

1

If Jake Palmer had only kept the mundane promise he'd made to himself, his life wouldn't be headed down a dead-end road at the speed of light. He'd vowed there'd be no more late-night flights. No more trips stacked on top of each other. No more landings at Seattle's Sea-Tac Airport after midnight, which pushed him to physical and emotional exhaustion. But there he'd been for the third time in eight days.

His phone rang as he pulled out of the parking garage, and Jake glanced at the time before he picked up. Twelve thirty-five a.m. Sienna should be asleep.

"What are you still doing up?"

"I miss you. I've hardly seen you for the past three months."

"I know. Not fun. But Italy will be here in six short weeks. Then fourteen days of cruising where you'll have to put up with me 24/7."

"Maybe I *should* get some rest."

Jake laughed.

"How far away are you, Adonis?" Sienna asked.

He smiled at her pet name for him. "Forty minutes."

“Get here now. I’ll wait up.”

“And sacrifice your beauty rest?” Jake tapped on his steering wheel and grinned.

“Yes, even though it’ll make me look horrible tomorrow.”

“Impossible. You’d win every beauty contest known to man even if you stayed up for a month.”

“If I’m asleep when you get home, wake me up. Promise.”

“Absolutely.”

Sienna blew a kiss through the phone and hung up.

Jake glanced at his gas gauge as he headed up I-5. The yellow warning light glared at him, red needle on the wrong side of the empty line. Problem. Wouldn’t be good to run out before getting back to Bothell. He glanced at the exits coming up. Probably not the greatest section of Seattle to get gas this late at night, but running out here would be worse. Why hadn’t he filled up before the trip? Because his schedule was insane and there hadn’t been time.

Jake pulled off I-5 at the next exit. Quick fill and he’d be back on the asphalt river, home to Sienna before one twenty. He pulled up to the outside gas island and snatched his wallet out of his coat at the same time. As he stepped outside into the October chill, odors of pot and gas filled his nose.

As he stepped to the pump, a battered Honda Civic with peeling dark blue paint lurched into the station and stopped behind his Jeep. A young woman got out, her black hair streaked with red and purple, her denim coat marred with grime and amateur images of dragons drawn with blue and red Sharpies.

She swiped a credit card and as she pumped her gas glanced furtively past Jake at the street to his back, then at the street in

front of them. She jiggled her nozzle up and down as if to try to make the gas flow faster.

“You okay?”

She flinched and glanced at Jake as if she hadn’t seen him during her scans of the street and was shocked to find someone standing nearby. “No, I’m . . . yeah, I’m fine.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No, I . . . uh . . . just thinking about . . . stuff.”

Her eyes continued to dart in a quick circle, and before her gaze had made it back to the starting point, the screech of tires filled the night air. The agitation on her face turned to fear as a gray Dodge Neon with a spoiler and white racing stripes sped into the station, then skidded to a stop behind the girl’s car, brakes squealing.

She dropped her nozzle and turned to run past Jake, but a beat-up Toyota appeared in front of Jake’s Jeep and she froze.

The passenger window of the Neon came down and a kid, couldn’t be more than twenty, adjusted his unneeded sunglasses and called out to her.

“Hey, sugar. We gotta talk. We’re running a business and you’re the product, see. And when the product goes missing, our clients aren’t happy. So we’re not happy. And it’s a trickle-down economy, which means you’re not going to be happy.”

The girl held out her palms as if they could keep the cars and the men inside them at bay. “I told you, I’m out of the game. You promised you’d leave me alone. You promised!”

“Don’t jam me.” The man swore, then flicked a cigarette toward the garbage can that sat between Jake’s pump and the girl’s. “Five more. That was the deal. Five. More. Don’t test me, girl.”

“No. I’m out now. Please!”

“You will be, baby. All the way out. Just five more. But right now, we gotta getcha all cleaned up. Nice and fresh, then we can start again, get it done, a week tops, then you’re free.” The man climbed out of his car and extended a completely tattooed arm toward her and wiggled his fingers. “Now come here, sugar. Now!”

Jake debated whether to move away or stay. But only for a moment. He left the nozzle stuck in the gas line and eased over next to the girl, his palms raised.

“What do you think you’re doing?” The man sneered at Jake. “You looking for a party? Or to get yourself totally messed up?”

“Neither.”

“Then bounce!” The kid took a step toward Jake and swore so hard spittle flew out his mouth.

Jake glanced at the kid in the driver’s seat of the Neon, then behind him. Two more in the front seat of the Toyota. Four against one. Jake was in good shape and knew how to handle himself in a fight, but these weren’t great odds. And the likelihood of one of these punks carrying a gun was high.

Jake kept his hands raised and shook his head. “I am not looking for any kind of trouble.”

“Good. That means you’re going to get in your Jeep right now, jam down hard on the gas pedal, and be back on your way to your castle. Go!” The kid stabbed his finger toward Jake’s Jeep, then eased toward the girl, a sick grin on his face.

“Tell you what. Let’s say I am looking for a party. Five parties. Why don’t I give you some money for your party supplies and you can let your friend here get back to filling up her car.”

He pointed to his back pocket. "Right now, I'm just going to grab my wallet."

