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a n d ED STEWART

A N O V E L

Vote of
intolerance

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Josh McDowell
Ed Stewart

PART ONE

spring

1

Friday

March 26

THE NOISY GYM became graveyard silent in an instant. Jon Van Horne had been keeping up with three of his young charges, Ari, Robert, and Jaleen, on easy layups and had just dropped in a nice running hook shot in an effort to pin an O on Jaleen during their friendly game of Horse. But now, instead of celebrating Jon's shot with high fives, Jaleen and his two friends were staring past the coach toward the entrance. The other games in the gym had also suddenly slowed to spectator pace. Jon turned to find out why.

There were eight of them, somewhere between the ages of sixteen and twenty, Jon guessed. Characteristic of the current hybrid gangs in L.A., there was a mix of races: three African-

Americans, two Latinos, two Caucasians, and an Asian, all males. They were clad in the latest Valley gang regalia: mismatched military clothing and boots. Although Jon hadn't seen these particular young men before, he was pretty sure they were members of the Valley's own De Soto gang. Even as he silently berated himself for forgetting to lock the door after a kid left ten minutes earlier, he watched one of the gang members lock the door for him, sealing him and the kids inside. Jon felt the icy fingers of a real and present fear touch him inside.

Like many L.A. gangs, the De Sotos patterned themselves after the maverick inner-city militia, which had unofficially occupied four square miles of south-central Los Angeles for over a year. The tyrannized area—called “the dead zone” by the media—was a hellhole of drugs, prostitution, violence, and murder. If you didn't belong there, you didn't dare cross the borders, or you might never get out. Even the Los Angeles Police Department, having lost several officers there, had unofficially conceded the dead zone to the ruthless south-central militia. The De Sotos and other gangs across the sprawling city exploited the reputation of the militia to rule by intimidation wherever they went.

Jon sucked a long, slow breath at the prospect of trouble. The De Sotos were known to terrorize kids for their money and valuables—and sometimes just for amusement. If they couldn't frighten their intended victims into submission, they thought nothing of using a knife or gun to carry out their threats. The rough-looking group who had just invaded the gym were probably packing weapons under their bulky trench coats and bomber jackets.

Jon sneaked a peek at his watch. It was exactly 9:45 P.M. That meant it would be at least fifteen or twenty minutes before parents began arriving to pick up their kids. Jon knew it was up to him as the recreation director to keep the gang docile and pre-occupied—and keep the wide-eyed kids behind him safe—until then. Hopefully the adults' arrival would defuse the situation, maybe even scare the intruders off. If not—well, Jon would have to cross that bridge when he came to it. For now, the responsibility rested solely—and heavily—on his shoulders.

As a high school counselor in L.A.'s sprawling, populous San

Fernando Valley, Jon spent thirty-seven weeks a year with students. For Jon and most educators, spring break was a jealously guarded respite in the grueling push from Christmas break to summer vacation. Yet here he was, finishing a long spring-break week of supervising youth basketball.

It wasn't that a brief vacation away from the Valley wouldn't have been wonderful, but Jon needed the extra money this year. Besides, it wasn't any fun visiting Mexico or Disney World or even Malibu Beach alone. And this was the second spring break in a row that Jon had found himself without a companion.

Actually, it was kids like Jaleen, Ari, and Robert who were the real reason Jon kept coming back to the rec center during school vacations. In this setting, he wasn't their teacher or counselor. Technically, he was here only to monitor the courts and break up an occasional scuffle between overheated competitors. Yet in Jon's mind, he was here to substitute for the dads who were missing from their lives. He felt sorry for kids like Robert and Jaleen and Kiki who had never met their fathers, and for Ari and Manon whose fathers had recently left home for greener marital pastures.

Jon's sympathy was especially acute this spring break, particularly when it came to the breakup of families. The same personal trauma that had left him without a companion just over a year ago had created an unwanted desert of distance between him and his own two children.

