

THE Z STREET BAND

By Rex Bolt

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Prologue

They took Jimmy up to the second floor of the police station and had him sit at a small metal table in a side room.

He could hear the policeman who brought him there talking about him out in the hall with another man.

Jimmy was more scared than he had ever been.

Bo and Jenny and Melissa were suddenly so far away, and last Thursday, before everything spiraled out-of-control, seemed so long ago.

1 - Bo and Jimmy

A couple of minutes before three o'clock on a warm Friday afternoon, Mr. Riggins came on the public address system.

"It's that time of year again," he said. "The 12th annual Huckabee Middle School Talent Show will be presented next Saturday evening. Participants may register in the office until five o'clock sharp on Wednesday, and I sincerely hope everyone has been practicing. Good luck!"

Jimmy reached over his desk and gave Bo a hard jab on the back of the shoulder. Bo ignored it.

"All right, that's you!" Jimmy said. "You figure out what you're gonna play yet?"

"Quiet down please!" said Mrs. Matters, but the whole class was stirred up now and making noise, with school about to be dismissed for the weekend.

"I'm not playing," Bo said, still facing forward.

"You keep saying that, but I'm telling you, dog, you're good."

"Yeah well, you know so much about it, why don't you get up there then?"

Jimmy laughed and stuck Bo again with his knuckles, digging in.

"What I'm thinking, what I'm starting to put together here," Jimmy said, "you're scared."

Bo whipped around.

"What?!"

"You heard me B."

"You're full of it," Bo said. "You better not say that again."

"You're afraid everyone's gonna laugh you off the stage. Just like what happened to Mackie last year."

"What happened to Mackie has nothing to do with it," Bo said. "At least he was good before he had his problem. I'm not GOOD. Lay off!"

Jimmy was standing up, zipping his backpack.

"You can play, and you know it," Jimmy said, smiling. "But you're scared. You're a scardie-dog."

Bo gritted his teeth. He stared down at his desk and felt a rush of heat in his face.

What he wanted to do was put Jimmy in a headlock and teach him a lesson, but when he looked up, there was Jimmy disappearing out into the hall, laughing and bobbing his head and doing his stupid 'cool walk', just as the bell rang.

2 - The Beach

Bo was not having a good weekend.

It seemed like everyone was going to the beach, and kids were knocking on his door asking him if he wanted to come.

But all Saturday afternoon he stayed in his room and tried to come up with something--anything--on his guitar, that might actually work for the dang talent show without making him look like an idiot.

Sunday morning, he was lying in his bed enjoying a nice peaceful sleep when he was jolted awake by a booming voice outside, followed by a girl giggling.

"Hey B-dog, get up!" Jimmy was calling. "On your feet--now!"

Bo scrambled out of bed and opened the window. Jenny was there in the driveway with Jimmy, both of them on their bikes holding their boogie boards.

"What the heck time is it?" Bo said, rubbing his eyes.

"Quarter to twelve, you doofus," said Jimmy. "What's your problem? You feeling all right?"

Bo couldn't believe he'd slept that late.

He felt like saying: "No, everything sucks, because you're right that I should be in the stupid talent show, but I can't figure out anything to play that doesn't suck, so all I want to do is sleep all day!"

Instead he said: "I'm great, just relaxing! Be right there!"

Twenty minutes later, the three of them were in the water catching waves at Manhattan Beach.

One thing was for sure: when you had a chance to do something with Jenny, you didn't want to screw it up. Jimmy was one thing, but Jenny...maybe the prettiest girl in the 8th grade, and smart and nice and just about perfect all around.

When Bo and Jimmy would sleep over at each other's houses, they'd spend a lot of time discussing the girl population at Huckabee. Often they'd disagree and make fun of the other guy for liking so and so.

But when Jenny's name came up, things got serious. Bo could see himself marrying her, no problem. He couldn't understand why she'd want to spend much time with Jimmy.

The water was crowded. It was a hot spring weekend in Southern California. They had to let a lot of waves go because there was too much competition, with people cutting each other off all over the place.

"Let's try the south side," Jimmy said, meaning down the beach toward Hermosa, and they got out.

Just past the first lifeguard station they saw two surfers heading into the water and recognized them both.

"Hey, that's Scott Hamburg and Stick Arrington!" said Jenny. "Wow!"

"Oh," said Bo.

"Ah," said Jimmy.

Hamburg and Arrington were football stars at Del Blarney High School, and they were also good beach volleyball players. They were in the local news a lot.

Jimmy and Bo hated both of them, all because of a little incident one Saturday last summer.

What had happened was Bo and Jimmy were down in the park on 11th Street, playing some paddle tennis. Hamburg and Arrington showed up with their girlfriends, ready to play doubles. The courts were filled, so Hamburg ordered Bo and Jimmy to give them their court.

They told Hamburg they'd hurry up and finish their set, which should only take about ten minutes.

Next thing they knew, Hamburg marched into the court and grabbed Bo, and Arrington got Jimmy, and they picked them up and stuffed them both head-first into the two garbage cans in the waiting area outside the courts.

As a finishing touch, they took their paddles and flung them over the fence into the duck pond.

The four of them--Hamburg, Arrington and the girlfriends--got a huge laugh out of the whole thing. Then they started playing doubles as though nothing had happened.

What Bo wanted to do was tie them all to the fence with a giant rope and leave them there overnight.

Jimmy wanted to take a sledgehammer and smash them in the knees.

But they knew you couldn't do those things in real life, only in the movies and on TV. They realized there was nothing they could do.

"Okay it's them, you see them around, so what?" Bo was saying now.

"Yeah, you don't want to make a big deal out of it," Jimmy said.

"Wow!" said Jenny again, and she stood still watching them get set to take off on their first wave.

The wave was a left break and pretty big. Arrington controlled it okay and got a decent ride out of it, but Hamburg went flying as he tried to get up. Jimmy and Bo laughed.

They watched some more. Each time it was the same pattern--Arrington worked a ride, though not that great a ride, while Hamburg never got up. Usually he went down off the back of the board, and once he tried to stand up too fast and shot head first over the nose.

"Big stud athlete, he lives near the beach, guy can't even stand up!" Jimmy said, winking at Jenny, who could out-surf a lot of guys. "You should give him some lessons, Jen. Charge him! Heck, even Bo or I could give him lessons--at least we can get up."

"Maybe he has an injury or something," said Jenny, not quite as interested now.

"Anyway, I'll beat you into the water!"

An hour went by. There was hardly any afternoon wind, and the sets were clean, and they each got a dozen good rides. When Jenny said she was starting to get cold, they came out.

They sat on the warm sand drying off and watched the surfers again.

"I can't believe it," Jimmy said. "That clown is still out there and still wiping out!"

"I have to admit," said Jenny, "it is kind of surprising to watch."

"B-dog, you ever see a dude wipe out that many times, that hard, and keep coming back for more?"

Bo didn't answer. He was thinking about something else now.

"I mean, if you were going to make a surf video showing people what you DON'T want to be doing--how NOT to eat it--all you need is to film this guy wiping out! Ooh, he's down again--excellent!"

"You're funny," Jenny said.

"Right, B?" Jimmy said. "What's the matter? You're not laughing."

"Isn't there a song called 'Wipeout'?" Bo said.

3 - Snack

There were two places you could stop for a snack on the way home from Huckabee Middle School.

One was the Fancy Freeze, which had all the action, with high school kids piling in and out of cars. The other was an RV across the street that sold Mexican food out of a side window.

Today, Bo and Jimmy needed some privacy so they were sitting at the metal table outside the taco truck, working on tasty \$1 carnitas tacos.

"I told you, no way!" Jimmy said.

"I've even got your part written out for you," Bo said. "I downloaded it and then made it simpler, so it doesn't matter that your left hand's not that great."

"Dude! What part of 'no!' don't you understand? I'm not a drummer!"

"Oh, you're not a drummer. Then what's that pounding on your desk you torture me with right in my ear every day in 7th period?"

"That's just me bored, fooling around."

"So, that's all 'Wipeout' is," Bo said. "Every time I hit a hard C chord and stop, you fool around. Same with an F chord, same with a G. Then I come back in."

"Why don't you try Mackie or someone. Doesn't he play snare drum in the band?"

"Can't take a chance on Mackie," Bo said. "Dude, you know girls love two things on stage, right? One is lead guitarists; two is drummers playing solos . . . That'd be you and me."

Jimmy took his time.

"I don't have a drum set," he said.

"Got that covered," Bo said.

4 - Drum Set

Jenny's mom, Mrs. McCoy, opened the door for them.

"I think it's just great that those drums are going to get some use," she said. "They've been gathering dust in Cameron's room ever since he left for college, and honestly, they pretty much did that even when he was living here."

Jenny appeared with her friend Melissa, from class. Bo had had a crush on Melissa since first grade and always had a little trouble making eye contact.

"Talent shows can be a wonderful experience," Mrs. McCoy was saying. "Jen's father and I actually began dating shortly after we both participated in our high school senior talent show."

"Mom--", said Jenny.

"It was a 1950's sock-hop theme," she said. "Bill and a bunch of guys got together and sang 'Runaround Sue' by Dion and the Belmonts. They tried to make it kind of a comedy song because they assumed their vocals were weak, but they actually sounded very good. I started to fall for him right then."

"Okay, mom," Jenny said.

"What'd *you* do for the show?" asked Jimmy.

"Oh, " Mrs. McCoy laughed. "A girlfriend and I did the old Mystics' tune, 'Hushabye'. I played piano and we sang it together."

"We get the idea," Jenny said. "We should go upstairs now and check out the drums."

"How's it go?" said Bo.

"What, 'Hushabye'?" said Mrs. McCoy.

"Yeah," said Bo.

"Oh no, I couldn't--it's been several years."

"Just give us a taste of it," said Jimmy. "Just the first verse--c'mon!"

Mrs. McCoy shrugged her shoulders and cleared her throat and stood up straight. Jenny took off up the stairs.

"Hush-a-bye, hush-a-bye, oh my darlin' don't you cry

Guardian angels up above, take care of the one I love,

Ooo ooo ooo, ooo-ooo-ooo, ah ah ah, ahhhh..."

"Wow, that was awesome!" Jimmy said.

"Really!" said Melissa.

"Totally!" said Bo. "Jenny never told us you could sing like that."

"Oh, you kids are too kind."

"You have any more of those old songs?" Bo asked.

"Well, I guess there are a couple of others that I do know," said Mrs. McCoy.

"Mom!!" shouted Jenny from upstairs.

"Uh, sounds like we better get started on the drums," Jimmy said. "But you'll continue the concert next time, right?"

"Oh, you're kidding now!" said Mrs. McCoy, but they saw she had a huge smile as they ran up to Cameron's room.

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The drum set was a simple Ludwig four-piece, with a hi-hat, a ride cymbal and a crash. It had a nice black marble finish.

"Okay, what you do," said Bo, "you start your solo on the snare and move around the kit as you get comfortable. Something like this--"

Bo tried demonstrating the drum pattern for "Wipeout":

BA da da da, BA da da da, BA da da da, BA da da da,

BA da da da . Bop BA--

"Dang, I can't really get it," said Bo.

"Let me try," said Jimmy.

"Maybe start on the floor tom instead--that way they can't hear the screw-ups as much because it has the lowest tone."

Jimmy banged around on the set for ten minutes. Bo, Jenny and Melissa couldn't make out one single thing that sounded like any part of "Wipeout".

"Hmm," said Bo.

"If I could make one small suggestion?" Jenny said. "My brother was never very good, but he did take some lessons. I know you have to hold the sticks lower, so they can rebound."

Jimmy adjusted his grips and tried it again. After a few more minutes you still couldn't hear "Wipeout", but at least the rhythms were more consistent.

Jimmy was sweating. "I've almost got it down," he said.

Jenny and Melissa tried not to laugh but couldn't help it.

"No, you don't 'almost got it down', " Bo said. "You have to work hard, dude. Otherwise we're gonna end up like Mackie."

"You're right," said Jimmy. "Forget this. We haven't signed up yet."

"It's only Monday," said Bo. "We'll wait 'til Wednesday to sign up, just to be safe. Then the gig's not until Saturday. We'll be ready."

Jimmy didn't say anything.

"Right?"

Silence.

"You know something, maybe that wasn't so cool after all, calling me a 'scardie-dog' the other day."

Jimmy was sitting on the drum stool, facing away from the three of them, looking out the window.

"Was it?" said Bo.

Jimmy didn't answer.

5 - Wipeout

At first recess the next morning, Bo found Jenny playing kick-back off the side wall of the gym with Nick Adler.

"Jimmy say anything to you?" Bo asked.

"No, nothing. I thought you'd know what was going on," Jenny said.

"I guess I was too hard on him at your house," said Bo. "Now he's not showing his face."

"Or couldn't it be he's just out sick today?"

Bo could pick up the anxiousness in her voice.

"Nah, Jimmy's an iron man, unfortunately. When's the last time you remember him being sick?"

"Ridley, move out of the way!" said Nick Adler.

"Why, so you can shank another kick?" Bo said.

But he was worried about Jimmy now. The talent show was a huge thing, but it wasn't worth losing your best friend over.

Phones weren't allowed at school, but at lunch Bo borrowed Mr. Camino's and tried Jimmy's cell, which didn't pick up, so he called the old home landline they still had. Jimmy lived with his mom and little brother in an apartment right on Highland Boulevard. His dad was back east somewhere and wasn't involved in his life. Mrs. McCoy had insisted Jimmy take the drum set home to practice

on, but Jimmy and Bo knew it wouldn't work out with his mom in the little apartment.

The home phone rang a bunch of times, and finally a voicemail came on. Bo thought about leaving a message and then decided he better not, in case it might get Jimmy in trouble.

Bo was extra-hungry after school but cruised right past Fancy Freeze and the taco truck, even though it killed him, and made a bee-line for home.

He needed to think, he needed to find Jimmy, and he needed to tell him: "Yeah, forget the stupid talent show! It was a terrible idea all along!"

Then they could head to the beach or skate-park or something, as though none of this happened.

Bo dropped his bike on the front lawn and hurried into the house. He opened the fridge, took a long swig of orange juice straight from the carton, and started down the hall to his room. There was an odd, muffled, tapping noise that was getting louder as he got closer.

"Moxie?" he thought. His dog liked to lay in his room while he was at school, and she often rolled around and scratched on the carpet. But this sounded different.

Just like that, the noise stopped. Bo cautiously pushed open the door. He was relieved to see Moxie there, stretched out in her usual position under the LeBron James poster. He walked into his room.

"YAAAHHHHHHH!"

Bo's heart jumped. He tore half-way back down the hall before he realized he recognized the voice and then the stupid laughter that followed. Jimmy was

coming out from behind the bedroom door, doubled over, enjoying himself so much.

"How was school?" Jimmy said.

"What the heck!" said Bo.

"What I did," Jimmy said, "I went down to Big Tone Music this morning. Thought someone there might be able to help me with the song."

"Nah, listen--the song's not important any more," Bo said.

