

HEAL THE WOUNDED



LYNN DOVE

REVIEWS FOR *SHOOT THE WOUNDED*

“This book digs deep into the lives of youth... I feel every parent and teenager should sit down and read this book together.” (*Shoot the Wounded* named as Finalist in the 2010 Readers Favorite Book Awards in the Young Adult Category)

—READERSFAVORITE.COM

“Lynn’s first book, *Shoot the Wounded*, is of the same calibre as Janette Oke’s first book, *Love Comes Softly*—the book that sold millions and propelled her into the reading public’s heart like a rocket. *Shoot the Wounded* is a book that will keep you up reading all night whether you are a teen or a fifty-something grammy like me! You’ll be buying copies for every teen you love.”

—CONNIE CAVANAUGH
Author and International Speaker

“[*Shoot the Wounded*] should be read by anyone who works closely with Christian teenagers, and of course, by teenagers themselves.”

—GOODREADS REVIEW

“Five stars all the way for this moving yet delightful peek into the lives of teenagers.”

—ELLEN C. MAZE
Author

“I loved reading *Shoot the Wounded*. What a great message!”

—J. HUFFMAN
*Principal, Bearspaw Christian School
Calgary, Alberta*

“Excellent book... am already anticipating Book 2 in the series!”

—B. KELLY
Teacher

“The characters are believable and the storyline engaging.”

—S. BOOTH
*Adjunct Professor, Canadian Southern Baptist Seminary
Cochrane, Alberta*

“This book was amazing... I loved the way the characters mirrored real-life situations, misunderstandings, friendships, and families... This could be a great start to changing the way youth, and even adults, treat one another, especially within the church.”

—A. HIGGINS
College Student

“This is a gripping book... This is a great read for teens.”

—NOVEL TEEN REVIEW

“*Shoot the Wounded* is aimed at young adult Christian audiences, but its topic is universal no matter your age or faith.”

—COCHRANE EAGLE

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*Dedicated to these courageous women
who fought the good fight:*

Laura Dove

Ellen Jorgensen

Victoria De Jager

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since publishing my first book, *Shoot the Wounded*, my life has taken a dramatic, albeit exciting, shift where I'm not only recognized as a wife, mom, and soon-to-be grandmother, but also as an author and award-winning blogger. I'm getting letters and emails from all around the world. I'll admit I'm a little overwhelmed some days by this new notoriety! I spend my days writing and networking with other authors from around the world and feel so blessed that God has placed me amongst a group of new family members; namely all those men and women who feel they have been called by God to write. So to all my new brothers and sisters, I say thank you for the way you have all encouraged me this past year, how you've been so willing to share your personal successes and failures with me to teach me more about the writing and publishing world than I ever knew before! Bless you all!

To Charles, my heart continues to overflow with love for you every day. Thanks for all the times you brought home pizza or Chinese food so I could keep writing and not have to worry about fixing supper. My three children—Laurelle, Brett, and Carmen—who practically had to stand in front of my computer screen sometimes to get my attention this past year, thanks for being patient with me while I pursued my dream. I love you all so much!

According to the Canadian Cancer Society, breast cancer is the most common cancer among Canadian women (excluding non-

melanoma skin cancer). An estimated 23,200 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer and 5,300 will die of it. An estimated 180 men will be diagnosed with breast cancer and 50 will die of it. On average, 445 Canadian women will be diagnosed with breast cancer every week. On average, 100 Canadian women will die of breast cancer every week. One in nine women is expected to develop breast cancer during her lifetime and one in 28 will die of it.

In 2001, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and now, nearly ten years later, I'm cancer free. Many consider me a survivor. I hope that I have done much more than *survive*... I hope I have *thrived*! It has taken me ten years to write about my experience with cancer and I have elected to share some of my journey with the disease through the character of Maggie Taylor. I pray that everyone who reads *Heal the Wounded*—and later, *Love the Wounded*—will have a better understanding of what it means to battle and beat this terrible disease.

To all the doctors and nurses at the Foothills Hospital and at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre in Calgary, Alberta, my heartfelt thanks go out to all of you. You are indeed the hands and feet of Jesus as He uses you to minister to each one of His children who are suffering from cancer. Lean on Him for strength on those days when you are weary from caring for patients who don't seem to appreciate your sacrifice on their behalf. Let Him encourage you and comfort you. Yours is indeed a thankless job and I just want you to know from one who has benefitted from your care that I am grateful for all you do!

*“He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.”*

PSALMS 147:3

*“Let us then approach the throne of
grace with confidence, so that we may
receive mercy and find grace to
help us in our time of need.”*

HEBREWS 4:16



CHAPTER 1

“Cancer...?” Jake looked at his hands and mouthed the word again. Her words struck him in the chest like a sledgehammer. He felt his older sister Fran tremble slightly as she shifted uncomfortably on the couch beside him.

“Yes, Jake...” his mother said softly, “but we think we caught it early enough. I’ll have to have surgery and the doctors recommend chemotherapy, but I have a good chance of beating this.”

Jake looked over at his mother and father sitting across from him on the loveseat. Maggie didn’t sound very confident, but she was putting up a good front. Jake’s father was holding Maggie’s hand tightly. Jake noticed how Grant was absentmindedly spinning her wedding ring around and around her finger as he continued to stroke her hand. Again he felt Fran tremble and then quickly leave her seat beside him to kneel in front of their mother. Fran reached around her mother and proceeded to sob into Maggie’s neck. Grant put his arm around his wife and daughter and beckoned to Jake to join them in this group hug. Jake wanted to run as fast as he could out of that room, away from this news, away from this pain, but instead he moved like a shadow towards his parents and stood silently while his father bowed his head and began to pray.

That had been a week ago. Jake sat in the dark, his computer screen flashing the only light in his room. The wind howled outside and sleet skipped over the roof and tapped against his window with white vengeance. The blizzard had been predicted, the temperature was falling rapidly, and tomorrow they would wake up to snow drifts and frigid wind chills. School would likely be cancelled. It would be the second time in a month. He didn't care.

The homepage screen lit up again. He hadn't responded to Leigh's last message and he wasn't sure he wanted to respond to this one.

"I just need to know you're there, Jake," Leigh messaged. He shut the lid on his laptop computer. He didn't want to get into this with her right now. It was past midnight and he just wanted to be left alone. *Can't she understand that?* Another icy blast of wind beat against the window. He shivered and grabbed a hoodie and put it on over the ripped t-shirt and flannel pyjama bottoms he usually wore to bed. He flopped onto his bed and stared up at the ceiling. "I just need to know that you're there..." He repeated Leigh's words silently to himself as hot tears welled up in his eyes and he felt the raw emotion escape out of him once again. "I just need to know *You're* there, God!" Jake rolled over and beat his pillow with a fist.

