

## Chapter 1

# CATCHIN' AIR

Labor Day Weekend  
The Victory Ride Skateboarding Competition  
*Massachusetts*

JED'S DARK HAIR peeked out of his gray camo beanie. He watched, wide-eyed, from the stands as his older cousin Mak took his signature stance. Mak looked like a crouching tiger ready to eat everyone's lunch. He wore his favorite black T-shirt that read *Face your fears*. That was Mak's motto. With a crooked grin and fierce look in his eye, Mak touched the front of his silver Pro-tec helmet and let fly.

*Yep, that's my cousin!* Jed wanted to shout when Mak launched off the lip of the quarter-pipe. Mak had sucked so much air, he looked like he was flying in slow motion. Man, what a rush to see him soar, his sandy hair streaming out of his helmet with a slight smile on his clinched lips. Showing off with only three seconds left, Mak grabbed the tail of his board, sending his family into a hooting rage. They were always the rowdiest bunch—full-on sports fanatics.

"That's the way to be, Mak!" Grandpa Holt hollered, pumping his fist.

Grandma stuck two fingers into her mouth and whistled over the loud music. She was trying to compete with Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust." Considering Mak was totally

slaying his tricks, it was pretty ironic for *that* song to be playing.

“Get ‘em, Lysandros!” the rest of the gang bellowed, calling Mak by his last name.

Even Mak’s two-year-old brother, Little Anatoli, was into it. With gold jewelry dangling from his neck and a Binky still in his mouth, he kept raising his pudgy hand above his head and shouting, “Bravo, Makarios, bravo!”

Makarios (aka Mak) and Little Anatoli were half-Greek—hence the funky names, gold jewelry, and European lingo. As soon as they both started walking and talking, Mak and Little Anatoli used their hands to emphasize their words. And if you listened very carefully, you heard a tinge of a Greek accent. Their dad, Eleftherios (aka E), was 100 percent Greek. He was born and raised in Greece, he spoke Greek as well as English, and all his ancestors were from the Old Country. When E married Mak’s American mom, who was Jed’s mom’s sister, Bean, they moved to the United States. That’s where Mak and his brother were born. So that made Mak and Little Anatoli half-Greek and half-American.

Even Jed was a smidge Greek, ‘cause his dad had Greek ancestors. But Jed’s dad was born in America and spoke only English. If it weren’t for their double-shot of Greek coffee-colored hair and deep, glistening brown eyes—plus the fact that they *loved* feta cheese—no one would ever know that Jed or his dad were Greek. Their swag was full-on all-American.

Jed loved hanging with Mak and the fam. Sunday dinners at Jed’s house were the best. Grandma Holt always cooked up a megafeast while the rest of the gang caught a game on the tube, usually the Red Sox or Patriots. Then Jed and Mak would skate ‘til dark on the quarter-pipe in the driveway.

Family ties aside, skateboarding linked Jed and Mak way closer than blood. As soon as they mounted their skateboards

for the first time, Jed and Mak dreamed about going pro. In fact, they hoped to get sponsored someday and skate for the United States. I mean, what could be better than traveling the world competing against the best? *Nothing*, they had agreed.

Don't get me wrong. Even though Jed and Mak were die-hard skate rats, they still played every sport known to man: hockey, soccer, baseball, lacrosse—you name it. But when they didn't have a game or practice, they skateboarded together. They'd been practicing nonstop since Jed was four years old and Mak was seven. Whether it was Sunday sessions in Jed's driveway or hitting their favorite skate park just south of Boston, Jed and Mak made sure to snag plenty of airtime. Jed's potential blew Mak's mind. He was popping ollies at age five with nothing short of a Rocket Power skateboard! Jed had seen the Rocket Power on Nickelodeon and just had to have it. But Jed retired that baby. Now he rocked a Plan B, just like Mak.

Mak always treated Jed like an equal. Their three-year age gap didn't matter. When Jed joined Mak at Victory Skate Park for the first time, Mak introduced him to the other kids by saying, "This is my cousin, Jed. He rips!" Then he took Jed on a deep drop. With his Greek swag in check, Mak rose his hands and looked Jed square in the eyes. "No fear, Jed."

Of course, Jed's stomach clenched and his big brown eyes grew skittish. Mak was crazy! And I mean, can ya blame the dude for thinking it? Mak had talked Jed up so much to all his bros, and now Jed had to prove it!

"C'mon, Jed. I know you can do it," Mak had said. "*Just believe!*"

So Jed cranked up what little courage he had and charged it.

But it didn't matter if Jed nailed it or not. Mak always met him at the bottom, beaming. "You keep that up, little Jedster," he would encourage, "and you'll be the next Ryan Sheckler!" Mak was like a supercool big brother Jed never had.

