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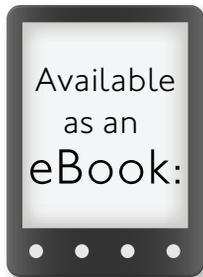
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DEADLINE

A NOVEL

RANDY
ALCORN



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DEADLINE

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CHAPTER ONE

The canary yellow three-by-five card fell to the floor, face down. Retrieving the card and turning it face up, he stared at it curiously. It was a single sentence, consisting of only four words in all-caps pica type. A waitress wiped the table next to him and happened to glance over just as a look of startled unbelief overtook him. She watched his eyes widen and hands shake, and wondered what could possibly be on that card to trigger such a reaction.

Chilled to the bone, he was forced to begin a radical reinterpretation of the flurried trauma of his past eight days. He slowly mouthed the four words, as if doing so would make them less menacing and bizarre.

Three pairs of eyes focused together on the twenty-seven-inch screen. Kansas City's placekicker planted his left foot and swung his right into the football. His teammates' focused energy seemed to lift it that extra six inches above the bar. The fifty-four-yard field goal was good, the first half over.

"All right!" Doc and Finney reached across Jake, slapping their hands over him in symbolic victory.

"No way. Gimme a break." Jake's buddies' celebration added insult to injury. His Seahawks headed for the locker room ten points down.

The three childhood friends—now doctor, businessman, and journalist—slouched back on the recliner-couch. Doc occupied the recliner on one end, Finney the other. As usual, Jake Woods sat between them, feet propped up on a stool and pillow. All three wore blue jeans, Finney a navy blue Microsoft Windows sweatshirt, Doc a snazzy maroon polo shirt, and Jake a torn and faded gray sweatshirt with an indecipherable message.

It began for the three men like almost every Sunday afternoon the last twenty years. None of them had a clue this one would end so differently.

"Okay guys," Finney announced, "it's pizza time—let's flip." The routine was automatic, a no-brainer. They'd done it since childhood a thousand times, to decide who got to bat first or who had to buy popcorn at the matinee. In the adult version, at half time they staged two coin flips and a tie-breaker, if necessary. Loser drove, loser bought the pizza. No home deliveries. While the winners gloated and kicked back, the loser raced to and from Gino's in an attempt to miss as little of the third quarter as possible.

Shoulders squared and back straight, Doc looked like a career military officer, though he hadn't been in uniform for twenty-five years. "Tell you what, Finn," he jabbed. "Let's just send Woody now and flip later."

Jake Woods, having lost the flip three weeks in a row, flashed a “shut up and flip the coin” glare. His sturdy jaw jutted out in mock insult, as if to say an award-winning syndicated columnist shouldn’t have to endure this kind of abuse. Despite his tough no-holds-barred reputation in this city, it was difficult to imagine fit but frumpy Jake being able to intimidate the dapper and ever-confident Doc. Standing there in his misshapen fur-lined sheepskin slippers, with disheveled hair, stray eyebrows veering out, and a two-day beard, Jake was in weekend gear.

“Hang on,” Jake said, pulling a quarter from his pocket. “This time I’ll flip. I think you guys have been rigging this. Let’s see how you do against an honest two bits. Okay, this is between you two—I’ll take on the loser. Call it, Finn.”

Finney’s face screwed up in feigned tension as if he’d been called on to kick a fifty-four yarder. “I can’t take the pressure.”

“Shut up and call it,” Doc said. “I’m hungry. You can pray about it later.”

As the coin reached the top of its flight, Finney called “Tails.” It landed on the coffee table, which from a distance appeared smooth and shiny, but up close showed countless tiny dents from years of half time coin tosses. The quarter hit on its edge and rolled around like a rim shot, seemingly taking forever to settle.

“Son of a...” Doc said under his breath, staring at the coffee table. The quarter had stopped rolling around the middle of the coffee table. But it hadn’t fallen flat. Balancing precariously, it stayed right on its edge. No heads, no tails.

“What are the chances of that happening?”

“Girls, look at this.”