"Are You there? Are You listening? Do You care?" He accentuated each question with a vicious punch to his pillow. Jake let the tears come again and felt the darkness overwhelm him. As sleep forced itself upon him, Jake was still asking the question as he drifted off, "Are You there, God?"



Leigh padded into the kitchen the next morning and hugged her little sister, Lisa, who was bustling about making some toast for herself. "It's a snow day!" Lisa chimed.

"No, duh?" Leigh gave her an extra tight squeeze. "It's like forty below out there!" It was a good guess. She looked out at the blankets of whiteness in the yard and noted that the snow ploughs had not as yet cleared the street. They were definitely snowed in for the day.

“Where’s Mom and Dad?” Leigh grabbed the piece of toast from the toaster before Lisa could claim it. Lisa scrunched her nose at Leigh in protest.

“They’re in the living room. Dad’s trying to get a fire started. He wants it going in case the power goes off like it did last time.” Lisa pointed towards the front room and snatched the next piece of toast out of the toaster before Leigh could grab that one, too.

Leigh looked out the window at the outside thermometer—minus forty degrees Celsius. Add to that a wind chill and Leigh was not too far off the mark in saying it was forty below zero. These frigid days in January did not happen often but when they did there was always the distinct possibility of power outages. The power lines would load up with heavy snow and break or the underground lines would freeze. The power grids in the city would be overwhelmed by the increased use of electricity, causing a system overload. The last power outage in Maplewood had lasted nearly six hours. Leigh remembered how she had been grateful for the fireplace in the living room then. She smiled as she heard her father’s voice and the familiar thump of wood being loaded into the fire bin. She buttered her toast and splashed some orange juice into a glass.

This would be a “no thinking” day for sure. Her mom had coined that phrase some years back when bad weather forced the Douglas family to take refuge inside one snow day. The schools were closed, the snow drifts were piled high on the street, and the wind chills prevented anyone from spending any time outdoors. The power had been going on and off all night, so Terry Douglas had built a smouldering fire in the fireplace ready to be stoked throughout the day with dry firewood he kept stacked out by the garage. The upstairs bedrooms were chilly but at least the living room was nice and toasty warm.

The three Douglas children—Leigh, Brian, and Lisa, who was a preschooler at the time—huddled under a warm comforter and watched the crackling fire with interest. They were still dressed in their “jammies” and gratefully accepted the mugs of hot chocolate Ellen had managed to make before the power went out again. Whenever the power was restored, even for a short while, Ellen would scramble to heat water and pour it into thermoses so they could at least make something

warm to drink, or make “itchy ban,” as Lisa called the prepackaged noodles that could be prepared easily by pouring hot water over them in a cup. Homemade cookies and peanut butter sandwiches would finish off the feast. If the power came on long enough to watch TV, they would all curl up and watch a family show together. Ellen would again scramble to make muffins, or something quick to eat before the power again cut out. It became a game of sorts to see what kinds of things she could make between power surges. But even when the power was finally fully restored, the family remained huddled together under the warm comforter.

As day turned to evening, candles were lit instead of turning on the lights, and Terry added more wood to the fire. The family sat together watching the flames dance and leap, enjoying the warm glow of both fire and candlelight around them. The children eventually drifted off curled up under the blanket and Terry and Ellen enjoyed one more cup of hot chocolate together before carrying their children up to their own beds. It was a wonderfully peaceful end to a “no thinking” day.

Leigh peeked around the corner and looked at her mom, knees tucked under her as she sat on the couch watching her husband Terry ball up more newspaper and add some kindling to help the larger logs burn in the fireplace. She caught sight of Leigh and beckoned her to come sit beside her.

“Looks like we’re housebound today.” Ellen Douglas shifted position so Leigh had more room beside her. “Your dad can’t even get out of the driveway with this drifting snow piled up... and it’s too cold to start shovelling out. At least the power is on for now, so I’ve got a batch of muffins baking and another one at the ready. Luckily we have cold pizza from last night.”

“Mom, we won’t starve.” Leigh laughed and took a bite out of her piece of toast. “You always have stuff in the house for us to eat, cold or not.”

Ellen smiled. She turned again to watch her husband’s progress with the fire. Leigh took another bite of toast and looked out the window. All she could see was a gray whiteness outside. It was hard to distinguish shapes in the snow. All lines and angles took on the form of

wavy curves of white—like frosting slowly dripping off a cake. Leigh didn't like the cold, but had to admit she liked snowy days.

“Remember David's reaction to snow last week, Mom?” Leigh giggled as she remembered the six-month-old bundled in his tiny snow-suit. “I didn't think the little guy could even move in that suit! But when we put him on the sled, he thought it was the funnest ride ever!”

Ellen grinned. “Yeah, but he didn't think it funny when he sort of rolled off the sled and face planted in the snow!” Leigh and Ellen laughed together. What a precious little boy! In a few weeks, David and his adoptive parents, Belinda and Wes Campbell, would be going on the mission field working with First Nations People in Northern Ontario. They had hoped to get an international posting but after working closely with church planters on the Stoney and T'sutina reserves in Alberta, they found their passion in ministry working with all First Nations people. Wes was already corresponding with the local Band Council there to establish a Teen Center on the reserve. They were excited to go. Unfortunately, the Douglasses were already depressed by the prospects of having to say goodbye to the young couple, and especially to precious David whom everyone had come to love and adore.

Leigh's eyes clouded as she thought about her best friend Ronnie. “It's going to be so hard on the Webbers... well... on *all* of us, to see David go.” Ellen sympathetically put her arm around Leigh.

“Yes, it is going to be hard, but they knew this day would come eventually. They're prepared for it, even if it's hard,” Ellen said.

The Webbers and the Douglasses had been neighbours for many years. Ronnie Webber and Leigh had grown up inseparable friends, having gone to school and church together from the time they were in kindergarten until tenth grade last year. Leigh and Ronnie's friendship faced some serious challenges in their junior high years, especially after Jake moved into the neighbourhood and both girls seemed to vie for his attention. When Ronnie discovered she was pregnant, she decided to give up her baby for adoption but tragically never saw David placed in his new adoptive home. Ronnie's parents, Dot and Will, and her two brothers, Tim and Evan, were still grieving over her sudden death, as were the Douglasses.

Leigh's thoughts turned to Jake Taylor and she furrowed her brow involuntarily. She was really worried about him. He had been one of Ronnie's closest friends and had stood by her through her pregnancy, even when all her other friends abandoned her. He was not handling her death well at all. In fact, he had changed over the past few months and Leigh felt he was becoming more and more moody and distant. *Maybe he just needs more time*, she thought.

Leigh cuddled closer to her mom and involuntarily shivered. "Dad, is that fire going yet?"

"The wood must have been a little wet," Terry Douglas complained. "I forgot to cover it with a tarp after the last snowfall." He blew at a flame, hoping some oxygen would light the kindling. Instead he blew the flame out and shrugged his shoulders. Balling up another wad of newspaper and tucking it under the log, he relit the paper with a match. "I'll have it going real soon."