"Got five dudes working there, not one of 'em knew it. You believe it? But there's this old guy, a customer, messing around on the drum sets. He hears me asking about 'Wipeout'. Guy knows it, and he gives me a lesson."

"Really?" said Bo.

"Told me I should practice it on a rubber pad. So I came over. I've been working it out on your mouse pad."

"You have your own mouse pad."

"True," Jimmy said. "But my mom stopping home on her lunch break might be a problem on a day I'm cutting school. Good thing about your house, your parents are never home during the day."

"So just like that, you broke into my house?!" said Bo.

"Dude, I didn't break in! I used our old clubhouse entrance."

Bo and Jimmy had a clubhouse in the corner of the basement that they called "The Box". They had walled it off with plastic milk crates, old plywood sheets and other materials they found. They tied a thick rope around a pipe that was running along the ceiling, so you had to climb the rope and then drop over the wall to get in.

They'd kind of lost interest in The Box since about 6th grade, but it was still there. Bo's parents never went down to the basement unless there was a problem with the furnace or the plumbing, and if they noticed The Box at all, they never said anything.

"You mean that screen?" Bo said.

"Yeah, it came right off, just like it always did."

When they were building The Box, Bo and Jimmy decided they needed a secret entrance, so they unscrewed a low screen from outside the house and replaced the screws with thinner ones that didn't grab. Everything looked the same, but you could pull the screen off real easy and then lay down and go headfirst into the basement.

"So what you're saying," Bo said, "is you broke into my house. Hand me the phone, I'm calling 911."

"B-dog, listen to this now," Jimmy said.

Jimmy picked up his sticks and started in on the pad.

Bo couldn't quite believe it--there it was, "Wipeout"! It was a little slow, okay, but Jimmy was playing it clean, beat for beat. It just might work.

Bo started to take his guitar off the wall but then remembered something.

"You better text Jenny," he said.

6 - Mouse Pad

A half hour later, Jenny and Melissa were standing in Bo's room, listening to Jimmy tell his big story again.

This time, Bo noticed, Jimmy added in extra information he was making up, like the old guy who showed him the song was a drummer from a famous 1960's band that Jimmy couldn't remember the name of. Finally, he finished.

"Whatever," said Jenny. "All I'm saying is, you had us worried."

"Ah, c'mon Jen," Jimmy said. "You know never to worry anything about me--I'm James Edward Martin, and I swing from a tree!"

"I feel sorry for that tree," Melissa said.

"Good one Mel," Jenny said. The girls were smiling now.

"Ah-hum, sorry to interrupt this hilarious conversation," said Bo. "But I thought since you guys are here, we'd try a little run-through. Me on guitar, Jimmy on, uh, mouse pad. Give us any feedback you want. Long as it's positive."

Bo tuned up his guitar and plugged in. It was about the cheapest electric guitar you could buy, and it came with a cheesy little amp. But it let you play.

"Don't forget now, " he said, "you're on the hi-hat keeping simple 4/4 time until I hit my hard C. Then you take over."

"What's a hi-hat, again?" Jimmy said.

Bo glared at him.

"It's those two cymbals that are pressed together," said Jenny.

"Oh," Jimmy said.

Bo counted it down: "One, two, three, four..."

He began picking the melody line of "Wipeout". It was strong and clear and lively.

It took Jimmy a few seconds to catch on, and then he started keeping time with his right hand stick on the top of Bo's desk, using it as a hi-hat. Bo finished the verse and hit the hard C, but Jimmy just kept on with the beat, not realizing he was supposed to come in for his first solo.

Bo stopped.

"Dude, that's you," he said. "Not bad up to that point, though."

"You guys, that sounds so cool!" Jenny said.

"Hold on, you gotta hear the whole thing," Bo said.

This time Jimmy came in on time, and he nailed his solo. Bo came back with the melody line, then strummed a hard F, and Jimmy took off again. Bo played the third and final verse, hit a hard G, and Jimmy banged out his final solo. Bo then finished it off with a nifty run of individual notes, followed by a couple of quick chords.

"Yes!" Bo said. He laid his guitar down and gave Jimmy a high-five.

"I can't believe I got it!" Jimmy said.

"Me neither!" said Bo.

"I know you can't, but you're not supposed to say that," Jimmy said.

"You guys have to play the spring dance!" Melissa said.

"Wow, thanks, but take it easy," Bo said. "We've got a total of one song--an instrumental--which we've now rehearsed a total of one time. And a whopping two people in the band."

"Melissa's on the dance committee though," Jenny said. "She can make it happen--right Mel?"

"I can try," Melissa said. "It'd be awesome to have a real live band for the last dance of the year, instead of a boring DJ."

"Whoa, I can't believe you just called us a 'band'," Jimmy said. "But tomorrow's the last day to sign up for the talent show. We better take care of that first, before we start behaving like a bunch we're Bruno Mars."

"Anyone starved besides me?" Bo said. "Let's go in the kitchen, see what we got."

"I'm with you dude, I could eat a horse!" Jimmy said.

"Cutting school gives you a big appetite, I guess," said Jenny

Jimmy smiled and shook his head.

On the kitchen counter, held down by a coffee mug, Bo noticed, was a \$20 bill.

Obviously one of his parents had left it there, to remind themselves to take care of something or other. Bo checked his wallet--he had a grand total of two dollars. Hmm...

"Actually, why don't we go to In-N-Out and grab a burger?" he said. "My treat."

He casually slipped the \$20 bill off the counter and into his pocket.

7 - The Name

Bo was excited all day at school on Wednesday, imagining himself and Jimmy on stage Saturday night.

It was like the feeling you had the last day of school before summer vacation, or the day before your birthday. He had trouble concentrating in any of his classes.

In English, Mr. Hacker, as usual, had them spend most of the class reading silently from the textbook. Today it was some old ancient poems that were ridiculous to try to figure out.

Why do any teaching, Bo thought, when you can give totally boring reading assignments instead?

A tune had been bouncing around in Bo's head all morning. It was not a song he knew, but something he was just absent-mindedly making up.

Looking up at Mr. Hacker patrolling the room with his arms folded, a couple of lyrics came to him that seemed to fit the tune just right.

When the bell rang, Bo whipped out a piece of binder paper and scribbled out the words:

"I sat there in English class

Reading from some way old text

Teacher prancing round the room

Get me out of this mess."

"Taking notes on the material, are we?" asked Mr. Hacker.

"Something like that," Bo said, and got out of there.

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At lunch, Bo was sitting at the picnic tables with Adler and Roland Myers, relaxing and enjoying his salami sandwich, when Jimmy came rushing over looking concerned.

"I was on my way to the office to sign us up," he said. "But then Allison Sturgeon tells me if you have more than one person you need a name for the band. Or group, or whatever."

"What does she know?" said Bo.

"She knows," Jimmy said. "She's doing a dance thing with Makena. They have a name."

"What is it?"

"Who cares!" Jimmy said. "What we have to focus on is coming up with ours."

"I know, how about 'The Mouse Padders'?" said Bo. "Or 'The Jerks', that's always a good one."

"C'mon, I mean it," Jimmy said. "This name thing is important. We don't want them laughing at us before we even start playing."

Bo thought about this.

"Okay, I see what you're saying," he said. "It's got to be solid but not fancy."

"You don't want to attract a lot of attention to it," Jimmy said.

"But it has to kind of, like, dominate," Bo said.

"Definitely," said Jimmy.

" 'The Huckabee Band'," said Nick Adler.

"Adler, stay out of this!" Jimmy said.

"Everyone else in the talent show is a pretender," said Adler. "You are the dominators. THE...HUCKABEE...BAND. That says it all."

"That's not bad," Bo said.

"Yeah, but there's already a regular Huckabee Band," Jimmy said.

"Technically," said Adler, "I think we're called 'The Huckabee Unified Middle School Marching Ensemble'. That's what it says on top of all those sheets they send home for my parents to sign."

"You know something, Adler?" Bo said. "If this band ever hits it big, we're hiring you as our business manager. That is, if you don't make it as a pro soccer player first."

"Shut up Ridley," Adler said.

"I like it," Bo said to Jimmy. "Take care of it."

"Really?" Jimmy said.

"As real as a meal--," Bo began rapping, "--on the head of an eel--get your cards and deal--"

"Shut up Bo," Jimmy said.

8 - No Exceptions

In the hall on the way to 7th period, Bo was talking to Jenny. Mackie caught up with them.

"Hear you're doing the show this year," Mackie said, pushing his black glasses tight to his face.

"Are you?" Bo asked.

"Me? Nah," said Mackie.

"I thought you were the most talented performer last year, Walter," Jenny said.

"Totally," Bo said.

"Really?" said Mackie.

"Dude, problem!" said Jimmy, suddenly showing up.

"You know what?" Bo said. "I've been feeling real good today, all day. Except for you keep on sticking problems in my face."

"I'm at the sign up table, and there's this list of rules," Jimmy said. "Type of song you can't play, what you can't wear, that stuff. We're okay until I get to the bottom of the sheet, where it says: Names of acts cannot contain the word 'Huckabee'."

"That's ridiculous!" said Mackie.

"Old Man Riggins and his stupid rules," said Bo.

"Someone did say he worked for the police department when he was younger," Jenny said.

"Really?" Bo said. "I thought he taught history over at Del B."

"Whatever!" Jimmy said.

"Okay, here's what we do," said Bo. "We'll go get a couple shakes after school. Sit down, think nice and clear. Figure out another name. Then come back and sign up. We still have until five."

"We don't want to cut it too close though," Jimmy said. "No exceptions with Old Man Riggins."

"Relax," Bo said.

9 - Fancy Freeze

"The Wipeouters?" Jimmy was asking.

They were sitting in the corner booth at Fancy Freeze, next to the jukebox.

"No," said Bo.

"The Beach Rappers?"

"We don't rap. We're not even singing anything Saturday."

"The Elephant Seals,"

"What?"

"Elephant seals are tough," Jimmy said.

"Terrible name," Bo said. "Keep thinking."

"I'm using up all my thinking," Jimmy said. "Where's Mackie? I told him to meet us here and give us a hand."

"Chess club, I think," said Bo.

"Oh boy," said Jimmy.

"You know who's in the chess club?"

"Who?"

"Total of two people: Mackie and Adler. Get this, dudes have been playing each other every Wednesday since sixth grade! Mr. Heffenstern stands there supervising the games."

"Who wins?" Jimmy asked.

"Pretty even, I think. They have some serious battles. Thrown pieces at each other a couple times."

" 'Band'," said Jimmy.

"Huh?"

" 'Band', that'll work," Jimmy said.

"Dude, you're getting on my nerves--speak English!"

"We'll just call ourselves 'Band'," Jimmy said.

" 'THE Band?' " Bo said.

"No, B-dog--'Band'!" Jimmy said. "Dominate the thing with one word."

"That's your dumbest idea yet," Bo said. "But let's go with it."

"What time you got?" Jimmy said.

"Quarter to four," Bo said. "We ride back to school now, sign up once and for all. We're beating the deadline by a full hour, at least. That is, unless you've got some OTHER big surprise on your mind."

"Nope, piece of cake!" Jimmy said, and they started to stand up.

"Sounds like you girls--I mean boys--have to be somewhere important," came the first deep voice.

"Look at how cute these two are, pouring their hearts out to each other, staring into each other's eyes," said the second deeper voice.

Standing right in front of Bo and Jimmy, blocking their exit from the booth, were Scott Hamburg and Stick Arrington. Hamburg was showing them a nasty smile, and Bo could smell onions, and he thought maybe alcohol, on Arrington's breath.

"Uh, hi Stick, excuse me, we were just leaving," Bo said.

"What he call you?" Hamburg asked Arrington.

"I know," Arrington said.

"Little dude," Hamburg said to Bo. "Let me explain something. Calling us 'sir' or 'Mr. Arrington' works. Calling us by our first name doesn't work. I was you, I'd follow the lead of your hottie girlfriend there and keep your mouth nice and shut, and be on your way."

"Saw you guys at the beach the other day," Jimmy said.

Oh no Jimmy, Bo thought, please stop right there.

"You were doing some surfing," Jimmy said.

"We gotta go!" Bo said, but he knew Jimmy wasn't going to stop now.

The one thing that bothered Jimmy more than anything in the world, the only thing that caused Jimmy to get into the few fist fights he'd had in his life, was someone calling him a girl.

"Course not everyone might call what you were doing 'surfing'," he said.

"You better shut up, punk," said Hamburg.

"Especially you, Scott," Jimmy said. "You were doing kind of a new sport out there. Like the idea was to see how many different ways you could go flying off the board."

Bo would have laughed if he wasn't so scared. He did notice Arrington was cracking a smile.

"Friend of ours, an 8th grader, would be glad to give you guys some lessons," Jimmy said. "She say how much she'd charge 'em, Bo?"

Bo kept quiet.

"I'm counting to three," Hamburg said. "Unless you want to find out what a real life beat-down feels like, you'll be out of my sight before I get there."

"C'mon, man, forget it!" Bo said to Jimmy, as he grabbed him by the shirtsleeve and hustled him toward the door.

"One....

"Two..."

"Have somebody do a little video next time you're in the water," Jimmy called back to Hamburg, as he and Bo were ducking out the door. "Put in on 'You Tube'. Your mother can watch it."

I did not REALLY hear you say that, did I?, thought Bo. I'm just dreaming it, right?

Bo pulled out his keys in case there was a remote chance he could unlock his bike and ride away, but he knew better.

A split second later, Hamburg and Arrington came sprinting out into the parking lot. Bo put up his arms to try to cover his face, but Arrington unleashed a vicious kick into his side, which sent him to the ground face down. He realized he was tasting the asphalt of the parking lot.

Hamburg had Jimmy in a headlock and ran him straight into the chain link fence that separated Fancy Freeze from the auto body shop next door. Jimmy stumbled and fell, and rolled onto his back.

"Now, since you brought my mother into it--," said Hamburg.

"Scott, that's probably enough," Arrington said.

Hamburg hesitated for a moment, sizing up the situation.

"Yeah, I guess you're right, Stick, it's over," he said. "Tell you what. You dudes are a mess, all laying on the ground like that. At least get on your feet, and you can go back to the sink and wash up."

First Bo, and then Jimmy managed to slowly get up, but everything was moving in slow motion. Neither one of them was thinking clearly as Hamburg and Arrington followed them around the rear of Fancy Freeze to the small, run-down, industrial washroom.

"Here, I'll close the door for you, give you some privacy in there," Hamburg said.

The washroom light didn't work, and the place reeked of disinfectant, stronger and worse smelling than the school bathrooms, but the hot water felt good on Bo's face. Bo reached for the paper towel holder as Jimmy took his turn at the sink.

"Open the door, so we can see what we're doing in here," Jimmy said.

Bo twisted the doorknob and pulled, but the door didn't open.

"What the heck!" he said.

"What's the problem?" Jimmy asked.

"You try it," said Bo.

Jimmy quickly dried his hands on his shirt and tried the door. He twisted the knob all the way to the right and yanked. Nothing. He twisted the knob to the left and pulled harder. Nothing.