The “girls,” each in their upper forties, were fast friends. It came with the package. Married to the three musketeers—or the three stooges, as they sometimes called them—the girls were destined to spend a lot of time together. They might as well like it, and they did. Janet wasn’t around as often now, since her divorce from Jake three years ago. But the relationship was amiable—it was a good modern divorce—and Sue and Betsy often persuaded Janet to keep them company during the Sunday afternoon ritual.

Sue, Finney’s wife, marched into the living room first, followed by Janet and Betsy. “Oh, did we miss the coin toss? Too bad—it’s always so exciting.” Noting the look on Jake’s face she added, “Lose again, Jake? Hope the *Tribune* pays you well. We appreciate you keeping us fed.”

“I didn’t lose. No one lost. Look.”

Sue followed Jake’s gaze to the coin on the coffee table. “You’re kidding. Don’t anyone breathe or it’ll fall.”

“So what are you going to do, boys? Toss again?”

“Nah,” Doc replied. “Let’s leave it right there. No one wins, no one loses.” He looked at Jake and Finney. “Let’s just all go together.”

“Together.” A familiar thought. Forty years ago the three had played army, hunted lions, dug up treasures and discovered aliens together in the fields and hill-sides and forests of Benton County. Together they’d exasperated their mothers, annoyed their brothers, harassed their sisters, confounded their teachers and principals, though not nearly as much as they remembered. Together they’d spiffed up

and swaggered into Kathy Bates's eighth-grade party, and trembled wide-eyed later that night when the police showed up. In high school they each earned letters in three sports, fought side by side in the state championship football game, and took their dates to the prom together. They'd gone off to college, joined ROTC, and graduated together. They'd entered the Army, traveled off to three different parts of the world, then shipped out to Vietnam as greenhorn lieutenants within three months of each other. In the almost quarter century since the war, they'd been best man in each other's weddings, and seen their children grow up together. And together they'd gone off on more hunting and camping trips than they could count, the kind where it was miserably cold and you hunched in close to the fire and the smoke stung your eyes and permeated your coats and flannel shirts, and you never got off a good shot at anything but an empty chili can, and you told stories you'd told a hundred times and laughed harder than you ever remembered laughing before. This was just Sunday pizza, but "together" sounded good.

"I'll drive," Doc said. Finney saluted good naturedly. Jake kicked off his slippers, which he brought to Finney's every Sunday, and slipped into his Nikes, not bothering to lace them. The guys all grabbed their coats.

"We've got twenty minutes till the third quarter." Doc was half way out the door when he turned. "You made the call, Betsy?"

"Have I ever fumbled the ball, Doc? Of course I made the call. One giant Hula Lula and a deep dish heart-attack-on-a-crust." This was the girls' nickname for the Meat Eater's special, full of the cholesterol their used-to-be-jock husbands' arteries didn't need but especially craved during football season.

"And, guys, don't slam the—" The loud crash toppled a photograph from the mantle. "Door," Sue added weakly, as Janet and Betsy giggled. Nobody noticed the coin fall on its side.

"Bulls in a china shop," Sue said, with more fondness than exasperation.

"Yeah, and there's no china left," Betsy added. "Not in my house. But the bull's still charging!" All three flashed a what-can-you-do expression, laughing together.

As the three bulls made the brisk walk to the car, Jake glanced up at the swirling gray of the Oregon sky. It looked as if it had been rubbed hard with a dirty eraser. No rain yet, but the sky felt heavy, and to someone born and raised here, even the air's smell and taste signaled the threat of long heavy rain. *A storm's coming*, Jake felt certain.

"With you in a sec, Jake." Doc and Finney were taking care of something by Finney's car, while Jake waited by Doc's. He didn't mind. He breathed in that air, that rich fresh Oregon air. There was no place like this one. Jake, along with Doc and Finney, had grown up in a small town in this same Willamette Valley, less than a hundred miles south of where they lived now. Anyone raised in the Pacific Northwest always wants to come home, and after college and the army Jake's internal homing device reeled him back, along with his friends. He loved the rugged mountains forty minutes to the east, and the jagged Oregon coastline ninety minutes to the west. He loved the endless towering Douglas firs, so thick you could pull over to the side of the road, walk half a mile and be a world apart from everyone else on

earth, inhaling the aroma those car air fresheners tried in vain to imitate. He loved something green growing everywhere you turned, and the four distinct seasons, each with its singular beauty, precisely ticking off the cycle of each year. Most of all he loved sharing this huge state with far fewer people than inhabited single cities in the east, midwest, south, or down the coast in California. In Oregon you could drive some roads and see more deer than cars.