Leigh and her mother smiled. It might take time, but they both knew he would not let something like this beat him. Now it was personal.

Leigh's brother Brian sauntered into the room, his hair in morning disarray. He stretched and yawned at the same time and scratched his bare chest while pulling up the sweat pants he wore to bed. Terry looked up at his tall teenaged son and smiled. "Bri, it's a snow day. I thought for sure you'd be asleep until noon at least."

Brian yawned again. Over the last six months, he had experienced a huge growth spurt. He was taller than Leigh now. "Growing takes a lot out of me, Dad. It's not my fault." Brian flopped down on the carpet and stretched out to his full length. Lisa kicked at him as she went past to sit beside Leigh and her mom on the couch. Brian merely grunted but refused to move. The wood started to crackle and Terry gave a thumbs-up sign, indicating success at last.

Leigh tucked her legs up under her and sighed. They were a very busy family most of the time, each with their own schedules and activities. It was seldom they could gather all together in one room for an extended period of time. She sighed again. *This is nice*, she thought. *It's cold outside and we're all here and there's nothing for us to do but just BE a family. How lucky are we... How lucky am I?*

The feeling was short-lived. Brian belched loudly and rolled over. Lisa squealed, “Ewww... Bri-an! You’re disgusting!” Brian emitted another bodily noise and smiled with satisfaction when Lisa made a hasty retreat to the kitchen. Leigh and her parents swiftly followed her. “You make sure you watch over the fire so it doesn’t go out,” Terry called to his son from the kitchen. Leigh held her nose as she walked by her brother. Brian pounced on the vacated couch and curled up into a contented ball. Soon he was fast asleep.



CHAPTER 2

Tim Webber could hear his little brother downstairs. The TV was on, tuned in to Evan's favourite show on Animal Planet. *Crap*, he thought. *Now I have to be stuck here all day with my stupid brother and my stupid parents!* Tim had been up for hours, lying in his bed with his iPod plugged into his ear. The guttural sounds of heavy death metal soothed him in ways nothing else could. His parents had already voiced their disapproval of his taste in music, but he didn't care what they thought about him, his music, or *anything*. They had no idea what he was going through personally, and he didn't feel any need to tell them. They had been powerless to help Ronnie, his older sister, when she got pregnant. She had died. There was no way they could help him.

He didn't really want their help anyway. One day he would make everyone pay for the way he was feeling right now. For now, he just hated them. Always an introvert, Tim had become even more distant and withdrawn since the death of his sister. He blamed her for what he called "his family's disgrace." She had gotten pregnant and the kids at school had made fun of him and his family ever since. *It was just as well she died*, he thought bitterly to himself. Better that than live with the shame he had to live with each day because of her. He hated her, too. He hated everything about his life. The hate consumed him.

Tim got up to look out the window and swore as he saw the mounds of heavy snow blanketing his front yard. He growled as he turned abruptly from his window and faced the mirror by his closet. Some days he barely recognized his own face in the mirror. He had changed so much in just a few short months. He had dyed his hair black and had let it grow with long bangs hanging limply to one side of his thin, pale face. The bangs covered the scar over his right eye, a visible reminder of how cruel some kids could be. He took special note of the yellowing bruise under his chin—another battle wound from the ongoing torment he faced every day just walking down the hallway at his school.

He snarled at his reflection as he remembered how some boys had cornered him and then pushed him into his locker. They slammed his head into the metal so hard he started to bleed from a deep cut above his right eye. Rather than let up on him, one boy elbowed him in the chin as he walked by and then they all laughed at him and called him “freak.” Tim touched the bruise lightly and lifted his bangs to look at the red welt above his eye. “One day,” he swore to himself, “I’ll make them pay for this.” He turned to his computer and hastily pulled up a website. The images on the site were disturbing and graphic. It showed videos of people inflicting horrible pain and suffering on dogs and cats. Rather than be appalled by the imagery, Tim smiled at the cruelty and torture. “It’s just a matter of time,” he hissed.



Jake woke up late. He was surprised he had slept at all considering how difficult it had been to get to sleep in the first place. The questions he had asked of God in prayer last night still remained unanswered. If God was in control, why was it his mother had breast cancer now? She certainly did not deserve this! If God was a loving God, how could He let something like this happen? Jake remembered how God had allowed Ronnie to die. “Totally not fair, God!” he said out loud. “First Ronnie, now my mom... when are You going to stop hurting the people I love, God?”

Jake moaned as he got out of bed. His normal routine was to open his Bible and read a passage or two from it and then spend a few min-

utes in prayer before going downstairs for breakfast, but this morning he couldn't bring himself to do any of that. His room was even chillier this morning than it had been the night before. He quickly pulled on a sweatshirt and some jeans and plodded downstairs. He was overwhelmed with emotion when he caught sight of his mother in the kitchen.

Maggie was staring out the window, seemingly mesmerized by the snow outside. A mug of hot chocolate was half finished and her Bible lay open on the table in front of her. Jake winced as he noticed she had been reading from the book of Job. Jake had always thought of his mother as one of the most beautiful women in the world. It was not her outward beauty that dazzled him, but her gentle spirit and enduring faith. She admitted to everyone who knew her that she wasn't much of a "homebody." She despised cooking and cleaning and she joked that there were cobwebs on her vacuum cleaner, but Jake, Fran, and their father, Grant, seldom complained about her lack of domestic skills. Maggie placed more importance on enjoying a walk with a friend, reading a good book, or volunteering her time at the church or hospital where she assisted in the resource library. Maggie was startled when she noticed Jake had come into the room.

"Oh, Jake, I didn't know you were up." She brushed a tear from her eye, embarrassed that he had caught her in this vulnerable state. "Can I make you a hot drink?" She started to get up, but Jake stopped her.

"Don't get up, Mom. I can get it." Jake put a hand on her shoulder. "What were you thinking about just now when I came into the room?"

"Oh, you know... just stuff." Maggie tried to smile.

"You worried, Mom?"

"I'd be lying if I said I'm not worried, Jake. It's all the unknowns, I guess. I'm not looking forward to surgery in a couple of weeks or going through chemo after, and I guess that's what worries me the most... but..." She glanced down at her Bible. "God has given me much encouragement this morning."

"From *Job*, Mom? Isn't that, like, the most depressing book in the whole Bible? I mean, that poor guy... he lost everything!" Jake couldn't help but compare his current situation with what Job had en-

duced. Everything Job had loved had been taken away from him. Was he going to have everything taken away from him as well?

“Oh... Jake.” Maggie sighed. “I think you’re missing the point. Job has helped me to understand why sometimes God allows us to go through real challenges in life. We have to trust the importance of God’s purposes even in the midst of suffering, because suffering, like all other human experiences, is still directed by God’s perfect divine wisdom. Job learned, and I am *learning*, that we may never know the specific reasons why we go through bad times, but we must always trust in God. He’s in control, Jake.”