Jake took all his cash and held it out. The kid took the bills and spun through them. "Two hundred eighty-five. You're a real hero, aren't you, pokey?"

"No. Not a hero. I'm just thinking this will end better for you, for me, for her, and for the cameras on the pumps if you take that and we all head out of here."

The kid grinned, then nodded at the driver of the Neon and toward the Toyota behind Jake.

"Oh, yeah, okay, I like that." The kid strutted back and forth in front of Jake. "You're a real Mr. Entertainment. Seriously funny guy. But I'm not laughing. You threaten me like I'm too stupid to think about the cameras?"

"See this place?" The kid laughed and swept his finger toward the store in a tight circle. "We come here, hang out sometimes. So we've adjusted the cameras to our liking. The clerks all like us too."

The kid stepped forward and jabbed Jake in the chest. "Nobody's gonna see what goes on here. Nobody. Which means you're going to jump in your shiny new Jeep right now and pull away and pretend you didn't see nothing. Got it?"

"Take the money, let her go."

"Wait, am I hearing you right?" The kid yanked on his earlobe.

"Yeah, you heard right. Let her go."

The kid's face grew red. He whipped off his sunglasses and got within inches of Jake, his voice a hiss now. "Last chance, hero."

"Let her go."

The kid hopped back and jerked up and down in a spastic

dance. “Wow. This is crazy. You’re not asking anymore? You’re telling? You don’t do that. I gave you a chance. Gave you two. But you’re breaking all the rules, Mr. Entertainment. You break our rules, we always get to have a little fun. And you get to take a bath.”

The kid pulled out a matchbook at the same moment something wet hit the small of Jake’s back, then his legs. He spun. One of the kids from the other car had a grin on his face, and Jake’s nozzle in his hand, gas streaming toward him in a lazy rainbow. Now his stomach and all the way down to his shoes were covered. He twisted back to glance at the first kid even though he knew exactly what was about to happen. He started to run, but he was far too late.

The last thing he remembered was a matchbook on fire, looping through the air toward his silver belt buckle.

2



ONE AND A HALF YEARS LATER

Jake took a deep breath as he rode the elevator to the eleventh floor of Chicago's Willis Tower. He forced a smile for his own benefit and tried to ignore the churning in his stomach. He could do this; he'd given this talk a million times. Written a book about it. Nothing to it. Like riding a bike.

He smoothed his suit coat and tightened his grip on his briefcase. When the doors finally parted, Jaclyn Thurman was waiting for him.

The woman's style was business casual, but something about the way she adjusted her glasses told him she was all work and no play. Fine by him. She gave his hand a quick shake, then folded hers in front of her as she led him toward the staff training center.

"Your first training session in a year and a half, right?" she asked.

"Right."

"Glad you came out of retirement."

“I wasn’t retired, I was . . . taking some time off.”

“A sabbatical?”

“Something like that.”

A forced leave of absence was more like it. A complete reset of life as he knew it. Learning to walk again. Learning to live alone. Pretending he was completely healed. Climbing back on the horse that was his consulting business.

“Well, good to have you back in the game,” Jaclyn said.

“Thanks.”

“If the things my business associates say about your talks are true, you’re going to take hold of my team, knock ‘em dead, and bring them back to life again.”

If his horse didn’t buck him off into the cheap seats first.

“I didn’t realize you’d hired me to kill people.” Jake raised his eyebrows. “But I do appreciate the compliment. Hope I can live up to it.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Jaclyn’s company was high-tech and the office reflected it. Sixty-inch monitors were built into the walls, and Jaclyn commented that the entire office was voice activated. The motif was stark but well designed. White walls and glass dominated the workspace. As she led Jake toward the auditorium where he’d spend the next six and a half hours, he spotted creatively decorated workstations. Individuality. Good. Stark was fine, sterile wasn’t.

Jaclyn glanced at her watch as they clipped along the slate floor at a pace just above comfortable. “I told my team to be ready to go at ten o’clock. That gives you nineteen minutes to set up. Is that enough time?”

“Plenty. Thanks.”

They reached a small auditorium filled with two hundred-plus seats, and Jaclyn excused herself. “I’ll be back just before ten. I’ll send one of my techs in to make sure your laptop is liking our systems. Anything else?”

“I’m good.”

Jaclyn strode away and Jake walked stiffly to the center of the room. He stared at the empty seats and decided there wouldn’t be any mingling with the audience as he’d always done. His gait was improving—he worked on it daily—but he didn’t want to risk an ill-timed stumble.

By nine fifty-one, Jake was ready, and he moved into a corner of the room to watch Jaclyn’s team as they ambled in. He studied the interesting mix of sharply dressed men and women, along with ones who appeared to have just jumped off the all-nighter wagon, and the rest somewhere in between. Again, good. It wasn’t a company of clones.

Jaclyn had said she expected thirty-five of the company’s staff to show up—as the training was optional—but as Jake studied the men and women seated in the eight or nine semicircle rows, it looked closer to seventy-five. Jake had hoped for the smaller crowd—it created a safer atmosphere for people to tell their stories at the end—but it was an element he couldn’t control.

Jaclyn gave a quick introduction, motioned to Jake, and he approached the podium. He studied his fingertips as he tapped them together, then looked back up at Jaclyn’s expectant team.