Before long, Jed was the one challenging Mak! He'd bounce new tricks off Mak to see who could go higher, faster, or better. They both loved the competition and earned the respect of their peers. Their rep started growing around their suburban Boston neighborhood. "Two skate rats chasing a dream!"—that's what the other kids at the skate park always said.



The music blared: "Bump, bump, bump! Another one bites the dust!" People in the stands continued hooting and hollering. Jed curled his toes with nervous expectation and held his breath. Mak had steered his board and was ready to drop in, and Jed wished he could fast-forward a whole year, when he'd finally be old enough to enter the Victory Ride skateboarding competition with Mak.

With an intense expression gripping Mak's face, his board finally made contact with the earth again. He blazed down the ramp and skidded to a stop on the cement.

*Epic landing!*

Mak took off his helmet to check the overhead clock. His hair was damp, sticking to his forehead. When he saw that he'd made perfect time, he pumped his arms over his head.

"Yeah, baby!" he said, cheering himself on.

Jed and Mak's family went nuts, as most New Englanders do when one of their own claims victory. Mak tucked his board under his arm and flashed them a thumbs-up. His

confident smile was so broad that his aquamarine eyes looked like paper-thin slits.

Stoked for his cousin, Jed pushed through the crowd to be the first to congratulate Mak. *Only one more year, and we'll be competing in the Ride together!*

Or so Jed thought.

Unfortunately, life doesn't always turn out the way we plan. Life as Jed knew it was about to take a sketchy turn...





## Chapter 2

# YIA SOU!

**T**HE SECURITY CHECKPOINT for international departures was pretty quiet, except for one family scurrying down the hall to make their flight. The restaurants in the terminal had some people grabbing a quick bite or reading the newspaper. The smell of freshly brewed coffee and pastries wafted through the air. But Jed wasn't hungry. He sat hunched over and with one elbow on the table at the Dine Boston Café, picking at his bagel with extra cream cheese. Usually he'd be plopping the two sides together like a sandwich and licking the ooze out of the middle and off the sides. But not this day. This was the worst day ever. Mak was moving to the other side of the world—to Greece! And Jed was losing his cousin, brother, and best friend all at once. To make things worse, it was raining outside. Jed hated rain. Rain usually meant being locked up inside all day with nothing to do. Oh—except go to the airport to say a final farewell to your best bro. And if that weren't enough, it was spring break! Spring break was *usually* the best week ever, because that's when Jed and Mak broke out their skateboards for the first time all year and headed to their favorite skate park.

But not this year.

Jed ignored everyone at the table, including Mak, who had just inhaled an egg and cheese sandwich. Mak didn't seem too bummed he had to move. He was actually laughing and tickling Little Anatoli like it was no big deal right now!

Without saying a word, Jed's mom, Jewel, locked her gaze

with Jed. All she had to do was flash a quick glance to his elbow on the table, then to his Red Sox cap that was turned backward on his head, and Jed knew what she meant. He knew his mother's silent language well: she was telling him *mind your manners*.

Jed huffed and rolled his eyes. Still, he took his elbow off the table. Then he ripped off his Red Sox cap, letting his hair fall over his eyes, and chucked his hat hard on the ground next to her purse.

Jewel broke the tension. "Jed, you stay here with Mak and finish your breakfast. I'm taking Uncle E and Auntie Bean over to Hudson News to buy some snacks for their trip." She picked up her nephew, Little Anatoli, and nudged Jed. "Go on, buddy. Eat. We'll be back in a few minutes."

Jed stomped his foot. "Mom, I know. Gosh!"

Stone-faced, Jed lowered his eyes and stared at a piece of gum stuck to the floor. He hoped his older cousin wouldn't see him fighting back tears—not the best image for an up-and-coming pro skateboarder.

A professional optimist, Mak kept it loose and made light of the situation. "Why so negs, Jed?" (That means *negative* in their skateboard dictionary.) "It's not like we're never gonna see each other again. My mom said maybe we can come back and visit next summer!"

Jed tried not to blink and risk spilling tears. "Yeah, well, *maybe* usually means never!"

"C'mon, bro. Just think. When I do come back to visit, you'll be one up on me. There's no skateboarding in Greece, you know." Mak landed a light punch on Jed's arm and snickered. "I know how you love to compete with me."

Jed's heart sank. He noticed for the first time Mak didn't have his board with him. He shot up out of his chair and snapped, "Well, that's just great! You think this is funny

now? What about all our dreams of going pro? Don't you even care anymore?"

A couple at the next table stopped their conversation to listen. Mak waited a second to see if he was actually supposed to answer Jed's question. Nope. He wasn't. Jed stormed around the table and continued his emotional rant.

"What are you thinking? What about the big contest this summer? I'm finally nine and old enough to enter! All the best sponsors are gonna be there. This was our big chance. But I guess you've forgotten all about that!" Totally disgusted, Jed shook his head and walked out of the café. Unfortunately, the piece of gum that was stuck to the floor ten seconds earlier was now glued to the bottom of his shoe. "Ah, man!" Jed moaned. "Just my luck!" He crossed his arms defiantly and slumped into a chair out in the hallway.

