was over for Nate. Inside his head, he heard himself say, "Thank you, God, for giving my son this opportunity. I will praise your name, now and forever..."

He let out a deep-held breath, which felt good. He couldn't wait to hug his son.

As the police car reached the entrance gate, Trey was thinking of God and God's plans, trying to make sense of everything that had happened. He may not have known what it all meant, but he trusted that somehow it would all be good. On that thought, a sense of peace enveloped him.

That peaceful feeling was soon interrupted by the cracking of a loud bolt of lightning above him. A quick series of blaring air horns followed.

"Looks like we're going to have a stoppage in play," Nantz said on the radio. "We've got lightning in the area."

As they drove through the entrance gate to the course, Trey was sure the lightning was a God-thing.

Nate was sitting at a round oak table inside the locker room, his head in his hands. He was sad and alone and it was clear he'd been crying. Several tour players walked by, patted him on back, and told him to hang in there.

"Danks," he said sadly.

Escorted to the locker room, Trey saw his son across the room. "Nate! Nate!"

Nate stood, turned, and saw his dad. And in that instant, he relaxed and was sure everything was going to be okay.

Trey embraced his son.

Tears filled Nate's eyes as he released from Trey. "Nate scared," he cried.

Trey smiled assuredly, re-hugged his son, and whispered into his ear. "It's okay, Nate. I'm here. Everything's going to be okay. I love you."

"Nate love you dad. Pa-Pa o-kay?"

Trey nodded. "I just talked to mommy. PaPa's fine. He just got too hot."

Nate let out a deep breath of relief. "Dat good. Nate pray hard." He chuckled like he knew something funny. "Play bad. But pray hard."

Trey smiled at him.

Just then a tour official poked his head in the locker room. "Excuse me, Nate. We're all clear now and we're getting ready to restart. Are you ready?"

Nate didn't answer. Instead, he looked at his dad for the answer.

“You don’t have to go back out there, Nate,” Trey said with a warm smile. “We can go see PaPa now if you want to.” He paused. “What do you want to do?”

Nate closed his eyes. It was clear he was praying, like his mom always did when she faced a difficult decision. When he opened his eyes, he knew the answer. “Nate play.”

Trey nodded proudly at his son.

The tour official pointed to a back room. “We’ve got a caddy suit in the back for you, Mr. Cooper.”

Trey nodded and emerged two minutes later wearing the white one-piece caddy suit.

“Dad look like ice cream man,” Nate said with a laugh.

Trey flashed two thumbs up at his son and the two walked out of the locker room and into God’s great world.

The rain seemed to have washed away all the bad spirits and the course had a fresh clean smell and look. Back on the 17th hole, Trey stood next to Nate and surveyed the situation. He knew what Nate needed to do to make the cut-- he needed to hit his next shot on the green, make that putt, and then birdie the tough 18th. It was a herculean task, a real longshot... but not as big a longshot as Nate himself. And it wasn’t as big a longshot as rising from the dead, either.

Trey pointed toward a small opening in the tree branches in front of them. “You think you can hit it through there?” he asked Nate.

Relaxed and smiling, Nate nodded. “Nate do.”

Trey held his breath as Nate stood over the shot. It was a low-percentage shot, no doubt, but it was the only option. Nate took a smooth swing and the ball zipped toward the opening. It went through cleanly and found the green as a cheer erupted from the gallery.

“Wow,” Jim Nantz commented, “quite a shot there.”

“Great shot,” Gary McCord injected. “Small opening, but Nate found it.”

“But he still needs this putt,” Faldo said.

Up on the green, Nate surveyed the putt. He smiled at his dad, “Nate make,” he said confidently.

Trey swallowed hard. It wasn't an easy putt.

But he'd come to the realization that things with Nate weren't what they always seemed. On the surface, Nate appeared weak, but deep within, Nate was strong and had a power like few others. His heart was that strong. And, like David facing Goliath, a strong heart could overcome anything.

Nate took one last look, made a smooth stroke, and the ball tracked perfectly across the green. Five feet away from the hole there was no doubt it was going in, and when it disappeared, the crowd erupted for the second time in less than five minutes.

Trey high-fived his son as they walked to the 18th tee. He also whispered a thanks to God.

“You are so awesome,” Trey said to Nate.

“Danks, dad. You so awe-some too.”

Nate pounded his drive down the 18th fairway.

“That's the longest drive we've seen there all day,” Nantz remarked.

Nate's approach shot, however, came up short, leaving him a tough, big breaking 30-footer up the hill. If the putt went in, Nate would make the cut and play over the weekend. If not, he would go the movies...

Nielson ratings would document that approximately 45 million people around the world were tuned in to CBS when Nate lined up that putt, another 12 million were watching on-line, and 6 million were listening on Westwood One radio.

They listened as Jim Nantz described it this way, “Folks, I’ll be brutally honest, I’m not supposed to root for any particular player, but I’ve never wanted a putt go in more than this one right here. Huge break, should go almost six feet to his left. Nothing to lose, so make sure you get it up the slope, Nate, and over the crest of the hill.”

Nantz swallowed hard.

Faldo jumped in, saying what so many were thinking, “Come on, Nate. You can do it.”

Across God’s great earth, 63 million people watched and listened and prayed.

In Texas, a group of prison inmates from every gang and faction crowded around the t.v. together, imploring the mentally-challenged boy with the big golden heart, “Come on, Nate. Make it.”

On the hills of Scotland beneath a star-filled night, a solitary shepherd’s I-phone glowed. He looked to the heavens and said, “Come on, Natey boy, you can do it.”

In a festive beer garden in Garmish, Germany, the crowd yelled for the Umpa band to stop, “Shhhh... ruhig”, as Nate lined up the putt. “Kommen Auf, Nate.”

On the Korean border, soldiers in two separate guard shacks watched and prayed, “Dull uh wah, Nate.”

And in a hospital bed in San Diego, an old man cradled his rosary and whispered a final plea, “Please God, help Nate.”

“This to make the cut,” Nantz said, framing the moment.

And as Nate took the putter back, the world held its collective breath.

Up on the top level of the green, Trey held the flagstick with a shaky hand as the ball left Nate's putter. Halfway up the hill, it looked like there was no way it would make the crest of the hill. But somehow, it did. At the crest, the ball began to turn left ever so slightly. As it trickled down the crest, the ball turned hard left, gathered momentum, and tracked toward the hole. It was gaining too much speed, however, and as the ball got within six feet of the hole, Trey pulled the flagstick and held his breath.

It was a great putt, but sometimes, he knew, even great putts didn't go in.

