

## WALK ME HOME

By Janet Alcorn

I'm looking out the window of Bethany's room onto the courtyard between Sierra Hall and Sutter. Pedro's there, and Hannah and Shari, and Bethany of course, and these two other guys. I don't know their names, but they hung out with us a few times. And Robert.

We're all sitting in an ellipse on the floor, sharing one of those cheap pizzas from Mama's like we always do, talking like we always do. Well, they're talking. I'm staring out the window at the tule fog and feeling awkward like I always do. I'm not Robert's type, not like you, but I will be tonight. I hope.

I pretend to nibble at the crust of my pizza, then I make myself eat the rest of it. It sticks at the bottom of my esophagus like a lump of wet cardboard. I gulp the last of my Coke to wash it down, but it doesn't go down. People are chattering, and it sounds like crickets on the summer nights we went fishing with your mom and dad. Sometimes I can pick out actual words.

Pedro says, "I think I aced my calc final." Of course he did, and he probably studied maybe a whole hour.

"I'm done, but I'm not leaving till Saturday afternoon." It's Hannah. At least I think it is.

One of the guys I don't know says, "Gonna spend one more night partying in the big city?"

"Yeah, right," she says, "because Sacramento is sooooo exciting."

The fog's getting thicker like it was the night before Winter Break last year when we almost drove off the second Twin Bridge in your dad's truck. Good thing you knew the road so well, or we'd both be dead.

Gol, Jenna, I miss you.

Fingers snap in my face. "Yo, anybody home?"

It's Robert. I turn toward his voice, and he leans across the empty pizza box so he's right in my face. You were right, his eyes really do look like the deep end of Long Pool. My brain bluescreens, and I feel like I did that time I accidentally ate a peanut and had to use my Epi-Pen. I try to talk without stuttering. "Sorry, what?"

"Earth to Rachel. When's your last final?" He smiles, and I see the dimples you always went on about. He looks like that 1970s painting of Jesus that hung in the dining hall at church camp, the one you nicknamed White Hot Jesus. Because of course Jesus was white, blue-eyed, clean-shaven, and hot as heck.

"Tomorrow morning." I don't tell him it's Computer Science because that sounds too nerdy. I'm too nerdy. And too short and too scared and the fog has left my hair so frizzed out, I look like Hermione Granger in a lightning storm and I don't think I can do this but oh, I want to.

I pull my phone out of my purse and glance at the screen even though I already know what time it is. "Wow, it's 9:30. I'd better go. I want to study a little more before I go to bed." My voice doesn't shake, I don't stutter, and the sentences make sense. Go me!

I take a breath and try to remember the YouTube videos I watched last week on how to flirt. I cock my head to the side and pitch my voice five intervals higher than normal. "Would you mind walking me back to my apartment?"

His grin spreads wider, and his dimples deepen. My heart thuds like the girl in that

romance novel we smuggled into camp right under White Hot Jesus' all-seeing eyes. What was it called? Oh, yeah, *A Night with a Debaucher*.

"Sure."

He's actually said he does mind, but then I hear your voice in my head telling me not to be so literal. I say, "Thanks," and start to say a silent prayer for what I'm about to do, but I stop because it isn't right to pray for the things I have in mind. It isn't right to do them either, but I don't care. Like you always said, you only live once.

I get up, smooth my too-short skirt, and follow Robert out of Bethany's room.

#

We walk outside, and by the time we reach the parking lot, I can't even see the dorms, only fog. It's like we're walking inside a cloud, just Robert and me.

Without looking at me, he says, "You live in Desmond, right?"

"Not anymore. I have an apartment in Campus Commons now."

"When did that happen?"

"Last month. My parents wanted me to live where it's quieter. My apartment used to be an Airbnb, so it's really nice." It's still an Airbnb, and my parents don't know I'm renting it, but I don't tell him either of these things.

"Want to walk along the river?"

"Yes," I say, a little too enthusiastically.

He strides across the parking lot on those long, strong legs like he's afraid of nothing and nobody. I have to speed-walk to keep up because my legs aren't long or strong. By the time we get to State University Drive, I'm breathing hard.

"I'm sorry, am I walking too fast for you?"

“A little.” I try to make my next line sound suggestive. “Keeping up with you is good exercise.”

He flashes me that dimpled smile again. I bet he smiled at you like that. I’m sorry, Jenna, I’m so sorry.

“Thanks for walking me home.”

“No problem. I wouldn’t want you to be out here alone at night. Too many sickos in the world.”

“Yeah.”

He slows down a little. “You know, it’s kind of weird how girls will ask whatever random guy to walk them home. How do they know the guy they met half an hour ago isn’t a rapist?”

I laugh and try to make it sound natural. “You’re not a random guy. I’ve known you all semester, and Jenna always said how amazing you are.”

He turns serious. “She was really sweet. I’m sorry about...”

“Yeah, me too.”

We stop talking, and all I hear is the soles of our shoes slapping the sidewalk. No traffic. No voices. Not even crickets chirping.

I should flirt or plan my next move, but instead I perseverate on what-ifs. What if I hadn’t stayed home to study that night, what if I’d told your parents what happened to you, what if, what if...

The buzz of an engine pulls me back to the present. The car, a white sedan, maybe a Corolla, takes form all at once like it sprouted out of the fog and escaped. It passes, and the sound fades behind us.

Robert says, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ruin the mood.”

“It’s okay.” I should ask him something about himself. If you get people talking about themselves, they’ll think you’re a great conversationalist. I read that in an article about how to make small talk at parties.

He says, “You look really nice tonight.”

“Thanks.” Literally no one has ever said that to me except for my dad, and parents don’t count. Of course, Robert isn’t looking at my face. I’m wearing your blue angora sweater, and it’s a size too small for me. You were right—men don’t notice faces if boobs are available.