Oregon was paradise for the hunter, fisherman, boater, hiker, backpacker, outdoorsman and wilderness lover. There was some of most of those in Jake. But he loved something else about this place, at least this northern Willamette Valley that had always been home. He loved the independent spirit, the rugged individualism, the free thinking initiative of people who weren't slaves to tradition or convention. People who didn't like being told what was right and wrong, who decided for themselves what they should and shouldn't do. A progressive state, Oregon had become home to nuclear protesters, animal rights protesters, environmentalist protesters, homosexual protesters, "legalize marijuana" protesters, "right to die" protesters, and representatives of any and every challenge to the status quo. Why, Jake wasn't sure. Maybe they'd inherited genes of individualism and autonomy from their forebears who braved the Oregon trail, who kept leaving behind the established order of American civilization, going west until the land ran into the Pacific Ocean, stopping only then, so far from the political power brokers of the east or the midwest conservatives or the southern Bible Belters that they could live their own lives as they saw fit. Church attendance was lower here than anywhere in the nation. People had better things to do on weekends than sit in stuffy old buildings, bored and feeling guilty. Oregon was free spirited, a great place to live, Jake's kind of place. He'd been all across his country and a dozen others, but wouldn't trade this place for any other.

Of all times, Sunday afternoons with his friends left Jake feeling free and content. But today an uneasiness gnawed at him. The coin and the clouds and the time of his life conspired to fill him with uncertainty and dread.

"Okay, let's go. Time's wastin'!" Doc took charge again, and they piled into his cherry-red Suburban, a fully loaded four-wheel-drive with a 454 engine. Doc hopped in the driver's seat, Jake scooted to the middle, Finney squeezed against Jake to close the passenger side door. It was a snug fit in the bench seat, but no one thought of hopping in back. It was only a ten minute drive, seven minutes for Doc, half of it on open highway.

Jake always marveled at Doc's cars, thinking they'd be more at home sitting in a shopping mall. This one was a year and a half old, but meticulously clean, with gleaming windows. The smell of the rich gray upholstery was so strong Jake could taste it. *How can Doc keep this thing smelling like he bought it yesterday?*

"A man's vehicle," Doc started in immediately, before he'd even shifted from reverse to first. "Three men, one of them a real hunk, shoulder to shoulder in the front seat. Must have been a thrill to drive it this week, huh Finn? Made you feel like a man, didn't it?" Doc eyed Finney, who'd borrowed the Suburban two days

earlier to move some office equipment. “Not one of those wimpy cars guys low in testosterone drive.”

Just as he pulled out, Doc flashed concern at some faint vibration only he would notice. Jake shook his head in wonder. *He takes this car into the mechanic faster than some mothers take their kid to the doctor.*

Finney noticed Doc’s concern too, and traded a knowing smile with Jake. “Hey, it was working perfectly when I had it, Doc! Of course, I had to pull in for gas every other stop light. My wimpy car could make it to Tokyo on the gas this monster burns on the way to Gino’s.”

“Yeah, well it’s still wimpy. You are what you drive. And you always were a wuss, Finney.”

“Doc, old buddy,” Finney began with a sigh, as if he’d been coerced into dredging up an ancient story. Doc knew exactly what was coming but forced himself to look like he didn’t.

Leaning forward and turning to look past Jake, Finney asked Doc, “Remember the dorm wrestling championship? You actually made it to the finals. You were almost in shape back then.” Doc sucked in his waist and flexed his arms against the steering wheel to prove he still was.