Bo and Jimmy started to panic. They both put their hands on the knob and twisted and pulled with all their might. The door didn't budge. They backed up

and kicked the door as fiercely as they could, to try to somehow un-jam it, but the thing was simply not going to move.

"Can we smash a hole in it or something?" Bo asked.

There was a pause.

"It's a metal door," Jimmy said, in a soft, sad, defeated voice that Bo had never heard from him before.

Bo wondered if Jimmy might be crying.

"Y'all have fun now, ya' hear!" came the muffled voice of Hamburg from outside the sink room.

What Hamburg had pulled, while Bo and Jimmy were busy washing up, was the old gum trick he learned years ago from his Uncle Jack.

You put three pieces of gum in your mouth, chewed them until they softened up and went together, and then took the wad out of your mouth and pressed it right against where the door latch met the frame. Then you took the tip of a pen and jammed the gum deep into opening, so no one could get hold of it to pull it out.

When you wanted to release the person, you could normally open the door by moving the latch with a screwdriver, but you had to know what you were doing.

"You really gonna leave them there?" Bo and Jimmy could hear Arrington saying now.

"Nah, just having a little fun with them," Hamburg said. "I'll stop back in a couple hours, rescue them. If I remember."

He let out a laugh that sounded like an old car trying to start.

"I ain't part of this, man," Arrington said.

"Know what Stick?" said Hamburg. "Maybe I should have shoved you in there with the little dudes. Don't think I didn't catch you smiling when they were making fun of me surfing."

"Fine," said Arrington. "Why don't you try putting your hands on me Scott, and see what happens?"

It was quiet for a minute. Bo figured they were staring each other down.

"Ah forget it," Hamburg said. "I guess you don't understand anything. I'm outta here!"

There was a tap of knuckles on the door.

"Help!!" yelled Bo.

"Open up!!" yelled Jimmy.

"You punks best remember--I had nothing to do with this," said Arrington through the door, and they soon heard him walking away.

Now there was total silence.

"The sign-ups," said Jimmy, slowly. "It's all my fault, B."

"Yeah but Mr. Riggins, this one time, he has to understand, right?" said Bo.

"He won't."

"I mean, in a way we are crime victims here! We're trapped against our will!"

"Doesn't matter."

"It's not fair!" Bo said. "And if he hadn't banned bringing phones to school, we could call someone now! Why can't..."

He stopped talking because he didn't want Jimmy to hear his voice breaking as he started to cry.

Jimmy didn't say anything more. After a minute, he slumped to the ground and put his hands to his face in the pitch black darkness.

10 - Mackie

For Walter Mackie, it was a good day to be a chess player.

He had tried a new set of opening moves, but he had to admit, Adler had defended the board well. Then on the 27th move, Mackie launched a sneaky weak-side attack that Adler never saw coming. Six moves later, Adler's king was trapped, and he stood up and pushed in his chair, indicating he had given up.

"What I don't like," Mackie said, as they were walking home, "is you always quit on me when you're in trouble. You never give me the satisfaction of checkmating you."

"First of all," said Adler, "that was an obvious attack, which I just didn't see today because my concentration was off. Secondly, what are you talking about? You quit on me all the time."

"Like when?"

"Like two weeks ago. You made that blunder, and I took your rook, and you stopped playing."

"Two weeks ago doesn't count at all, because Mr. Heffernan was making all kinds of noise that day and it was impossible to focus."

"Yeah well, either way," said Adler, "I still have the edge on you in total wins, 43 to 41."

"What?!" said Mackie. "I have no idea what kind of math you're using, but I'm up 44 to 40!"

"What are you talking about, I'm ahead!" said Adler.

"Shut up, I am!" said Mackie.

They were approaching Fancy Freeze now.

"Hey, those are Bo and Jimmy's bikes, right?" said Adler.

"Looks like them, yeah," Mackie said. "I guess they finally got the band name straight and are all signed up and ready to go now. I'm sort of looking forward to hearing them Saturday night."

"I'm actually looking forward to it, too," Adler said. "Did you know Bo told me if the band ever takes off, he's making me business manager?"

"You better get your math right if you're going to try something like that," Mackie said.

"That was a cheap shot, Walter," said Adler.

They peered into Fancy Freeze but didn't see Bo and Jimmy, so they went inside to make sure.

"Maybe they parked the bikes here and walked back to school to sign up," Mackie said.

"Except we just walked here FROM school, doe-doe bird," Adler said. "We would've seen them."

"Yeah, well, could be other possibilities, then."

"I don't get it," Adler said. "Let's make sure those are their bikes."

They went around the side of the building to where the two bikes were locked to the fence.

"Definitely them," said Adler. "I recognize the 'Ocean Ready Surf Shop' sticker on Jimmy's top tube."

"Lot of those stickers around though," said Mackie.

"Idiot, stop fighting me!" said Adler. "It's them!"

"Okay, well, it's a mystery then. Anyhow, I'm tired--beating you today took a lot out of me. Let's go."

"Something's not right though," said Adler, scratching the back of his neck. "I mean, why would you ever walk any place, when you had your bikes?"

"Unless you got picked up for some reason," Mackie said.

"Could be," said Adler, and they headed out of the parking lot.

A half-block away, in front of Lynch's Laundromat, Mackie was still trying to figure it out, and he wasn't paying attention to where he was walking, and he stepped in a big pile of dog-doo. He said, "This is unbelievable. I have to wash this off good. It smells terrible."

"Ah, man," Adler said.

"I should go back to Fancy Freeze," Mackie said.

"Forget that! Use one of the sinks in City Hall. We're not backtracking."

They continued the two blocks to City Hall, but Mackie soon came out of the building with a distressed look on his face.

"They have a sign," he said. "Closed for Renovation". "I gotta take care of this," he said. "I'm going back. Hang onto my backpack."

"No way, that's ridiculous!" Adler said, but Mackie was already on the move, walking fast back toward Fancy Freeze.

There was nothing to do but wait right there in front of City Hall. Adler found a bench that hopefully a homeless person hadn't slept on recently, and he sat down, trying to figure out how the heck Walter could have beaten him today.

Ten minutes later, Mackie had made it back to Fancy Freeze, and he circled around the outside to that washroom they had in back. He went to turn the doorknob and pushed, but nothing moved.

UN...BELIEVABLE, he thought.

"Hey!!" came a scream out of nowhere.

"Help us--help!!"

"Uh, sure," said Mackie, stepping away from the door, startled. "What's wrong?"

"We're locked in here!!" said a voice that Mackie now realized was Bo.

"Ridley, that you?"

There was a pause.

"Mackie!!" Bo and Jimmy yelled together.

"Okay, well, now just hold on you guys--I'll run inside and see if anyone has a key!" Mackie said.

"No, Walter, wait!!" said Bo. "Key's not gonna do it. They jammed something into the lock."

"Okay I'm still here," Mackie said. "Who did?"

"Hamburg and the other dude!" yelled Jimmy. "Don't worry about that right now!"

Bo was thinking hard, putting it all together.

"What time you got?" he asked Mackie.

"I got 4:46."

"All right...so we got fourteen minutes...here's what we're going to do then," said Bo, trying to stay calm. "Walter, you're going to unlock Jimmy's bike.

You're going to ride it quick as you can back to school, and you're going to sign up for the talent show for us. You'll make it. I know you can do it."

"The combination is 5. 19. 24.!" yelled Jimmy.

"Got it!"

"Mackie, we really appreciate this," Bo said. "The name is 'Band', by itself!"

"Right!" said Mackie, and he hurried around the corner to the bikes.

"That's lock's a little tricky, unfortunately," Jimmy said to Bo. "I pray he can get it open."

A minute later they could hear Mackie yelling as he raced back toward them and their predicament . . . "Guys!" Mackie said. "I can't work the combination! I tried it twice!"

"Kay then," said Bo, trying real hard not to panic. "In that case, you take my bike. I'll try to wedge the keys under the door."

Bo tried to squeeze his key chain as compact as possible and got down on the cement floor and shoved it toward the tiny sliver of daylight on the other side of the door. A couple keys made it part way through, and Mackie pulled on them as hard as he could, but the key chain was simply too fat to fit under the door.

"Can you take the bike key off and slide it through by itself?!" said Mackie.

"So dark in here, don't know if I can get it!" Bo said, as he furiously tried to feel around and figure out which was the bike key and somehow maneuver it off the chain.

"Mackie, I'm remembering something that might help!" said Jimmy.

"Right as you pass the second number--19--on your way to the third number--

24--jerk up on the lock and then jam it back down real quick! Then go to the third number!!"

" 'Kay!!" said Mackie, and he raced off again.

Maybe 90 seconds passed, but it felt like an hour to Bo and Jimmy.

"He's not back," Bo said. "I think he got it."

"I think he got it too," Jimmy said, "but what time you think it is?"

"Seemed like maybe three, four minutes went by, everything we were trying," Bo said.

"Felt more like five or six to me," Jimmy said.

"Maybe," said Bo.

"What is it, like four-and-a-half blocks to school and then across the yard to the office?" Jimmy said, picturing it.

"He's got a shot," Bo said.

"It is Mackie, though," said Jimmy.

"Yeah, it's Mackie," Bo said. "But he's got a shot."

11 - Decision

It was slightly uphill from the Fancy Freeze parking lot to the sidewalk.

Mackie was standing on the pedals and trying to crank them as hard as he could, but it felt real weird, and way too difficult, like he was trying to ride up Mount Everest. He was barely able to get the bike to move forward.

Finally, he made it up to the Magnolia Street sidewalk at the entrance to Fancy Freeze. He jumped off the bike and checked the rear v-brake to make sure it wasn't rubbing against the wheel and screwing something up, but the brake looked fine.

He hung a left toward school, but even though the sidewalk was level, it didn't get much easier to pedal. What this felt like, he thought, was when you tried to ride your bike on the beach in the really thick sand that was furthest away from the water. It was basically impossible.

He stopped after going just a few yards.

What the heck was going on here?

And then he realized it: the front tire was flat. He could see the rubber flattened out and spread wide where it met the pavement.

Still, he thought, you can ride with one flat tire in an emergency, can't you?! I've done it before.

He reached around and felt the rear tire, and a terrible, sick feeling hit him smack in the middle of the stomach.

"Dang it!!" he said. "No!!"

Mackie stood there straddling Jimmy's broken down bike, and a million thoughts rattled around in his head in about five seconds.

He thought about how much he hated running, that he was probably the worst runner in the 8th grade, and how on those torturous days when Mr. Gustaf made them run the mile, he had to walk almost all of it.

He thought about Bo and Jimmy trapped in that awful bathroom, and how they had put their faith in him.

He thought about how nice it would be to just crawl into his bed and get some sleep, and make this bad dream go away.

He dropped the bike and took off in a full sprint toward school.

By the time he got to the corner and crossed the street, he started slowing down. He couldn't help it. He was still madly churning his legs and swinging his arms, but his body simply was not working very well.

As he reached the second intersection, Mackie was pretty sure now he wasn't going to make it. He felt a burning in his lungs every time he inhaled, his feet were not stable, and he was starting to get dizzy.

He crossed B Street and visualized the rest of the route. He had a short block to Fairview, then a long block to C Street. Then half a block to school, and then through the main yard to the office, tucked back behind the gym.

He knew it was getting extremely close to five o'clock, but he decided not to look at his watch. What for? Knowing the time wouldn't change anything--he couldn't possibly go any faster.

It was that last block before C Street that finally got him. The corner looked so far away. His legs were numb. He was furiously sucking in air but could not get enough oxygen. He stopped and reached out for a lamp post and put his head down.

Mackie had read stories about what people could do when they were in extreme situations.

He remembered one about a guy stuck in the desert, who walked over a hundred miles to a town. He knew the human body was capable of more, a lot more, than your brain told you it could do. He thought about this for a few seconds.

He let go of the lamp post and started walking. He was limping, but at least he was moving again. When he got to the little house with the dog in the yard that always barked at everyone, he could suddenly see the top of the gym in the distance.

This gave him hope.

He took one huge breath and broke into a run again, though it was the hardest thing he ever did.

As Mackie entered the Hillcrest school grounds, in front of him was the big outdoor clock above the entrance to the main building. He thought it said 5:00 right on the nose, but his glasses were so fogged up he wasn't sure. Anyway, that clock was always a little off--by a minute or two either way.

He tried to flat-out sprint the last fifty yards to the office, not quite sure anymore who he was or what he was doing.

He slammed into the office door and it flew open. Right there in front of him, standing alongside the attendance desk, were Mr. Riggins and Miss DePiazza, the school clerk.

Sitting on the desk, all by itself, was the talent show sign up sheet, clipped to a silver metal binder.

Mackie started to wobble, and then he doubled over, catching himself from falling by squeezing his elbows into his knees.

"Yes, may I help you with something, Walter?" asked Mr. Riggins.

Mackie couldn't answer.

"Perhaps you are intending to register for the talent show?"

Mackie nodded, unable to look up.

"Walter, I'm sorry to inform you that entries officially closed two minutes ago. The time is now 5:02."

"Please, Mr. RIGGINS!!," Mackie called out in a hoarse whisper.

"These are explicit regulations, Walter," Mr. Riggins said. "I know you--as well as anyone--understand the logic. If an exception were to be made for one individual, then exceptions would need to be made for all individuals."

With that, Mr. Riggins snapped shut the metal binder and put it under his arm.

"Please...!!" was all Mackie could say, his voice barely there.

"Mr. Mackie, I must tell you this discussion is now over. Any further dissent will result in a 2-day suspension, effective immediately."

Mr. Riggins turned and headed to the back office.

"You don't look too good, hon'," said Miss DePiazza. "You really don't. Can I get you some water or something?"

Mackie shook his head and staggered out of the office, still not standing up straight.

Off to his left, in front of the science room, were three low bushes, spread out.

He leaned over the top of the first bush, used it for support, and threw up. He wasn't sure if he felt any better. After a minute, he picked himself up.

When he got to the second bush, he threw up again.

He thought he was done, was sure he had nothing left, but when he got to the third bush, BOOM, he threw up one more time.

12 - I'm Not Dreaming

Okay, that's it, Adler said to himself, and got up off the bench.

He had a decision to make. Walter--and whatever the heck had happened to him on his stupid wash-up mission--he could care less about. The trouble was, he had the two backpacks to deal with, and Mackie's was heavy. He couldn't just leave it on a bench, even though he sure felt like it, and even though the dude was ticking him off now beyond belief.

So reluctantly, Adler decided to start back toward Fancy Freeze, since his own house was five blocks away from where he stood right now, Mackie's was six, and Fancy Freeze was only two-and-a-half. Two-and-a-half in the wrong direction, but still.

He made it there easily enough, but now there was something very weird going on.

Down by the fence, where Bo and Jimmy's bikes had been locked, was just one bike now--Bo's, he was pretty sure-- with only an empty cable lock on the ground next to it.

And just up ahead, laying right there in the middle of the sidewalk, was a second bike--Jimmy's, he guessed.