Jake shrugged, unconvinced by his mother’s explanation. “I still don’t get why bad stuff has to happen to good people... especially to you.” Jake sat down wearily beside his mother and faced her.

Maggie smiled at her son and said, “I don’t understand why things happen either, Jake, but God does. That’s enough for me to understand right now.” Maggie looked out the window at the snow again. “The only thing I’m a little worried about is how you, Fran, and your dad will handle things when I’m...”

Jake said it before she could, “Gone? Is that what you’re thinking, Mom?”

Maggie glared at him. “That’s *not* what I was going to say, Jake! I was going to say when I’m *recovering*.” She said the last word slowly, stressing every syllable.

Jake shifted uncomfortably on the kitchen chair and was sorry he had spoken out of turn. “Don’t worry about us, Mom. We’ll be fine. It’s *you* we’re worried about... *you*’ve got to get better!”

Maggie managed a weak smile, very moved by her son’s concern for her.

“I’ll be just fine, Jake... *really*.” Maggie got up from the table and looked out again at the accumulating snow. “I think I’ll get dressed and see if I can shovel the steps out front.”

Jake leapt to his feet. “Are you kidding, Mom? You shouldn’t be doing that! I’ll do it later. Right now you need to take care of yourself. Don’t overdo things, okay?”

“Jake,” Maggie quietly reprimanded, “I’m perfectly capable of shovelling the steps. In fact, I don’t want to stop doing the things that

need doing around here. I don't feel sick, Jake. Let me try to live as normally as possible for as long as possible."

Jake was silently watching his mother from the window when his father joined him. "What's your mom doing?" Grant asked. Jake pointed to the bundled figure outside, busily trying to shovel the heavy snow off each porch step.

"You're kidding, right?" Grant furrowed his brow and waved to his wife outside.

Maggie waved back and they could see that her cheeks were red from her exertion and there were snowflakes hanging off her eyelashes. She smiled and bravely continued to struggle with the heavy snow.

Grant laughed and turned away from the window. He walked over to the cupboard and pulled out a couple of coffee mugs and then calmly put the kettle on. Leaning against the cupboard, he waited for the water to boil. Jake fumed at him and then grabbed his arm. "Dad, I don't think Mom should be doing that."

"Why not? She looks like she's enjoying herself." Grant laughed again. Jake gave his father a dark look. Grant became serious. "Look, Jake... let her be. She won't be out there long anyway. It's way too cold." He pointed to the boiling water, indicating that he was prepared to make her a hot drink when she came back inside.

"But Dad," Jake complained, "she's sick. She shouldn't be doing stuff like that. I don't want her to get any more sick."

Grant patted Jake's shoulder. "You know, Jake, we've got to cut her some slack. It's important for her that we treat her the same way we've always treated her."

Jake shook his head. How could they treat her the same way when everything about her was forever changed? She had cancer now.

Grant seemed to understand the struggle Jake was going through trying to deal with his mother's diagnosis. He was as confused and upset by all this as his son. Just the other night, as Maggie lay sleeping tucked up close beside him, he tried to convince himself that her cancer diagnosis was just a bad dream. She had sighed in her slumber and the softness about her face made him catch his breath. He was so in love with her. In a few weeks, she would be facing surgery, and then chemotherapy, and it was all he could do not to collapse under the weight of it

all. He was supposed to be the one to protect his family, but he couldn't protect his wife from what she would have to endure.

At his request, Maggie had brought home books and pamphlets from the hospital library. He had been reading and had spent hours researching online. Comparing all the statistics and trying to find out as much about breast cancer as he could gave him something to do. It gave him something to occupy his mind and invested him with a sense of purpose. The more he researched, however, the more he feared for his wife. How could he live without her? He shook his head involuntarily and smiled weakly at Jake. He could not let himself crumble in front of his children, or his wife. They needed him to be strong now more than ever.

Grant looked out the window again and then quickly went to the hall closet and grabbed his parka, boots, toque, and gloves and joined Maggie outside. *We'll face this challenge together*, he thought as he picked his wife up in his arms and spun her around until they both collapsed laughing in the deep snow. Holding hands, they made snow angels while Jake glared out the window at them.



CHAPTER 3

Mike woke up to the yelling. He rolled over and tried to drown out the sound of his parents' voices by putting his pillow over his head. It was futile. He had become so accustomed to their arguing that he hardly registered it anymore, but this morning he had looked forward to sleeping in, especially since it was a snow day and he was confined to the house. At least when he was at school he could get away from them for a little while. He was so sick and tired of hearing them constantly bickering and quarrelling. He had listened to the same arguments ever since he was five years old. He moaned as he heard the door to his mother's room slam shut, followed by her using an angry expletive as she cursed at her husband. He knew what would follow. His father would pound up the stairs and yell at her through the locked door. This would carry on until he finally stormed off to his room or to the bar down the street. She would never open the door for him.

When will they stop doing that? Mike sighed to himself, and sure enough he heard his father's footfalls outside in the hallway. "Claire! Open this door right now!"

Mike sat up in bed and ran his hands through his sleep-tousled hair. His father continued to pound on the locked door next to Mike's bedroom and, finally giving up, hurled one more curse at the closed

door. Mike could hear him stumble back downstairs and retreat to his bedroom in the basement. Another slammed door. Mike knew he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep now. He knew his mother would eventually try to gain his sympathy later in the morning. She didn't fight fair. She had tried for years to turn Mike against his father, but Mike would not take sides. He determined that both his parents were equally to blame for the mistakes they had made in their marriage. He just wished they would leave him out of it.

Mike leaned over his nightstand and picked up the Bible Jake had given him several months before. "God, just get me through today, okay?" He mumbled a quick prayer and opened the leather-bound book.



"Hello?" Leigh said, answering her cell phone, but she already knew who was calling. Jake's ringtone was distinctive.

"Hey," Jake said softly.

"Hey. What's up?" She was relieved to hear his voice but could guess by the softness of his tone that he was feeling down... again.

"Not much... too cold to do anything today anyway."

Leigh was slightly annoyed with him. Jake had been avoiding her for the past week. Ever since Jake lost the student council election at the beginning of their Grade 11 year, he had been quiet and subdued. Jake did not begrudge the popular Marshal Winter becoming student council president, but along with losing his friend Ronnie only weeks before it was enough to throw him into a spiralling kind of depression. It was difficult for Leigh to watch Jake struggle with his feelings. He was usually so strong and self-assured, but now he seemed distant from her, especially the last couple of weeks.

"Do you feel like hanging out today?" Jake asked and then added, "I have something I need to talk to you about."