“We”—Jake motioned at the group, then at himself—“have a significant problem.”

He stooped and picked up a large dark green bottle from behind the podium. Its label was blank. Jake lifted it high in the air to his left, then spun on his heel 180 degrees, stopping as he faced the right-hand side of the audience. Then he strode to a small table and smacked the bottle down hard enough to make the table wobble. A smattering of nervous laughter came from the group.

“Yes, we indeed have a serious problem.” Jake steeped his hands, his profile to the audience as he stared at the bottle. He waited another second, then pointed at the crowd. “You . . . have a problem.”

He brought his fingers up to point at himself as he leaned in toward Jaclyn’s team. “I have a problem. Today I’m going to show you how to fix the problem. But it’s your choice whether you want to take action and apply the solution to your life. If you’re willing, you will never be the same again.”

He pointed at the green bottle on the table. “Our situation? We are the bottle. Each of us.”

Jake clicked to the first slide of his presentation and a quote filled the sixty-inch screen behind him. He read it slowly, taking time to emphasize each word. “It’s extremely difficult to read the label when you’re standing inside the bottle.”

He bent slightly at the waist as a smattering of laughter skittered through the crowd. “Hear it once more: it is extremely difficult to read the label when you’re standing inside the bottle.”

He scanned the group. “And we are all standing inside our own bottles.”

Jake waited as he always did for realization and small murmurs of acknowledgment to move through the crowd. He let the

nods and quick whispers fade, then picked up the bottle and took two steps forward.

“You get it, don’t you?” He laughed. “I see it in your eyes.” He smiled and pointed at the bottle. “For each of us, the label is blank. We don’t know the life-changing words that are written there. No clue, believe me. But we need to. How desperately we need to.”

Jake looked around the room, pausing to make eye contact every few seconds.

“And I promise you, what is written on every single one of your bottles are words and phrases and truths more powerful than you can imagine. If you knew what was written there, right there on your label, if you truly knew what other people think of you, if you truly knew the impact you have on them, you would be stunned.

“I know exactly what some of you are thinking. ‘He doesn’t know the dark parts of me.’ You’re right, I don’t. Others are thinking, ‘There are so many things written on my label I’m ashamed of.’ Yep, I get that too. But here’s my suspicion: you’ve focused on your faults and mistakes and regrets for too many ages to count. It’s time to start looking in another direction. Trust me, you’re not going to be able to follow the sun by staring at the night. I’m going to suggest you turn your back on the darkness and walk toward the light.”

Jake paused again to gauge the group. Some were checked out. There were always a few. But most were engaged, their eyes locked on his. He moved back and forth a little, ignoring the dull throb of pain in his legs.

“Still others are thinking, ‘Me? No. Other people, sure. They

don't see how powerful they are. I see what they are. Their talents. Gifts. But me? I barely make a ripple. There's next to nothing on my label.' But that proves my point. You see their glory, but not your own. And they see *your* glory, but not *their own*."

He paused to let the truth sink in. "It is the same with all of us. Me included."

Jake clicked to his next slide. An image of a woman standing on a precipice in silhouette with a vast mountain range behind her filled the screen.

"Finally, we have the people who know what's on their label, or maybe used to know, but they've forgotten, or they've gone into hiding. They won't let people see their strengths any longer, because something has frightened them, or a personal crisis has taken them out of the arena, or they're too ashamed of something they've done, or something has happened that has made them scared to show people who they really are."

Jake clicked to the next slide, a photo of a man emerging from a dark forest into bright sunshine. "It's time to step out of the shadows.

"The truth is, most of us are saying every single one of those things, I mentioned, but it's time to stop speaking lies about ourselves. It's time to stop!"

Jake smiled and joined the nervous laughter of those shocked by his shout.

"Yes?" He nodded and most of Jaclyn's team joined him.

"My new friends, it's time to come out of hiding. Time to discover what's on our labels."

The adrenaline that had never failed to kick in when Jake

spoke pulsed through him. They wouldn't all take hold, but the ones who did would never be the same.

“This isn't hype, this isn't motivational pabulum that will fade when you walk out that door at the end of the day. For the next six hours we're going to go through a comprehensive series of exercises that will help you discover in detail what is written on your label. And if you are able to actually believe what is written there, your life will change so immeasurably, you'll wonder how you lived in ignorance for so many years. Are you ready?”

Jake delivered his first session, then broke the audience into groups of five or six who all knew each other. When they settled, he said, “I want you to do a simple activity. You're going to go around your group and describe to each other what you see on each other's labels. I'll be wandering from group to group to see how you're doing. Don't make this hard. A few things for everyone, then on to the next person. Yes, it might feel strange and uncomfortable at first, but trust me, just go with it.”

After offering them a few more guidelines, Jake wandered through the auditorium catching snippets from each group. Jaclyn's team grabbed the idea and sprinted with it. Nice. He reveled in the looks of hope and surprise on the faces in each group.

As he meandered around the conference room, his gaze kept returning to a woman who talked with her hands and leaned forward as she spoke to her group. Every few seconds she would touch the person on her right or left, and when she did the person's eyes brightened.