Jed's world had spun into a 180-degree flip—but not the kind of flip he loved to attempt in skateboarding. This flip was way out of control, like he hit the pavement face first and had the wind knocked clear out of him. *How did this happen?* he thought. *Just yesterday our families were sitting around the dinner table, laughing and carrying on. Me and Mak were totally slaying our tricks. We pretty much mastered the ollie. Even our kickflips and grinds were wicked awesome!* (FYI: If you aren't a skateboarder and have no clue what Jed's talking about here, no worries. That's why I'm here. You know—to fill you in when things get sketchy. Anyway, the *ollie*, *kickflip*, and *grind*, according to Jed and Mak, are three super-hot moves.)

So, what was I saying? Oh yeah...Jed is the sensitive type. His parents always comment that he wears his heart on his sleeve. Not a bad characteristic to have, you'd think, 'cause it just means that Jed cares a lot about stuff. He feels

things more deeply than most people. Except sometimes Jed thought it more of a curse than a blessing.

Whenever Jed was bummed and his heart ached, he prayed. In church he had memorized the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary prayer long ago, and he had said them religiously for a long time, but for some reason they never made him feel better. His heart craved more. Then when Jed was eight years old, he accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and had his first Communion. Jed didn't fully understand what it all meant, but he knew it was the right thing to do. He didn't know much about God, but he wanted to. And sometimes when he was really wiggled out, he secretly talked to God. This was one of those times.

*Hello, God? Are You there? Can You hear me? It's me, Jed Truman, from Massachusetts. Am I being punished for something? I mean, I'm pretty religious and stuff, and I say my "Our Fathers" every single day. Me and Mak even go to church on Sunday and get Communion. We make the honor roll at school. I mean, if it'll change Your mind, I'll say fifty million Hail Marys before I go to bed tonight. Please. Just don't make Mak move away. I'll do anything!*

Jed longed to hear God answer him. But it seemed like he never did.

Sighing, Jed sat back and zoned out. He thought about the good and truly odd times he had spent over Mak's house. Let's just say that Mak's European family was a bit kooky. It was like attending a live production of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. E often spoke Greek to Mak and Little Anatoli so they'd be able to communicate in both the Greek and English languages. (It was important to E that his children respect their Greek heritage, so they could pass it down to their children. It was, like, their special bond or something.) And even though Jed had no clue what they were saying half

the time, he still enjoyed learning about his Uncle E's Greek culture. It was hard sometimes, though, to decipher if Mak's family was just shooting the breeze or in a heated argument. They always spoke wicked loud, passionately throwing their hands around to get their point across.

Dinner at Mak's house was a hoot and a half. Mak's mom, Bean, and her attempt at the Greek language was a joke—always, by far, the big hit of the evening. It was like watching Tinkerbell sumo wrestle. Bean's ballerina-like frame was misleading. Standing only four feet ten inches tall and barely weighing ninety pounds, she was a real spit-fire. That's how she got her nickname. Her siblings, Ike, Jewel, and Mae, used to call her Weenie Beanie. They teased her and sang, "Itsy-bitsy-teenie-weenie, that's my sister, little Beanie!"

Bean didn't care. She'd just pile her fire-engine-dyed-red hair on top of her head—it gave her that extra inch. Then she'd put on three-inch high heels to complete her eccentric look. Her collection of cat eye glasses ranged from emerald green to black with rhinestones. She loved glitz and bling. I guess being a retired circus performer was to blame for that.

Anyway, Bean's strong-willed attitude kept her busy. She never backed down from a challenge and was very determined when she put her mind to something. She never gave up. With the spoon stirring an old Greek recipe in one hand and her Greek dictionary in the other, Bean practiced both skills—Greek cooking and the Greek language—day and night. One time, when preparing *arni souvlaki* (lamb skewers) and *tzatziki* (cucumber sauce) for dinner, she tried impressing the boys with her knowledge. She said, "We're having your favorite tonight: *adio . . . yia sou . . . kalo . . . taxidi!*" Bean smiled at her brilliance and presented the meal proudly.

When her husband and two boys laughed, Jed had asked, “What’s so funny?”

Mak replied, “My mom just said, ‘Good-bye... to your health... Bon voyage!’”

Auntie Bean’s Greek needed work, but her food was pretty tasty. She learned Greek cooking quickly, because that’s all Uncle E would eat.

Learning how to make authentic Greek cuisine was an art form, and Uncle E was extremely passionate about his old family traditions. The Greeks took great care in preparing every meal, so Uncle E took great care in showing Auntie Bean how to prepare them. When Bean made the special Greek sauce, Uncle E explained every detail. He gathered the boys around to watch. “Boys, *ela* (come)!” In his thick Greek accent, he corrected his wife. “Beanie Baby... *ohi, ohi, ohi* (no, no, no). Here, let me show you. You do like this. *Ne* (Yes)? You stir *aristera*’ (left), slowly, fifty-seven time. Not this way, *deksia*’ (right). *Andaxi* (OK)? Here... now you try.” He handed the spoon back to Bean.