Jon took a deep breath, forcing himself to sound cordial but firm. "May I help you guys?" he asked, slowly approaching the gang members, who stood staring him down from near the entrance. Jon was a muscular six-footer in excellent physical condition, thanks to a regimen of weekly workouts and regular involvement in sports. He was clearly more agile in his shorts and Nike T-shirt than the eight young men in their bulky uniforms. But Jon knew he couldn't take them all on, even if by some miracle they were *not* armed. The thirty or so kids in the gym, now frozen statues of fear, would be of little help and might even be in greater danger if he tried to be a hero.

Then Jon remembered Traci, his part-time aide—a cute college girl—who was dust-mopping the small gym. He hated to

think what these guys might try if she wandered into the room. *Wherever you are, Traci, Jon willed silently, stay out of sight until these guys leave.*

The reply came from a big African-American kid in a stained, rumpled army trench coat, baggy fatigue pants, green beret, and jackboots. Minus some multiple vulgarities, the kid said, "We're here to play some basketball, dude." Signs prohibiting profanity in the rec center were clearly posted on the walls, so Jon already had cause to dismiss the surprise visitors. But he had learned years ago to pick his battles when dealing with tough kids, especially when he wasn't sure what a kid might do to get his way. Four teachers had been shot in the school district already this year attempting to discipline students for minor misbehavior. It wasn't worth the risk to ignite a major conflict over a minor issue. Jon made a snap decision to let the kid's bad language slide.

"The rec center is only open for a few more minutes," Jon explained, still holding his voice steady. "And as you can see, all our courts are being used." Just as he spoke the final word, Jon heard two or three basketballs drop to the hardwood floor. Jon knew what had happened without looking. The kids behind him had surrendered their basketballs to the invading gang and backed off the courts en masse.

"Looks like a couple courts just opened up, Rashaad," a Latino member said to the leader with a coarse laugh, adding a few vulgarities in Spanish, clearly directed toward Jon.

Anger rivaled fear for supremacy underneath Jon's carefully monitored external calm. Weapons and violence had become commonplace in his school. Jon hated it, but he was becoming less and less shocked at finding a gun on a fourteen-year-old student or breaking through a hysterical crowd to find a kid on a hallway floor spouting blood from a hole the size of a silver dollar in his chest. But it was the impertinence that galled him the most. It leered out at him through the eyes of kids like these who had no respect for authority, no real interest in education and career, and little regard for human life, particularly their own.

Insolence possessed this generation like a demon, Jon had often thought, even slipping its sinister tentacles into his own home and wreaking an unthinkable tragedy, destroying his

son and dividing what was left of his family. The demon had outraged Jon to the point of wanting out of teaching. He had written his resignation letter four times over the last four years. But that same outrage had also prevented him from following through with the surrender. If he did not stay to oppose the dragon poised to devour younger kids like Jaleen and the others, even in a seemingly losing battle, who would?

Rashaad, the hulking leader, interrupted Jon's thoughts. "Guess you're right, Chako," he sneered. "Let's play some ball." Six of the eight gang members shed their coats and jackets, leaving any weapons they might be carrying hidden in the inside pockets. The remaining two members, the Asian and the other Latino, kept their coats on, apparently designated to be guards.

As the six new players approached the center court, Jon casually backed away, intent on keeping himself between the gang members and his kids, who were lined against the back wall, silent. He had already detected the odor of alcohol, intensifying his alarm at what the hoods might do. "We don't allow street shoes on our courts," he said with artificial politeness. "Please take your boots off while you play. They scuff up the hardwood floors."

Rashaad, stooping to pick up a basketball with muscular, scarred arms, blew a scornful laugh but said nothing. He tossed the ball to Chako, and the six players began an informal shoot-around, leaving their boots on.