Jake ambled over until he was close enough to make out her words. She was heavy, probably on the upside of three hundred

pounds, with piercing blue eyes that matched a sky-blue blouse, her face sun-kissed with the perfect amount of freckles. As she listened to each of the others in her group, she gave tiny nods of her head. There was an inquisitiveness in her eyes as if she was fascinated with their responses.

As he studied her, a middle-aged man from the neighboring group signaled him with a raised hand. Jake had a brief conversation with them about how to read a label when you didn't know a person well. After spending a few minutes with the cluster, he excused himself and moved toward another group wanting his input. But as he chatted with them, his intuition pinged and told him to talk to the woman in blue who had captivated him.

He returned slowly, wanting to time his interruption to the best moment. A few moments later, laughter. As it died, he leaned in.

"Excuse me." He tapped the lady lightly on the shoulder. "We're going to take a break in about five minutes and I'm wondering if I could talk to you for a few seconds before we do."

She stared at him with an expression he'd seen many times over the past nine years. Surprise. Nervousness. An *I can't believe the speaker wants to talk to me* look mixed with *Did I do something wrong?*

"Talk to me?" The woman pressed her hand against her sky-blue blouse just below her neck. "Right now?"

"If that's okay."

"Sure." She shifted in her chair. "I mean, yes, that's fine."

Jake led her to two empty seats well out of earshot of the rest of the groups and motioned toward the one on the left. "Can we sit?"

"Yes. Of course." She smoothed her pleated skirt and blinked.

Jake leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands. "Listen, I don't want this to be awkward and I don't mean to make you feel nervous, but I feel like I have to tell you something."

"Okay." She brushed back her hair and pressed her lips together tight.

"My name is Jake." He offered his hand. "What's yours?"

"Rachelle."

"It's good to meet you, Rachelle."

"You too." Her breaths came out in little puffs.

Jake started to speak, but before he could get the first word out, Rachelle blurted, "I'm talking too much in my group, aren't I? I need to give the others more time. And I kind of ended up taking over and I should have sat back more. I'm sorry about that. Really."

Jake shook his head and smiled. "I have to disagree. I think you're wrong. I don't think you're reading your label with any kind of accuracy. You don't talk too much. Not even close. And you haven't taken over."

He waved his hands toward the men and woman clustered in groups of five and six. "As you saw, I've spent a good deal of the past forty-five minutes going to each group, watching them, listening to them, helping them with questions if they needed it, offering suggestions, sitting in for a moment if they wanted me to. Encouraging them to speak. Lighting the match, to use a cliché."

Rachelle nodded. "Okay."

"I've done that with every group." Jake held up his forefinger. "All of them except one."

"Mine."

"Yes. Did you notice I haven't dropped in?"

“Yes.”

“Why do you think I haven’t engaged?”

“We’re not made up of the important people in the company and you only have so much time.”

Jake laughed and held his thumb and forefinger up to his eyes.

“We need to buy you reading glasses for that label of yours.”

“What?” Rachelle squished up her face and stared at him.

“The reason I’ve left you alone is because you’ve been leading beautifully. You’ve drawn out the people in your group like an artist. You’ve asked great questions and offered spot-on suggestions. You’ve done an excellent job of reading the labels in your group. It’s been truly beautiful to watch.”

Rachelle stared at him like he’d just told her that in a few seconds she was going to fly to the moon and back.

“And speaking of beauty, you are beautiful.” Jake let the words hang in the air and watched Rachelle’s eyes fill with tears.

“I’m so heavy.” Rachelle let her head fall forward.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“It always matters.” Rachelle’s eyes dropped and she straightened her skirt though it didn’t need straightening.

“And you’re not just beautiful physically. Yes, you are beautiful on the outside, but the beauty you have on the inside spills out like a river and everyone around you gets swept up in it. Do you know that?”

Rachelle shook her head. “If only I could lose weight.”

“Listen.” Jake leaned forward and waited till she met his gaze.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“I’m so heavy.”

“It doesn’t matter, beautiful Rachelle. It’s time to come out of hiding.”

“It does matter.”

“Look at me.” Jake waited till she lifted her face, eyes red. “It’s time.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Yes, you do. Not easy, I realize that. It can be brutal at times, but you can. I know. Time to come out of the shadows. To believe what’s written on your label.”

Jake clasped his hands in front of him. “If you want to lose weight, fine. But don’t do it for anyone but you. Start to believe what is written on your label: Beautiful. Smart. A river of life to those around you. Natural leader. Friend. Your weight is no longer going to define who you are. Do you understand me?”

“You don’t know me.”

“You’re right, I don’t. Yet even in the few seconds I’ve seen you, the things I just described are so evident, anyone with eyes could see them.”

Jake stood and Rachelle followed his lead. “I wish we could talk longer, but I do need to give you and your colleagues a break.”

“Can I give you a hug?”

Jake grinned and craned his neck as if looking for security. “As long as we’re not breaking any company rules.”

Rachelle laughed and hugged Jake hard and he hugged back just as tightly.

“I have a friend who is a wonderful hugger.” Rachelle wiped her eyes. “He says we should always give hugs that are fierce.”

“I like that. Do you think he’d mind if I steal that idea?”

“I think he’d love it.” Rachele nodded as she stepped backward. “Thank you, Jake. You don’t know how powerful this was.”

“So good to meet you, Rachele.”