Sliding her signature cat eye glasses down to the tip of her tiny nose, Bean raised a crooked brow to her husband. “Does it really matter if I stir to the left instead of the right? It’s all gonna taste the same anyway.”

Clutching his chest as if he were going to drop dead from a heart attack, Uncle E cried, “*Feu* (Ah)! You don’t respect my family tradition! Don’t you know this is the way *Mite’ra* (Mother) did it, and her *mite’ra*, and her *mite’ra* before that? Oh, Beanie Baby, why do you challenge me so?”

Realizing she’d struck a nerve, Bean apologized. “OK, OK. I’m sorry, honey. I’ll stir to the left. See? I’m doing it... *ena* (one), *thio* (two), *tria* (three)...” But as soon as her husband left the room, she went right back to stirring the sauce the way she always had—her way.

Jed and Mak enjoyed their unique family, because it always made things interesting.



Mak sat alone in the café and did some thinking of his own. He was definitely gonna miss his bro Jed, that was for sure. But Mak had a special way of letting things fall where they may. He wasn't prone to worry. Actually, he was kind of excited about the new adventure. He thought, *Well, I guess going to a new school where all they speak is Greek won't be so bad. Learning a whole new alphabet and the seven-hour time change might be pretty cool. I'm a smart kid and never had a problem making friends before. Soccer's popular in Greece, and I'm actually pretty good at it. And the best part—Mom and Babas (Dad) promised to get me a dog if I cooperated. Yeah, I'll survive.*

Mak checked his watch. It was almost boarding time. He saw his family heading back from across the hall, so he approached Jed to patch things up. "Hey, man, you can't stay mad at me forever. I promise to call and write all the time."

Standing up, Jed crammed his hands into his pockets and sighed. His voice was more raspy than usual. "Yeah, I know. Sorry for being such a baby before. I just can't believe you're really leaving." His eyes welled up again, his long dark lashes moist with tears. He looked away, trying to cover it up. "My allergies must be acting up or something."

Mak smiled and patted his younger cousin on the back. "No worries, bro. I'm gonna miss you too. I'm just trying to stay positive so it doesn't hurt so bad."

"But what about your skateboard?" Jed asked. "You always have it with you. Where is it now?"

"My dad wouldn't let me take it. There wasn't enough

room.” Mak showed Jed a duffle bag he was carrying instead. It was full of soccer balls. “But it’s all good, Jed. I can always order a new skateboard online.”

As Mak’s family returned from Hudson News with Auntie Jewel, an announcement came over the loud speaker. “British Airways’ flight 720 to London will be boarding from gate 7.” Jed and Mak shot each other a knowing smirk. A 720 is a sick skateboarding move that only the pros can do.

They knocked fists. Then Mak hugged Jed. Mak wasn’t one to skimp on hugs—another European thing.

“Love ya, man,” Mak said. He turned to his Auntie Jewel and hugged her too, then added the European kiss, one on each cheek.

Forcing a grin and wave, Jed managed to mumble, “See ya, Mak. Hope you like Greece.” Then he hugged his aunt and uncle and Little Anatoli.

As Mak and his family moved through the security line, Jewel shouted, “Call us when you get there!”

After handing the attendant the tickets, Uncle E, Auntie Bean, Mak, and Little Anatoli stopped to give their final wave. “*Yia sou* (Good-bye!)” they all yelled. Then they were gone.





## Chapter 3

# COMMISSION LOVE

Love covers a multitude of sins.

—1 PETER 4:8

**T**HAT EVENING AFTER dinner Jed went straight to bed. He skipped dessert—which was strange, 'cause Jed never missed dessert. His mom was concerned, so she went to check on him after cleaning up.

She knocked softly on his bedroom door. “Hey, buddy. Can I come in?”

There was no answer. Cracking the door and peeking in, Jed’s mom saw Jed neatly tucked in his bed. He was wearing his favorite Tony Hawk skateboarding PJs—a hand-me-down from Mak. With his back facing her, he was staring out the window, watching the rain hit the glass. It was picking up a bit, and Jed heard some thunder in the distance.

“Do you want to read a little?” she asked. “It might help you sleep.”

Jed sighed. “No, thanks.”

“Have you said your prayers yet?”

“Yeah...but I think Mary and God must be busy 'cause they never answer me. Sometimes I wonder if they even know I’m alive.” Jed’s voice cracked. “I wish...I wish I could just call God on the phone and talk to Him personally. You know? Ask Him what He’s thinking by making Mak move away...” Jed’s lips quivered as he fought back tears.