Someone's messing with my head, he thought. Today is not my day.

An idea came to him: He would take Jimmy's bike and simply ride home and get out of this mess. He could call Jimmy later and let him know he had it. The heck with finding Walter.

But first, he knew, he did owe it to his friend to at least check the one place Walter said he was going, which was that industrial sink job around the back of the restaurant.

Adler turned the knob but the door didn't move, so he knocked.

"Mackie! Mackie! What happened?!" shouted Bo.

"Yes or no, did you make it?!" shouted Jimmy.

What I just heard from in there, thought Adler, *I did not REALLY hear.*

Right?

"Make what?" Adler said cautiously.

"The sign-up!" said Jimmy. "What do you mean, '*make what*'?!"

"How should I know--it's me, Adler!" he said. "Open up."

"Oh," said Bo.

"We were hoping it was Mackie getting back," said Jimmy.

Adler took a moment to try to digest what was going on here.

"You know, I got a lot of stuff confusing me today, and people ticking me off, bad," he said. "Open the dang door!"

"Hey, Adler, man, you gotta help us!" Bo said.

"Dude, get us outta here!" said Jimmy. "We're starting to go crazy!"

Adler was beginning to figure it out now, some of it, though it seemed like the most unbelievable bunch of things happening that you could have imagined.

Bo and Jimmy somehow got locked in that sink thing. Mackie must have found them there. Time was running out on signing up for the talent show. Mackie took Jimmy's bike to sign up for them.

But then what?

Mackie decided not to ride the bike for some reason? So he left it on the sidewalk and walked to school?

"Jimmy," said Adler. "Your bike working okay?"

"Is my bike working OKAY!" Jimmy said. "What you mean by that?!"

"It's laying on the sidewalk, just outside the parking lot," Adler said.

"What?!" said Jimmy.

"Ah, man," said Bo.

"Those dirty, ugly, greasy, SLIME BUCKETS!!" Jimmy said.

"Who?" asked Adler.

"They must have messed with his bike," Bo said. "That meant Mackie had to try to walk it. He can't run, right?"

"Not really, no," said Adler. "Wait a second, though--bike broke down, why not come back and get yours then?"

"Couldn't get him the key," Bo said quietly.

"There wouldn't have been enough time to walk it," Jimmy said. "He left here around ten to five, maybe even later."

They were silent for a minute.

"You have to give him credit, though," said Bo. "He didn't give up. He tried."

"Dude definitely has my respect," Jimmy said. "Ever hear me laughing at Mackie again, slap me."

"I'll be glad to," said Bo.

"What I need is a drill and a couple different type bits," said Adler, sizing up the situation now with the jammed lock and the gum.

"Good idea!" said Bo. "Try inside!"

"Nah, I don't know," Adler said. "That manager guy, I don't think he likes kids. Might think we caused the problem in the first place."

"Probably right," Bo said. "You got your phone?"

"No. I don't break rules, and I haven't been home yet."

Bo pulled out whatever change he had in his pocket and shoved it under the door.

"Find one of those old pay phones, call Jenny," he said. "Her dad's got a workshop in the garage. He has everything."

There were no pay phones around anywhere, Adler barely knew what one was. He was thinking: who is Bo kidding? He had to go all the way to City Hall where they did have one in the basement, and then hustle back to Fancy Freeze. This was definitely a day he was going to try to forget.

Jenny and Melissa got there in fifteen minutes. Jenny was holding a yellow cordless drill with one hand and her handlebars with the other.

"I can't believe those guys did this to you," Melissa said through the door to Bo and Jimmy.

"All because of you saying something about when we saw them surfing?" Jenny said.

"Whatever," Jimmy said.

"Don't worry about that right now," Bo said. "Adler, what's happening out there?!"

"Dang gum keeps getting caught on the bit," Adler said.

"Dude, so try something else then!" Jimmy said.

"Okay, I'm switching to the big 1/2 inch bit, see if I can blast that latch out of there. Stand back."

It took Adler a long time, easily five minutes of very noisy drilling in between the metal door and the frame, but finally the drill bit broke through the latch. He stopped the drill, pulled it out, and opened the wash room door.

Jimmy and Bo came stumbling out, squinting their eyes.

"I wouldn't recommend that," Bo said, shaking his head. "But thanks, all you guys."

"Likewise," said Jimmy.

"What we really need to do now--" Bo said.

"Is find Mackie," said Jimmy.

They went around the corner of the building, and directly in their path was the was Fancy Freeze manager with his white chef's hat on, talking to a

policeman in a patrol car and pointing back toward where they were coming from.

"I'm not believing this," Jimmy said.

"Everyone just keep cool," Bo said. "One thing--whatever they ask us, we don't know how we got stuck in there."

"Why?" said Melissa.

"He's right," Jimmy said.

The officer noticed the five of them now and got out of the car. The manager went back into the kitchen.

"Excuse me ladies and gentlemen," he said. "Seems we have a report of some vandalism on the restaurant premises. Y'all wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

No one said anything.

"I see," the officer said. "In that case, you, sir, with the drill, you want to get in the back seat of the squad car for me, please?" He meant Adler.

"Wait just a second now!" Bo said.

"Un-huh?" said the officer.

"See, my friend and I, we went in there to wash up," Bo said, "and somehow the door wouldn't open. So our other buddy came along and found us and--"

"So I went and drilled out the lock," said Jimmy. "I broke the door. Guess I should have waited or something. Or maybe gotten a locksmith."

"I see," said the officer. "In that case, young man, it's you I'll need to ride with me down to the station house."

Adler started to say something, but Jimmy gave him a look that cut him off.

"I'll be okay," Jimmy said in a shaky voice as he got in the police car.

"Don't worry!" called Jenny, as the squad car drove out of the parking lot.

"We have to do something!" Melissa said.

"That should have been me in there," said Adler.

"First thing, we have to get my mom!" Jenny said.

"Just checked my bike," said Bo. "Amazingly they didn't mess with it. So here's what we do: I gotta go find Mackie before anything. You guys go talk to Mrs. McCoy. Let's see--you got two bikes... and Adler walked here."

"It's okay, I can walk," Adler said.

"Jen, can you ride Nick?" Bo said.

"Nah, don't worry about it," Adler said.

"I can," said Jenny. "Nick, you just have to hold onto me. Everything'll be fine."

Please tell me I'm not dreaming, Adler said to himself.

Bo stood on the pedals and cranked it full speed all the way to Huckabee. It was getting dark. He recognized the one car in the parking lot--it belonged to Julio, the night custodian.

There was Mackie, sprawled out on the grass in front of the gym. He looked up, saw Bo, and started to cry.

"I tried real hard man," he said.

"It's okay, take it easy," Bo said.

"I just...missed it by two minutes."

"Walter, please, don't beat yourself up."

"The sign up sheet...it was still open..."

"Stop," said Bo.

"But Mr. Riggins..." His voice trailed off.

Bo reached down to him now and helped him up. Mackie's "Huckabee Chess Club" t- shirt was soaked through with sweat, and his face looked white as a sheet.

"Where're your glasses?" Bo said.

"Uh, over there somewhere. I kind of threw up a little bit. They fell off."

Bo looked around, found the glasses and rinsed them off in the water fountain.

This hadn't just been a kid trying to help them sign up for a talent show. This had been some sort of superhuman effort.

"You did good Walter," said Bo.

Mackie didn't say anything.

"Better than any of the rest of us could have done."

Mackie was silent.

Bo put his hand on Mackie's arm.

"You gave it everything you had," Bo said. "And I'm not going to forget this . . . Ever."

13 - Police Station

They took Jimmy up to the second floor of the police station and had him sit at a small metal table in a side room. They gave him a soda.

Finally a man came in who was wearing regular clothes, but with a police badge on the outside of his jacket. Jimmy guessed he was a boss of the policeman who had brought him in from Fancy Freeze.

"Lieutenant Mitchell Stonewaller," the man said, smiling. He extended his hand for Jimmy to shake.

"James, I'm going to cut right to the chase here," he said. "You are suspected of being in violation of Criminal Code 42-f, which is 'willful and malicious destruction of private property'."

"Sorry," Jimmy said.

"Son, what you did may not seem like a serious crime to you," Lieutenant Stonewaller said, "but it's something we take very seriously,"

"I understand that," Jimmy said.

"Oh really?" said the Lieutenant, in a rougher tone of voice now. "You want to tell me what else you were thinking about destroying with that power drill before the officer came and apprehended you?"

"Nothing else," said Jimmy.

"You break things at home?"

"What?"

"Do you go around breaking things in your own house, kid," said the Lieutenant, "or do you just save your criminal behavior for other people's property that you couldn't care less about?!"

"All right, that's enough."

It was a woman's voice. Jimmy looked over and saw Mrs. McCoy entering the room. She had a dead serious look on her face, a look he'd never seen from her before.

"Ma'am?" said the Lieutenant.

"I'm Mr. Martin's lawyer," she said. "Please don't ask him any further questions at this time."

She's a lawyer?, thought Jimmy.

"Fine," said the Lieutenant, and he left the room

Mrs. McCoy closed the door. "You okay Jimmy?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, but not meaning it.

"Okay, look," she said. "I'm going to go talk to the officers. Make a few phone calls. I'm pretty sure I can work this thing out."

"Thank you," he said, not knowing what else to say.

"And Jimmy, what you did," she said, "it was very brave."

"I shouldn't have drilled the door...I should have waited," he said.

Mrs. McCoy smiled as she left the room.

Twenty minutes later, Lieutenant Stonewaller came back, this time with the officer who had picked up Jimmy. Mrs. McCoy followed them.

"James," the Lieutenant began, "after careful review and discussion, we have decided to drop this matter,"

Jimmy let out a big exhale.

"Provided," continued the Lieutenant, "that you perform the work which your attorney, Mrs. McCoy, has arranged."

"We spoke to the restaurant manager, Mr. Jensen," Jenny's mom said. "He agreed to forget about the whole thing if you can go in there every Monday for the next five weeks and wash dishes for two hours. Is that acceptable?"

"Heck yes!" said Jimmy.

"It's kind of the way things worked in the old days," she said. "If someone got in a little trouble with a restaurant--if they finished their meal and realized they didn't have enough money to pay for it, for instance--they could often resolve it by washing dishes."

"Happened to me once," said the Lieutenant.

"It did?" said the officer.

"Really?" said Mrs. McCoy.

"Long time ago, back in high school," he said. "Took a girl on a first date to a sort of fancy restaurant. She ordered all the most expensive things on the menu, and when the bill was totaled up, I was short . . . Explained it privately to the owner, and the guy was nice enough. Let me come back and wash dishes."

"Wow," said the officer.

"Course a few years later, after I became a policeman," said the Lieutenant, "guy gave me free meals. I kept an eye on his restaurant for him."

"He did?" said the officer. "What restaurant was it?"

"We really should be going now," said Mrs. McCoy. "Thank you."

"Our pleasure," said Lieutenant Stonewaller, shaking her hand. "And James, have you learned a lesson today?"

"I've learned a bunch of them," Jimmy said.

The officer and lieutenant laughed, and it was over.

"Are you hungry?" asked Mrs. McCoy, when they were in her car. "We've got meatloaf and potatoes staying warm in the oven at home."

Are you kidding?, Jimmy said to himself. I'm so hungry I could eat Cameron's drum set!

"Nah, thank you anyway," he said. "I better get home and tell my mom what happened. I didn't call her because she would have worried, and she wouldn't have known what to do."

"That's being a good son," said Mrs. McCoy, and she gave him a little wink as she dropped him off in front of his apartment.

14 - Jimmy and The Box

Thursday at lunch, the six of them were sitting in the cafeteria talking about everything that had happened.

"One thing I never would have guessed in a million years," Bo said. "Your mom's a lawyer."

"She was," Jenny said. "Once Cameron and I were born she wanted to just be a mom at home, though. My dad says she was pretty tough in court back in the day."

"Really? Mrs. McCoy?" Bo said, trying to picture it.

"Oh yeah, big time," Jimmy said. "Dude, you should have been there. She comes walking in and totally takes over. Before you know it, I'm free."

"Martin, about that whole thing--," Adler said.

"Don't EVEN say a word," Jimmy said. "Only reason you had to drill us out of there was because of my big mouth in the first place."

"You got that right--ever want to wake up Jimmy," Bo said, "call him a female."

"Walter, and how are *you* doing?," asked Melissa.

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine thanks," Mackie said. His voice sounded thin.

"We heard about what you did," said Jenny.

"Oh," said Mackie.

"I just want you to know, I think it's totally incredible," she said.

"I do too," said Melissa.

"In fact, I hear Mr. Gustaf is having us run the mile in PE today," Jimmy said.

Mackie froze and his eyes got real wide for a moment.

"He's kidding, Walter!" Bo said. "Jimmy, you think you've done enough damage yet for 24 hours?"

"The only thing that really sucks here--after all is said and done--is you guys don't make it into the talent show," said Adler, shaking his head. "You should have been up there Saturday night."

"Aw, forget THAT--you know what really sucks?" Bo said.

"That Mr. Riggins couldn't show a little heart," Melissa said.

"That we gotta sit there and watch Allison Sturgeon and Makena do their dance routine," Jimmy said.

"That we would have discovered you in time if I hadn't originally talked Mackie out of washing off the dog-doo at Fancy Freeze," Adler said.

"Nah, none of that," Bo said. "What really sucks is Hamburg and Arrington are still running around loose like nothing happened."

"True," said Jenny.

"Forgot about that," Jimmy said.

"But anyway," said Bo, "Jimmy and I were talking, and how about everyone comes over to my house after school? We have a little clubhouse downstairs--The Box--we thought we'd get going again. Jimmy's buying pizza and soda for everyone."

"I am?" Jimmy said.

"You are," Bo said.

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The Box was a pretty comfortable place to hang out.

There was a beat up couch, a couple of stuffed bean bag chairs, an old stereo you hook into, and a bunch of surfing and car magazines.

There was even bright green carpeting on the floor, that Bo and Jimmy had grabbed when a neighbor was throwing it out. They had pretty much set up everything inside The Box before they built the walls, because after that there was only the one opening, where you had to climb over the top of the wall with the rope.

They all got there by 4 o'clock except Jimmy. Jenny scampered up the rope in about two seconds and shot over the top of the wall. Melissa had to work harder, but she made it over next.

Adler had trouble. He'd never liked playgrounds or climbing equipment, and he couldn't seem to get his feet in the right place on the rope. Finally, Bo grabbed the rope to keep it from swinging and Adler, with some loud grunts and groans coming out of him, made it up the wall, swung over the top and dropped into The Box.

Mackie was a different story. Bo could see right away this wasn't going to work. It seemed to be the right time for an announcement.

"When Jimmy and I set this club up a few years ago," Bo began, "we made it that you had to be able to get over the wall to be a member."

"That's okay then, I don't need to be a member," said Mackie.

"But today, March 29th, we're making our first exception to that rule."

"You are?" said Mackie.