No consideration, no "please may we," only taking. It made Jon seethe inside. Normally a man who looked for the best in people, ready to excuse faults and overlook shortcomings—to a dangerous extreme, according to his ex-wife—Jon found himself wanting to press the issue about the boots, not only because of the gang's insolence but also because he knew it would take him an extra hour to scrub the scuff marks off the court. But this was another battle not worth fighting. *Every minute they're occupied with themselves, Jon acknowledged silently, is another minute they aren't harassing me or the kids. Time is on my side. Parents are bound to show up soon and start pounding on the door. And unless these guys are prepared to take on the outside world—and I pray they're not—they'll leave and it will all be over.*

As the players continued to warm up, one of the Caucasian

boys, a hollow-eyed, gaunt kid with tattoos of snakes entwining both arms, caught Jon's attention. The others called him Rattler. He was fairly good at handling the basketball, but he was also drunk. He was especially boisterous and foul-mouthed and a little unsteady on his clunky army boots. In between shots, Rattler kept looking past Jon and leering at the line of kids backed up against the far wall. The evil in Rattler's gaze made Jon's skin crawl.

After a minute of practice shots, the six players huddled on the court. Jon glanced over his shoulder and telegraphed his most encouraging look toward the kids behind him. A couple of the younger ones were stifling tears of fear. Jon mouthed the words, "It's all right, it's all right," and prayed that his hopeful encouragement would be rewarded.

The gang members broke their huddle with a raucous laugh. Three of them, including Rattler, threw off their shirts for a typical "shirts versus skins" game. "We need a few more players," Rattler laughed. "Rashaad gets to choose first."

"The shirts take that fat brother over there and that skinny Arab." A quick glance told Jon that the gang leader had singled out Jaleen and Ari, who were petrified with fear. Without turning around, Jon subtly motioned the two boys to stay put.

Before Rashaad could object, Rattler stepped forward, standing a dozen feet in front of Jon. "And the skins take those two tall chicks right there," he said, cackling wickedly as he aimed a tattoo-scarred hand past Jon to the wall.

The small whimper of terror from Kiki and Rachel, two of the five girls locked arm-in-arm against the back wall, was swallowed up by an explosion of mocking laughter and curses from the eight gang members. Rattler's eyes flared with fiendish delight. He began moving unsteadily toward the girls.

Avoiding sudden motion, Jon eased into Rattler's path. He would not compromise with the gang members on this issue. Kiki was barely fourteen—his own daughter's age—and Rachel was only thirteen. They were innocent, fun-loving girls who enjoyed shooting hoops with the boys. Somewhere in his brain Jon knew that he might get shot over this, that some of these kids might get shot, and that one or more of these girls might get raped and even murdered. Things like this were on the news nearly every day in L.A. Rattler's diabolical gaze left

no question in Jon's mind that he was capable of such horrors, and his friends looked no better. The fear of death gripped Jon's chest, but he could not let this happen without a fight—on that point he had absolutely no question.

Rattler stopped three feet from Jon. The wicked humor had drained from his face. After blazing a stream of foul breath and curses at Jon, he said, "I want the chicks, man. They're on my team." The other gang members stood by watching the confrontation and egging Rattler on.

Jon kept his hands at his side. Most teachers in Los Angeles were encouraged to take classes on administering physical restraint. Administrators, counselors, and special education staff were *required* to take them. Jon was well-practiced at physically subduing out-of-control students with a minimum amount of inflicted pain, since pain can provoke greater resistance and combativeness. He could subdue Rattler, especially in his inebriated state, and he knew he could hurt the boy and temporarily disable him if restraint was not enough. But how far would the other gang members let him go before they unleashed their hate-filled fury? Jon was afraid he might find out in mere seconds.

"You can play on my court, and you can scuff up my floor," Jon said forcefully but in a reserved tone, meeting Rattler glare for glare. "But you can't mess with my kids. Play your game, but leave these—"

Rattler swung at him, an ill-aimed but potentially vicious blow. Jon stepped back as the fist passed in front of his face. The unsuccessful attack brought a chorus of profane cheers from the squad. Jon had been trained to back away and avoid physical contact whenever possible. In this instance, he also sensed that such a tactic might keep the rest of the gang from getting involved. If it never developed into a fight, they might not feel pressured to join in. But Rattler kept coming at him—swearing, swinging, and fuming, backing Jon closer to the kids he must protect with his life.