The ball was just a foot away now, but looked to be travelling too fast. Trey watched as the ball flew over the cup, lost contact with the ground, fell slightly as God's perfect gravity got hold of it, and banged into the back edge of the cup. It popped up about three inches and hung in the air for what seemed like forever. Then it fell and clanked into the bottom of the hole.

But it was not over.

As if it were some cruel joke, the ball bounced off the bottom of the cup, out the hole, and hung on the lip. The crowd gasped. The ball hung for a split-second before turning ever so slightly, and disappeared into the cup.

With a deafening roar from the crowd in the background, Jim Nantz yelled out from the booth above the green, "He made it! He made it. Oh my God, he just made it."

He took a few deep breaths before continuing, "Nate Cooper has just come back from the dead and is the youngest player to make the cut in a U.S. Open." Nantz was crying.

In Texas, inmates whooped and high-fived; on the Scottish hills a shepherd smiled up at the heavens; in Garmish, Germany, the Umpa band broke out in celebration and the people danced under a gazebo; on the Korean border, guards high-fived enemies and felt a peace come over the world; and in a San Diego hospital room an old man smiled, whispered a thank you to his maker, and closed his eyes for the final time as his heart monitor flat lined.

Trey ran down to the front of the green and hugged his son. “I promise I’ll take you to the movies on Monday.”

Nate hugged back hard. “Dat great dad.”

TWENTY THREE

Having made the cut on the number, Nate was in the first group to tee off in the third round. A huge and zealous gallery, ten people deep, lined the tee box and extended all the way down the fairway to the green more than 420 yards away. Deep within their hearts, they all were all feeling the same thing-- they wanted to be part of Nate's journey that day, to be part of something more, something bigger than themselves, something romantic and heroic and out of this world.

The boy with the red blots on the left side of his brain gave them hope and purpose and made them want to be better people. They wanted to be like Nate. And so, for the next 18 holes, as they walked alongside him, or watched him on t.v., or listened on the radio, the world seemed like a more hopeful and loving place.

From the tee box, Trey, caddying once again, smiled at Kristie, who was in the front row surrounded by PGA officials.

The starter announced, "Welcome to the third round of the 2018 United States Open. In our first group, please welcome Mister Nate Cooper from Peachtree City, Georgia."

The gallery erupted as Nate stepped up to the tee and hit a smooth drive. The crowd roared louder. They sensed magic in the air.

The round was a repeat of round one as Nate played the first sixteen holes flawlessly. As he stepped onto the tee at the 17th hole, he was five under par on the day, and even par for the tournament.

In the broadcast booth, Jim Nantz spoke, "I'm sure Jace Cooper is resting easier in his hospital bed as he watches his grandson Nate rally back to even par as he walks to the 17th tee."

"No doubt about that, Jim," Nick Faldo answered. "And according to my sources, he'll be released from that hospital today. I'm sure it will be quite a happy night at the Cooper house tonight."

"It looks like we've got quite a back-up down at the 17th," Nantz commented. "Let's go down to Gary McCord, who's on the tee. What's happening down there, Gary?"

Gary McCord responded, "Jim, we've got a backup on the tee box because of that lost ball from Rory. Three groups waiting. And it is hot and humid."

Near the tee box, Nate stood next to Trey. Nate looked pained, as if something was bothering him.

"You okay?" Trey asked him.

Nate held his stomach with both hands. "Nate hun-gre."

Trey rummaged through the golf bag and held up a granola bar. "You want a granola bar?"

Nate shook his head, smiled like he knew a secret, and motioned toward a man he'd seen with a Chick-fil-A bag. The man was eating a sandwich. "Nate wish sam-wich."

Trey hesitated, but decided to walk over to the man.

"Excuse me, sir, you wouldn't happen to have an extra sandwich in there, would you?"

The spectator smiled sheepishly. “Actually, I do. They gave me one with pickles and I don’t like pickles, so they gave me another one.”

“Would it be okay if my son eats it? I can pay you for it.”

“Are you kidding? I’d be honored.” The man handed the Chick-fil-A sandwich to Trey.

“Hey Nate, come here,” Trey called over.

Nate walked over and took the sandwich that was offered. He looked into the spectator’s eyes, “Dank you. So much.” The spectator watched happily as Nate devoured the sandwich.

One of the groups had finally teed off, but there was still a long wait for Nate. To pass the time, Nate took off his golf glove and began to draw on it with a sharpie. He was so engrossed with his drawing that he didn’t even realize the group in front of his had teed off. Finally, Nate’s group was called up to the tee.

“Come on, Nate” Trey called out to his son.

Nate handed the glove to the spectator. The palm of the glove was a drawing of Jesus surrounded by baskets of fish and bread. The fingers showed the faces of people surrounding Jesus, being fed.

“You feed Nate like Je-sus feed all da peo-ple. Dank you.”

Then Nate proceeded to knock his shot onto the green. As Nate walked away, the lucky spectator cradled the glove and marveled at the drawing.

One hole later, Nate stood over a short 10-foot birdie putt. As Nate stroked the putt, Nantz provided the commentary, “Nate Cooper has this short birdie putt to finish with a stunning 66. There it is. He’s got it. Great round, Nick.”

Faldo said, “Yes siree, Jim, Nate’s back on the first page of the leader board, just four strokes back.”

Ever wary of the weather, Nantz said, “And with the winds supposed to pick up, a lot can happen in the next five hours as the leaders tee off.”

Nate’s round complete, the Coopers returned to the calm of Peachtree City. Although Nate loved people and the attention, Jace had been released from the hospital around noon and Nate was anxious to see him. When he walked into the door of his home, Jace was there waiting for him.

“Pa-Pa!” Nate cried, and he ran into his grandfather’s arms.

Then the foursome gathered around the t.v. to watch the afternoon broadcast. What they would see would be incredible. But it was nothing compared to what would happen later that evening.

Not long after Jim Nantz had warned about the weather, the winds began to blow, flags stiffened and flagsticks bent, hats flew off, and players were blown around like ants in a hurricane. There were numerous balls in the water, putts blown off line, and scoreboard operators scrambled to keep up with the big, crooked numbers being posted. One by one the leaders stumbled and the scores kept falling.

As the coverage was wrapping up, Jim Nantz said, “Five hours ago, when he signed his scorecard, Nate Cooper was four shots behind the leaders. But the golf God’s threw some nasty winds at the rest of the field, and now, with three rounds in the books, young Nate Cooper is tied atop the leader board with veteran Brad Zemian.”

Nantz paused as if listening to someone talking into his earpiece.

“Hold on,” Nantz continued, “We’ve got some breaking news. Gary McCord, what’s going on?”

The camera shifted to McCord, who was standing outside the tent used by the rules officials.