Leigh felt her throat constrict. She suddenly felt so unsure of herself, so unsure of their relationship. They had only been dating a short while, but since Ronnie's death she had felt like Jake was pulling away from her. Did he want to break up?

She swallowed. "Uh, sure, Jake. When?"

Jake could hear a little panic rise in her voice and realized he should have told her sooner about all the things that were going on in his life. He had kept her in the dark thinking he could handle things on his own. He had pushed her away. He suddenly thought, *I've pushed her away, just like I've been pushing God away.* Suddenly he felt guilty for neglecting his quiet time with God that morning. Jake tried to make his voice sound more casual.

"How about I come over after lunch some time?"

"Sounds good, Jake. I'll be here."

Leigh went to her closet and pulled out a warm sweater and some jeans. As she dressed, she became more and more worried about what Jake would have to say. She picked up a brush and started to brush out the tangles in her naturally curly blonde hair. *What does Jake even see in me?* What was it Ronnie had once said? "*Who would want to date a ditzy blonde like me?*" It wasn't exactly what Ronnie had said, but it was exactly what Leigh thought about herself when she looked in the mirror. She certainly wasn't as pretty as Ronnie had been. In fact, in Leigh's opinion, she was rather plain looking. She didn't have the perfect complexion like Janelle, or the athletic body like Corey. She certainly wasn't very outgoing; she was only an average student, not an honours student like Jake. *What does Jake see in me?* she said again to herself.

She remembered her first impression of Jake. Tall, blonde, muscular... a "hottie," she had thought when she first saw him. *He is so perfect and, well...* She looked at her reflection. *I'm not anywhere near perfect.* She had always been a little self-conscious, but as she looked in the mirror now every one of her flaws seemed to stand out. Jake and Ronnie had been good friends. Ronnie had been the exact opposite of Leigh. Ronnie had been beautiful, for one thing. No doubt if Ronnie had lived, Jake and Ronnie would be together now. Self-doubt continued to gnaw at Leigh. "I'm sure he's going to break up with me sooner or later," she said out loud as hot tears filled her eyes. She looked at her wristwatch. She only had an hour to prepare.



As expected, the power went out shortly after. Grant had finished shovelling the steps after sending Maggie inside to warm up. He came through the back door, stomping the loose snow from his boots.

“Whoa, it’s cold!” he complained and blew into his hands to try to warm them up. Even though he had been wearing leather gloves outside, his fingers still felt numb. Maggie looked up at him from the table.

“I made you a sandwich,” she said. “As you can see, the power’s off.”

Grant tried to flick on the kitchen light anyway. He winked at her. “Yep, it’s off.”

“Told you.” She smiled. “Jake is thinking of going over to talk to Leigh. He asked me if it was okay if he told her about me. To tell you the truth, Grant, I was a little surprised he hadn’t told her already. I mean, it’s not really a secret. They know about it at the hospital, and I have already talked to our pastor. Why didn’t Jake tell Leigh about this?” Maggie frowned and absentmindedly broke a part of the crust off her sandwich.

Grant bit into his sandwich and wiped a crumb from the corner of his mouth. He had been hesitant to tell his closest friends of this crisis, too. Immediately he regretted that. He realized he would need his close friends around him more than ever now.

“You know, Maggie, I think Jake is having a hard time right now. It’s not just your diagnosis that’s got him down, it’s a combination of a lot of things. First Ronnie, then the school election, and now David’s leaving. There are lot of things on his mind right now.”

“I realize all that,” Maggie said. “But Jake usually takes things in stride. I thought he brushed off the election loss pretty well. Granted, I know he was disappointed, but then he started to draw into himself and when I asked him about it he said, ‘The better man won. I didn’t deserve to win.’”

“That doesn’t sound like Jake.” Grant frowned. “Jake’s never been one to put himself down like that. I like Marshall, don’t get me wrong—he’s a great student body president—but Jake was just as deserving of that title as Marshall was.”

“I agree.” Maggie sipped a glass of water. “And the vote was so close, too. Leigh told me that Marshall asked Jake if he would help him on council, an opportunity to prepare himself for what would be a sure victory next year, but Jake refused. Leigh even said that Jake told her he probably wouldn’t run for student council president next year.”

“Hmmm?” Grant mumbled with another piece of sandwich in his mouth. Jake came into the kitchen then and his parents glanced at each other. Jake knew they had been talking about him again.

“What’s up?” Jake questioned. His mother looked a little guilty. Grant avoided answering by taking another bite out of his sandwich and chewing slowly. Jake shrugged.

“I’m heading over to Leigh’s now, okay?”

Maggie felt fortunate Jake hadn’t forced her to answer his first question. “Put on your coat and gloves. I don’t want you to get a chill.”

Jake was already out the door. The cold hit him with full force, freezing his nasal hairs. He almost regretted his decision to walk over to Leigh’s today. He could have told her over the phone and saved himself from being out in the cold, but he felt like he needed to say this face to face. It was going to be tough either way.



Mike glanced at his clock radio. It was an automatic reaction and he realized immediately the futility of it with the power being off. He could hear his mother still crying in her bedroom just next door. He knew he couldn’t hide in his room much longer, but he also knew she would be right there in his face trying to get him to side with her as soon as she heard him in the hall. Sure enough, the familiar but tell-tale squeak from his bedroom door caused his mother to quickly open her door and, in a choked sob, she called him into her room.

“Look, Mom...” he tried to say, but she had already pulled him inside and closed the door. She looked a mess.

“Mike. This is the last time I’m putting up with his...” She swore.

It offended Mike to hear his mother use such language. He had grown up listening to that talk as if it was a normal way for people to communicate with one another. Now that he had become a follower of

Christ, the foul language he heard around the house affected him as never before.

“Mom, I don’t want to get involved in your and Dad’s arguments. Leave me out of it.”

“I can’t, Mike, not this time. He’s gambling away our savings, your college funds. He’s lying about it, Mike, but I know. All he’s interested in is drinking and playing those stupid VLT slot machines at the casino. I’m sick of it, Mike. I have to leave.” Claire was using her most overly-dramatic gestures to show that she meant it this time, but Mike didn’t believe her. He had heard her say this time and time again. She had threatened to leave Mike’s father, Jim, for six years or more. The truth was that she was afraid to leave. Jim, despite his drinking and supposed gambling, managed to maintain his high-salaried engineering job with a large oil company in Calgary. He made a good living. No one at the office suspected his “casual” drinking was anything more than that. He had learned to keep his personal life separate from his professional life. It astounded Mike that no one had caught on at the office. He had seen his father passed out on the couch so many times that he had almost grown accustomed to it. Claire was always threatening to phone the boss and rat her husband out, but she knew if Jim lost his job the beautiful home, cars, and lifestyle she had become accustomed to would be gone.

“So leave him, Mom.” Mike sighed. He’d call her bluff... again. He could see the panic rise up in her eyes from that suggestion.