"Walter, you are now our first honorary life member of The Box, whether you ever get over the dang wall or not. Congratulations!"

"Wow, thanks Bo!" Mackie said.

Finally Jimmy showed up, crawling in headfirst through the outside secret entrance, holding the pizzas in one arm and bracing his landing with the other. He pulled two giant soda bottles out of his backpack.

"Sorry, but had to ride all the way to Costco," he said. "Couldn't afford the pizza anywhere else."

"Whatever," Bo said. "Let's eat. And you've got to help me get Walter over the top."

Jimmy climbed the rope and straddled the top of the wall. Bo handed him the food and drinks and he passed them down to the others. Then Bo clasped his hands and gave Mackie a foot boost. Jimmy grabbed Mackie's hands from the top and between the two of them they got him onto the ridge of the wall.

Jenny and Melissa and Adler helped ease him down the other side, and he was in.

"Boy, it's nice in here," said Mackie, settling into a beanbag chair. "Except, how will I get back out?"

"Same way you got in, no problem," Bo said, as he rappelled down the rope.

"But I'm thinking," said Jenny, "I bet I could teach you how to make it. You know that rope at school hanging off the old play structure that no one uses anymore? I could teach you on it at recess, any time you want."

"I'll help too," said Melissa.

"Wow," said Mackie, not really wanting to try it, but thinking about Jenny and Melissa being there.

"Hey, can I get some lessons too?" Adler said, thinking the same thing. "I need a lot of help with it too!"

"Adler, shut up," Jimmy said.

They started eating, and soon they'd nearly finished off two extra large combination pizzas.

They were laughing and enjoying themselves, all except Adler now, who had a strained, puzzled look on his face, kind of like when he got in trouble in a chess game and couldn't figure out his next move.

"There's got to be a way," he said.

"A way, what?" said Bo.

"That you can still get in the talent show," Adler said.

"Dude, that's history, and we're past it!" Jimmy said. "You keep bringing that up, I'm gonna lock YOU in one of those."

"It gets transferred to the computer, right?" Adler said. "Because they put it on the school web site."

"You mean the sign up list?" Jenny said. "Yes, I think you're right. I heard someone say the whole talent show schedule was going to be online tomorrow."

"So we figure out how to get into the computer program," said Mackie, catching on. "Then all's we do is add 'The Huckabee Band' or 'Band', or whatever it was . . . to the online schedule."

"Precisely," Adler said.

"Whoa," said Bo.

"Old man Riggins," said Jimmy.

"When Walter did his marathon run and came up the two minutes short, Mr. Riggins assumed he was trying to sign HIMSELF up, right Walter?" Adler said.

"True--I never said anything about Bo and Jimmy."

"Plus," said Melissa, "there's a lot of acts this year--Allison said over fifteen--so it does seem unlikely Mr. Riggins would notice one more that was, um, slipped in."

"Hold on now," Bo said. "I'm having trouble wrapping my mind around this one. Going online, working your way into the school computer and changing something--"

"Is flat-out wrong, not to mention probably illegal," Jimmy said.

"I would agree with you almost any other time," Adler said. "But what happened to you yesterday--what prevented you from signing up like everyone else--that was flat-out wrong, too!"

"So you're saying you'd be just putting in a name that should have been there all along," Jenny said.

"That's all."

"Uh, just one small question," said Bo. "How the heck would you get into that computer program?"

"Well, now, why not let me and Mackie worry about that," Adler said.

"Right, Walter?"

Mackie nodded.

"We'll meet you back here in The Box after school tomorrow," Adler said.

"We should have some good news for you then."

15 - Crack the Code

"Adler in your first period today?" Bo asked Jimmy, as they were passing in the hall on Friday morning.

"Nope. Mackie in yours?"

"No." Bo said. "I'm not BELIEVING these dudes are actually staying home trying to pull this off."

"I don't like it," Jimmy said.

"They get caught," Bo said, lowering his voice, "Mrs. McCoy might not be able to get them out of there so easy this time."

"I know," Jimmy said. "Thing of it is, guys with smart, geeky brains like that, they want to use them. They like the challenge."

"Kind of like it's a chess match," Bo said.

"Unfortunately," said Jimmy.

The day went by quickly. Right before the end of 7th period, Mr. Riggins came on the public address system.

"Your attention, if I may," he said. "We are pleased that so many of you have chosen to participate in tomorrow night's presentation of the annual Huckabee Talent Show. For your convenience, you will find the schedule of performances now online at the school website. Good luck to all!"

"And just one more thing," he said, "Will Mr. Ridley and Mr. Martin please see me in my office after the bell."

Bo slowly turned around and looked at Jimmy. Jimmy's mouth was stuck in the open position.

"He figured something out," Bo said. "This is not going to be good."

Jimmy tried to speak but nothing came out that you could understand.

"We gotta stay calm," Bo said, his voice shaking. "The main thing--he asks us a question we can't give a safe answer to, don't answer at all."

Jimmy gave a weak nod. A second later the bell rang, and they stood up and headed to the office like a couple of dazed zombies.

"Ah gentlemen, please be seated," said Mr. Riggins.

Bo and Jimmy didn't speak.

"Well, then. I suppose you might know why I've called you here this afternoon?"

Jimmy didn't move a muscle. All Bo could do was barely shake his head, as he tried to picture how he was going to tell his parents he'd been expelled from school.

"It's about your friend Mr. Mackie," Mr. Riggins said.

"Unh," said Bo.

"He was just a bit tardy on Wednesday in his attempt to register for the show," he said.

"Unh huh," said Bo.

"Naturally it was my duty to enforce the regulation. Yet, as I've given the matter some thought, it is my sense that Mr. Mackie may have indeed been faced with some truly extenuating circumstance which forced his late arrival."

Hold on, thought Bo, what direction are we going here?

"Still, I cannot, in good conscience, allow Mr. Mackie entry into the talent show. I've decided, however, that as an alternative he may perform before the student body at the next assembly."

"Uh, sounds good," said Bo, thinking: Is that it?

"I wished to meet with him today and clarify this matter directly, but I see he is absent. Would you gentlemen express this to Mr. Mackie over the weekend?"

"We sure can!" said Jimmy.

"No problem at all!" said Bo.

And they tore out of there.

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A half hour later, they were sitting around in The Box, all except for Adler and Mackie.

"I was trying to figure out what other school would let me in after I got expelled," Bo was telling Jenny and Melissa.

"Forget that," Jimmy said, "I was trying to imagine who my roommate was going to be at Juvie Hall."

"But can you believe it?" Bo said, "All Old Man Riggins was doing--really--was apologizing to Mackie!"

"It's not over yet though," Jimmy said, meaning Adler and Mackie were, at this very moment, doing who knows what to try to get into the school computer system--if they hadn't already--and everyone got serious.

An hour went by. Then they heard the outside screen rattling around, and the sound of the two of them diving through.

"Ouch!" said Mackie.

"Dude, you okay?" called Bo.

"Yeah, just sprained my wrist a little, landing," he said. "But that's not our biggest problem."

Jimmy had climbed the rope and was straddling the top of the wall, looking down at the two of them. They were wearing the same clothes as yesterday, he saw, and they looked terrible--greasy and smelly and with their hair all sticking up in different directions.

"Looks like you guys have been working pretty hard on this," Jimmy said.

"We have actually," said Adler. "We went straight from The Box to Walter's last night. We assumed it would be a simple 'type two' entry into the computer program, but it turned out it was more difficult than that."

"A lot more difficult," said Mackie. "You see, we thought it was Mr. Heffenstern who set up the school computer system, and he's not that swift--we can both beat him easily in chess--so we couldn't understand why it was turning out so complicated."

"But then we remembered that substitute Computer Lab teacher they had last year," Adler said. "Younger dude with a goatee? He knew his stuff, and I'm thinking they had him set it up."

"So we stayed up all night trying to get in through a 'type three' entry, but that didn't work," Mackie said. "Then we switched to a 'type four' this morning."

"And...?" Jimmy asked.

"And we still haven't been able to crack the dang code!" Adler said.

"But we just need a few more hours, I know we can do it!" Mackie said.

Jimmy slid down the rope, and Bo and Jenny and Melissa followed him up and out of The Box.

"Tell you one thing," Bo said. "You dudes are looking awful. Scary in fact. What you do now, you put the computer business away for awhile. You go upstairs, look around my room for some fresh clothes, and take a couple showers--serious showers. Then Jimmy'll treat us all to In-N-Out."

"I will?" Jimmy said.

"Dude, don't EVEN ask that question," Bo said.

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The hamburger place was crowded as usual on a Friday evening. Jimmy stood in line, while the others hovered near the booths, trying to nab one when someone got up.

Bo spotted Henry Pacheco at the soda machine and went over to say hi. Mitch Stanza and Ike Denzell were there too.

"Hey, you guys are playing tomorrow night, right?" Bo said, pretty sure he'd heard they were in the talent show.

"Supposed to be," Pacheco said, "if you can call it that."

"What do you mean?" said Bo.

"Well we're trying to play 'Purple Haze' by Jimi Hendrix, but these home boys don't want to practice it."

"We don't want to practice it because your guitar riffs sound like crap!" said Stanza.

"Nothing personal," said Denzell, "but dude, you need some serious lessons, bad."

"See?" said Pacheco to Bo.

Bo was thinking, grasping onto this.

"What's the name of your band?" he asked.

"The Destroyers," said Pacheco.

"That how you signed up on the sheet--just 'The Destroyers'?" Bo asked.

"Yeah," said Pacheco. "What's the matter, you got a problem now too?"

"Sorry, no problem at all," Bo said. "Henry, you guys like eating here?"

"Do we like *eating* here--yeah, we do, as a matter of fact. And I got to tell you Ridley, these questions are starting to get on my nerves big-time."

"What I was wondering--" Bo said, trying to phrase it just right, "how it'd be if maybe I could treat you to lunch here tomorrow. And then...instead of you guys playing the talent show--as The Destroyers--I would. Or make that me and Martin would."

"Let me understand what you just said," said Pacheco.

"I understood him," said Stanza. "Sounds okay to me."

"Me too," Denzell said. "Let's face it--we suck."

Pacheco was quiet for a minute. "Forty bucks, up front, right now," he said, winking at the others. "We eat a lot."

Bo checked his wallet--he had eight dollars. "Stay right here," he said.

"I need money right away," Bo said to Jimmy in line.

"B-dog, what do you think I am, a bank? I'll be lucky if I have enough to cover this order!"

Jenny and Melissa and Adler and Mackie were sliding into a booth that had just emptied.

"Guys, I need cash--Jimmy'll pay you back--I'll explain later!" Bo said.

The four of them began pulling out whatever they had and putting it in the center of the table. It felt like a poker game. When the pot hit thirty-two dollars, it was the most beautiful sight Bo had seen in a long time. He scooped up the money and went back to see Pacheco.

"Enjoy your lunch tomorrow," he said.

"We will, and you 'break a leg'," Pacheco said. "Doesn't that mean 'good luck' or something?"

"I've heard that," said Bo.

Jimmy was there holding his receipt when Bo returned to the booth.

"I've got good news and bad news," Bo said.

They all waited.

"The bad news is--Jimmy-dog, you owe everyone forty bucks."

"I do?" said Jimmy, starting to feel a little sick.

"But there's good news?" Jenny asked.

"There is," Bo said. "You know that little thing happening at school tomorrow night? There's a new band in town, and it's called 'The Destroyers'."

16 - One Cool Mom

"Wrists feel tight, not like the other day," Jimmy was saying, shaking his hands.

It was Saturday afternoon, and they were back in Jenny's brother's room, all six of them this time, plus Mrs. McCoy looking on. Bo had his guitar and amp plugged in, Jimmy was at the drums, and they were rehearsing 'Wipeout' .

"Dude, there's nothing wrong with your wrists," Bo said. "What it is, you're starting to feel the pressure of tonight. Just relax, and let your sticks rip."

"Yeah, remember, you're The Destroyers now," said Adler, smiling. "So destroy the drum set."

Jimmy glared at him. "I was you, I'd stick with breaking into computers instead of trying to be a comedian," he said.

"Ah hum," Bo said.

"Jimmy's just joking, Mom," Jenny said.

"Here's the deal," said Bo. "I checked out the talent show web page last night. Old Man Riggins--sorry, Mrs. McCoy--Mr. Riggins, has all the rules posted. Each act has a ten minute limit."

"Gee, that's a long time," said Melissa.

"Really," said Jenny. "I can't see Allison and Mekena dancing for close to that long."

"Or Dirk Lefroni going more than a couple minutes with his unicycle routine," Adler said.

"Or how long can Myers juggle those bowling pins he's always messing with?" Jimmy said.

"Or how about Rachel Wainwright," said Melissa, "How many verses of 'Over the Rainbow' can she sing?"

"My piece was supposed to go long last year," said Mackie. "Of course, it got cut short."

Everyone was quiet.

Mackie was a skilled piano player, easily the best in the school. What had happened last year was, at about the halfway point of the classical Beethoven sonata he was playing, his glasses started to fog up. It may have been the heat of the auditorium, it may have just been his face getting hot and sweaty from playing hard, or it may have been from tension.

Whatever the cause, it got so Mackie could barely read his sheet music through the fogged up lenses, and he started slowing down. Finally he stopped playing altogether and took his glasses off and tried to wipe them. He started up again but still couldn't see well enough, so he took the glasses back off and tried to play without them. This was even more of a disaster, because now he was squinting to try and read sheet music that was out of focus, and he started making mistakes.

Soon his fingers couldn't find any correct keys at all, and every note he played was a wrong one. The Beethoven sonata that had started out so perfect now sounded like a three-year-old kid smashing around haphazardly on an old

piano. Mackie could hear the audience making noise and he was pretty sure people were laughing. He closed his music, popped up and scrambled off the stage.

"Yes, but Walter," Jenny said, after a minute, "one little unlucky incident doesn't change the fact that you're a terrific piano player."

"Oh, thanks," said Mackie.

"Ever play anything besides classical, like rock for instance?" Bo asked.

"I don't know. Never really tried it, I guess."

"What you need next time," said Jimmy, "is a headband. Something to catch that sweat, dude! Or maybe we can get you one of those masks like you see them wearing on TV when it's 50 below zero at Green Bay Packers football games. Then you can keep the sweat off your big glasses and no one even has to know who you are."

Jimmy put his arm around Mackie's head and pulled it down in a friendly headlock. With his other hand he started digging his knuckles into Mackie's scalp.

"Hey!" said Mackie.

"Gonna keep this up until you start smiling," Jimmy said.

"Okay, stop, I'm smiling--I mean it!"

Jimmy checked, but Mackie wasn't smiling, so he started tickling him under the arms. Mackie tried to squirm away but Jimmy didn't let him. Mackie started to smile and soon was laughing uncontrollably.

"That's better," Jimmy said.

"Anyhow, I got to thinking," Bo said, "if we could stretch it out the full ten minutes, we could kind of like, dominate the action."

"That's a lot of drum solos, though," said Adler.

