

W



chapter ONE



*t*he statue has got to go.

That's my first thought as I prep the living room for Dustin's visit later tonight. I know I'm the only one who would notice the discriminating eyes of Mom's four-inch Jesus staring down from the mantel. Dustin probably wouldn't look away from my breasts if the room were two feet deep in holy water. Still, I reach for it.

When my hand fumbles and the statue topples sideways, I pick the thing up and scan the hearth for any other too-holy housewares.

"What are you doing?" My older sister rushes in from the kitchen, scuffles across the carpet, and ignites a spark when

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she snatches the statue out of my hand. She settles it back into its ring of dust, adjusting it to its all-seeing viewpoint, and then eases her hand away like she's afraid the thing might fly right up to heaven. Turning, she glares at me.

Great. Caught in the act of abducting a religious icon. Not exactly the act I feared being caught in tonight.

"Actually, Faith"-I stare into her eyes so she won't miss this-"I was wondering if you could give me a lift to the church."

As expected, her whole face lights up, and I'm tempted to let her believe she's finally fished her heathen sister out of the sea of despair. It's better than telling her the truth.

"Amy's going to meet me at a coffee shop near there," I add. Not complete honesty, but close enough.

"Oh." Her face falls. "I'm not sure, Brie. I mean, I wasn't going to-" She flicks her fingernail against her thumb a few times and looks away.

She wasn't going to what? Wasn't going to youth group like she has every single Friday night since she was born? I glance at the clock above her head. Good thing Dustin's not waiting down the street somewhere, which was my initial idea. But me staying home alone on a Friday night would be far from ordinary and I don't want to raise anyone's suspicions. I stare back at Faith until she goes on.

"Celeste doesn't want to go, my car's out of gas, and I

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can't find my Bible." She starts for the kitchen. "Sorry, Brie, I'm not going tonight."

Usually, I strategize about as well as a fly caught in a screen door. But tonight I had taken the initiative to plan something nice—really nice—for Dustin, and tonight, of all nights, Faith's turning into someone I don't even know. What happened to her Big Salvation Plan, the one that wraps around her life in giant, multicolored jawbreaker layers of certainty?

I can't do anything about Celeste cutting out on her. They argued on the phone earlier and I learned a long time ago that I don't understand their friendship well enough to get involved. But I can fix other problems. I reach for my purse. "I have gas money."

She stops in the kitchen doorway.

I dig out the only bill I can find, walk toward her, and push it at her chest. She looks down at my hand like it's covered in warts.

"I know it's only five bucks, but that'll at least get your car to the church and back, right?" Heading to the bookshelves in the living room, I scrunch my nose because the dog, curled up on the couch, must have farted. I pull off a Bible with *Brie Jenkins* inscribed in the bottom corner of its black leather cover. "Here," I say, coughing from the flutters of dust. "Take mine."

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"That's a King James Version," Faith says. "I really need my N.I.V."

Faith and her New International Version. Like it matters. And here I thought getting my parents out of the house would be the hard part, but they left before six, barely taking time to say good-bye. When I don't move my outstretched hand, Faith lets out a sigh and takes my Bible from me.

She opens it, apparently figuring this is the perfect time for her daily devotional, and I call the dog to get him and his raunchy smell out of here. "Nuisance, here, boy."

Our overweight golden retriever has selective hearing. It's probably too late anywayj Dustin will certainly end up with blond dog hair all over his pants, but I want to at least try to give the cushions a once-over with the lint roller.

I pry my :fingers under the dog's mass, using all my weight to lug him off. He takes my gesture as an attempt to play and jumps up, frothing all over my freshly made-up face. I fall on my butt and let out a giggly yelp. When I look up, expecting to see Faith laughing, she just stares into the open Bible, and nibbles on her lip.

She shakes her head, and at first I think it's at me and my stupid predicament, but then she flips the page and scowls hard down at the words. I'm baffled, since I can't imagine her disagreeing with anything in The Good Book.

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The loops of her blond hair mimic the paisley wallpaper behind her. It's hard to remember when my hair used to be even curlier, before Amy permanently lent me her straightening iron. It takes me a second to notice Faith's whole body trembling.

"Faith, what's-"

"Nothing.,, She snaps the book shut, and heads for the foyer. Her renewed determination makes me wonder if it had been my eyes that were trembling. "You wanted a ride, right? Let's go."

I follow her, but she picks up the hall phone and dials while she slips on her shoes.

"Oh, good, you're still there," she says into the handset. "I'm driving my sister to the church, so I **think** I am going to go. That's my sign." Her forehead creases as she stares at the floor listening.

At least she doesn't sound angry with Celeste anymore. Though she doesn't exactly sound cheery either.

"Nothing dangerous, but I need you, Celeste," Faith prods.