McCord reported, “Jim, I’ve just learned that PGA Officials are discussing an incident that took place on the 17th tee earlier today involving young Nate. It seems that Nate’s father-- his caddy-- solicited a Chick-fil-A

sandwich from a spectator, which Nate ate. And according to Rule 33-8, and I am quoting now, ‘a player or his caddy cannot solicit and/or receive assistance from any other player or spectator.’ If the PGA officials determine that Nate broke this rule, he could be disqualified.”

Trey was in disbelief. “No way,” he said. He began to pace the room.

“Just relax,” Jace said calmly. He was remembering the day 25 years ago when he’d assaulted that official at the SEC championship. “It’s not like Nate received help reading a putt or anything like that.” He winked at Trey. “You just got him a sandwich. Just wait. It’s gonna be fine.”

Trey nodded at his dad. “They’ll have riots if they disqualify Nate for eating a Chick-fil-A sandwich.” He sat back down on the couch and took a few deep breaths.

Oblivious to the drama, Nate said, “Nate go play with ants.” And he went off to his room.

Inside the rules officials’ tent, a heated discussion was being held. “Are you kidding me?” one of the rules officials shot back, “We can’t disqualify a 15-year old kid for being hungry and eating a chicken sandwich. If we do, we might as well cancel the tournament. We’d have chaos.”

A second official chimed in, “Not to mention the t.v. ratings. Our ratings would go to zero in protest.”

The third official stood his ground, “His caddy solicited the sandwich and the player ate it. That could be construed as outside assistance.”

The first official countered, “You friggin’ stupid ass lawyer. The sandwich didn’t hit those shots and make all those putts. There’s no way to prove the sandwich was assistance. Sustenance... yes, assistance... no. I move we vote.”

And the three officials made their votes.

In Peachtree City, Trey, Jace, and Kristie were on the edge of the couch as they watched the continuing coverage. CBS was showing highlights of the round and ten minutes had passed in slow-motion. What could be taking so long for the ruling?

Finally, the camera cut to Gary McCord outside the tent where the officials were meeting.

“Jim,” Gary McCord reported, “we’ve got a ruling. PGA officials have determined there was no infraction. I repeat, no infraction.”

Nantz responded, “Great news, Gary. I think they got this one right.”

There were hugs and high-fives in Peachtree City.

Nantz continued, “We’ve got another angle on this story, so let’s go down to Jimmy Nix. Jimmy.”

Jimmy Nix, the roving reporter said, “Jim, I’m here with the man who gave Nate that sandwich. Your name, sir?”

“Jesus Joseph,” the man said in a Spanish accent.

“And you’re from where, sir?”

“Nazareth.” He paused before adding, “Pennsylvania.”

Jimmy Nix smiled at him. “Don’t tell me you were born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania?”

Jesus Joseph shook his head, “No. Las Vegas.”

“Phew. Okay, Jesus from Nazareth, can you please tell everyone what took place on the 17th tee box today?”

“It started yesterday after Nate’s caddy went to the hospital. The announcer said to pray, so I did. I’m not normally that religious, but I did ask God to help Nate, and if He did, I promised I would do anything He asked of me. After Nate made that miracle putt on 18, I was so happy I just

started crying like a baby. And as I was crying I felt this strong urge to be here, to see Nate in person and cheer him on. So I got in my Mustang and drove all night.”

“You didn’t happen to follow a bright star, did you, Jesus?”

“No. I have GPS. I am carpenter so I need it to find customers. So when I get down here today, I decide to try that sandwich Nate likes-- the Chick-fil-A. We don’t have those up in Nazareth. But when I open it up, I see it has pickles. I don’t like pickles, but when I try to give it back and get another one, the counter girl tells me to keep it. I told her I am coming to see Nate and she joked that I should bring the extra one for Nate. So I did. And when his caddy, who I guess is his dad, asks if I had an extra sandwich, I gave him the one with pickle. Then Nate gave me this golf glove with this drawing he did.” He held up the golf glove with the drawing Nate had made for him.

“Wow!” Jimmy Nix responded as the camera zoomed in on the drawing. It was mesmerizing. “Nate drew that on the tee box?”

“Un-huh. That Nate can do more than just play golf.”

“Amen to that. Well, cherish that, Jesus. Who knows what it might be worth if Nate goes on and wins this tournament.”

“It’s priceless. That’s all I know.”

As the interview ended, Trey’s personal cell phone rang. Not many people knew that number and he looked at the caller i.d. He didn’t recognize the number, but decided to answer anyway. “Trey Cooper,” he said.

“Hi Mr. Cooper, Dan Cathy here.”

The Cathy name was legendary in the Atlanta area. Dan’s father, Truett, had founded Chick-fil-A, and Dan was now President of the chain.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Cathy.”

“Call me Dan. Please”

“Oh, okay, Dan.”

“I have a few ideas I wanted to talk over with you... about your son Nate. Would it be okay if I stop by and meet with you this evening? I can come by your house if it’s not too much trouble.”

Trey was floored. “Yes, sure, absolutely. We’re in Peachtree City. You know the address?”

Dan chuckled. “Actually, I’m sitting in my car outside your house as we speak.”

Trey opened the front door and looked out to see a white Mercedes parked in front of the house. He waved. Dan waved back.

Dan walked up the front walkway holding a bulging Chick-fil-A bag. “I brought Nate some sandwiches,” he said with a smile as he shook Trey’s hand.

Inside the living room, they talked for almost an hour.

And that night, Trey cried himself to sleep. God’s plan just kept getting better and better.

TWENTY FOUR

It would be a Father's Day like no other.

Kristie was standing in the front row of the congregation flanked by Jace and Nick Faldo. They were singing with the band at the opening of the service:

Who breaks the power of sin and darkness?
Whose love is mighty and so much stronger?
The King of Glory, the King above all kings

Who shakes the whole earth with holy thunder
And leaves us breathless in awe and wonder?
The King of Glory, the King above all kings

This is amazing grace
This is unfailing love
That You would take my place
That You would bear my cross
You laid down Your life
That I would be set free
Oh, Jesus, I sing for
All that You've done for me.

When the song ended, the large t.v. screens flanking the stage lit up. A 46 year-old man walked toward a solitary chair. He was balding and a bit pudgy. He turned around, sat down, looked directly into the camera, and began to speak.

“My name is Trey Cooper,” he said, “And today I am here to publicly profess Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior.” Trey took a deep breath. His eyes were already misting, his chest tightening.

“One month ago I tried to kill myself. By the grace of God, I failed. Today, I want to share with all of you the note I wrote to my wife and son.” He was swallowed hard.