"Good point. The way I thought we'd handle it, we'd kick it off with 'Wipeout' the same way, with the three drum solos, and then we'd continue with a bunch of other stuff to fill up the rest of the time."

"What other stuff?" asked Jimmy.

"Couple things I downloaded and worked out overnight, kind of a medley," Bo said.

"Let's try it--it's all just bass drum, snare and straight 4/4 time on the high hat. Or you can switch to the ride cymbal any time you want."

Bo started playing. Everyone recognized it was 'surf' music, similar to 'Wipeout', maybe just a little more complicated. No doubt it was old music, but it sounded fine. Bo seemed able to easily run one melody into the next. Jimmy kept up pretty well.

"Wow!!" said everyone in unison.

"The four songs went together okay?" Bo asked.

"And you're telling us you worked all that out overnight?" Melissa said.

"Uh, well actually I kind of didn't go to bed. I wanted to get it down."

"Honey, that was one of the most beautiful guitar medleys I've ever heard!" said Mrs. McCoy.

"Mom!" said Jenny.

"Oops, sorry about that Bo. I recognized them all, but the only one I can name is 'Secret Agent Man'. What were the others?"

" 'Walk Don't Run' and 'Diamond Head' by the Ventures," Bo said, "and I start it off with 'Pipeline' by The Chantays."

"That's right, 'Pipeline'! It's a classic. A man named Dick Dale sort of invented that whole style of guitar playing."

"Right, I love Dick Dale! And I guess Chuck Berry had something to do with it too, right?"

"He certainly did," Mrs. McCoy said. "You can hear the influence of those two players on everyone from The Beach Boys to even many of your modern artists you find on the radio today."

"Okay mom!" Jenny said.

"Well, I seem to be getting a bit carried away. I'll be downstairs in the kitchen, then. Whenever you kids like, we have delicious deli sandwiches for everyone."

"Man, I love your mom," Bo said.

"That is one cool older person," Jimmy said.

"Please...!" said Jenny.

"Jimmy, let's run through this thing again, from the top," Bo said.

"She have any potato chips with those sandwiches?" Adler asked.

"You don't shut UP," Jimmy said, "you're not gonna find out."

17 - Manhattan Beach Medley

It was finally happening.

After all that had occurred--the excitement, the disappointment, the twists and turns--Bo and Jimmy were sitting backstage in the Huckabee Auditorium on Saturday night, waiting for the talent show festivities to begin.

It was a livelier scene than they remembered from last year. Even after all the seats were filled, people kept coming in through the rear doors. Many adults were standing along the side aisles and a large group of Huckabee kids was sitting on the floor between the front row and the stage.

The whole place was loud.

"I don't know, B-dog," Jimmy said. "I let you get me into these situations."

"Ah, you'll be fine, as soon as you hammer out your first few notes," Bo said. "You'll feed off the energy of the crowd."

"Yeah, right," Jimmy said. "Either that, or else pull a 'Mackie'."

"Anyone pulls a 'Mackie'," Bo said, "it'll be me. I got four songs I barely know!"

"I got complete faith in you B--always have, always will."

"Good, that makes one of us," said Bo.

"Wow, check out Old Man Riggins," Jimmy said.

Mr. Riggins was making his way to the podium. He was wearing an expensive looking tuxedo, with a white jacket, a bow tie and a red carnation in his lapel.

"It gives me distinct pleasure," he began, "to acknowledge this year's participants in the 12th Annual Huckabee Middle School Talent Show. These young men and young women have spent long hours dedicating themselves to developing their various talents, and they should be commended."

The audience applauded. Bo and Jimmy could see Mr. and Mrs. McCoy sitting in the center section. Jimmy found his mom and little brother further back on the left. Jenny, Melissa, Mackie and Adler were together in the front row of the right side section. Bo noticed Henry Pacheco, along with Stanza and Denzell, standing back near the far exit. He couldn't find his parents--he hoped they had made it, but he wasn't sure.

"Furthermore," Mr. Riggins said, "On a personal note, I know how difficult it is to get up in front of an audience--especially an audience that includes one's own classmates--and perform. To each and every one of you students waiting backstage: On behalf of the Huckabee faculty--I'm proud of you. Now then...let the entertainment begin!"

Bo and Jimmy were scheduled ninth, out 16 acts.

First up was Stuart Hill, a 7th grader playing "Greensleeves" on the clarinet. Second was Dirk Lefroni, wearing a cowboy hat and doing unicycle tricks to a Tim McGraw song. Next were Bryce Daags and Richie Linares dancing hip hop. Then Karey Dean singing a Nelly Furtado song, followed by Chelsea Anton and Ashley Rasmussen acting out a scene from "Miss Congeniality". Then

a 7th grade band called "Bold" did a hard rock song, "Bad to the Bone". Rachel Wainwright followed with "Over the Rainbow".

"Everyone's doing a good job, unfortunately," Jimmy said. "The audience loves it."

"What we do," Bo said. "When we look out there, we only look two places-- Mrs. McCoy, and Jenny and Melissa and the chess dudes. We ignore everyone else. We play it just like we're back in Cameron's room."

"Okay," said Jimmy, taking deep breaths. His mouth was so dry he could barely swallow.

Marty Zuckerman was on stage in the middle of his magic act, and The Destroyers were next. Bo had his tuner attached to the headstock of his guitar and was making his final adjustments.

Zuckerman finished it off by waving his wand and pulling a fake rabbit out of a top hat, and everyone cheered and the curtain closed. Jimmy scrambled to get the drums set up. Bo had decided against using his cheap amp. He was doing as Adler suggested, which was plugging his guitar cable directly into the mixer, to take advantage of the power of the school sound system.

"These next two gentlemen, we've known only as students," Mr. Riggins was saying on the other side of the curtain. "Tonight, we are about to know them as performers. Please welcome--making their talent show debut--The Destroyers!"

There was a little applause, but the curtain didn't open right away. Gardner Garrison, who was in charge of it, was having trouble with the controls.

Someone had to run on stage and begin pulling the curtain by hand, and then Garrison got it to open.

What surprised Bo was how you had trouble seeing the audience. The lights were right in your face, and they seemed to be coming from every direction. He looked back at Jimmy, Jimmy gave him a weak nod, and Bo stepped to the microphone.

"I'm Bo Ridley on guitar, and that's Jimmy Martin on drums," he said, "and what we have for you tonight is some instrumental music--a few songs we've strung together that we call: 'Manhattan Beach Medley'."

There was some polite applause.

"You may recognize some of this," Bo continued. "If you do--great. If you don't--well, too bad."

The audience was slightly stunned and quiet for a second. Then Bo broke into a big smile, and a lot of people started laughing.

I have no idea what made me say that, Bo thought, but maybe they're with us a little bit now.

Bo strummed a quick C chord, an A minor, an F and a G7 as a final tune up. His eyes met Jimmy's, and he called out: "One, two, three, FOUR!" and launched into the guitar line of "Wipeout":

Da da da DANG da dang da dang dang, da da DANG da dang da dang dang...

After 30 seconds he came to the end of the first verse:

Da da da DANG da da da dang daah, da da da da da da DANG!

Bo's hard C was Jimmy's cue for his first solo. Jimmy started off on the air tom-tom playing fast, too fast, and he was making mistakes. Bo began hitting rhythm chords to try to slow him down.

By the second solo, Jimmy was on the floor tom and had steadied himself, and the crowd was getting into it and making some noise. When Jimmy played out his third solo on the snare drum and Bo took over the melody the final time, a huge cheer went up.

What Bo had decided overnight was instead of playing the final chord of "Wipeout" when the time came, he'd play a filler line that he made up, and then he and Jimmy would go straight into "Pipeline":

Da da daah, da da DANG da da daah da,

Da dang da, dang da da daah...

Jimmy's forearms hurt and his hands felt all cramped after putting so much energy into his three "Wipeout" solos. But he knew all he had to do now was keep a strong, simple back-beat and let Bo do his thing, and not screw anything up.

As "Pipeline" blended into "Diamond Head", it occurred to Bo that he was totally relaxed. His tones were clear and clean, and his timing was there. Everything about playing the instrument and being up on stage and having the crowd respond--it all felt right.

When "Diamond Head" turned into "Secret Agent Man", first a few people--and soon much of the audience--began clapping in rhythm. The clapping continued into "Walk, Don't Run", which was supposed to be Bo and Jimmy's closing song.

One thing about being best friends was you sometimes knew what the other person was thinking.

Right before the end of "Walk Don't Run", Bo took a sideways glance at Jimmy, and Jimmy nodded. Bo strummed a heavy A chord one octave up and let it resonate for a moment, and then BOOM, they were back doing one more verse of "Wipeout".

Jimmy was slowing down, but he did his best to pound out a solid final solo. He made a few mistakes, but Bo realized he was probably the only one hearing them at this point.

When "Manhattan Beach Medley" finally ended with a suspended G chord from Bo and a cymbal crash from Jimmy, an ovation rang out that seemed thunderous. Many people were standing.

"And once again," Mr. Riggins was saying, "for your listening pleasure tonight--The Destroyers!"

The audience started cheering again, and some of the Huckabee kids that knew how were putting fingers in their mouths, whistling. A group of 6th grade girls was screaming in high voices.

Jimmy came out from behind the drums and took a funny looking little bow, which only made Bo decide that he was never going to do that. The curtain closed.

"How'd I sound?!" said Jimmy as soon as they were off stage. "It was loud--I couldn't always hear you that great--so I wasn't sure if I was staying with you."

"Dog, let me put it to you this way," Bo said. "Ringo Starr would have been proud of you tonight."

"Who's Ringo Starr?"

"A famous drummer," Bo said.

"Oh," said Jimmy. "So I guess that means it went okay, then. Funny thing-- I got up there, I couldn't see out worth jack."

"Me neither," said Bo. "It was definitely different being center stage."

"You rang that guitar like a pro though, B., you really did . . . You glad now I talked you into doing it?"

"Wait a second--YOU talked ME into it?"

"Darn right I did. Right there in 7th period, Mrs. Matters'."

"Dude, I talked YOU into this, remember?"

"No way! When?"

"Right there at the taco truck!"

"Dude, forget THAT! If I didn't drag you out of your room to go to the beach that day when you were feeling all sorry for yourself, you never would have figured out anything to play!"

"Oh really," Bo said. "How about this, then? If you didn't drag me out of my room, we might not have run into HAMBURG and ARRINGTON at the beach that day, and then you wouldn't have had to open your BIG MOUTH later and get us locked inside that dang closet thing!!"

"Hey Ridley, SHUT UP over there!"

It was Myers, yelling at them from on stage in the middle of his own performance.

He'd been readying himself for his grand finale, where he would attempt to juggle two clubs and an apple, but Bo and Jimmy's arguing kept on breaking his concentration.

"Oops, sorry Roland," said Bo.

Mr. Riggins appeared. "Gentlemen," he whispered, "I must insist you lower your voices immediately and show respect for your fellow performers!"

Bo and Jimmy slumped into a couple of chairs and neither one said another word. They could see the rest of the show through an opening in the side curtain.

After Myers was Hale Blalock, playing his acoustic guitar and singing a folk song; then Angie Landry with mallets, doing something reggae-like on a marimba; then Allison Sturgeon and Makena De Soto doing their dance number to a modern jazz tune; then Jason Bruno with his double yo-yo tricks; and then Eva Laggerman playing classical piano. The talent show ended with Becky Hamm and Fiona Murphy singing the old Smash Mouth song, "All Star".

"Actually," said Jimmy, when it was over, "the level of this thing really wasn't bad. For a bunch of kids."

"I know," said Bo. "When we finished I thought we were strong, but after watching everyone else, I'm not so sure now."

"I'm sure," said Jenny, suddenly showing up backstage.

"And I'm sure," said Melissa.

Jenny gave Bo a big hug and Melissa gave one to Jimmy.

"Whoa," Jimmy said, "don't stop there. Now we need to switch it around."

"Very funny," Jenny said.

"Isn't he a riot, the way he runs his mouth?" said Bo. "You hear Myers have to stop right in the middle and yell at him?"

"Actually, we heard Myers yelling at you," Melissa said.

"Oh," said Bo.

18 - Thwap

It was Sunday morning at six--daybreak--and Bo and Jimmy were on their bikes, riding to meet Jenny and Melissa and go surfing.

If you could wake up, the early morning was the best time to surf because there was no wind and the sets of waves were spaced apart just right. You didn't have one wave crashing into another and creating whitewater, like you often did in the afternoons when the wind came and the ocean got churned up.

"How'd you sleep?" Bo asked, as they turned left on Palm Avenue toward Melissa's house.

"That air mattress you gave me," Jimmy said. "Dude, that thing needed some serious air."

"I know," said Bo. "Everyone says that. You can only blow it up so far. It feels like rocks underneath you."

"Gee, thanks for telling me now. I would have slept on the couch or something. Or not slept over at all."

"But you love sleeping over at the B-Dog's, because that's where it's all happening, brother!"

Bo was still exhilarated and feeling giddy from last night's performance.

"Guy plays one gig," Jimmy said, "thinks he's Van Halen."

Jenny and Melissa were out front. They looked cold and tired.

"Hey you guys! Thanks for coming!" Bo said. Nobody answered.

They started off toward the beach.

The thing that was nice about modern surfing was surfboards were so small that you could actually ride your board to the beach in a rack on the side of your bike. You had to learn to surf at first on a bigger board because it was more stable, but once you got decent you went to the shortboard which was more fun and maneuverable. Sticking up out of your bike rack, it didn't look all that much bigger than a longboard skateboard.

"What a great morning!" Bo said, as they were crossing Acacia Avenue.

"First we hit the surf. Then how about we finish it off with a couple hard sets of paddle tennis? In fact, you're all in luck because I happen to have four paddles right here in my backpack. How's that sound?"

No one responded.

"You can see they're thrilled to be around rock stars," Jimmy said.

"Hey, they're here though, right?" Bo said. "We're lucky, one of them might even smile."

They glanced toward Jenny and Melissa, who were both looking straight ahead as they pedaled, with grim expressions on their faces.

"Or not," Bo said.

They got to the beach and pulled on their wetsuits. In southern California you could boogie board or fool around in the water without a wetsuit on a hot spring afternoon, but to go surfing without one at six thirty in the morning was tough. You saw the occasional person going in with just their swim suit--usually some old guy--but they had to get out pretty fast.

There were a dozen surfers in the water on the north side of the pier. Bo recognized Dirk Lefroni out there with his dad. Lefroni saw Bo and gave him a thumbs up. Bo had to give the guy credit--he had ridden backwards down the stage steps on his unicycle as part of his routine last night.

After a couple of minutes in the ocean, Jenny started to come alive. While Bo and Jimmy and Melissa could catch waves and stand up and basically angle their boards left or right, Jenny was flying all over the place, constantly changing direction to get the maximum propulsion out of each wave.

Her "cut back"--where she'd be low on a wave and turn the board to shoot back up to the crest--was lightning fast, and sometimes her feet were almost higher than her head and you couldn't believe she wasn't falling off. Just at the exact right moment when the wave started losing momentum, she'd end her ride by "kicking out" over the top, and she'd paddle into position for the next one.