At the end of the day Jake stood at the podium and clapped his hands. “Okay, friends. Time for a few minutes of Q and A, then I’ll let you get back to your regularly scheduled lives. But my hope is they are never regularly scheduled again. I hope you choose to live lives of risk and boldness as you come to realize what is on your label.”

He let his gaze sweep the room. There were some neutral faces, but most had bright eyes and expectant smiles. He’d made it back. A year and a half away—a little creaky in a few parts of his presentation—nothing anyone but he would notice. A few more sessions and he’d be back to firing on all cylinders.

After half a dozen insightful questions from the group, a man in the back row raised his hand.

“Yes.” Jake pointed at him.

The man stood, his head cocked, his eyes narrowed.

“Tell me this, Palmer. What happens when all the gooshy feelings from one of your talks fade away, huh? What happens when your bottle isn’t filled up with the things people expect you to pour out? The things they demand you pour out?”

Jake started to reply but the man interrupted.

“What happens when you go home one night and find out your wife doesn’t think what’s in the bottle is good enough anymore?”

What happens when she reads the label and comes up with words that aren't the kind you'd want slapped on a Hallmark card?"

Jake's scarred legs went weak. The man was still talking, but Jake couldn't hear anything but Sienna's devastating announcement, which she dropped on him barely seven months after the attack: *I can't do it any longer. I really, truly thought I could, but I can't and I won't ever be able to pretend that your burns don't make me . . . I'm just not able . . . you know . . .*

"It's all candy and tulips for you, isn't it, Jake?" The man pointed at his own ring finger. "Used to have gold wrapped around this here finger. But my ex saw the dark places inside my bottle, and she didn't like 'em too much."

Jaclyn started to speak, but the man cut her off.

"No, Jackie, I'm going to finish. I'm not trying to hassle Jake. I really want to know."

He fixed his eyes on Jake and spoke once more, his voice now softer, the tone now tinged with sorrow. "What do you do when your whole life someone tells you what's on the label isn't enough? What if that scar follows you around your entire life?"

This isn't what I signed up for, Jake. I won't ever feel toward you the way I used to. I'm so sorry, but it's over.

The only sound in the room was the whir of air pouring through the heating ducts.

"You know what I mean, Jake?"

Jake gave a slow nod as his mind raced for an answer that he knew he'd never find.

I've filed for divorce. I know you'll say we can work it out, but we can't. So don't try. There's nothing you can do.

Every eye in the auditorium fixed on him. As heat rushed to his face, Jake shifted from trying to find an answer to trying to fight the panic threatening to take him to the floor. His legs wobbled and the corners of his vision grew darker.

“Jake?” Jaclyn appeared beside him and laid her hand lightly on his arm. “Are you okay?”

He blinked and stared at her for a few moments before years of experience navigating difficult questions kicked in. Jake fixed his eyes on the man and cleared his throat.

“Excellent question.” He swept his eyes over the rest of the group. “The kind of change I’m talking about doesn’t happen overnight. At times it will seem as if you can never erase what others have written on your label. But in time the ink will fade, replaced by the truth.”

He paused and tried to think of a final, powerful thought to wrap things up, but all he could think about was how lame and cliché the words he’d just spoken were, and the panic started to seize him again.

Jaclyn saved him. “Thank you all for coming today, and let’s thank Jake Palmer for sharing his life and his wisdom with us.”

Jake barely heard the smattering of applause as he gave a half-hearted wave and a quarter-hearted smile. He’d never get the man’s question out of his heart, because the exact same question had haunted Jake for the past year and a half.

Disquiet settled on him as he faked his way through the necessary good-byes, then rode the elevator back down and left the building. Everything he’d said during the past six hours was true. But it was also true that he’d shoved his own bottle into a locked

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closet at the back of his soul and conveniently misplaced the key. There was only one thing his label said these days. That he wasn't enough—not for his dad, not for his mom, not for Sienna, not for anyone—and he never would be again.



3

Jake handed his boarding pass to the woman at the kiosk. She scanned it, handed the pass back, and he trudged down the Jetway toward the 737 that would wing him from Chicago's O'Hare Airport back to Seattle.

He pressed his phone to his ear and said for the second time, "I'm not going this year. Drop it."

"Not an option. You gotta be there. Come on. Tenth anniversary."

"Forget it, Peter. You don't remember what happened last year?"

"That was your fault."

"Mine?"

"You didn't exactly engage."

Jake came to a stop on the ramp behind a woman with hair straight out of the late sixties. Groovy.

"No, it was your wife's fault," Jake said. "Can't go through it again this year. Last year sealed the deal. No more Jake Palmer at the annual summer gathering."

He was weary of the conversation. Weary of his business trip. Weary of his life.

“It won’t be like that this time, I promise. Camille feels bad about what happened. Plus, it’ll be good for you. Really. You’ve done the hermit routine long enough. Time to—”

“I’m boarding, Peter. I gotta go.”

Jake hung up and stepped from the walkway onto the plane, taking his briefcase in one hand, carry-on in the other. He stared at the passengers in first class. He could afford to be there, but he’d never been able to rationalize the expense. One-fifty to three hundred percent more for a little extra room? Nah, it didn’t compute.