“Dear Kristie and Nate, I hope you can forgive me...”-- he stopped mid-sentence as the tears in his eyes fell furiously down his cheeks--
“... someday. My failure as a husband and father are just too much for me to take anymore and I know your lives will be better without me.”

Kristie wiped her eyes.

Trey continued, “Please do not blame yourselves for what I have done. You have been a great wife and a great son. I hope God will bless you and have mercy on my soul.”

On the screen, Trey had broken down completely. His chest was heaving and he buried his head in his hands. The congregation was weeping with him.

Trey continued to read the note, “I love you both very much. I really do. I am so sorry.”

Trey let out a final wail that echoed throughout the church.

After a few seconds, Trey wiped his face and looked directly into the camera. “My life should have ended right then,” he said, now more composed. “But, God didn’t let it. He had other plans for me, and like a good shepherd and a good father, he protected me. Today, on Father’s Day, I am here to profess that God is my Father, and though I may not understand why things happen, I believe that He is watching over us and wants the best for us. He really does have a greater plan than any of us could ever

imagine... we just need to surrender to Him. Today, I pledge to spend the rest of my days giving glory to God and doing His will on earth. I will never again fail my wife, my son, or my God, for I truly believe that I can do all things through Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior. Praise Jesus!”

The screen went dark and the curtain opened to show the baptism pool. Trey was standing in the pool next to Nate.

Nate smiled proudly at his dad and called out happily, “Dad. Nate bap-tize you in da name of Je-sus Christ da Lord.”

Then Nate dunked his father into the baptism pool. And when he emerged, Trey felt like a new man, reborn and alive, and with a purpose.

In the front row, Nick Faldo wiped away his own tears and hugged Kristie and Jace.

Still dripping, Nate walked up to the microphone in the middle of the stage and began to sing. “A-ma-zing Grace, how sweet da sound, dat saved a wetch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

The congregation sang along with him and no one at that little church would ever forget the Father’s Day 2018 service.

Four hours later, in the player’s Locker Room at the East Lake Country Club, Brad Zemian sat down on a bench next to his agent.

“This just sucks,” Z-Man moaned, “Here I am tied for the lead in the U.S. Open and no matter what I do, I lose. If I beat this kid, the whole world hates me. And if I lose, I lose.” He looked into his agent’s eyes. “What am I supposed to do here Bill, you’re my agent.”

It was a no-win situation, for sure. “Just go out, play your best, and smile a lot. If you lose, lose with grace. Congratulate the kid. And if you win, be humble... give glory to God... it seems to be working for Nate.”

Z-Man shrugged. “I guess. Damn. I sure wish he were my kid. I got one kid in rehab, another that just knocked up his girlfriend, a daughter that won’t speak to me, and a wife who’s filing for divorce.”

“And you can’t draw, either,” his agent said.

“That’s another thing. The kid’s a frickin’ Van Gogh virtuoso, to boot. Supposedly that golf glove drawing of his could be worth half a million dollars.” Z-Man shook his head. “I tell you, life’s just not fair.”

His agent had no response.

A record audience had tuned in for the final round of the 2018 U.S. Open. “Welcome back, friends,” Jim Nantz said as the broadcast opened, “to what promises to be a most memorable day. In fact, the leaders haven’t even teed off yet and we may have the most memorable final round the U.S. Open has ever seen. For that, let’s go down to Gary McCord.”

The camera showed Gary McCord standing on a tee box. “Right you are, Jim. As you can see, I’m standing on the 17th tee, and hanging from the trees all around me are-- you guessed it-- Chick-fil-A sandwiches. And it’s not just here on the 17th hole, it’s on every hole.”

Cameras showed aerial views of the entire East Lake Golf Course. As the cameras zoomed in, they showed the unmistakable sight of Chick-fil-A sandwiches wrappers hanging down from trees. It looked like Christmas time in the Land of Chick-fil-A.

Gary McCord continued, “It seems those mischievous cows were busy last night and didn’t want to take any chance that Nate might be penalized for being hungry.” He laughed. “I talked with PGA officials, and the sandwiches are being taken down and will be donated to the needy, but I think the point has been made.”

Nantz jumped in, “On a related note, Gary, Chick-fil-A announced this morning that they have entered into a multi-year sponsorship deal with Nate Cooper. Terms were not announced, but we do know that Chick-fil-A will be donating \$2 million a year to charities of Nate’s choice. And to

celebrate that sponsorship, every Chick-fil-A restaurant in America is open today-- Sunday-- which is something that has never happened in the company's history. But they're not selling anything. They're asking folks to come in, have a free sandwich, take an extra one in honor of Nate, and give it to someone needy. They're calling it, "Be Great Like Nate," and they expect to give away more than 5 million sandwiches today."

Nantz swallowed hard. "Great stuff. What do you think of that, Sir Nick Faldo... the young man who speaks single syllable words is going to be the spokesman for Chick-fil-A."

Faldo responded, "I think it's great, Jim. There's so many great single syllable words out there-- faith, hope, love, Nate."

"Well said, Nick." Nantz returned to golf. "And there's nothing more eloquent than words said with love... no matter how many syllables. So, back to golf, Nick, what do you expect to see on the course today?"

The camera showed Faldo smiling wide. Atop his head was a wig that looked just like Nate's hair, complete with headband with four letters on it-- HWLF. On the lapel of Faldo's jacket was a button that said, "Be Great Like Nate". He was chewing a Chick-fil-A sandwich and dabbed at his mouth with a napkin.

Faldo smiled into the camera, "As you can see, Jim, I am officially on the Nate Cooper bandwagon. And to be great like Nate, I let my hair down and even went to church with the Coopers this morning-- a very moving experience, I must say." He paused. "So... what do I expect today? I expect Nate to win."

"You're going out on a limb there, Nick."

Faldo looked at Nantz. "Not at all, Jim. Mark my words-- Nate Cooper will walk off the 18th green the biggest winner of the day, whether or not he wins the U.S. Open."

Nantz nodded. There was no arguing with that. "He's certainly captured the hearts of the world. And all the world is watching. In fact, a death row inmate in Texas was issued a stay of execution based on his claim

that it would be cruel punishment to execute him prior to the end of the U.S. Open.”

Faldo chimed in, “And how about the bettor who wagered 1,000 pounds two weeks ago that Nate Cooper, who nobody even knew at the time, would win the U.S. Open. At 5,000 to 1 odds, that bettor stands to pocket a cool 5 million pounds if Nate the Great wins today.

At 1:30 pm, Nate and Brad Zemian stepped onto the first tee. The starter called out, “In our final group, please welcome Nate Cooper from Peachtree City, Georgia,”

The gallery erupted as Nate stepped to the tee. Kristie was in the front row of the crowd, next to Jace. Wearing a white polo with a small Chick-fil-A logo on the breast, Nate took the driver from Trey and hit a smooth drive. The crowd roared.