Fresh out of evasive options, Jon took the offensive. He snatched the kid's wrist in midswing. In a blur of motion, he spun the kid around. Quickly locking him in a painless but effective bear hug from behind, Jon began to guide the cursing, struggling young drunk back toward the gang.

Before he took two steps, Jon's feet tangled with Rattler's flailing boots and the two of them toppled forward. With the kid's arms locked to his side in Jon's grip, the shirtless gang member hit the hardwood floor face first with his captor's dead weight on his back. The kid howled and cursed in pain. Jon knew it must have looked—and felt—like an intentional, vindictive takedown.

This is it, Jon thought, fighting off a shock of panic. If the rest of these guys are going to jump me and pound me senseless or shoot me, they're going to do it now. God, help me. He scrambled quickly to his feet, ready to defend himself.

The other seven thugs were nearly on him when a loud, heavy rap on the gym's main doors stopped them in their tracks. The blur across the far end of the room, Jon realized, was Traci, his aide, sprinting from the small gym to the front doors. She hit the panic bar and pushed open the door, admitting two LAPD officers in short-sleeved navy-blue uniforms and baseball-style caps. Both had their nightsticks in hand.

Blind with pain and rage, Rattler didn't notice the cops. He scrabbled to his feet and lunged for Jon. But Rashaad and Chako, the two largest gang members, grabbed him by the arms and pulled him back. Blood streamed from Rattler's split lip and several loosened teeth in his mouth, running in rivulets through a sparse goatee and down his neck. He hurled vile curses at Jon, spraying the floor between them with crimson droplets. His mates quickly shut him up as the officers approached.

"I saw them come in, and I thought you might need some help," Traci said from a safe distance, her face pale with fright. "So I called 9-1-1."

Jon released an audible sigh, grimacing as a searing pain, caused by his fall, ripped through his right elbow and wrist. "Thanks, Traci," he said, his voice strained from the shock. "Your timing couldn't have been better."



Jon Van Horne lay awake until almost midnight, riding out a massive adrenaline surge and the caffeine-laced pain pills he had taken to dull the throb in his bruised arm. Unable to sleep, he replayed the events of the evening. All had ended

well enough, he thought. The two De Soto “guards” were arrested for packing semiautomatic handguns without permits. Jon refused to press charges for the attempted assault. Rattler, whose real name turned out to be Eugene Hackett, was from nearby Canoga Park. He and the others had had no weapons on them. They were released at the scene.

The cops were sure that the two gun-toting boys would also be released before morning. It was almost impossible to make a weapons charge stick in L.A. anymore unless the shooter actually fired at and hit a victim. Someday Rashaad, Chako, and Eugene might go too far and blow someone away with those big guns of theirs, Jon mused somberly. But until they did they were as free to roam the streets of the Valley as he was.

Jaleen, Ari, Kiki, Rachel, and the others had left the rec center a little shaken but able to joke about the scary ten minutes in the gym. Unfortunately, they saw too much of guns and gang violence on their school campuses as it was. Like Jon, they were becoming, if not calloused, at least accustomed to this destructive lifestyle. The parents who picked up the kids had seemed only slightly more disturbed by what happened in the gym.

At the center of Jon’s thoughts was his own fourteen-year-old daughter, Shawna. After what could have happened to Kiki and Rachel tonight, he wanted to hold Shawna and never let her go. She was a good girl, but she was naïve and irresponsible, growing up too fast. Jon’s ex-wife, Stevie, who he reluctantly acknowledged had been a good single mom since the divorce, lamented that Shawna was watching too much TV and losing interest in church. Jon hoped he could spend some time with Shawna and nine-year-old Collin this weekend. Maybe the three of them could go to church together Sunday morning. Now that he was unable to see his children every day, Jon yearned for their all-too-infrequent visits.