His phone vibrated. Jake glanced down as he waited for the people ahead of him to grab a piece of that precious overhead cargo space. Peter. Again. He sent an automatic message saying he’d call back later, then stuck his phone in his pocket.

Peter Danner was a stellar friend and meant well, thought he was doing the right thing putting the full-court press on Jake to come this summer, but there was no way Jake would join the other five at the lake in three months. Last year had been brutal even without Camille rubbing the proverbial salt in his wounds. The tradition held too many memories of how life used to be, and he wasn’t going to face them a second time.

The flight was full, one section packed with what looked like a girls’ soccer team, the rest with the typical assortment of people from a cross section of life. He settled in next to the window in seat 11A, slid his briefcase under the seat in front of him, and stared out the window at the crewman loading luggage onto the plane.

A few minutes later Jake turned as an elderly gentleman with a full head of white hair and a well-worn brown leather jacket sat next to him. The man’s face was tanned and ruddy, dotted with

sun spots. The moment the man finished buckling his seat belt he inclined his head slightly and touched two fingers to his brow. "Hello."

"Hi."

The man stuck out his hand and shook Jake's with a strength that belied his age. Jake couldn't remember the last time he'd been greeted on a plane with a handshake, but something about the way the man did it felt right.

"Name is Leonard."

"Jake Palmer."

Leonard nodded and gave a quick smile as if he knew something Jake didn't. Jake tried not to stare at the gap where the man's two front teeth should have been. But for some reason it didn't look odd, as if this was the way a smile was supposed to be. He returned the smile with one of his own and hoped it didn't look phony. He wasn't in the mood for conversation, but after the usual pleasantries, Leonard pulled out what looked like a book on gardening and started to read.

Jake thankfully pulled out his e-reader and reviewed his notes to see if he could figure out what had gone wrong in Chicago. But even before he started he knew he wouldn't find the answer in his outline. The problem was buried somewhere much deeper.

By the time they flew over South Dakota an hour and a half later, Jake had skimmed through half a dozen articles on kayaking. Leonard apparently was done reading as well, because he closed his book and shoved it into the holder on the back of the seat in front of him. He did it with enough force to make the scarecrow-thin woman seated there rise up, twist, and glare at

him with coal-black eyes. At first it seemed Leonard didn't notice, but as the woman continued to fling her scowl at him, he waved a hand as if to dismiss her, then focused on Jake.

"These planes? Way too small. Metal tube shooting through the sky like an elongated toaster with wings. Only the ninth time I've been on one in my life, and it'd make me plenty happy for this to be my last."

"I'm not a fan either." Jake knocked on the white wall of the plane to his left. "Can't wait till they invent teleportation so I can beam all over the country instantaneously."

"They've already done it." Leonard gave Jake that double-gap-toothed smile. "They have. I'm one hundred percent serious. Now it wasn't people or lab rats or even bugs, I'll give you that much. But way back in 2014 scientists took two qubits that were separated by a distance of three meters and watched and recorded the spin of one electron and saw that same spin reflected in the other qubit instantly. Instantly. No time passed. Teleportation. Proven."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Jake grinned. "But it sounds dang cool."

"All I'm trying to tell ya is—think there've been breakthroughs over the past hundred years? Ain't nothing compared to what's coming."

"You're into technology?"

"Nah, but I like to read. And I'm intrigued by things that prove we don't have next to nothin' figured out. See, I think there's way more to life than what our ears can hear or our eyes can see. We've barely scratched the surface of the surface of what's out there beyond our five senses. There's much more going on than we know."

A flight attendant passed by with a large bottle of water and Leonard flagged her down as if he were in a restaurant. After his plastic cup was filled, Leonard pointed at Jake and gave him a cryptic smile.

“What do you do, Jake?”

“I’m a speaker and a corporate trainer.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I give talks to the public, I work with salespeople, CEOs, managers, individuals.”

The cryptic smile again. “And what do you teach them?”

“How to help them see deeper into themselves. See that the things that hold them back are usually lies they believe are true. I help them see themselves as they truly are.”

“For some that could be a rather disturbing vision.”

Jake laughed and popped the last of his airline peanuts into his mouth. “Yeah, I could tell you some stories, wow. But I’ve found most people are well aware of their faults, their weak areas, those places where they’ve brought pain to themselves and those around them. And they dwell on those failings and continually beat themselves up with a stick so big they have no chance of seeing the other side; the areas where they bring light and hope and life to people. And even though others can see those qualities, the people themselves can’t.”

The smile on Leonard’s face grew as he tapped the plane’s armrest between him and Jake. “And because they are so focused on their own darkness, they miss the light and don’t do all they could for themselves or those around them.”

“Well said. I should hire you to write the copy on my website.”

Leonard's face grew serious and he nodded as if it was a certainty that would happen. "When do you want me to start?"

"I was kidding." Jake laughed again. He liked this quirky guy.

"Don't worry, so was I." A knowing smile grew on his face. "I think you're doing people some good. You discover people's areas of light—that they can't see—point them out, then give them a plan on how to work from that perspective instead of the one where they're emotionally crippled. You take them through exercises to discover and define the things they could accomplish if they'd only see the truth about themselves and believe it."

Jake opened his mouth slightly and frowned as the old man's smile grew into a full-out grin.