Jewel comforted him the best way she knew how. She smiled hopefully. “Each night before you go to sleep, remember to look up into the sky. When you see all the stars shining bright, it will be the same sky Mak is looking at.”

“Whatever,” Jed mumbled under his breath. “It’s pouring outside. You can’t even see the stars.”

Jewel smoothed his hair away from his face, kissed him on the cheek, and tucked him in nice and tight. “A good night’s sleep will do you some good,” she said. “You’ve had a long week, sweetheart. And don’t forget, you still have the Victory Ride contest to look forward to this summer.”

Jed turned to face his mom, his deep brown eyes misted and puffy. “Actually, I’m gonna quit skateboarding. It won’t be the same without Mak.”

Suddenly, a flash of lightning lit up the sky, startling Jed and his mom. They froze in eerie silence, waiting for the piercing bang that usually followed.

*BOOM!*

The deafening thunder rebounded off the walls and inched closer by the second. Rain rushed violently down the gutters. Jed heard the wind howling and tree branches scratching his window. It sounded like one of those horror sci-fi movies Jed’s mom wouldn’t let him watch, like the ginormous pine tree in the backyard was gonna metamorphize into a big, slimy, one-eyed gremlin and then burst through the window and skewer Jed and his mom on his branchlike arms before hauling them to his spaceship to barbeque them over some creepy alien pit fire! (Sorry. I got a little carried away there. But you get the idea.)

Jed’s eyes were heavy, and he was too spent to even care. So as he drifted off to sleep, he yawned, “I’m gonna . . . remove . . . my entry . . . from . . . the com . . . pe . . . ti . . . tion . . .”

Jed was out. His mom kissed him on the forehead and

shut off the light. “I love you, buddy,” she said, and closed the door behind her.

Jed floated into dreamland.

He didn’t remember his dreams very often, but sometimes he had an occasional nightmare that left an impression. There’s one where he’s at a hockey game and the score’s tied up with only one second left in the game. Jed’s ready to shoot the puck before an open net but totally misses the goal, and his team loses the whole season. Or another where he’s competing at a skateboarding contest and he’s about to take off on the half-pipe, but when he looks down, he realizes he doesn’t have his board with him. Instead, he has on his little sister’s frilly pink roller skates. That one’s the worst!

This dream was different. First of all, it wasn’t a nightmare. It was more vivid...so vivid, in fact, that Jed couldn’t separate it from reality. He heard a mighty roar of thunder, but it wasn’t coming from outside anymore. It was inside his bedroom—and someone was calling his name.

*“Jed... My child...”*

Jed half-wondered if the one-eyed gremlin was gonna finally make his appearance and take him prisoner after all. But the voice wasn’t scary like a monster. It was soothing and inviting, a gentle whisper with power and authority like no voice Jed had ever heard.

Rubbing his sleepy eyes, Jed sat up quickly and listened. He still heard pellets of rain hitting the rooftop. But when he gazed out the window, there was no more rain. The clouds had parted and the sky had opened up. He jumped out of bed and ran to the window. A luminous and narrow path reached down from the heavens into his bedroom. The torrential rain had turned into a vision of light and diamonds, and it looked like the Fourth of July! The image was so intense, Jed had to avert his eyes.

Again, he heard the voice calling him. “*Jed... My child... I am sending My Son, Jesus, to give you a very special mission.*”

Then the frightening thunder transformed into a righteous presence that beckoned Jed to fall to his hands and knees. He feared the brilliance and magnitude of the light, yet somehow, he still felt safe. No evil gremlins here, that’s for sure! The holy presence was standing before him now, creating a shelter of light around him. Jed knelt with his face to the ground, unable to say a word. Then he felt something like a feather brush over his lips, and he was able to speak.

Peeking through his hands, Jed trembled. “God, is that You?”

Jed felt a soothing and warm breath blow over him. “Yes, Jed. It’s Me, Jesus. I’ve come from Zion to send you on a great adventure.”

Jed gasped. “You’re sending me away? Am I in trouble or something? I mean, I’m sorry for the way I acted today—for being fresh and stuff. You aren’t gonna send me to that awful place *downstairs*, are You? You know, where it’s *real hot* and there’s no water? Please, God. I’m sorry for taking five cookies yesterday when my dad told me to only take two! Just don’t send me to that horrible place!”

Jed was speaking of hell, but the thought of saying the word *hell* made him shiver. And he also thought it would be disrespectful to say it in front of Jesus. “Will You *please* forgive me?” he asked.

Jesus smiled. “Yes, Jed, I forgive you. Actually, I’ve been waiting for you to confess that to me. But beloved, it’s very important that you know that you are no longer under any condemnation. When you prayed My prayer of salvation last year, your sins were covered. You don’t have to fear the punishment of hell. In fact, I’ve already prepared a place for you in heaven where you’ll spend eternity with Me.”