I should say something else, return the compliment, but my brain has locked down. I make my lips move, make sound come out of my throat. “S- So do you.” And now I want to disappear into the fog like that car. I guess those flirting videos didn’t do much good.

An orange tower emerges in front of us. Guy West Bridge, Sacramento’s Golden Gate. Another Epi-pen’s worth of adrenaline jolts my body. I point at the tower, and my arm shakes. “My apartment’s just two blocks from the other side of the bridge.”

We turn onto the bridge, and as we walk, I look over the railing. The river is invisible under the fog. I don’t like it, don’t like knowing it’s there but not being able to see it. I imagine toppling over the side, imagine the splash, how loud it would be, imagine the cold, dark, invisible water closing over me like it closed over you.

By the time we get across the bridge, I’m shaking all over, and my stomach is twisting, and half-digested pepperoni and bile are rising in the back of my throat. I swallow hard and try to think. Two more blocks. I have to make this happen in two more blocks.

Will he ask to come in like he did with you, or will I have to invite him in? I’m pretty sure I can’t even talk. And would he say yes if I did invite him in? I’m not beautiful like you

were. I spent hours watching makeup tutorials on YouTube, but my acne scars still show, and the gap in my front teeth makes me look twelve, and what if I make a move and he turns me down? And how do I even make a move? Put a hand on his arm, like that one video said? Invite him in for a nightcap like in an old movie? Just lean in and kiss him? I can't do that.

One block.

I point to a rectangular slab of a building just ahead. "That's it over there." I sound more like a bullfrog than a person, and the pizza is in my throat again and my stomach is twisting again and I'm going to puke, I know I'm going to puke and—

"Hey, I think I'm going to call an Uber. I rolled my ankle playing basketball on Tuesday, and it's getting a little sore. Could I come in and wait for my ride inside?"

*Yes!* The pizza retreats and the words flow. I even touch his arm. "Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't know about your ankle or I wouldn't have asked you to—"

"It's okay." He smiles, and he looks so much like White Hot Jesus I almost change my mind. It's wrong, I know it's wrong. White Hot Jesus wouldn't want me to do this. Maybe you wouldn't want me to do it either.

"Of course, you can come in."

We walk up the concrete path to my door. He stands close behind me on my square slab of a porch, so close I can feel the heat from his body on the back of my neck. I turn and give him a big, sexy smile. He returns it, and I know I've got this.

I punch in the four-digit code for the lock. A light flashes green, and the deadbolt releases with a click. I turn the handle with my left hand and stuff my right hand in my jacket pocket.

In the moment when I cross the threshold, I see your face. Slurping spaghetti across a folding table under the painting of White Hot Jesus. Laughing as you bounced up from the

bottom of the pool after a cannonball. Smiling out of your senior picture, blown up poster-sized and propped on a stand beside your closed casket.

The door slams shut, and Robert's arms lock around me. He shoves me against a wall and his mouth is on mine and his hands are climbing up my thighs. I flip the cap off the hypodermic, pull it out of my pocket, and slip the needle into his jugular.

#

The police are waiting for me when I finish my CS final. They've talked to Bethany and Pedro and Hannah, and they all said Robert and I left together. They interview me at the police station, and I tell them how I asked Robert to walk me home, but we got a little romantic, and he invited me to his place instead. Because thanks to my mad hacking skills, the Airbnb is in his name.

"Did you have sex?" one of the cops asks.

I'm tempted to bat my eyelashes like women in old movies and say, "I'm not that kind of girl," but I'm supposed to be upset so I shake my head and cry and tell them we made out a little and then he walked me home.

I think I aced the final.

#

The fresh dirt on your grave is cold between my toes. It would be wrong, unholy even, to step on you with shoes. I kneel and trace the letters on your headstone with my index finger:

*Jenna McDaniel*

*2004-2022*

*Beloved daughter, blessed of the Lord*

I sit cross-legged in the dirt and call your number. Your parents haven't turned it off yet.

They probably call it every day to hear your voice, just like I do.

“Hi, it’s Jenna. Leave a message.”

I hang up before the beep and think about calling again but I don’t. Instead, I swipe the call screen away. My browser is behind it, the *Sacramento Bee* article already open. *Sac State student dead of suspected overdose.*

Maybe I should send the article to your parents. Maybe they’d feel better if they knew Robert was dead. Or they might if I told them what he did to you, but you didn’t tell them, so I won’t either.

But nothing will make them feel better, not the article, not the truth, not even God. Not their church friends who brought them casseroles and told them everything happens for a reason, and God must have needed another angel, and we’re praying for you, and all that other stuff people say before they go home and shake their heads and talk about what a shame it is to lose someone so young and had she been drinking and who was she involved with and if people just prayed more and disciplined their children, things like this wouldn’t happen.

Under the headline is Robert’s senior picture from high school. White Hot Jesus smile, letterman’s jacket, hands cradling a basketball. Will his parents blow it up to poster size and prop it next to his casket? Guess I’ll find out tomorrow.

When the funeral’s over, people will serve his parents casseroles and platitudes too, and on their way home they’ll shake their heads and say what a shame it is to lose someone so young, he had his whole future ahead of him, he must’ve gotten in with the wrong crowd and if we just enforced our laws and executed people like God intended, these drug dealers couldn’t poison our kids, and things like this wouldn’t happen.

I guess they’re right about one thing. Everything does happen for a reason. Cause and



effect. Stimulus and response.

Robert is the reason all I have left of my best friend is a voicemail greeting and the goodbye text you sent me before you drove off the second Twin Bridge with a ten-week fetus inside you.

And I'm the reason your rapist is dead. Executed, like God intended.