“And please welcome Brad Zemian from Jupiter, Florida,” the starter called out to a smattering of light applause. There was no doubt the gallery was there to see Nate win.

The two battled evenly through the front nine. On the 10th hole, however, Nate bogeyed from the trap while Z-Man coaxed-in a short birdie putt. Now two down, some in the crowd began to wonder if it was asking too much of the 15 year-old to hang with the tour veteran.

But Nate never thought that. He was actually enjoying the round—the gallery was amazing in their shouts of support and encouragement and he was loving the time with his dad on the bag. He wasn’t thinking about losing... or winning. He was thinking about what a beautiful day it was. That may have been the greatest thing about Nate. He never lost his sense of wonder. He could find beauty in anything and everything-- a colorful rainbow, the twinkling of stars at night, the determined work ethic of a colony of ants, the love in his mother’s eyes, and a smile from his dad.

And so, while those watching him may have felt stress as Nate walked onto the 11th tee, Nate was actually thinking about going to the movies with his dad the next day. He couldn’t wait to see Antman 2.

Z-Man stepped to the tee, looking tense. Ahead by two strokes, he was thinking of putting the 15 year-old away, of winning the U.S. Open, and hoisting the sterling silver trophy. He hooked his drive into the trees on the left.

Nate followed with a perfect center-cut drive, and as they walked down the fairway, somehow Z-Man knew he wasn't going to put the kid away.

Z-Man punched out into the fairway while Nate hit a 9-iron stiff. Ten minutes later, the two were tied once again. The crowd went wild.

"Great resiliency, there by Nate," Nick Faldo said. "I don't think the kids gonna back off."

"I agree," Nantz said. "He certainly looks like the calmer of the two."

They remained even through 16. And then they stepped onto the 17th tee.

Jesus Joseph was standing in a prime spot in the gallery. Nate saw him and walked right up to him. "Hi dare," he said.

"Hi Nate. We're all rooting for you."

Nate touched his heart. "Nate know. Nate feel."

"I love you, Nate," Jesus said out of the blue. He wasn't sure why he said it, the words just came out. He felt tears in his eyes.

"Nate love you, too."

The tears fell down Jesus's cheeks.

"Hap-e tears?" Nate asked.

Jesus smiled and nodded.

Then Nate looked at all the people on either side of Jesus. He called out what he felt in his heart. “Nate love all you.”

“We love you, too, Nate,” the crowd yelled back.

Feeling the love, and without a care in the world, Nate stepped up to the tee and hit his shot a foot from the hole, almost jarring it.

“Wow!” Nantz said as the ball cozied up. “Talk about a clutch shot. The pressure’s on Z-Man now.”

“He doesn’t look well,” Faldo said.

Z-Man managed to hit the green, but when he missed his 30-foot birdie putt and Nate tapped in, suddenly Nate was leading the U.S. Open with just one hole to play. The crowd was in a frenzy as they crowded around the 18th hole.

Jim Nantz set up the moment perfectly, “And so it comes down to this-- one hole for the U.S. Open Championship.”

“You said it would be memorable, Jim, and these two players have not disappointed... a real heavyweight bout,” Faldo said. “Z-Man took a two shot lead on the 11th, but Nate the Great came right back to tie it on the next hole, and after that great shot at 17, he’s got himself a one shot lead.”

Nate teed up his ball. “Nate with the honors,” Nantz commentated. “He’s played this hole magically the first 3 rounds— that unbelievable birdie from the water in the opening round, the clutch birdie putt to make the cut in round 2, and a nice closing birdie yesterday that got him in this final group.”

Nate made his swing and the ball took off to the right. “Looks like he left it out to the right,” Nantz said. “Might need to catch a break. Gary?”

Gary McCord was quickly walking to the ball, which was in the rough near a group of pine trees. “I’m coming to the ball now, Jim,” he reported, “and unfortunately, it looks like he’s got some problems.”

McCord looked down at the ball and could not believe his eyes. “You’re not going to believe this,” he said, “but his ball has landed on top of

some bits of a sandwich that fell to the ground from the pines. And it's crawling with ants."

"Will he get relief from that, Gary?" Nantz asked.

"Well, the pieces of sandwich are considered a man-made obstacle, so Nate can remove those without penalty. But the ants aren't man-made, so they can't be moved by Nate."

Nantz carefully considered what he was hearing. He turned to Nick Faldo. "Interesting situation, Nick. Everyone knows Nate loves ants. We documented that in the piece we did on him Saturday. And you visited the Coopers. You saw that huge ant farm in his bedroom. You wonder what he's going to do here."

Faldo felt ill for Nate. "And Z-Man's in perfect position in the fairway. Wow. Go figure."

Nate soon arrived at his ball and studied the swarm of ants. He was visibly shaking as he stood over the ball and stared down at the ants. They were doing what ants did-- scurrying around, eating, carrying crumbs, working diligently. And they were all in the path of his swing. He watched them for a while-- that one looked like a son, that one a mom, that one a dad, and that one a PaPa.

Trey watched Nate intently. He could sense every painful thought running through his son's mind. More than that, he could sense the distress in Nate's heart.

At once, a million memories filled Trey's mind. First, little 5 year-old Nate was sitting on the kitchen floor watching the ants crawling out of the woodwork. Trey heard the desperation in his own voice when he'd called Nate the Ant Shepherd and the despair he'd felt when he thought of taking care of Nate for the next 50 years. The next memory was 10 year-old Nate, sitting in front of his ant farm, watching with innocent bliss as the ants scurried around and did their work. Next Trey thought of his dream, when he was an ant, when he cried out for the Ant Shepherd to save him. And finally, he thought of the ants that had scurried on the nightstand eating Butterfinger crumbs when Trey had surrendered himself to God. They were his earthly witnesses that night.

As Nate was standing over the ball with a 6-iron in his hands, Trey saw that his hands were shaking. "Hold on, Nate," Trey said.

Nate backed away and looked into his dad's eyes.

"You don't want to hit that ball, do you?"

Nate's lips began to quiver. "No, dad... Nate no kill ants." Quickly tears were streaming down his cheeks. "Nate love, Nate no kill," he cried.

The t.v. cameras were zooming in on Nate's face and millions of viewers were undoubtedly wondering why Nate was crying.

Nantz asked the question, "Gary McCord, we see something's bothering Nate. It looks like he's crying. What's going on down there?"

"I hate to say it, Jim, but Nate's really uncomfortable about this shot. He doesn't want to hit this ball with all those ants around it."