“Is that where You’re taking me . . . to heaven?”

“Oh no, Jed. There’s too much work to be done here on earth. I have a special destiny planned for your life! I ordained it for you before you were even born. But first, before I get into all that, you must continue turning from your sins and confessing them to Me daily. And I want you to tell your parents you’re sorry for disobeying them. Will you do that for Me?”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Jed remained bowed down and answered, “Yes, I will.” Then, slowly cocking his head, he took a longer peek at Jesus.

Surrounded by rainbows of light, Jesus sat on the floor across from Jed, His smile exuberant and friendly. He didn’t look like the pictures Jed had seen of Him in church. Maybe that’s because Jesus wasn’t dressed in a robe and holding a lamb. I’m not saying that wearing a priestly robe and holding a lamb is bad. It’s just that Jesus was more contemporary, like someone Jed could relate to and maybe even hang out with. He looked like a rugged, average joe—not what you’d expect from the King of the universe! He had dark wavy hair and kind brown eyes and was dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt, similar to what Jed and Mak would wear. Except His Spirit was full-on stellar, perfect, and pure.

Jesus locked Jed’s gaze. “There’s something else that’s very important to Me and necessary for your salvation.”

“There is?” Jed asked, pinching himself on the arm. He wanted to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating.

“Yes, Jed. I’m not only your God and Savior, but I’m also your friend. My line is always open, and you can call Me wherever and whenever you want to. My Father and I work around the clock!”

Jed’s eyes widened as he thought to himself, *That’s exactly*

*what I wished for tonight. I wished that I could call God on the phone and talk to Him personally! He really heard me!*

“Yes, Jed. I always hear you.”

Jed’s heart skipped a beat. He realized that Jesus had just heard his thoughts!

“You no longer have to wish, Jed. All you have to do is pray. But I want you to pray in *My name*. This brings great glory to Me and My Father.”

“So You mean . . . You’re not too busy for me? I don’t have to go through Your mom first? I can come straight to You?”

“Yes, Jed. I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Me.” With a big-brother-like smile, Jesus extended His hand. “Here. Sit beside Me.”

Jed sat up gradually and slowly advanced to his feet. His knees buckled as Jesus gripped his hand. Instantly, a rush of love and light spiraled through Jed’s veins. *Yep . . . You’re definitely real, Jesus.* Jed had never experienced a love so strong. He knew his family loved him, but this was different. This was supernatural.

Jed sat beside his Savior. Jesus’s presence was contagious, and Jed felt comfortable and safe next to Him. He wanted to stay with Jesus forever.

“There’s nothing more important to Me than My relationship with My friends,” Jesus said. “I enjoy spending time with you. You make Me smile.” Jed stared at Jesus in awe, feeling like the most important person in the world. “Communicating with Me is very important to your salvation, because it builds your faith and keeps you out of trouble, and that blesses Me very much.”

Jed wondered if Jesus liked the same things that he did. *I bet Jesus likes to skateboard. He kind of dresses like He does. He even has the same cool haircut as me and Mak!*

Jed sat quietly and listened to every word Jesus spoke.

“I’ve examined your heart, Jed, and I already know everything about you. But there’s a lot you don’t know about Me. If you want to learn more about Me, we’ll have to communicate on a regular basis, because that’s what friends do.”

Jed nodded in agreement.

“Do you want to tell Me about the rough week you’ve had? I bet I can help.”

Jed sighed. “Yeah. My cousin Mak moved to Greece today. Now my future is, like, totally doomed. I don’t even want to skateboard anymore, and Mak doesn’t even care that he had to leave. Sometimes I wish . . . I wish I didn’t have any feelings. I wish I could be tough like Mak.”

Jesus waited patiently and listened. When Jed finished pouring out his heart, Jesus spoke. “Jed, do you know why My Father sent Me to earth over two thousand years ago?”

“Umm . . . to die on the cross for the forgiveness of sins?”

“Yes, that was part of it. But I also came to give *life* to all of My friends. My purpose is to give My friends a rich and satisfying life. And that’s why I’m here. I want you to follow Me and be My disciple. If you follow Me, I promise your future will not be doomed.”

Jed wrinkled his nose. “You want me to be Your what?”

“My disciple. A disciple of God is someone who learns from Me and spreads My love and truth to others.”

Jed brushed the hair from his eyes and listened earnestly.

“I have chosen you, among others, to bring My Spirit into this fallen world,” Jesus continued. “There are many people struggling in their sins who need to be led back to the truth. I believe you have the heart to do it.”

Jed’s pupils dilated as he soaked in Jesus’s wisdom.

“When people live by My Spirit, they produce spiritual fruit. But not fruit that spoils like apples or oranges. Spiritual

fruit lasts forever. The fruit I'm talking about is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I want you to allow My Spirit to guide your life so you can teach others to do the same."

Jed cracked his knuckles. His palms were sweaty. "Sounds like a big job. You sure You have the right guy?"