"Do you realize you're quoting me almost word for word?"

"Yep, I do. I sure do, bucko."

Jake shook his head as the obvious explanation filled his mind.

"You've been to one of my seminars, haven't you?"

Leonard's eyes narrowed. "Like I said, I think you're doing people good. But don't you think your talks would be more powerful if you were living what you're preaching?"

Jake's face went hot. "What are you—"

"The owner of the company you just spoke at is a friend of mine. She told me you were coming." Leonard tapped his temple. "I read your book. I liked it. I happened to be in town visiting my daughter and decided since I was already here, I might as well hear you speak. So they let me sneak in a few minutes after you started and sit in the shadows in the back of the room. You didn't spot me, I'm guessing."

"No," Jake said.

"I felt for you during your, uh, stumble at the end of the day."

Jake didn't respond.

"Tough getting back in the saddle after a long layoff."

"Yeah, it can be."

"But we both know that it's more than the layoff, don't we?"

Leonard sighed. "Awhile back I watched your TED Talk after I finished your book. The guy who gave that talk and the guy I watched today are different people. Something happened to you."

Again, Jake didn't respond.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Nope."

"No worries," Leonard said. "You want to know what I think?"

"No."

"I think you can relate to the guy who heckled you more than you'd ever want to let on." He pointed at Jake's ring finger. "I think you used to have a gold band too."

Jake glared at him. "Interesting coincidence that we wound up sitting next to each other."

"Yeah, quite a surprise." Leonard winked, settled back in his seat, and continued at a volume that said he didn't care if anyone else heard them. "So what's the scoop? Not married any longer? Or do you take off the ring on trips so you can pick up women?"

Jake considered making a joke to deflect the question, but chose not to. "Next week it'll be nine months since we signed the papers."

"Pain in the butt, divorces," Leonard muttered. "I've had two."

"Then why the ring?" Jake pointed at Leonard's left hand.

"Yeah, well, the third time stuck."

Leonard blinked as if dust had landed in his eyes, but Jake didn't think it was dust. If Jake was guessing, Leonard wasn't the type of man to admit to tears even if they were streaming down his cheeks. Jake turned away to give Leonard a moment and stared out at the dusk stealing the last of the sun. A minute or two later, Leonard cleared his throat.

"Married to her for fourteen years. Till she decided to leave me for the world where there's no more pain. But I'll graduate from here someday, probably sooner than later. At that point maybe I'll see her again. She said I would. Not sure, but it's a thought, you know?"

"I'm sorry."

"Ah, what can you do? The moment we're born we have a death sentence hanging over us." Leonard leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. "Okay, Jake. We're almost friends here. Tell your old pal Leonard what happened last year that makes you not want to go to the summer gathering this year."

"You listen to my phone calls too?"

"Couldn't be helped." Leonard grinned and a laugh sputtered out.

Jake joined Leonard and leaned his chair back, then scolded himself. "I always talk too loud when I'm on my cell phone."

"Most people do."

Jake closed his eyes and dumped his story on Leonard. "Every year for eight years, my wife and I and two other couples got together at a small lake in eastern Washington for a week of sun, water, great dinners, and deep conversation. Our best friends. We rented the same place, same dates in mid-July, and it was always one of the highlights of my year."

“But this year you don’t want to go because it reminds you too much of your wife.” Leonard waved his hand as if to wash away his words. “Sorry, I mean, ex-wife.”

“Yeah.”

“In other words, you didn’t divorce her, she divorced you.”

“That’s right, detective. Thanks for that reminder of the facts.”

“What happened? Why’d she leave?”

“That’s a very long story.”

“Got it,” Leonard said. “You don’t want to tell me.”

“It’s not that, it’s—”

“Yeah it is. You don’t know me.” Leonard folded his hands and settled back in his seat.

“I’m going to plead the fifth, Leonard. At this point, the end of the why-stick is still a little too sharp, so it’s pretty brutal to tell the story. Let’s just say I loved her and did everything I knew how to do to show her that, but she ended up shattering my heart into so many pieces you’d need a microscope to spot any of them.”

“Fair enough.” Leonard reached into the satchel at his feet, pulled out a novel, and opened it toward the end, but he didn’t read. “Is there any part of you that wants to go this summer?”

“Not much.”

Leonard turned to his book, and the rumble of the engines had just started to lull Jake into the edges of sleep when he was hauled back to the conscious world by Leonard’s tap on his arm.

“You asleep?”

“Almost. At least I was. Not so much now.”

“Good.” Leonard clasped Jake’s arm and shook it. “Then open your eyes. I have an idea for you.”

Jake blinked and gave his eyes a quick rub with his thumb and forefinger. “What? You’ve figured out a way to time travel with all your futuristic science stuff? I can go back and make that October night disappear?”

“What October night?”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s done. What’s your idea?”

“It’s a good one, and yes, maybe, in a way, it can help you go back.” Leonard winked.

④ Jake squinted at Leonard. “Tell me.”

The loudspeaker growled and the captain came on. “This is Captain Jeff Stucky from the flight deck, and if you could go ahead and make sure your seat belts are fastened we sure would appreciate it. Looks like we’re going to hit a few miles of turbulence pretty quick up ahead here and we want to make certain you all stay safe.”