Jon tried to pray for his kids, but as often happened when he tried to pray, his mind wandered. Something terrible could have happened to sweet little Kiki tonight. Horrible stuff happens to good girls, and it could happen to Shawna, too. A knot of worry twisted painfully in Jon’s stomach. He finally fell asleep begging God to keep his little girl safe.



Nineteen-year-old Eugene "Rattler" Hackett paced the dark driveway of the run-down house in Canoga Park where he lived with his uncle. Sober now, he had been seething for a couple of hours over being bloodied and humiliated in front of his gang. Eugene vowed to find the guy in the gym, the basketball coach who had taken him down. Rashaad and Chako had told him to let it go, that the dude at the rec center wasn't worth the trouble of getting even. But Eugene wasn't about to let this one go. A man had to take a stand, earn his stripes in front of his brothers. The coach had not only pushed Eugene over the edge but had set himself up as a perfect target.

Rattler took a long drag on the cigarette in his left hand and blew the smoke skyward. Then he lifted his right hand and admired the gleaming, smooth metal object in the dim street light. It was Rattler's equalizer: a military issue .45 automatic he had been clever enough to hide in the car before his squad crashed the gym. He aimed the large gun at a battered trash can beside the house. "Hey, coach," he said softly, adding bitter curses. Then he mimicked firing a lethal burst from the .45 into the can. "You're a dead man."

2

Friday
March 26

SHAWNA GUESSED that she had been lying motionless on her bunk for nearly forty-five minutes, pretending to be asleep. One by one her chatty, giggling, teenaged roommates had fallen asleep, evidenced by the chorus of deep, steady breathing filling the dark cabin. When their female counselor had finally dropped off, the buzz-saw snore was music to Shawna's ears.

She quietly slid out of her flannel-lined sleeping bag and slipped into the clothes she had hidden under her mattress. She knew the camp leaders would freak out if they saw her in this outfit. Tight-fitting turtleneck sweaters and microskirts were not approved attire for a Christian youth camp. Nor was

it an outfit Shawna felt very comfortable wearing—at least not yet. Her mother had often said that a fully developed fourteen-year-old like Shawna was still too young to dress and act like an eighteen-year-old trying to attract boys. But Shawna's friend Destiny had told her what to bring to camp for this special night, and Destiny was always right about things like this.

Shawna was outside less than three minutes after leaving her bunk. It was chilly in the mountains, even for spring in South California. But the cold air stinging Shawna's bare legs was tame compared to the electric crackle of excitement running up her spine. What she and Destiny were about to do was against the camp rules. But the rules were for kids who needed to be told what and what not to do, "dorks who forgot to pay their brain bills and got the power shut off," as Destiny sometimes said. "Trust your own feelings, Shawna," her friend had tutored her. "It's a lot easier than learning tons of rules, and it's a lot more fun." Surveying the dark campground before her, Shawna was suddenly energized at the thought of making her own rules.

Staying out of the moonlight was easy, thanks to the massive shadows cast by bushy evergreens surrounding the camp. Yet Shawna moved cautiously and quietly, not wanting to spoil Destiny's plan through carelessness. Reaching the rendezvous point behind the camp kitchen, she hunkered down behind a large tree trunk and listened. The soft *whish* through the pine branches above her muffled any sounds from the little village of Arrowhead down the road. And the camp, Shawna knew, was sound asleep.

"Destiny," she whispered into the darkness. "Destiny, where are you? It's Shawna." She strained to hear a response, but there was none. She whispered an expletive, a four-letter word most adults considered unbecoming to a girl her age. *I knew you'd fall asleep or chicken out*, she mouthed silently to the girl she imagined was dead out in her bunk. *I'm waiting five minutes, Destiny; that's it. If you don't show up, I swear I'll . . .*

Shawna couldn't think of what she would do. Tonight had been Destiny's idea all along. Shawna felt suddenly bummed at the prospect of a lost adventure. But for all her eagerness to meet Rik tonight for the first time, Shawna could not shake an