Trey knew what had to be done. He stared into his son's eyes. "You don't have to hit it, son... we can take a drop over here." Trey pointed to a spot a yard away, a yard further from the hole... it was clean grass, not an ant in sight.

Nate decompressed in an instant. "Real-ly?"

Trey nodded. "Yes, of course... let's do that. Okay?"

Nate's face brightened and his shaking stopped. "Dat great, dad. Danks."

Trey motioned for the tour official to come over. "We're gonna take a drop. Unplayable," he informed the official.

The official looked at Trey like he was crazy. "You do know that's a one-stroke penalty, right?"

"Yes, sir."

“Okay. Mark your spot and take relief one club length no closer to the hole.”

Nate placed a tee in the ground near his ball to mark the spot.

“What’s he doing down there, Gary?” Nantz asked.

“You’re not going to believe this, Jim. Young Nate has taken an unplayable lie and is dropping. He’ll be hitting his 3rd.”

“Wow. Big decision,” Nantz responded. “Could cost him the U.S. Open. Was the lie that bad? Why’d he take the drop?”

McCord hesitated to answer. The reason seemed almost too far-fetched to say aloud. As Nate took his drop and was readying himself for the approach shot, McCord finally answered, “He said he could never kill an ant.”

Nantz was speechless, but Faldo had a response, “Real conviction, there,” he said. “Not enough of that in the world today.”

Nantz said, “And a whole lot of love, too. Not enough of that, either.” Nantz returned to golf, “What’s he got, Gary?”

“185 yards to the center ridge, 195 to the hole. 6-iron.”

“He’s going to need to jump on that,” Faldo said, “He needs to get it over the ridge. You don’t want to come up short with this Sunday pin placement on the back tier.”

Nate hit the shot. The ball hit the green, waivered on ridge, but rolled all the way down to front of green.”

Nantz watched in agony. “Oh. Just needed one more foot to get it back to the top tier. That putt’s going to be nearly impossible.”

In the fairway, Z-man readied himself for his approach shot.

“Now Brad Zemian,” Nantz said, “From 168, seven iron.”

Z-man hit his shot to the right of the flag. It stayed on the top tier of the green.

“Solid play there, Nick,” Nantz said.

“Absolutely, Jim. Kept it on the top tier. He may be a couple feet further away than Nate, but it’s definitely the easier putt.”

The two players and their caddies walked up the green to thunderous applause. Smiling ear-to-ear, Z-Man pointed to Nate and tipped his hat to the youngster.

“How ‘bout that for sportsmanship, Nick?” Nantz commented.”

“Classy move by the veteran, Jim.”

Z-Man was walking next to Trey as they approached the green. “You got some kid there, Trey. I sure wish he were mine.”

“Thanks, Z-Man. I spent the last 20 years wishing I were you.”

“The grass is always greener...” Z-Man waxed.

“Yep. I finally figured that out.”

With the players now even, the U.S. Open would likely be decided in the next five minutes.

Up on the green, Z-Man studied his putt. He knew a two putt was probably all he needed to get into a playoff. And, given the difficulty of Nate’s putt, a two putt might even be enough to give him the win. He stepped over the ball, made a solid stroke, and the 22-year tour pro lagged his putt to within a foot. He tapped in for an easy par to a smattering of applause.

As Nate and Trey looked at their putt and discussed the options, Nantz said, “Somehow we knew it would come down to this, Nick Faldo. You were out on the 18th green this morning. Tell us about this putt.”

“I putted from just about every spot on the green, and this putt is virtually unmake-able,” Faldo said. He took out his telestrator to show the viewers. “If he putts it at the hole, there’s no way to stop the ball. He really needs to aim to the right, get it over the ridge, and leave himself an uphill 6-footer to tie. That’s where Nate seems to be looking right now.”

Nate was pointing to a spot just to the right of the hole.

Trey nodded. But something about that didn’t feel right.

Since the time he was just a boy, and all the way through the PGA Q-school tournament, Trey had thought about a defining moment like this-- a final putt to win the U.S. Open. He’d played thousands of rounds of golf in those years, and every time he stood over a putt on the 18th hole, he’d whisper something like this in his head-- ‘Trey Cooper has this putt to win the U.S. Open.’ And it was always gratifying whenever he made that final putt on the 18th. Even in the PGA Q-school tournament, when he needed to make that 15-footer to break 100, he was dreaming it was the putt to win the U.S. Open.

Although Trey had always had the putter in his hand, he felt an even greater rush of emotion knowing it was Nate’s putt. Indeed, the only thing better than winning the U.S. Open himself, would be having his son win the U.S. Open... *his 15 year-old mentally-advantaged son.*

Trey looked into his son’s eyes and tried to make sense of the enormity of the moment. If Nate made the putt, it would undoubtedly become one of the greatest moments in sports history, maybe even the biggest-- certainly bigger than Babe Ruth calling his home run shots, bigger than any Michael Jordan buzzer-beater, bigger than Joe Namath’s super bowl victory guarantee.

If Nate made the putt, millions would cry tears of joy and believe that anything was possible. They’d believe in something more, in something that transcended the world, perhaps even that God was real and had a plan for every life.

Trey convinced himself it was that big.

He also convinced himself that God had not brought them to this point for Nate to *not make* that putt. Indeed, if Kristie was right about God and his plan for their lives-- and Trey knew she was-- the putt *had to* go in. Nothing else would make any sense.

Trey looked up past the hole, near the fringe. Then he walked to the spot he had been looking at. Nate followed him.

Nantz watched them. "Can he putt it further to the right and up to the fringe, where his caddy is now, and let it feed back to the hole?" Nantz asked Faldo.

"That's risky, Jim." Faldo pulled out the telestrator again. "If he hits it too softly, the ball's going to come right back to him. If he hits it too strong, he's over the back of the green, like we saw in round 1. Too far left and he ends up on the plateau. Too far right and he's stuck in the fringe." Faldo's telestrator looked like a spaghetti junction, with lines going every which way from Nate's ball. Unfortunately, none of the lines reached the hole. "Absolutely zero margin if he tries to do that," Faldo summarized.

Back down on the green, Trey smiled at his son, "I believe in you, Nate. And all these people watching you believe in you. I think you are going to make this putt."

Nate looked at the path the ball would have to take. "Hard putt. You dink so?"

Trey nodded and pointed at the spot he had been studying. "I know so. God is with you, Nate. He has a great plan for you. And making this putt is part of that plan." Trey pointed at the spot again. "If you hit it to this spot, it'll feed back down to the hole and go in. I just know it."

Nate nodded. "O-kay. Nate do dat."