Finney resumed the familiar folklore. “But somebody beat you, Doc, he beat you real bad. And despite the brain damage you suffered that day—and Lord knows you couldn’t afford any more brain damage—I’ll bet if you think real hard you can remember who that somebody was.”

Doc closed one eye and squinted the other, as if trying to remember.

“And if that somebody is a wuss, Mr. Macho Chief of Surgery, would you explain what that makes you?”

“Hey, I had a wrenched shoulder and torn cartilage in my knee.” Doc began rustling through his duffel bag of favorite excuses that grew with the years. “And I’d just had the flu.”

“Yeah, and as I recall you’d donated blood that afternoon,” Finney added.

“No, that was in the morning. In the afternoon I was having a heart transplant.” Both men laughed heartily, the way you laugh with your oldest and best friends. At the same moment, both realized Jake wasn’t laughing. His face was scrunched and his expression distant and uncharacteristically troubled.

“Jake,” Finney said. “You’re awfully quiet. Doc could bore a guy to death, I know, but that’s nothing new. Something wrong?”

Jake, right index finger aimlessly stroking his graying temple, made a slow dissolve from the inner world to the outer. “Wasn’t that thing with the quarter sort of...eerie?”

Doc flashed him his familiar screwed-up face that called people “weird” without a spoken word. “You still thinking about that? What’s the big deal?”

Jake, his reputation as Mister In-Control and Unflappable on the line, tried to downplay his response. “I don’t know,” he finally answered. “For some reason, it’s almost like...like it means something.”

Doc flashed a spacy look and hummed the theme from *The Twilight Zone*. “Don’t get spooky on me, ol’ buddy. Things don’t mean something. They mean nothing. Zilch. They just happen. Unless you buy into Finney’s way of thinking, that is, which someday you may if you get Alzheimer’s. One kook’s enough for this threesome. Right, Finn?”

Finney knew how to roll with Doc’s punches and counter with his own. But right now his energies focused on Jake, who appeared to need more than a light-hearted slough-off. “Well, I don’t know if the quarter means anything. But I know life does. Things have meaning and purpose. Maybe even a coin toss. Who knows?”

“Sure, Finney, whatever you say.” Doc rolled his eyes back so far all Jake could see was white. “But I’ve always found that meaning in life is no substitute for a cold beer with your pizza. Know what I mean, Woody?” Slapping Jake on the thigh, Doc turned suddenly into the 7-Eleven, his tires bouncing off the curb.

As Doc hopped out, Jake seized the opportunity. “It’s weird, Finney. Why is that quarter bugging me? It’s like it’s...a sign or something.”

“Maybe it is a sign, Jake. I don’t know. Maybe Somebody’s trying to get through to you again.”

Jake sighed and asked Finney, as if reading from a script, “Is this the part where you tell me life is a brief window of opportunity, and today could be my last day here, and I should prepare for eternity, or one day I’ll stand before God and wish I’d done something different?”

Finney broke into his patented dimple-to-dimple grin that took fifteen years off his already too-young face. “Well said. Sounds like you don’t need to be told. The question is, what will it take to convince you it’s true? What you said is right on target. Life is short. And you don’t have forever to decide what it’s about. None of us do.”

“I’ll say one thing for you, Finn.” Jake wavered between irritation and admiration. “You’re as dependable as Big Ben and Oregon rain. You always sing the same tune.”

“It’s a tune I’ve come to love,” Finney said sincerely, his confident deep blue eyes peering into Jake’s cynical but uncertain chocolate browns. “I’m just looking forward to the day I hear it sung in one of your columns.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Jake retorted. “I’m not a Bible waver. I work for the *Tribune*.”

“Isn’t there room for both? I read the Bible and the *Tribune* every day.” Finney grinned. “Guess I just like to know what both sides are up to.”

Jake winced. Finney made no secret he thought Jake’s newspaper was biased and unfair, especially concerning matters of religion and morality. His friend, Jake reminded himself again, just didn’t understand the role of the newspaper, that it was neither adversary nor advocate. It simply told the truth, no matter whose toes it stepped on. Finney would never get it, Jake knew. Not until hell froze over which, in Finney’s theology, it never would.