“I *can’t* leave, Mike,” Claire whined in desperation. “How would I live? How would you live? You’d have to come with me, you know.”

Mike actually laughed out loud. “Mom, I have no intention of leaving until I’m done high school. I’m graduating with my friends. I’ll be eighteen then, and believe it or not I have plans for my life.”

Claire looked up at her son and saw the set of his jaw. She suddenly felt ashamed of herself, but she also felt the familiar fear creep back. Her son would leave her soon. She would be alone. It was overwhelming to her and she started to weep uncontrollably. Mike was unmoved. It was one of the ways she used to manipulate him and he no longer was intimidated by those kinds of tactics.

“Go talk to your Dad, Mike,” she begged. “He’ll listen to you.”

“Yeah right.” Mike shrugged. He had no intention of talking to his father. The wall between them was almost impossible to break through after so many years. He was always surprised that his mother constantly tried to get the two of them to talk and come to some kind of reconciliation when she was so incapable of reconciling with him herself. It was one of those weird ironies within their dysfunctional family make-up.

“Go talk to Dad yourself. I’m going out.” Mike quickly retreated from the room before she could argue further. He grabbed his coat, toque, and gloves quickly and slipped on a pair of running shoes. He was in too much of a hurry to get outside to bother looking for his winter boots in the hall closet. He slammed the front door shut and jumped off the porch only to land ankle deep in the snow. His 1968 Plymouth Road Runner was parked on the street, buried in a snow drift. He winced at seeing it buried under the snow. His father refused to let him park his prized possession in the garage. It was many of the things they had argued over since Mike had started restoring the car.

“Piece of junk!” his dad had called the car when Mike first brought it home. Mike’s dad had agreed to loan Mike half the money he needed to get a car when he turned sixteen. Mike had saved up for two years to buy the car, working at Tim Horton’s and saving the allowance his mother dutifully doled out to him every month. Jim had thought his son would get a little used car, one that would be easy on gas and fairly dependable. Instead Mike had gone to the used car lot where he’d seen the Road Runner. The car was in need of some major body work and an engine rebuild. The upholstery was ripped and the dashboard cracked. Mike didn’t care. He excitedly paid half of what he would have spent on a smaller used car and pocketed the rest of the money his father had loaned him to restore the muscle car. That had been nearly two years ago and Mike had diligently paid off the loan to his father first before spending a nickel on the car. In addition to working at Tim Horton’s almost every weekend, he managed to find a part-time job in a local auto body shop after school. He was fortunate his new boss let him work on his car when the shop wasn’t busy, but still it was a slow process and Mike’s father refused to have anything to do with the whole restoration project, calling it a waste of time and money.

Mike had underestimated the enormity of the project, which he realized once he started ordering parts and came to the conclusion that he would have to do things piecemeal over time without any help, but he refused to admit his father may have been right. With little money to spend on the car, he focused on the engine rebuild first and decided he would take care of the aesthetics of the car later. He and Jake had scoured the local auto wreckers and scraped up the various parts needed to make the car roadworthy at least. The upholstery would wait, he decided so he covered the bench seats with blankets to hide the rips. He had banged out the dents in the quarter panels himself, but hadn't been able to paint them or the rest of the car. It was driveable, but he had to admit it would be a long time before it was the shiny classic muscle car of his dreams.

As he walked by his car, he swept his arm over the back bumper, wiping the snow off with his sleeve. He knew he wouldn't be driving it anywhere today. It would remain buried until he could dig it out, but he had no intention of doing that right now. It would take too long and in this cold he knew it wouldn't even start. It pained him to leave it there in the cold, but he had to get away from his house as quickly as possible. Ignoring his freezing toes, he headed quickly across the street, slipping and sliding a bit, but already he could feel the relief of escaping for a while and a feeling of peace washed over him.

"Lord," he prayed, "I need You."



CHAPTER 4

Tim Webber swore when his computer screen went blank. “Stupid power is off!” he complained out loud and slammed the lid on his laptop shut in disgust. He knew Evan would be ticked off that the TV was dead and he couldn’t watch any more of his shows, so he’d be looking for someone to entertain him. Tim wasn’t sure he wanted to play “big brother” today. He was in a foul mood and it was getting fouler by the minute. Sure enough, he heard Evan’s knock on the door.

“Tim! The power’s out. What should we do?” Evan poked his head inside the room and Tim scowled at the intrusion.

“Get out, you little jerk!” Tim yelled at him. Evan was used to Tim’s outbursts and was not fazed by them. He walked in and plunked himself down on Tim’s unmade bed and scowled back at his brother. Despite Tim’s harsh words, Tim had no animosity towards Evan whatsoever. In fact, despite acting like he despised his younger brother—especially when others were around—Tim was powerfully protective of him. They had been close before Ronnie’s death, and now they were even closer.

“What do you want?” Tim growled.

“Power’s out. What’s there to do now?”

“I don’t know. Read a book or something, just get out of my room and out of my face!” Tim glared menacingly at Evan. “Go see what Mom and Dad are doing.”

“Whoa! What’s got you in such a crappy mood?” Evan threw a pillow at Tim playfully.

Tim repelled it aside easily and smiled reluctantly at his sibling. Try as he might to be angry with his brother, Tim knew Evan was his weak link. He would do anything for his little brother. Tim grabbed his iPod and threw the ear buds at Evan. Pushing Evan over to one side of his bed to make room for himself, Tim plugged one ear bud into his left ear and Evan plugged the other bud into his right ear. Tim used his thumb to scroll through the playlist to find a song he knew his brother would like. Then, satisfied with his choice, he turned up the music to a deafening volume. Evan bobbed his head in time to the beat and both he and Evan closed their eyes to listen. That was how Dot found them a half an hour later when she went to check on her sons and call them down for lunch.



Jake had no sooner stepped off his porch when he caught sight of his best friend, Mike, walking towards him from down the street. Mike’s head was down, his arms wrapped around himself like a hug, trying to keep his hands tucked in his armpits for warmth. He seemed totally oblivious to anything but just trying to keep warm. Jake almost turned to go back into his house to avoid him. He wanted to get what he had to say to Leigh over and done with and he didn’t want to have Mike around when he did. As Mike got closer, Jake noticed he was only wearing running shoes. Jake wiggled his toes in his Kodiak boots but still felt the chill. He shook his head, wondering why Mike wasn’t dressed for the weather. With a sigh, Jake went out to meet his friend. Leigh would have to wait.

“Hey!” Jake called to Mike as he got closer. Mike seemed almost surprised to see his friend waiting for him on the sidewalk.

“Hey, yourself.” Mike smiled and blinked a snowflake away. “I didn’t think anybody else would be out on a day like this. What’s up?”

Jake laughed unintentionally. “Man, I was going to ask you the same thing. What’s got you out and about...” Jake looked down at Mike’s feet and pointed. “...and wearing only running shoes? You must be freezing!”