As Nate lined up the putt, it was clear to the viewing audience that he was aiming further out to the right, toward the fringe, toward the spot with zero margin. "Looks like he's going for the win," Nantz said excitedly.

"Great decision, Jim," Faldo replied. "He's a hero either way. Come on, Nate. You can do it. Finish this."

The crowd was deathly quiet as they, too, sensed the enormity of the moment. If Nate made the putt, they'd tell the story over and over about being in the gallery on the 18th hole that day. Most would say they knew Nate was going to make it. Some would say they called out encouragement to Nate just before he took aim. And a few would say that Nate made eye contact with them and smiled confidently just before he hit that putt.

With 40,000 souls around the green, it was nonetheless eerily quiet as Nate hit the putt. As the ball left the putter, it rolled over the ridge with speed, then up to the top of the green, and into the fringe.

“Whoa now,” Nantz said as the ball turned precariously near the edge of the green. Another rotation and it would trickle over the green and into the water. The crowd took a collective deep breath, sucking air hard, as if trying to keep the ball from making that last rotation.

It stopped on the spot where Trey had pointed and hung in the fringe for an eternal second. Just when it appeared that it might be hung up, God's gravity took over and the ball slowly nudged to the left and rotated backwards toward the green. At several points it looked like it might not make it out of the fringe... but it did.

One rotation turned into two, then three, and the ball was soon picking up speed as it rolled off the fringe and back onto the green.

“Here it comes,” Nantz cried out excitedly. “Watch it now.”

The ball tracked toward the hole in slow motion as millions of eyes around the world watched the drama. As the ball approached the hole, Trey coaxed it on with a quick yell, “Come on, baby.”

It was a great putt.

By now, Nate had walked up to the top tier of the green and was standing next to Trey, watching as the ball made one last rotation and stopped on the edge of the hole. The crowd gasped as the ball hung on the edge of the cup. Finally, with the help of gravity, it quivered as it was pulled, turned one last time, and fell into the cup. The crowd erupted into a thunderous ovation.

“He made it! He made it!” Nantz yelled. “Fifteen year- old Nate Cooper has just won the United States Open. Wow! How about that putt!”

Before the ball hit the bottom of the cup, Trey was hugging Nate. Quickly Kristie and Jace ran onto the green and joined them, and with the crowd cheering, the foursome embraced and began jumping up and down.

They did that for nearly a minute. When they stopped, Nate looked into his dad’s eyes. “Hap-e Faw-der Day dad. Nate love you.”

“I love you, too, Nate. You are the greatest son a man could ever have.”

Then Trey hugged Kristie. “You were so right baby,” he whispered into her ear, “God really did have a great plan. I just knew Nate was going to make that putt.”

And Trey fell to his knees and raised his arms to heaven and cried out with joy.

As unforgettable as that moment was, the interview with Nate may have been even more unforgettable.

Gary McCord pulled Nate aside. “Nate, you may have just pulled off the greatest moment in sport’s history. Tell us what you’re feeling right this moment.”

“Nate give all glor-y to God. Dat make Nate hap-e.”

“Did you ever think you weren’t going to make that last putt?”

The double negative confused Nate. “Dad say God with Nate, dat Nate make putt. And Nate make putt.”

“Let me bring your dad in, Nate.”

Beaming, Trey moved in close to McCord. “Trey, you were a great amateur golfer in your own right. But now, to see your son win the U.S. Open at the age of 15... what’s that feel like?”

“It’s the greatest feeling ever. I’m proud, I’m excited, but mostly I’m thankful... thankful to my wife for always being the guiding light for Nate, thankful to my dad for teaching Nate to play golf, but mostly thankful to God. He really does have a plan for all of our lives... we just need to trust him.”

McCord was about to ask another question when Nate noticed something moving on his trouser leg.

“No move,” Nate said directly to McCord.

McCord froze.

“Dare ant on you leg.” Nate bent down and put his finger near the ant. The ant crawled onto Nate’s finger, then onto his palm. Nate brought the little ant up to his eyes. “Hi dare lit-tle ant. You want come home Nate?”

Nate paused for the answer.

“O-kay. Dat great. You tell all Nate ants ‘bout golf game.”

McCord watched in amazement. He looked at Trey and asked, “So, how will the Coopers celebrate this great victory?”

Trey responded, “I’ll let Nate answer that one.” Trey looked at his son. “Nate, tell Mister McCord how we’re going to celebrate tomorrow.”

Nate leaned into the microphone. “Nate help at soup kit-chin, see Ant-man movie, have Chick-fil-A, and go church. Dat a per-fect day.”

McCord smiled at Nate. “It does sound perfect-- help the needy, be entertained, eat some fried chicken, and spend some time with God.”

“And Je-sus,” Nate added.

“And Jesus,” McCord repeated enthusiastically.

And in the months that followed, millions around the world would become new volunteers in soup kitchens and homeless shelters, Antman 2 would set box office records, Chick-fil-A sales would soar, and belief in God would become more important than Facebook likes.

As Nate and Trey walked off the green to sign their scorecard at the scorer's tent, they saw a young boy of perhaps 5 years-old. He was sitting on his dad's shoulders holding up a homemade rainbow-colored sign that said, 'I love you, Nate. You give us all hope.'

Trey stopped with Nate in front of the man and his son. As he looked up at the boy, Trey couldn't help but notice the faraway look in the boy's eyes, and he was sure the boy had some sort of mental challenge. He looked into the dad's eyes and could almost sense the father's joy having witnessed Nate's win. Nate really did give them hope.

Trey smiled at the dad.

The dad smiled back, looked at Nate and said, "Congratulations, Nate. Great win today."

Nate smiled back. "Dank you."

Trey offered his hand to shake. "Thanks for coming out and supporting Nate. You have no idea how much love he felt out there, and without that love, I'm not sure Nate would have won." Trey motioned up at the boy on the man's shoulders. "How old's your son?"

"He's five."

"I remember when Nate was five. It was a hard time for me. Hang in there. Your son is a gift and I am sure God has a great plan for you and him."

The man nodded and became emotional very quickly. "I almost left my wife and son last month. But then I heard about Nate and your story. You really do give us hope."

Tears welled in Trey's eyes. He looked at Nate. "Hey Nate," he said, "what do you say we give the ball you used to win the U.S. Open to this little boy?"

Nate broke into a big grin. "Dat great."

Trey instructed Nate to sign the ball and Nate did. Then he lifted the ball up to the boy. The boy took it. "Dad-e," he said, "Nate give Jake ball."

Tears fell down the dad's cheeks. "Thank you," he said. And in his heart, he somehow knew everything was going to be okay for him and his family.