With a broad smile Jesus nodded. "Yes, Jed. I have the right guy. I don't make mistakes."

"Ah, man!"

Jesus cocked His head thoughtfully. "Do you know how many hairs you have on your head?"

"No, but probably a lot 'cause my mom keeps telling me to cut it."

"One hundred and twelve thousand, four hundred and sixty-seven, to be exact. I remember the day you were born. You were named Jed because it means *beloved*. All of My angels in heaven threw a great big party. We had a huge feast and rejoiced over you! There was music with singing and dancing." As Jesus recalled Jed's birth, the light sparkled around Him even brighter, and His eyes were misty. Jesus was emotional, just like him! "Many of My angels proclaimed that an amazing hero had been born and that you would go on to do great and mighty things for My kingdom!"

"But Lord, I'm not a hero. I'm just a regular kid!"

*BOOM!*

Thunder rattled the rooftop again, sending a lamp and some books crashing to the floor.

Sternly, Jesus replied, "No, Jed. You are *not* just a regular kid. I don't do *regular*. You are precious and unique! You were personally designed for an eternal destiny that no one else can fulfill. You were born to live a great adventure. The sensitivity and thoughtfulness you bear is of great worth to Me and My kingdom. You have the *heart of a lion!*" Jesus

placed His hand over Jed's heart. "I know you can lead My people boldly and with compassion."

Jed swallowed hard as more electricity jolted through him. When he looked down, he noticed something on Jesus's hand, the one that was covering his heart. He saw it on the other hand too. *What is that, I wonder?*

"These are My scars, Jed. From the cross. I have them on My feet too, and one in My side."

Jed winced. Just the thought of Jesus hanging on the cross was unbearable. It's pretty heinous when you think about it. Because of *our* sins, Jesus was rejected, spit on, pierced, beaten, whipped, brutally crushed, and slaughtered until He was *unrecognizable*. He bore the punishment for all mankind so that *we* wouldn't have to—so that *we* could be forgiven and have eternal life in heaven. Because of His sacrifice, we can escape hell! That, my friend, is true, unselfish, pure, and radical *love*. I don't know about you, but I think Jesus is the greatest superhero yesterday, today, and forever. He saves people from their own destruction!

*Phew.* Now that I have that off my chest, let's get back to Jed and Jesus.

Still gazing at Jesus's scars, Jed grimaced. "Do they hurt?"

"Well, it was sin that put them there, and sin always hurts. But the good news is that sin won't last forever. A day is coming when I will conquer evil. If you go on this journey, you can share in My victory!"

"And then Your scars won't hurt anymore?"

Jesus beamed. "Yes, Jed. When the devil is finally destroyed, My scars won't hurt anymore. I'll be crowned King of all kings and Lord of all lords, and all My friends will reign with Me in heaven forever!"

Chills ran down Jed's arms. He doubted if he was worthy

of the calling. “But Jesus, I still don’t understand why You chose *me*. I mean, I’m far from perfect.”

“I don’t require perfection. All I ask is that you love Me with your whole heart. My Word says, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.’ Do you love Me, Jed?”

Jed didn’t hesitate. “Yes, of course I love You!”

“Good. Then *trust* Me and *believe* Me. When you believe My promises, nothing shall be impossible for you. Hey, do you remember Susie Tripp?”

Jed’s ears perked up. “How could I forget Susie Trip-a-lot? That’s all the kids at school ever called her. She always forgot to tie her shoes, and one day she tripped in the cafeteria. Her tray of food went flying everywhere.” Jed sadly shook his head as he remembered the kids’ cruelty toward Susie. “I felt so bad for her.”

“What happened next?” Jesus asked.

Jed bowed his head and spoke softly. “I helped her pick it up . . . and told her that her shoe was untied. That’s why she tripped.”

“Yes, and then you did something else.”

Thinking hard, Jed studied the air. “Oh yeah! I gave her my extra allowance so she could get another lunch.”

“That’s right. But do you know what was inside that crumpled-up dollar that you gave her?”

Jed shook his head, “No.”

“It was a memory verse about *love*. You received it from church. ‘Love is patient and kind . . .’”

Jed’s eyes lit up as he interrupted Jesus. “Oh, yeah! I remember exactly what it said. The priest told us whoever memorized it the fastest would win a surprise, and I love to win, so I made sure to learn the whole thing!” With a burst of enthusiasm, Jed recited the verse. “‘Love is patient and

kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way..." Then Jed paused, trying to recall the rest.

When Jesus saw him struggling, He helped out. "It is not irritable, and—"

"Oh, yeah!" Jed remembered. "It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged..." Thinking, Jed wrinkled the corner of his mouth and looked to the ceiling. "Umm...oh, yeah! 'It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out..." He stopped again, hoping for another hint.

"Love never gives up—" Jesus prompted.