Up to that point, Mike had more or less ignored the fact that his toes were numb, but now he realized it was probably a foolhardy thing to go outside without his boots.

“My mom would kill me if I didn’t invite you in to warm up.” Jake nudged him. “Let’s get inside.” Gratefully, Mike followed his friend.

Maggie called from the kitchen when she heard stomping in the hallway. “Jake, I thought you’d gone to Leigh’s...” She smiled when she saw Mike hesitantly walk into the room.

“Michael? What are you doing here?” Maggie looked at his red cheeks and frosty eyebrows and eyelashes. “Did you walk over here? My goodness!”

Mike shivered involuntarily. His toes were starting to warm up and the prickly pain was starting to make standing a little uncomfortable. Maggie, sensing his discomfort, offered him a seat and grabbed the electric kettle to make him a hot drink.

“That’s okay, Mrs. Taylor,” Mike protested. “You don’t have to go to any trouble.”

Maggie laughed and pulled the plug out of the wall. “I have all the best intentions, but we still have a power outage. I keep forgetting. Can I make you a sandwich instead?” Mike smiled since Maggie was already pulling mustard and bologna out of the fridge.

“That would be great,” Mike said. His stomach growled. He suddenly remembered he hadn’t had any breakfast that morning. Maggie gestured for Jake to sit down and she quickly made him a sandwich as well and then retreated to the living room to leave the boys alone to eat.

“Hey, you didn’t answer my question,” Jake said, frowning at Mike. “Why are you out wandering around? You couldn’t possibly have come this way just for my Mom’s *gourmet* sandwiches.”

Mike laughed at Jake’s sarcasm and then became serious. “Jake, I’ve been thinking a lot about what I’m going to do once I graduate.”

“You’re kidding, right? We’ve got a year and a half left of high school. Who says you’re even going to graduate with your crummy marks?” Jake teased.

Mike smiled. There was a healthy competition between them over who could get the better marks at school. Before meeting Jake, Mike hadn’t much cared about school. His sole interest was fixing up his car and playing sports. He hadn’t thought about university, and he had *never* thought about God, but his friendship with Jake had led him to develop a personal relationship with Jesus. With that came a hope that there was more to life than just listening to his parents bicker all the time. His parents were so self-involved that they never even noticed the improvement in his grades.

Mike finished his sandwich and gulped down a glass of milk. Jake did the same and the boys retreated up to Jake’s room. Jake sensed Mike needed to talk. He quickly glanced at his wristwatch. Leigh would be waiting for him. He thought about calling her to tell her he would be late, but when Mike flopped down on Jake’s bed wearily, Jake elected to let Leigh wait a little longer and concentrate on what was going on with Mike.

“Talk to me, man,” prompted Jake.

Mike rolled over and stared at the ceiling. He probably knew Jake’s room as well as he knew his own. For two years the boys had become the closest of friends. They hung out as much as possible and, even though Jake was going out with Leigh, he always seemed to have ample time to spend with Mike as well as his girlfriend. Mike felt at home here.

He smiled as he noticed the little hole in the wall by Jake’s closet. Months ago, they had been shooting baskets using a foam ball and a dollar store plastic basketball hoop hanging over the door. It had started with just trying to get the ball into the hoop by sitting on the floor, but soon had escalated into full-contact slam dunking and trying to wrestle the ball away from the other. Mike had finally taken control of the ball but in the process had elbowed a dent in the wall. They had remorsefully confessed to Jake’s mom what had happened, but rather than being upset she grabbed a Calgary Flames hockey team poster that had been tacked crookedly on Jake’s closet door and said, “Cover it up with

this for now and we'll repair the damage later." The dent was still noticeable if you looked closely.

Jake was well aware of the troubles his friend was having at home. Even though Mike seldom gave details, Jake knew that Mike's home life was always tense. Jake did not question his friend's sincerity that his parents were having marriage difficulties, although he had never seen any indication of it himself. Mike told him that his parents were experts in knowing how to act around others. "They put on a show for you. Pride won't let them do otherwise." The only time Jake saw the break in their facade was after Mike shared with them that he had given his heart to Jesus.

It was the day of the student council speeches, the day before the election. Mike had been Jake's campaign manager and when the team had all met to pray just before Jake was to speak in front of the entire student body, Mike prayed to receive Christ as his personal Lord and Saviour. Jake still thought often about all that had transpired on that eventful day. It had been a day full of drama, but full of promise, too. He had been on such an emotional high afterwards, as were all of his friends. Everyone, himself included, thought he had the election locked up. He had encouraged Mike to tell his parents what had happened at school, somehow expecting they would be thrilled to hear of his new commitment to God. Mike, however, knew what their reaction would be and was not disappointed. Jake found him parked outside his house fast asleep in his car the next morning. He had been there all night.

As Mike continued to stare up at the ceiling in Jake's room, he was thinking about that fateful day, too. He had been so eager to tell his parents about his conversion experience. He expected their reaction but, like Jake, he was on such an emotional high from the events of the day that he naively thought his parents would react favourably to his news. At dinner that night, Mike blurted out excitedly that he had prayed with his friends that morning and he was now a Christian.

Mike's father burst out laughing. "You? A Christian? Yeah, that's a good one, all right! I'll bet that Jesus Kid you hang out with... Jake... put you up to that, right? You've been hanging out with him way too long! He's got you believing in all that crap now? I thought you were smarter than that!"

Claire glared at Mike and surprisingly sided with her husband. “Mike, that’s just nonsense. There’s no such thing as God.”

Mike pushed away from the table before they could say more and grabbed the keys to his car on his way out the door. His father yelled at him as he was leaving, “Yeah, take off, boy. Not sure you’ll get too far, though. Better pray to Jesus that you can afford another tank of gas in that rattrap you call a car!”

Mike had driven into Cochrane, watched a late movie, and then decided to park his car in front of the one place he felt safe rather than go home to be ridiculed and yelled at again. He parked in front of Jake’s house. The windows were dark, and he knew everyone was in bed, so rather than get them up to ask if he could spend the night inside he decided to just sleep in his car instead. He woke up to the sound of Jake tapping on the driver’s side window the next morning.



CHAPTER 5

Leigh glanced at her wristwatch. What was keeping Jake? He had never been late before. Her room was starting to feel chilly. The power had been off for more than an hour now. She could hear Lisa and Brian downstairs bickering over the correct spelling of a word as they played Scrabble together. No doubt this was the last thing any one of them wanted to be doing today, playing a board game to pass the time. She could hear her mother reprimand them while telling them to find a dictionary. Leigh grabbed her cell phone and texted Jake. Despite her fear in what he would say to her, she just wanted to get the conversation over with. The wait was killing her.

Jake texted back immediately: “Be there soon, Mike’s here.”