They surfed for an hour and a half and then sat on the beach for a while.

"You gonna compete next year, Jen?" Jimmy asked, meaning would she try out for the surf team in high school.

"I've haven't really thought about it," she said. "There's no girls team though, is there? The girls have to surf with the guys, right?"

"Yeah--but so what?" said Bo. "You can out-surf them all, except maybe for Skip Malakai, and he's probably going to turn pro!"

"I'd feel better if they had a girls team, though," Jenny said.

"You guys looking forward to it?" Jimmy said.

"What?" said Bo.

"Next year--going to Del B."

"Oh yeah, big time," said Bo.

"I am SO ready to get out of Huckabee," Melissa said.

"Me to," said Jenny.

"I'm not looking forward to it," Jimmy said..

"You aren't?" said Melissa.

"Lot of changes," Jimmy said. "You know what happens--everyone starts doing different stuff, spreading out in different directions."

"Dude, you're going serious on us now," Bo said.

"Not trying to," said Jimmy.

"Yeah, well, for sure one thing's not gonna change," Bo said. "Melissa and I are going to own you and Jen in paddle tennis today, just like we always have, always will."

"You want to put a little money on that, since you're so full of yourself?" Jimmy said.

"I'd be glad to, except you're broke, remember? In fact--I seem to recall something about 40 bucks."

Twenty minutes later they were at the 11th Street paddle tennis courts, warming up on Court 3, the same court Hamburg and Arrington had hauled Bo and Jimmy off of last summer before stuffing them into the two garbage cans.

Paddle tennis was easier and more fun than regular tennis. The court looked identical to a tennis court but was about half the size. You used a tennis ball that you stuck a pin into to let out the pressure, and paddles that made a satisfying "thwap!" every time you hit a shot. You didn't have to be very good at paddle tennis to have nice long rallies.

In the first set, Jimmy didn't do anything special but his partner Jenny hit a lot of put-a-way shots from up at the net, and their team won 6-4. Bo and Melissa toughened up in the second set and took it 6-3. Now, whoever won the third set would win the match.

At 4 games apiece, Bo lost the first two points by hitting his serves over the line. Then Melissa hit a ball into the net. The next point, Jimmy mis-hit a forehand that landed low and skidded off the left sideline. Melissa raced over but couldn't get it on one bounce, so Jimmy and Jenny won that game to go ahead 5-4.

Jimmy hit two shots out, giving the first two points of the next game to Bo and Melissa, but Bo then hit one into the net and Jenny hit a soft drop shot that bounced twice for a winner. That made it 30-all. If Jimmy and Jenny could win these next two points, they would win the match and defeat Bo and Melissa for the first time ever.

This next point was suddenly the critical one for both teams.

Jimmy served to Melissa. Jenny was at the net. A long rally took place, the longest of the day. Finally Jenny smashed an overhead into the corner but Melissa was able to anticipate it and angle back a very wide forehand, sending Jimmy almost to the side fence.

Jimmy barely got the tip of his paddle on the ball but managed to lob it over Bo's head. Melissa ran back, and her return shot just cleared the top of the net.

Jenny knew she couldn't get to the ball in time from her side of the court so she called out, "Yours!".

Jimmy dug and stretched and with one final lunge he got the ball before the second bounce, popping it up right into the middle of the court for Bo.

With Jenny and Jimmy both at the net now, Bo had a half second to decide what shot to hit. He knew the best choice in a point you absolutely had to win was to go right down the middle of the court in between your two opponents, hitting the ball as hard as you possibly could.

Bo planted his right leg, took the paddle back in a high looping motion like a slingshot loading up, and then accelerated it forward through the ball, as he shifted all his weight from his right leg to his left, creating the loudest "thwap!" sound of the day.

Almost instantly, there was a second, slightly duller "thwap!", and Jenny was laying face down on the court.

It took a second for anyone to react, and then Jimmy and Melissa were bending over Jenny, trying to figure out what to do.

Bo was standing where he'd hit the ball from, frozen in place. Melissa got Jenny to turn onto her side, and then they saw that her mouth was bloody. Jimmy sprinted to the bathroom and got wet paper towels, and by the time he got back Jenny was sitting up.

"It's okay," she said in a weak voice. "Really, I'm okay."

She tried to stand up, but Melissa wouldn't let her.

"Let's clean you up a bit first Jen, and see what's going on."

Miraculously, Jenny had suffered only a cut lip, which was bleeding a lot and was swelling up, but that was it. Her teeth and the inside of her mouth were

okay. Melissa and Jimmy kept pressure on her lip with the towels, and after a few minutes the bleeding stopped.

Bo made it to the bench and could only wait and watch and hope. When they got Jenny to her feet, he felt like the luckiest kid alive.

"Jen...," he said.

She waved him off like it was nothing and smiled slightly as Jimmy and Melissa walked her over to the sink.

They were going to call someone's parent to pick Jenny up but she insisted on riding her bike. They decided to go to Bo's since his was the closest house to the park.

"Tell you one thing," said Jimmy as they were packing up, "definitely some kind of bad vibe on Court 3. First we get stuffed in the cans, and now Jen goes down. Next time, B-dog, let's pick a different court--or even a different sport."

"Next time," was all Bo could say.

They had phoned ahead to Adler, and he was waiting in front of Bo's house when they got there, with latex gloves, cotton balls, hydrogen peroxide and a big ice pack.

"Nick, you didn't have to do this," Jenny said.

"Why don't you sit down in kitchen and let me take a look at the injury under the light," Adler said.

Adler had been told over the years by teachers that he had the aptitude to be a doctor, and he was acting like one now.

"Laceration of the lower lip," he said, after he had cleaned the wound. "Not substantial enough to require stitches. Make sure you apply the ice pack for ten minutes every hour."

"Got it," said Jenny.

"Are you experiencing any dizziness, headaches, drowsiness-- anything of that nature?"

"No I'm not," Jenny said, "but if I do you'll be the first to know, Doctor Adler."

Bo saw she was smiling now, not quite back to her old self, but close, thank God.

They microwaved two boxes of frozen chimichangas, mixed a gallon of gatorade, and stood around the kitchen wolfing everything down.

"It's fine, we can go down to The Box now," said Jenny. "I know that's where everyone wants to be."

"You can make it over?" Bo said.

"Piece of cake," Jenny said, and everyone headed downstairs, all except for Bo who phoned Mackie and told him to come over and to bring along his keyboard.

"Jimmy and I have been talking it over," Bo said, after they were all settled in The Box, including Mackie. "We'd like to take the music to a new level."

"Dude, what are you TALKING about?" said Jimmy. "I thought I was retired after last night. That's why we tried to get back to normal stuff today, remember?"

"And we've decided," said Bo, "to add more members to the band."

"We have?" Jimmy said.

"On keyboards, standing 5 foot 2, with black glasses," Bo said, drawing out the words like an announcer, "this musician also excels in chess and cross-country running--Mr. Walter Mackie!"

"Hold on now, Bo--" said Mackie.

"And on vocals, a 5 foot 5 inch 8th grader who is SO ready to get out of Huckabee, and who boys have had a crush on since kindergarten but won't admit to it--Miss Melissa 'Mel' Robinson!"

"Wait a second--who's had a crush?" said Melissa.

"And also on the vocals, a five-six surfer girl who is looking forward to high school but doesn't want to compete against guys--except in paddle tennis--but not anymore after today--Miss Jennifer 'Jen-Jen' McCoy!"

"Two things," said Jenny, taking the icepack off her lip. "First, you should become a sportscaster, you've got the voice for it. Second, no way."

"Right," said Mackie.

"Definitely not," said Melissa.

"So our first practice is tomorrow after school, right here in the basement outside The Box," Bo said. "It'd be nice to have it be *in* The Box, but it's a pain to get the instruments in and out every time. And the drums, forget it."

"I have to do that washing dishes thing at Fancy Freeze tomorrow," Jimmy said.

"Mel and I have a volleyball game over in Hermosa tomorrow," Jenny said.

"Uh, I'm busy tomorrow too," said Mackie, though Bo would have bet money he didn't have anything going on.

"Fine, so we'll make it Tuesday then."

No one said anything.

Whadda you know, thought Bo.

19 - Liking the Blend

People were coming up to Bo at school on Monday, but it wasn't what he would have expected.

He hoped he might hear a little: "Saw you Saturday night", or better: "Good job", or even better: "You dudes rocked up there!".

Instead, what people were saying to him was: "Dang, Ridley--you smashed a girl in the face with a tennis ball?"

Jenny's lower lip was attracting a lot of attention. It was still swollen, causing it to roll outward, and the cut was healing but had turned an unpleasant yellowish color.

On the way to school, Jenny had thought of saying she fell off her bike or something, but Melissa convinced her to tell the truth, since everyone knew Jenny was a bad liar.

The only compliment Bo received all day, in fact the only mention of the talent show at all, was from Mr. Riggins, who passed Bo in the hall after 3rd Period and simply said: "Well performed".

"They forget real quick," Jimmy said at lunch. "I guess the rock star thing is overrated."

"Speaking of that," Bo said, "you have to come over and help me pick out some songs for us to practice tomorrow. Adler'll be there too, as our business manager."

"Told you dude, I gotta wash dishes today," Jimmy said.

"So after that then."

"B, you sure Mackie can't play drums instead of me?" Jimmy said. "I tried it as a one-shot deal--okay--but let's face it, I'm not a drummer. I'm feeling like I'm getting in too deep now."

"First of all," said Bo, "I'm going to need Mackie to play bass lines on the keyboard because we don't have a bass player. Second, when you take away all the solos and fills and flashy stuff, what would you say is the most important job of a drummer?"

"To rock people's world? How should I know?"

"To keep time. To keep a steady beat the band can play to. Dude, Saturday night you were keeping time like a machine."

"I was?"

"Not only that, you looked good up there doing it, which is what I've been hearing all day," Bo lied.

"You have?"

"So you'll get there when you get there," Bo said.

At 5:30 Jimmy came thundering over the top of The Box.

"I'll give you three guesses whose table I cleared at the Freeze," he said.

"Uh-oh," said Bo, knowing it had to be Hamburg and Arrington.

"They give you any trouble?" asked Adler.

"It was surprising," Jimmy said. "Dudes were half-way decent. Ordered me around a little bit, had me wipe up a spot on the table that wasn't there, that

kind of thing. But told me they were glad to see we made it out of that lock-down situation."

"Yeah, right," said Bo.

"More like relieved, I think," said Adler. "They could have gotten arrested for that, for sure."

"Anyway," Jimmy said, "they've got something going, some kind of DJ gig I think."

"Those guys?" said Bo.

"They were, like: 'Do we need a turntable, or can we run it all through the I-Pads?', and: 'What about a fog machine?' Stuff like that."

"That should be US doing that," Bo said. "What does either one of those pieces of garbage know about music?"

"That's what happens when you're a stud athlete," Jimmy said. "Especially in football. People hire you for stuff just because they like having you around."

"It would be interesting, though . . . to find out exactly what they are doing and when they are doing it," Adler said.

"And screw 'em up somehow," said Bo.

"My thoughts exactly," said Adler.

"Nick, coming in strong with his first idea as business manager, and it's not a bad one," Jimmy said.

"Okay, getting back to the band now," Bo said, "we thought we'd start off with a couple more classic oldies. Ever heard 'Brown-Eyed Girl'?"

"Maybe," said Jimmy.

"The thing about the older songs," Adler said, "is even though the adults like them, the kids know most of them too, or at least they recognize them when they hear them. Playing oldies could make you stand out from the other teenage bands that are out there."

"And the old songs are usually arranged pretty simple, and easy to learn," said Bo.

"I always liked that song 'Sweet Home Alabama'," Jimmy said. "Who's that by, again?"

"I think Lynyrd Skynyrd," said Bo. "That wouldn't be bad either."

"Of course, you have a great resource in Mrs. McCoy," Adler said. "She could be a lot of help in developing your set list."

"Set list, now," Jimmy said. "Don't you think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves?"

"Not really," said Bo.

"Nope," said Adler.

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Everyone showed up at four o'clock on Tuesday. Jimmy came with Jenny and Mrs. McCoy, who had been kind enough to drive the drums over.

Mackie had his keyboard set up on a stand and Bo was passing out music and lyrics.

"All right then, let's run through this real slow," Bo said. "Jimmy, you gotta go light on the volume until we figure out a mike and speaker set up. Otherwise we won't be able to hear ourselves sing."

Bo played the solo guitar intro to "Brown-eyed Girl", and Jimmy and Mackie started up as Bo laid down the first verse. The girls came in on the chorus, singing clearly and with good energy.

If they're not right on key, Bo thought, they're pretty darn close.

"Walter, that's a great bass line you're playing," Bo said when the song ended. "Any way you can fuzz up the tone a little more?"

"Oh, sure," Mackie said, "I can add something in the higher range with the right hand too, if you'd like. To compliment your rhythm guitar."

"Go for it, man--you're the boss," Bo said. "Okay everyone, let's take it through again, this time a little faster."

"Brown-eyed Girl" sounded better the second time. The girls were getting comfortable on the vocals, and Mackie was delivering some nice, edgy keyboard.

If you didn't know they were just learning it, you would have thought they'd had the song down for awhile, that they were, in fact, a real band.

"I'm liking the blend," said Bo. "What do you think Nick?"

"I'm more than liking it," said Adler. "Now I have to figure out what to do about it."

20 - DJ Thing

The next afternoon they were back in Bo's basement, working out the parts to song number two, "Sweet Home Alabama".

"We really do need a name for this band," Jimmy said.

"Please, not again," Bo said, "I can't take the pain."

"What were you thinking of calling us then?" Jimmy asked.

"What's wrong with just leaving it 'The Destroyers'? It hasn't caused any problems so far. Unlike certain other names we came up with."

"It's not the right name for who we are, B," Jimmy said.

"No? Then how about if we add 'doofus' to it, as in 'Doofus and the Destroyers'? That a better name for who we are?"

"Dude, shut up."

"I do actually agree with Jimmy," Jenny said. " 'The Destroyers' does sort of make you think of rough music, like really hard rock."

"Or metal," said Melissa.

"Or gangster rap," said Mackie.

"Okay, that's enough," said Bo. "You people are obviously desperate for a new name, so don't let me stop you."

"My mom and I were talking about it this morning at breakfast," Jenny said. "She said a simple name usually works out the best."

"Here's sort of what I've been thinking," Melissa said. "Bo lives on Zircon Street. We practice on Zircon Street--"

"Who was Zircon anyway?" asked Jimmy.

"Zircon is a mineral which becomes a blue gem similar to a diamond," Mackie said, "after they cut and polish it."

"A keyboard player that memorizes the dictionary," Bo said.

"What I was getting at," said Melissa, "is, most importantly, the band was formed on Zircon Street."

"So," Jimmy said, "The Zircon Street Band'?"

"Right, I was thinking of just 'The Z Street Band'," Melissa said.