Trey said, "Take care of that ball. I have a feeling it may be worth something. If times get real tough, Nate and I want you to use that ball to help your family.

The dad wiped his eyes. "Thank you. I think we're going to be alright now."

Before they walked away, Trey had one more thing to say. "And make sure you tell your son that you love him... every day."

The man nodded and wiped his eyes.

Two hours later, the Coopers walked to their car. Trey carried the golf bag, Jace carried the sterling silver U.S. Open trophy, Nate carried the new ant that would live in his ant farm, and Kristie carried an overflowing heart and a deeper faith than even before.

TWENTY FIVE

At 10 pm on that unforgettable Father's Day, the four Coopers were gathered together in Nate's bedroom. None of it seemed real, and Trey couldn't stop glancing over at the U.S. Open trophy atop Nate's chest-of-drawers.

Nate was in bed, saying his prayers. He didn't understand the enormity of what had happened, but he knew he was loved and that was enough for him. Oh, and he was excited to be going to see *Antman 2* tomorrow.

"Dank you Je-sus dis great day. Bwess mom dad Pa-Pa. Dank you golf. One day Nate dad Pa-Pa play golf. Mom watch. A-men."

Trey looked into Nate's eyes, "We can play golf any day you want to, Nate."

Jace laughed out and added, "That's right. In fact, I just happen to have a tee time for the three of us this Thursday... at St. Andrews."

Trey didn't understand. "St. Andrews? As in Scotland? What are you talking about?"

Jace responded, "I guess it's one of those weird British laws... if you win more than a million pounds you have to collect it in person... taxes, I guess. So, since we're gonna be over there collecting my winnings, I thought we'd go up to St. Andrews and pay homage to the golfing Gods." He winked, "It's pretty easy to get a tee time when you tell them Nate Cooper, the U.S. Open champ, is in your foursome."

"Holy cow," Trey said, as he looked into his father's eyes. "You made that crazy bet?"

Jace nodded. "Un-huh. That day after I was baptized. I just had this strong feeling that somehow Nate was going to win." He swallowed hard and collected himself. "It wasn't crazy," he said, "it was a God-thing." He winked at Kristie.

"Wow. Five million pounds. That's over 7 million dollars."

Jace nodded. "Un-huh. I already have my eye on a nice piece of property in Fayetteville. And I already have the design of the house I'm going to build-- a big white farm house with an inviting front porch." Jace winked at Nate. "I'm going to use the money to build a homeless shelter, put in a driving range, and have a putting green. Thanks to Nate, I even have the name all picked out-- Jace Place."

That made Nate laugh. "Jace Place. You rhyme Pa-Pa. Dat name on Nate painting."

Jace smiled at his grandson, the U.S. Open Champ. "I'm gonna teach golf to the homeless. Maybe I can change a life or two through golf... and God."

"I know a pretty good putting teacher," Trey replied. "And he also happens to know a thing or two about God."

"And Je-sus," Nate chimed in.

Trey looked at Nate, "Nate, you want to help PaPa?"

He nodded his head up and down quickly. "Nate like dat."

Then Nate closed his eyes and went to sleep. He was soon dreaming of playing with his ants when he awoke.

Four days later, Trey, Jace, Nate, and Kristie were walking hand-in-hand down a lush green fairway into a bright and beautiful Scottish sunrise. In the background, the distinctive Royal and Ancient Clubhouse rose majestically. It was the same scene Nate had painted and given to Trey on his birthday just a month before, the same day Trey had wanted to end his life.

A song was playing in Trey's head...

Shine your light and let the whole world see,
Singing, for the glory of the risen king,
Jesus, Shine a light and let the whole world see,
Singing, for the glory of the risen king.

As they walked into that Scottish sunrise, Trey felt the sun kiss his face and felt the grace and love of God embrace him. It was glorious and tears soon filled his eyes. He squeezed Kristie's and Nate's hands tightly and blinked back his tears. Then, looking up to the heavens, he whispered a heartfelt thanks to God and His great plan.

This day, like every day, was a God-thing.

—THE END—

Please turn the page

A NOTE TO READERS FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed reading “The Ant Shepherd” and found it both entertaining and inspirational. I loved writing it.

I came up with the basic concept for a story like this when I had the following thought: wouldn't it be great if someone's 'handicap' actually turned out to be an 'advantage.'

I thought about that for a while and eventually came up with 'Nate' and the concept that a 'mentally-challenged' boy could actually be 'mentally-advantaged' on a golf course. Golf is a deliberate and very mental sport, not reactionary, like baseball and many other sports. And Bobby Jones had it completely correct when he said, “You swing your best when you have the fewest things to think about.”

I know. I am too mental on a golf course!

I love Nate... truly I do. And I loved writing every scene that involved Nate, every utterance of his, and all the love that came so naturally out of him. He really is Nate the Great. Nate makes everything better, and the world would be a much better place if we were all a little more like Nate. He has a profound simplicity and the ability to see wondrous greatness in everything. Nate does not see old, or worn, or dirty. Nate sees with his heart and looks at other people's hearts. Nate loves first... even the tiniest of life. If we all did that, so many problems in this world would go away.

There are different themes for each of the main characters. Around Nate, the theme is, of course, to love first.

I also loved writing about Trey. In many ways, I was, and am, Trey. The theme around Trey is to never give up. Suicide is never the answer. As Trey would come to find, Jesus-- and only Jesus-- is the answer. So, if you ever get to the point where you are thinking of giving up, think about Trey and know that you may be just one great day away-- or one surrendering away-- from turning things around.

Jace showed that it is never too late to ask for forgiveness and to accept Jesus into your heart. And with God's great grace and forgiveness, there is always a second chance. I loved writing his comeback story.

And Kristie... she is so beautiful inside and out, her faith unwavering. God knows the plans He has for us and, like Kristie, we need to place our trust in Him. Things may not always happen the way we want, or when we want, but we need to trust in Him.

I am deeply saddened by the mad and sickening world we live in. My hope is that reading “The Ant Shepherd” will move you closer to God and Jesus. In my humble opinion, that is the only real hope for the world and each of us.

Time will tell.

I did not write this book to make money, and it will always be free to anyone who wants to read it (although for legal purposes, I must note that I have copyrighted it and retain all legal rights). If you enjoyed it, 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.fmsc.org).

This book is dedicated to my kids: Kelly, Sean, Patrick, Mackenzie, and Allie. I love each of you so much and hope you will always strive to be great like Nate, to never give up like Trey, to turn to God and ask for His forgiveness like Jace, and to trust in God like Kristie.

Thank you for reading “The Ant Shepherd.” Please visit me at “JayRoseBook.com”.

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, March 2018--