Jake glanced at Leonard. He was smiling. It was obvious from the look on his new friend’s face that he was one of those wackos who thought turbulence was nature’s version of in-flight entertainment. Jake couldn’t even start to relate. A friend once told him to think of turbulence like a raft on a river. Not so easy. Jake had run a few rapids in his kayak. The difference was rivers were on the ground, where the farthest you could drop if something went wrong was a few feet. A plane? Try six miles.

“We’ll be looking for better air above or below us, so if you feel like we’re climbing or dropping, don’t worry, folks, it’s all part of the normal routine.”

The chop came thirty seconds later. Jake kept his eyes locked on the faint lights thirty-five thousand feet below. Somehow it

helped to see something outside the plane that was stable. He yanked his seat belt tighter, as if that would do anything to make him more secure, and glanced at Leonard. The old man looked like he was getting ready for a siesta.

“You okay, Leonard?”

“You’re not asking that question for me.” A tiny smile broke out on Leonard’s face as his head rocked on the back of his seat. “You’re asking it for you.”

“True.” He took slow breaths.

“This is the perfect representation of your life right now, isn’t it, Jake?”

The plane dropped what felt like a hundred feet. Jake tightened his grip on his armrest and quickened his breathing. “My life?”

“The turbulence came out of nowhere. Snuck up on ya.” Leonard shifted in his seat, looking as comfortable as if he was at home in a ten-year-old recliner. “And now everything’s out of control and you don’t know how to stop it. Huh?”

Jake focused on the dim lights splattered across the darkness below and tried to ignore Leonard’s words. But the man was right, and the truth hurt.

“Paths are right in front of us all the time, Jake. The right ones. Ones that can take us exactly where we need to go, but they’re so hard to see, so hard to see. Most people are blind. But the water and path are there, take us where we need to be, oh can’t you see, can’t you see, even if they’re sometimes too real to embrace.”

“Huh?”

“From a poem I know. Seemed apropos for the moment.”

“Okay.”

Leonard shifted toward him, a playful look in his gray eyes. “You like these friends of yours?”

“Yeah.”

“Do they understand you? Support you? Give you things to laugh at?”

“Most of them.”

Leonard smiled and closed his eyes again. “It wouldn’t be real unless at least one of your crew was a massive pain in the butt. One of the men or one of the women?”

Jake laughed in spite of the vise grip around his stomach, courtesy of the rough air. “You’re on the far side of blunt, aren’t you, Leonard?”

“I’m too old not to be. Cared what people thought till I reached fifty. When I hit sixty I started letting loose. Not all the way, but plenty. Now that I’m pushing hard on my mideighties, I don’t have time for any subtle language that only muddles up the truth.” He tapped his head. “What was I saying?”

“You asked if they were true friends to me. They are.”

“Then be with them.” He poked his chest. “At your age you think they’ll live forever, but they won’t. Neither will you. Who knows if this is the last year you’ll gather together?”

Another question straight to the center of Jake’s heart.

“Here’s my idea.” Leonard took a slow breath. “Don’t go to the same lake. Go to a different one. Fresh start. Same friends, but none of the memories lurking about from being at the lake you’ve always been to. Could be a life changer. I know of a place. It’s a lake with hope.”

“Hope?” Jake frowned at Leonard, then turned back to the window. “Hope for what?”

As Jake uttered the words, the turbulence started to ease. By the time Leonard opened his eyes and pulled out a small tablet of paper from inside his coat pocket, the jolts from the plane were gone. Leonard scribbled on the pad, ripped off the sheet, and handed it to Jake.

“Here. This’ll give you all the information you need if you feel like checking it out. Name of the lake and the website for the house I’m saying you should rent. It’s secluded, off the beaten path, but still close enough to get groceries and most of the stuff you’d need for an entertaining week.

“The rent is cheap, the lake is usually glass, and the eagles are common. Has plenty of room for you and your friends. The nice thing is, most people don’t find it, so it’s peaceful. Only twelve houses on the entire lake and so spread out from each other you can’t hear anything but the calls of the mallards as they lift off the lake in the early moments of dawn.”

“Maybe you really should be writing my website copy.”

Jake smiled, folded the paper, and shoved it in his front pocket. They touched down in Seattle fifty minutes later. When they reached the sign pointing toward baggage claim, Leonard offered his hand and Jake took it.

“I’m going to overstep my bounds here, Jake. But I’m too old to care any longer, so here goes.” Leonard peered into Jake’s eyes. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re on the verge of doing something that’ll make a lot of people in your life pretty dang sad. But then again, I could be wrong. So why don’t you tell me I am so I can stop worrying about you.”

THE LONG JOURNEY TO JAKE PALMER

Jake didn't pull away from Leonard's gaze, but he didn't answer either.

"Don't do it, Jake Palmer. Think hard about going this summer instead."

"All right. I will." He handed Leonard a business card. "Let's keep in touch."

"You mean that?"

Jake hesitated before saying, "Yeah, I mean it."

Leonard took the card, studied the front, then turned it over and read the printing on the back. "What is hidden will be revealed. What is hidden needs to be known." Leonard held up the card and wagged it. "You believe this?"

"I used to."

"I have a feeling in my gut you're going to get the chance to believe it again."