Leigh bit her lip and winced. She did not usually begrudge the time Jake spent with Mike but today she felt they were conspiring against her somehow. Was Jake telling Mike his plan to break up with her? Leigh started to arrange the books on her bookshelf. When she was nervous and she couldn’t sit still, she had to tidy. She was an orderly person to begin with so rearranging books that didn’t need rearranging was sort of silly... but it kept her busy. Even so, she couldn’t get Jake off her mind.

The lights flickered on. Leigh wondered if the power would stay on for good now. She pulled another sweater from her closet and turned

on the space heater in the corner. It would take some time before the furnace was able to get heat circulated up to her room, so she was grateful she could put the portable space heater on full blast and let it warm her room quickly. It was short lived. The lights flickered and then the power went out again. Leigh shivered involuntarily and grabbed her comforter off the bed to wrap around herself. This power outage was starting to get tedious. *Hurry up, Jake!* she complained to herself.

She looked out the window and down the street towards his house. Snow continued to accumulate in drifts outside. She knew that if this kept up much longer, tomorrow would also be declared a snow day. Although Brian and Lisa might enjoy another day off school, Leigh wasn't sure she could spend another day cooped up in the house, especially if the power continued to remain off. It would be so boring! Still, would she be able to face all her friends at school if Jake *did* break up with her today? It would be too humiliating to have them feeling sorry for her. Certainly she didn't want to have to explain herself to them. Besides, they would likely sympathize more with Jake than with her anyway. She already anticipated what her friends would say. She immediately thought of Janelle. They barely talked to each other, but she could guess just how happily Janelle would react to the news. Leigh shuddered and pulled the comforter tighter around her shoulders.

"Let's get this over with, Jake Taylor. I'm tired of waiting."



Tim glared at his mother when she opened his door to discover her sons sharing ear buds and listening to Tim's iPod. It was her smile that set him off. He angrily pushed Evan off the bed. The peace was broken.

"Tim!" Dot reprimanded him and rushed to Evan's side.

Evan laughed good-naturedly, "It's okay, Mom. I was just getting ready to leave anyway. Later, bro!" He pushed past Dot, leaving her alone with her oldest son.

"What has got into you, Tim?" she asked with a bewildered expression on her face. He merely continued to glare at her. "I don't know who you are anymore! You're so surly and unpleasant around us all the

time. You treat your brother like he's garbage. What's with you?" Tim continued to stare her down without answering.

It upset Dot even more that he could make her feel so uncomfortable just by looking at her. He stared at her like he wished she would die, and then he slowly, purposefully, stood up so that he towered over her. It unnerved her. Nervously, she picked up a pair of his jeans that lay on the floor. She started to fold them when he growled, "Just leave my stuff alone."

Dot dropped the jeans. Tim smiled. It was a small victory that he had intimidated his mother, but he was unprepared for what happened next. Dot crossed the room and slapped her son across his face. The imprint of her hand stung red against his skin. Without a word, she turned and walked out of his room.

It was all she could do to manage to walk through his door and get down the stairs without collapsing. Her hand still stung from the slap. At the bottom of the steps, Dot sat on the last stair and began to weep. "Not another child, Lord!" she cried. "I can't lose another child!"

The past six months she had basically been going through the motions. She would get up, make the beds, tidy the house, make lunches for her two boys to take to school, go to work, come home, make dinner, do dishes, help Evan with homework, watch the news on TV, and then collapse from exhaustion at 10:00 p.m. Since losing Ronnie, her zest for life had left her. She felt drained of energy, and she seldom smiled at home. But in public she put up a good front. People said she was handling things "so well," but in the solitude of her own home, she knew that to be a lie.

Children are supposed to live beyond their parents. They aren't supposed to die. Ronnie was supposed to be graduating next year! Dot sniffled and wiped her eyes quickly with the back of her hand. She had to compose herself before her husband Will saw her like this. He was still reeling with guilt over Ronnie's death and it was up to her to stay strong for both of them. She glanced up at the family pictures hung with precision on the wall. Ronnie smiled down at her—a head shot taken when she was fourteen, just before she started to change and grow apart from them. Those were happier times, precious times that Dot tried to think about whenever she felt the dark depression start to

overwhelm her. Right below Ronnie's smiling face was the cherub face of Ronnie's son, David. She had died giving birth to him and now he, too, would be taken away. Dot felt like she would suffocate as the air was nearly sucked out of her thinking about how in a few weeks she would hold her grandson for the last time as he moved to Ontario with his adoptive parents. The pain of letting go made her double over and the tears started to flow again. "I can't say goodbye, Lord! I just can't!" she wept aloud.

Up in his room, Tim felt bitter tears well up in his eyes. He was more humiliated than hurt by his mother's surprise attack. He knew he probably deserved her reaction and he felt a small twinge of guilt that was nudging him to go downstairs and apologize to her, but that feeling was immediately replaced with anger and self-pity. "I've got to get out of here!" he growled to himself in the mirror. *But where can I go?* He started to feel trapped, almost claustrophobic. He crept across the room and as quietly as possible locked his door.

It was an unwritten rule in the house that he and Evan were not to lock their bedroom doors. Locked doors meant you were hiding something, his father would say. Tim scowled. Well, his dad was right, Tim was hiding something. At the bottom of his closet, tucked away in a pair of cowboy boots he never wore, was a razor blade wrapped protectively in a small facecloth. There were a few caked-on drops of blood on the cloth from the last time he had used the blade. He lightly touched the blade and pushed the left sleeve of his hoodie up, exposing his scars. With precision, Tim reopened an old wound with the razor.

He remembered the first time he had cut himself there. It was right after a fight at school when he had tried to defend his sister's honour after she had been called a "sleaze." She was a sleaze, but something just made him snap when the kids started to make fun of her. He'd heard the rumours, he knew the truth, and all the rage that had been bottled up inside him exploded into fisticuffs as he tried to pummel an older boy who laughed and taunted him. It was bad enough that he had lost the fight and was summarily hauled in to see the principal, who lectured him for an hour about the school's zero-tolerance policy for fighting on school grounds and then gave him an in-school suspension. His parents were called and he was lectured again when he got home.

He could have endured all that, but it was Ronnie's reaction that hurt him the most. She actually laughed when she heard he had gotten into a fight because of her. It broke him apart emotionally. He loved her and hated her at the same time. Couldn't she see he was trying to protect her... their family? He convulsed slightly, remembering her laughter. She laughed at him! That was intolerable!

Tim bit his lip and watched the blood surface on his arm. He made a parallel cut and then cut cross ways... *X's and O's*, he thought and almost smiled. He steadied himself and cradled his arm, squeezing the skin so that the blood oozed. It was an art to cut deep enough to let the blood flow but not deep enough to cause serious injury. He had perfected the art over the last year. He couldn't explain why cutting himself made him feel better, but it did. It calmed him. He was finally in control.