"Oh, yeah! 'Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.'"

Jesus laughed, pumping His fist triumphantly. "That was awesome! Many adults can't remember scriptures like that!"

Jed dropped his eyes humbly and smiled. "Thanks. Hey, whatever happened to Susie Tripp? Did she move or something?"

"Yes, the story isn't finished," Jesus said. "You see, Susie's parents were planning on getting a divorce. That evening, Susie shared your Scripture verse with them. As she was reading it, her parents remembered their wedding day and the sacred vows they had made. Then an amazing thing happened. They all received Me into their hearts! Over the last few years, their marriage has been restored. They recently moved to Indonesia and will be working as missionaries for a Christian orphanage. They'll help save hundreds of children each year, providing them with food and shelter. But mainly, they'll be sharing the gospel with the children."

As Jesus spoke about Susie's family, His eyes misted again. "Do you see now why you're so significant? Do you see why you're a great hero? Your one act of love, helping Susie,

planted a seed. And that seed has grown into thousands upon thousands, and it will continue to grow for all eternity! I want to encourage you, Jed. You won't have to do this alone. You'll receive supernatural gifts during this miraculous adventure. As you receive those gifts, they'll bring you special powers. I'll distribute only the ones you'll need to complete your missions. Tonight, I want to bless you with the gift of *discerning between spirits* so you'll be able to discern if someone's spirit is good or evil. You'll need this one for your first mission."

Jed sat stunned. His stomach was queasy. *Special powers? Good and evil spirits?* He thought he might faint and take a header right there in front of Jesus.

"When My Holy Spirit comes upon you, Jed, you'll receive astronomical power. But I'm not going to force this. It's your choice to obey. My love for you is unconditional, and that will never change. Would you like more time to pray? I'm not in a hurry."

Jed gazed at Jesus's scars again. "No. I wanna obey." Then he craned his head slightly and looked up at Jesus. "So does this mean I'm gonna be like a superhero or something?"

Jesus smiled and nodded. "That's exactly what it means."

"Umm...OK. But as long as I don't have to wear tights. That'd be lame."

Jesus held His laughter and pretended to ponder Jed's request. "OK. Deal."

Then they knocked fists to seal their pact.

With that, Jesus stood up and Jed followed. "OK, buddy. I'm going to speak a prayer over you now. Would that be OK?"

"Umm...yeah. Sure," Jed said.

Before Jed changed his mind, Jesus placed His hands on top of Jed's head. The explosion of love that flew through

Jed's body almost knocked him over. A gust of wind circled them like a funnel, blowing objects and papers around Jed's room. It sounded like ocean waves crashing on the seashore. Jed didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. He was confused, excited, joyful, and scared all at the same time. To steady himself, he held on to Jesus with all his might.

Jesus prayed over him. "Father, I thank You for My friend, Jed, a mighty warrior. I release him into this evil world to be a blessing and an encouragement to people in need and to continue on his quest to receive all the supernatural power I have for him. I pray he would defeat the works of the devil and produce much fruit in My name. I bless him now with his first gift of My Holy Spirit, the gift of *discerning between spirits*. In the name of My Father, Me, and My Holy Spirit. Amen."

Jed's room quaked at the sound of Jesus's prayer. Goose bumps prickled Jed's spine, and his heart felt like it was gonna kickflip right out of his chest!

Jesus stared Jed square in the eyes. "You must listen carefully, Jed. I have left you a very precious treasure. You have been entrusted to guard it with your life. This treasure is your true family heritage and eternal destiny—My last will and testament. It's very important. Do you understand? Lives depend on it."

Doubts crept in again causing Jed to waver. "But... what if I screw up?" Jed stammered. "I'm afraid—I'm only nine!"

"Your fear doesn't come from Me, Jed. It comes from our enemy, the devil. *Don't listen to him!* He's a liar!" Jed gulped as Jesus looked at him with holy fire in His eyes. "*No fear, Jed!* You've been blessed with My spirit of power, love, and a sound mind. Just receive it and believe!"

Jed pleaded, "But Lord, I'm not strong enough to be a superhero! I'm small for my age. I barely weigh sixty pounds!"

Jesus's earthly body began fading into the air. "Shhh... it's OK, Jed. You must trust Me. My power works best in weakness. I've left everything you'll need to conquer evil..."

Jesus's majestic voice trailed off. His Holy Spirit still consumed Jed, but Jed couldn't see Him anymore. Jesus had disappeared! From a distance, he heard a voice echo from heaven: "*And remember, Lion Heart... may My Spirit be with you!*"

"Jesus, wait! Don't go—come back!"

The brilliant light fizzled away, and the room went black. The rain and thunder had stopped, and everything in Jed's room was perfectly put back in its place. Jed threw his head back and groaned. "Ah, man!"

But before he got too worked up, he noticed something on the floor beside his bed—and it was glowing. It was a treasure chest!