Suddenly the driver’s side door opened and Doc’s megaphone voice boomed,

“Okay, six pack of Coors for me, three Buds for Jake, and a Shirley Temple for the Preacher.” He handed Finney a Diet 7-Up. Holding up a Coors he announced, “This may send me to hell, but it sure washes down the pizza!”

“Come on, Doc,” Finney replied. “You know I’ve never cared about that. Where you spend eternity isn’t about what you drink. It’s about who you know.”

“Sure, sure,” Doc said. “Well, I do know the young lady behind the counter at Gino’s...and I’d love to get to know her in the biblical sense, if you get my drift.”

Jake got it and smiled. Finney got it and didn’t. As surely as if he had a verbatim transcript in front of him, Jake knew what both his friends were thinking. Doc didn’t let his marriage to Betsy get in the way of his sexual liberties. That fact created endless conflict between the friends. Or, rather, Jake corrected himself, it was Finney who created the conflict because he was so intolerant, refusing to just mind his own business and keep his mouth shut when Doc’s eyes wandered and he crossed the fence to other pastures.

The remaining three minutes of the drive seemed destined for wordless discomfort. Jake’s mind traveled back to an incident a year earlier when the three amigos headed for an overnight duck hunt. Doc flirted with a woman at a truck stop. Just when she was writing down her phone number for him, Finney said, “You’re wearing a wedding ring, Doc.” Suddenly the embarrassed woman covered her own wedding ring. In a flash, she and her phone number disappeared. An outraged Doc turned on Finney with every foul word he could draw from his sizable repertoire. Finney was almost as angry as Doc. Jake couldn’t remember everything, but he’d never forget Finney telling Doc, “Stop trying to prove you’re a man and start acting like one.” It had taken all Jake’s wits and even some physical restraint to prevent a rematch of the dorm wrestling championship. Jake had often shuddered as he’d wondered, *What if Doc’s shotgun had been in his hands, instead of in the truck?*

Later, around the campfire, Finney apologized for getting angry. But, in vintage Finney style, he made it clear he wasn’t sorry for reminding Doc of his obligation to remain faithful to his wife. Again, Finney’s words stuck in Jake’s mind—“I stood next to you when you said your vows, Doc. Friends help you stick to your vows. They don’t look the other way when you’re tempted to violate them.”

This comment still rankled Jake, perhaps because he was Doc’s other best man at the wedding, and he’d said nothing to stop Doc on that occasion or dozens like it. *Does this mean you think you’re a better friend to Doc than I am? Who appointed you judge of the universe? What right do you have to tell Doc what to do?* It still infuriated Jake, but he knew that wasn’t the whole story. What right did Doc have to cheat on his wife? *Yes, and what right did I have to cheat on Janet?* The questions couldn’t be separated. It all hit too close to home. A cloud hung over the rest of the hunting trip and, for one of the first times in his life, Jake looked forward to getting away from his buddies. Even now, as the feelings filling the Suburban dredged up the memories, it caused Jake to physically cringe. He desperately hoped this all-too-familiar tension wouldn’t culminate in another explosion today.

The Suburban pulled into Gino’s. As the rig gave its final lurch from the sudden stop in the ten minute pick-up space, Doc bounded out like a man on a mission.

Finney and Jake walked quietly behind him, both dreading the next few moments.

“Hey, sweetheart, I hoped you’d be here.”

Doc aimed his syrupy voice at the slim hazel-eyed eighteen-year-old in the emerald green dress. Reaching across the counter like an old pro, Doc touched her arm, his fingers lingering. She didn’t withdraw, obviously taken with the handsome, well-built head of surgery from Lifeline Medical Center.

“Your hair sure looks pretty today, Sheila.” Doc read her name tag, but said “Sheila” as if he’d remembered her name. She smiled shyly, soaking in the attention. Doc played her like a fiddle, enjoying every moment. Jake hung back, desperately hoping either Doc would back off or Finney would keep still.