I wonder what kind of crazy, shake-in-your-shoes idea the church has planned for them tonight. Perhaps they'll play tag in the parking lot in bare feet.

When she glances up from her call and notices I'm still there, she whispers, "Hold on," into the receiver and moves down the hall with the phone pressed to her chest.

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Fine. Not like I wanted to listen in on *that* conversation anyway. I open the door, calling, "Don't worry about me. I'll just be in the car," loud enough so they can both hear me.

Whatever. So what if they don't want me in their stupid inner circle. My own circle's coming together and it'll be much better than their little saintly one.

I collapse into the front seat of her Toyota and decide once again that I'll have to try harder to get Dad to take me driving so I can finally get my license. Then I won't have to ask Faith for anything, won't have to concern myself with what she and her friends are up to. Swiping the chip bags from around my feet, I shove them into her already full garbage bag. As I reach for one more wrapper on the dash, a new sticker above the stereo catches my eye. Or at least it wasn't here the last time I was in this traveling garbage dump. The round yellow sticker has an artsy cross on it. Almost scribbled-looking, but preprinted on there.

Faith slides into the driver's seat and I'm about to reprimand her for defacing her vehicle—I mean, at least she has one—but I stop myself when I see the tense look on her face.

"All worked out?" I ask, even though I know Faith almost always gets her way with Celeste.

"You need a ride home, too?" she asks, backing out and then driving down the street with her eyes straight ahead.

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Her fingers grip the steering wheel at ten and two like it's a life preserver.

"No. Amy'll drop me." I haven't thought of a reason why *Amy* couldn't pick me up, and I hope Faith won't think to ask.

Her hands loosen and drop to the lower half of the wheel. She nods, apparently relieved that I'm not going to be any more of a burden. For a second I wonder why things had to change between us. Why aren't we still friends, or at least siblings who can have a normal conversation? But the thought is gone as soon as it enters my head.

After stopping at the corner gas station, she reaches to turn on the radio, confirming there'll be no sisterly chatter on the car ride over. Once she starts singing along, I decide I much prefer listening to her singing voice over arguing with her anyway. I nudge the radio volume down. Faith is used to this move of mine, and keeps singing without any reaction. And this is the way I like her voice-not tied to her church worship group or up on stage with everyone staring in amazement. Just her singing and me listening.

We pull into the large church parking lot, and Faith backs into a spot near the perimeter. She turns off the engine and we sit there, both staring ahead at the looming steeple.

"You okay, then?" Faith asks after several seconds.

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I take that as my cue to reach for the door handle. "Sure." Something in me wonders if I should ask her the same question. "Are you—"

But a dark-haired girl with a ponytail scurries over to the driver's side and interrupts us. "Faith, oh my gosh, it's so good to see you!"

Faith and I get out on either side, and I raise my eyebrows. Only at church can people get so excited to see each other after only a day or two apart.

"Oh, you brought your sister." The girl nods approvingly.

I pull my arms across my chest and feel the scratchy condom wrapper I'd stashed in my bra. More teens move in toward Faith, toward us, and I get a mental picture of them grabbing my hands and singing "Kumbaya."

And just then, Faith's dark-haired friend makes her way around the car with a hand outstretched. I stare down at it.

"I'm not staying," I say, tucking my hands behind my back. "I mean, I'm meeting someone . . . over there." I point over my shoulder. "Thanks for the ride," I call out, but Faith waves me off, since she's now surrounded by several of her elated youth-group buddies.

I dash across the street and make a show of ducking into the Rio Cafe. After waiting a few minutes to make sure it's safe, I slip out into the dark alley alongside the coffee shop and

race through to the next corner. The street is deserted and I hug my purse to my chest. I wish Dustin could pick me up in front of the coffee shop but I can't chance Faith catching sight of me heading back to the house with my boyfriend.

I blink into the shadow of the art supplies store so I won't be obvious to any straggling lonely men driving past, and pull out my cell phone. After checking the street sign, I text Dustin with the coordinates.

I snap my phone shut and blow on my sweaty palms. "*What if I'm not ready?*" Dustin's been patient-too patient, Army says. And now that I've given him so many hints, how could I say no?

I won't, I decide only a second later. Even though I'm not completely at ease with this, who is, their first time?

I look up just in time to see a familiar red Toyota sail by. The smiley antenna ball catches my attention, and I squint at the back of a blond curly head in the driver's seat. It's Faith.

Worse, she's headed back in the direction of our house. There goes my special night with Dustin. Though the thought does make my racing heart slow a little.

When Dustin's lights gleam around the corner and onto the deserted street where I wait, I put Faith out of my mind. I paste on a smile, smooth down my straightened hair with both hands, and step out of the shadows into the bright lights.