Suddenly Finney strode toward Doc and slapped him on the back, bursting the bubble of the private space he’d established with the girl. *Here it comes*, Jake thought, bracing himself.

“She really looks like Molly, doesn’t she, Doc?” Addressing the confused and suddenly self-conscious girl Finney explained, “Molly’s his teenage daughter—about your age. Yeah, Doc and his wife Betsy have two lovely children. Doc and I, and Jake here, we all fought in Vietnam. You’ve probably read about that war in your history class—it was over before you were born. Hard to believe, but we must be about your dad’s age. Maybe older.”

“Yeah?” the girl mumbled, more to the counter top than to Finney. “Whatever.” The spell broke.

“That’ll be \$28.50.”

Doc plopped down his VISA, waving off Finney and Jake as they reached for their wallets. No one said anything more until the pizzas were in hand and they headed out the door.

“We must be about your dad’s age,” Doc mouthed sarcastically as they stepped out in the parking lot, now pelted by sheets of rain. Jake laughed, partially from relief. If Doc was joking about it, things would probably be okay. As he ran to the car, arms crossed in a vain attempt to keep his sweatshirt from getting soaked, Jake thought, *Maybe we’ve avoided another duck hunting disaster—at least for now.*

After the three jumped in the Suburban, Doc jammed the key into the ignition, but didn’t turn it. The tension started building again, as the men sat shoulder to shoulder, each looking straight ahead, as if the parking lot dumpsters in front of them were as interesting as sunset at the Grand Canyon. Jake stared at the beads of water on the windshield, watching them join into little waterfalls. The heavy smell of wet fabric pressed itself on Jake. After an interminable ten seconds, Doc abruptly leaned over toward Finney, giving Jake a close up view of his right ear. His baritone voice dripping with sarcasm, Doc asked, “Oh, what would I do without you, Preacher Finney, Mother Theresa of my life? Thank you, thank you, for being my conscience.”

“It’s a tough job, but someone has to do it.” After a moment’s pause Finney added, “You should try it yourself. It might keep you out of trouble.”

“I don’t want to keep out of trouble. What you call trouble is what I call life. What you call life, well...” Doc chortled, “thanks, but no thanks!”

“I’ve had my share of the kind of trouble that comes from making wrong choices. Enough to avoid it when I can.”

“Well,” Doc sounded distinctly unconvinced, “how about you watch out for your life, and I watch out for mine? Sound like a plan?”

“And how about I watch out for Sue and my kids, and you watch out for Betsy and yours? Sound like a plan?”

The irresistible force and the immovable object. Finney was as adamant as Doc, two ocean rocks stubbornly refusing to be beaten down.

Doc shook his head in disgust. “Finney, you’re hopeless. I don’t know why we put up with you and your stone-age morality. You’re a fossil, a throwback to the Puritans. You were born in the wrong century. You’d have fit right in during the Dark Ages. But not here, not now. We’re tired of your holier-than-thou attitude.”

Jake and Finney both noticed the “we.” Doc was ushering support, and looked to Jake for a nod of agreement. Jake turned and gave Doc a sympathetic look that Finney couldn’t see, but refrained from an overt nod. *I’m staying out of this one.*

“Have I ever told you what a major pain in the rear you can be, Finney? Yes, I see that I have. Sometimes,” his tone turned icy, “I think you’re the biggest fool I’ve ever met.” Just as suddenly, Doc’s voice returned to normal. “But, call me sentimental, you’re still my friend.” Hesitating just a moment he added, “Don’t push it, though, because big as my heart is, even it has limits.”

Jake turned enough to see Finney’s quiet nod of resignation. For the moment the two bombs sitting on each side of him had been defused. He saw in Finney’s eyes what he’d seen before. The confrontation stung him, and he hated the conflict. *So why do you make it happen?* Finney could be so inexplicable, judgmental and...obnoxious. It irritated Jake, and frustrated him. Sure, Doc wasn’t a saint, and not always the easiest guy to get along with, but he had a good heart and was fiercely loyal to his closest friends. Jake couldn’t ask for more. Why didn’t that ever seem to be enough for Finney?

As Doc finally started the engine, Jake drew within himself again. The bantering between his two friends was as familiar as his worn-out bedroom slippers. To the casual observer it seemed impossible these men could be friends. Anyone hearing this exchange would be certain any past friendship was over. But Jake knew otherwise. Now, as always, these men were the two defining personalities of his life. Their polarized beliefs and philosophies seemed like matter and antimatter—two contradictory world views inevitably hostile, explosively hostile, to each other. Yet they were embodied in men who all their lives had been thrown together. No matter how great the explosion and how far it threw them from each other, something always brought them back together. And always Jake was there, right in the middle.

Jake fancied himself a livable compromise between many of their extreme views. But in moments of honesty he had to admit his own beliefs were, as he’d confessed to his journal no more than two weeks ago, “a formless bowl of mush.” They were an almost random combination of the views of college professors, media colleagues, and his own interpretations of his life experiences. Despite his rep as a no-nonsense cut-to-the-chase journalist, Jake was an iron filing pulled between these two powerful

magnets he called friends. He identified much more with Doc's beliefs, politics, and self-determined lifestyle. But he was drawn more to Finney's character and quality of family life. He admired Doc's sense of power and Finney's sense of peace.

Jake admitted to his journal what he told no one else. *I feel like a moral chameleon, a Star Trek shape-shifter—I can blend in with Doc when we're at a bar, or Finney, when I'm having dinner with his family. I'm at home with both, yet ultimately not at home with either.*

Doc and Finney both exuded confidence in their own beliefs. Both passionately and consistently acted on those beliefs. Doc the dedicated atheist and humanist, Finney the devout Christian. Doc the relativist, Finney the absolutist. Doc trusting in himself, Finney trusting in a Christ he called God. Jake wavered between these worlds, much closer to Doc's, but never fully at home in either. Neither world was his.

Since turning fifty a few months ago, Jake had paused to think more about the big questions of life. But he didn't really know how to phrase the questions, much less where to go for answers.

He'd written, *Half a century old now, and I don't have time to think—only to record thoughts. I live under the tyranny of 800 words.* He referred to the columns due on his editor's desk by noon every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Finished or not, facts checked out or not, he spoke through those columns to a half million loyal readers three times a week, and many more in the two that went out under syndication. As together as he appeared on the outside, on the inside Jake Woods knew his world was a muddled mess of uncertainty and confusion. He felt like...almost like a coin tossed in the air, a coin that was supposed to land on one side or the other, but hadn't.

Suddenly Doc's roaring voice yanked Jake back to reality. He was yelling at someone on the highway, someone Jake couldn't see through the driving sheets of rain.

"Watch where you're going, you idiot!" Doc's shoulder jammed into Jake as he threw the Suburban into a sharp swerve to the right. When, in an instant, Jake heard Doc's loud voice turn from anger to panic, his blood froze. Suddenly a disorienting blur of images overwhelmed him.

"I can't stop! I can't stop!" he heard Doc bellow.

The Suburban embarked on a wild ride, carving its own path, as if declaring independence, celebrating its free will. A towering telephone pole and billboard appeared out of nowhere. The Suburban cut through them as if they were Jell-O, then careened into a ten-foot-high embankment. Jake watched in slow motion the pizza flying up against the windshield, just before the bone crushing impact. The car bounced off the embankment back onto the highway. Like a raging wild beast shot in the chest, the out of control Suburban kicked and thrashed away its last moments of life, determined to take down with it anything and anyone it could.

Somewhere between the sound of Doc's last cry and the cold sickening crunch of bent metal from the car's first roll, Jake lost consciousness. His last sensation was

being pressed hard from both sides by two men whose bodies lunged against their harnesses like wild stallions against a corral.

In the unearthly silence that followed the chaos, his upside-down frame sagged limply, held aloft only by his seat belt. Jake's body hung between two friends; his soul between two worlds.



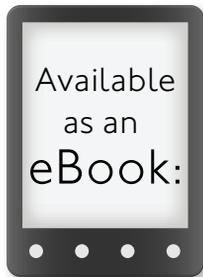
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