"Wow Mel," Jenny said, "that's perfect!"

"It is an excellent name," said Mackie.

"I'm in," said Jimmy. "Dog?"

"Fine with me," said Bo. "Unless our business manager tells us there's something wrong with it."

"Where is Adler, by the way?" asked Jimmy.

"Said he had to make a bunch of phone calls. I think he's coming though."

They ran through "Sweet Home Alabama" several times. . Bo was thinking this would be a good one to give Mackie an extended solo on, and he'd have to figure out the best place for it in the song.

Meanwhile, he passed out more music.

"We got 'Down on the Corner' by Creedence--you guys know this one," Bo said. " 'Early in the evenin' just about supper time, over by the courthouse they're starting to unwind...' Right?"

Just then, Adler came diving into the basement through the secret entrance.

"Okay now, this is important!" he said.

"Nick, we named the band," Jimmy said.

"Forget that right now, I have to talk to everyone," Adler said.

"Mel came up with 'The Z Street Band'," Jenny said. "What do you think of it?"

"Uh, oh I see, Zircon, Z," Adler said. "Yeah, that should work. It's a general enough name that it won't pin you down to any one musical genre."

"You have to talk like that?" Jimmy said.

"Here's what I have," Adler said, "on the Hamburg-Arrington DJ thing."

"Wait--Scott and Stick are DJ's?" said Jenny.

"What, you know them personally?" Bo asked. "That why you call them 'Scott and Stick'?"

"Sorry, I just..."

"She calls them by their first names because she has a little crush on both of them," Jimmy said. "Don't you Jen?"

"No way! Of course I don't! I can't stand those guys just like you can't!"

But she was starting to blush.

"How about you, Melissa?" Bo said, getting into it now.

"You're crazy if you think I like them!" she said.

Bo and Jimmy waited, and Melissa started to blush too.

"Well, WE definitely do NOT have a crush on them, which is why everyone has to listen up now," Adler said.

"Good one Nick," said Jimmy.

"First I looked around and started calling places that rent DJ equipment. I told them I was Arrington and was checking on my order, just in case he and Hamburg really did have an order there."

"Very clever," said Bo.

"Finally at about the sixth place, over in Hawthorne, the guy doesn't speak English very well but he seems to confirm I reserved equipment for the 14th."

"That's, what, like a week and a half," Jimmy said.

"So I go online and start checking school calendars. Del B. has nothing that night, so I try the other high schools around-- Pacifica and Emerson and Loritas--and they all come up empty. Except for Emerson, which had something, I forget what, but nothing like a dance."

"Wow, Nick, your detective work is certainly impressive, but why are you doing all this?" asked Melissa.

"So now I'm thinking they're working a private party, and we're probably out of luck . . . But even though it's a long shot, I start checking all the middle schools within 30 miles. It took a while, but wouldn't you know, there is a 'Spring Blossom Dance' on the calendar that night at Jasper Middle School down in Dorita Beach. They list Hamburg and Arrington right on the web site as guest DJs!"

"Adler--I'm not trying to put down your great effort, which it definitely was," Jimmy said, "but I'm not getting why you're all excited about that piece of information."

"Unless you're telling me there's something we can do about it," Bo said.

"So I call the school and speak to a teacher--a Mr. Lerner, or maybe it was Lehrer--"

"It doesn't matter!" said Jimmy.

"Anyhow, he's in charge of the Jasper student council and he sets this stuff up. So I figured there was nothing to lose. I told him straight: We have a band, we'll come down and play for free, and it would be a lot more exciting than having DJs playing recorded music."

"You HAVE GOT to be kidding," Jenny said.

"What did he say?" said Bo.

"It was interesting. He started talking about how when he was growing up, there were always live bands at the school dances. He asked me what kind of music we played, and I told him it was family stuff with no bad lyrics or anything."

"C'mon, get to the point!" Jimmy said. "You're killing us here!"

"You guys--or I guess I should say 'The Z Street Band'-- now has an audition scheduled at Jasper Middle School Friday at 4:30. As your business manager, I suggest we make it."

It was silent for a minute.

Finally Mackie said, "Everyone knows what this means, though. If somehow we did get this--that would mean the school canceling Hamburg and Arrington."

"So?" said Adler. "What does that have to do with us? All we did was audition for a gig."

"Come on," Melissa said. "Are you guys thinking clearly here? Do you want more trouble from them--is that what you want?"

"No Mel, we don't want any more trouble," Bo said, serious. "We want something else."

"And it's called payback," said Jimmy.

21 - Modern Technology

Mrs. McCoy drove them all down to Dorita Beach after school on Friday.

Luckily Jimmy didn't have to bring the drum set, or everyone wouldn't have fit in the mini-van. Mr. Lehrer had told Adler they could use the school's jazz band drum kit for the audition.

"What we do," Bo announced from the front passenger seat, "is we give him 'Brown-Eyed Girl' first. Then 'Sweet Home Alabama'. Hopefully that'll be enough."

"What if he wants more?" Melissa asked.

"Then we give him 'Down on the Corner' if we have to, but that one's a little shaky. You guys keep forgetting the words."

"If you get the gig, how many songs can you learn between now and next Saturday night?" Adler asked.

"I'm thinking one a day, totally memorized," Bo said. "But if we bring the sheet music with us on stage, then two a day."

"So that's 14, plus you have the 3 already, so that's 17," said Adler, calculating. "Say you average 3 minutes per song, and you fool around for another minute in between songs--let's see, 17 times 4--you'd have 68 minutes of material. How long's the dance?"

"Ours are normally two hours, so I'm assuming theirs are too," Melissa said.

"So even learning two songs a day for the next week, we're short," Bo said.

"Nah, we're fine," said Jimmy. "All's we do is repeat our set list the second hour. No one'll know the difference, and if they do they won't care."

"I actually think he might be right," said Jenny.

"When you think about it," said Bo, "hopefully someone even notices that we're up there."

Traffic was bad. They inched slowly along on the 405 Freeway. Mrs. McCoy didn't seem to mind.

"The only way you can live in Southern California is if you don't have to go anywhere," she said, laughing.

"Well we sure do appreciate this," Bo said.

"Oh, it's my pleasure entirely. I think it's so wonderful that you've incorporated Jenny and Melissa and Walter into the band."

"I look at it that we're lucky to have them," Bo said. "They're all really good."

"And I know Jen, for one, is so proud to be in it. She may pretend otherwise, but the other night she spent two hours designing a 'Z Street Band' logo that she hung on her wall."

"Mom!!"

"Really? A logo?" said Jimmy. "Maybe we can put it on the bass drum."

"How about we actually get a gig first, before we start worrying about too many details," Bo said.

"Oh, no question they'll want a live band to play this dance," Mrs. McCoy said.

"I don't know," said Bo. "I'm thinking the kids might actually prefer the DJ thing. It's what they're used to."

"That could be, but don't forget, it isn't the kids making the decision," said Mrs. McCoy.

Mr. Lehrer was a tan bald guy with sunglasses pushed up on his head and a Hawaiian shirt. He shook hands with everyone and helped them get set up in the band room.

"You all look a little young to drive," he said, smiling.

"Oh, my mom brought us," said Jenny. "She's getting coffee."

"Well, I'm anxious to hear what you've got," he said. "Having a real band at a dance would certainly be an improvement. I was telling Mr. Adler how things were back in my day."

"But just think, you missed out on rap and hip-hop," Jimmy said.

"I think he's trying to make a joke," Bo said, glaring at Jimmy.

"No, I understand," said Mr. Lehrer. "I do see some value in hip-hop--the rhythms can be very interesting and complex. But you can make the case that it's all based on James Brown and Little Richard and the old stuff a lot of us grew up with."

Bo tuned up, he and Mackie checked with each other, and the band kicked off "Brown-Eyed Girl". It was a clean take--no mistakes, not much that you could criticize about it.

"I see," said Mr. Lehrer. "And I assume you have 25 or 30 such songs in your repertoire?"

"We do," Bo lied.

"Well, then, that takes care of it," he said. "We'll see you on the 14th! Try to be at least a half hour early so you're set up and ready to play right at 7:30 when the doors open."

"Uh, sure...!" said Bo.

"Ooh, that reminds me. We had a couple of young men lined up to DJ. I better call them right now. Incidentally, the school earmarks \$200 as entertainment expenses for each dance, so that will go to you now."

"You mean," said Jimmy, trying to keep his excitement under control, "we'll earn the \$200 that would have been paid to the DJs?"

"Yes, that's right," said Mr. Lehrer. "Keep in mind, of course, you'll have to split it six ways, as opposed to two."

"Oh, that'll be more than fine," said Bo. "Thank you!"

"See you in a week," Mr. Lehrer said, and he left.

"Dude, did what I think just happened--really happen?!" said Jimmy, slapping Adler a high-five.

"The best part," said Bo, "isn't even that we have a gig and we're getting paid."

"You guys!" said Jenny.

"Jen, you and Mel are in the band, what, four days, and you're already making money," Bo said. "You're professional musicians!"

"Get out of here, Bo," she said.

"And I'm gonna need to see that little smile, right now."

Bo gave her the face-to-face stare-down, and Jenny tried to stay serious but couldn't, and she broke into a big smile within a couple seconds. Bo looked around to see if anyone else was smiling, and they all were.

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Saturday morning, Bo was sitting on the sofa in Jenny's living room while Mrs. McCoy was pulling out vinyl records from her collection and playing them on her old stereo turntable.

It was Bo's job to listen to each song and make a snap judgment: no, it wasn't right for the band--even if it might be a great song otherwise--or yes, it could work.

Bo rejected a lot music, probably three-quarters of what Jenny's mom came up with, but she never once tried to talk him into anything. By lunchtime, he had chosen the 14 new songs the band would try to scramble and learn before the Jasper dance.

They were:

Hound Dog

Summer in the City

Johnny B. Goode

Surfin' USA

Solitary Man

I Fought the Law

I Wanna Hold Your Hand

Barbara Ann

All Right Now

Hello I Love You

Rock Around the Clock

The Joker

Centerfield

and

Surf City.

"Maybe you want to take these records along?" asked Mrs. McCoy.

"Oh, no thanks," Bo said, "I'm pretty sure I'll be able to find them all and download them. Plus the lyrics, and guitar and bass tabs--they should all be there too."

"My goodness, I'll never catch up to modern technology," she said.

"Speaking of which, how about I have Jen put a nice big homemade burrito in the microwave real quick."

"Gee thanks, but we've got practice in an hour," Bo said. "And I need to get back . . . And get the parts organized and all that."

"Oh, absolutely. I understand."

"What kind of burrito?"

22 - Can't Pinpoint It

The Z Street Band learned two new songs on Saturday afternoon and two on Sunday.

They decided they'd better not skip practice Monday, even though Jimmy had to work at Fancy Freeze again and Jenny and Melissa had another volleyball game. So they made it for seven o'clock.

When everyone arrived, there was a new set-up in the basement: three matching microphones on stands, an amplifier, a mixer, two large speakers mounted on tripod bases, and cables running all over.

"What the heck," Jimmy said.

"I figured sooner or later we'd need our own P.A. system," Bo said. "So I went down to Big Tone Music after school. The guy said this was the most reliable used system they had. Belonged to a country band that broke up. It's nice and powerful too, 500 watts per channel, whatever that means."

"So you just paid for it, out of your own pocket?" Mackie asked.

"I had half saved up. I called my dad at work, asked him if he'd loan me the other half. He put it on his credit card. They just finished delivering everything about twenty minutes ago."

"You know as I think about it, I've been over here several times now, and I've never met your parents," Adler said.

"They're not around much during the week," Bo said.

"Ah," said Adler.

"Actually, they're not around much on the weekends either."

Jenny was looking at him now, trying to figure out the right thing to say.

"It's okay," Bo said. "You learn to deal with it."

Everyone waited a moment.

"But this P.A. thing," said Jimmy. "We owe you big time. How much we talking about here?"

"You know what guys?" said Bo. "Forget about it. It's a done deal."

"No, it isn't," said Melissa. "That's not right at all."

"Plus, look at it this way," Bo said, "Remember when we were at the beach the other day and Jimmy starts talking about everyone maybe going different directions next year when we get to high school?"

"Yes, I remember him saying it," said Jenny, "but it's not going to happen."

"You think that now," Mackie said. "But things change."

"Whoa, Walter chiming in out of left field," Jimmy said. "Not that I'm disagreeing, but you're some kind expert on this all of a sudden?"

"It just...makes sense," Mackie said.

"Either way, when you guys all dump me, at least I'll have a sound system," Bo said. "End of discussion."

"Jimmy, how many more work days do you have left at The Freeze, by the way?" Adler asked.

"Oh, almost I forgot!" Jimmy said. "Dudes, you should have seen Hamburg and Arrington dragging their sorry bones in there today!"

"Yeah?" said Bo

"It was beautiful! 180 degrees different from last time. They're definitely bummed out. They were talking about it."

"They were?" said Jenny.

"They didn't mention us though, right?" asked Mackie.

"Nah, nothing like that. Just said some guy at the school cancelled on them. They called him a 'double-crosser'."

"Now that I hear that," Bo said, "I'll be sleeping even better tonight."

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By Wednesday the band had learned eight of the new songs. It was hard to believe, but they were on schedule. Two more that evening, two on Thursday, the final two--'Centerfield' and 'Surf City'-- on Friday, and then they'd have a rehearsal Saturday.

Bo and Jimmy were heading to the lower field after lunch to throw the football around, and they ran into Adler and Jenny playing kick-back against the side of the gym.

"You have to admit," Bo said to them, "a few things have happened since last time you were doing this."

"THAT--is for sure," Jenny said.

"I'm a little worried, though," Adler said. "I can't pinpoint it."

"Oh no, don't be going dramatic on us now," Jimmy said. "Worried about what?"

"I don't know, the whole thing seems too easy," Adler said. "It's like, I'm waiting for it to get complicated."

"Dude, what you're doing," said Bo, "you're spending way too much time working that big brain."

"Yeah, maybe you need a little tropical vacation or something," Jimmy said. "Isn't that what business managers do after they make big deals?"

"Okay Martin, shut up."

Mackie suddenly appeared.

"Mr. Riggins just asked me to play at the assembly on Tuesday!" he said, with alarm in his voice. "What did he do *that* for?"

"Wow," said Jenny. "This goes back to the talent show, then?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Mackie.

"I guess you and Nick were busy trying to hack into the school computer," said Bo.

"We forgot to tell you. Old Man Riggins actually felt kind of bad that he jobbed you on signing up for the talent show. He said you could play the next assembly as a make-up."

"Wait a second--make-up for *what*? I wasn't even trying to sign up for *myself*!"

Bo and Jimmy were smiling.

"Don't lie to us now Walter," Bo said.

"What were you thinking of playing?" Jimmy asked. "Same thing you had lined up for the show, or something else?"

"What are you guys TALKING about?!" said Mackie.

Thursday at practice the band was getting ready to walk through the opening lines of 'The Joker' by Steve Miller. They had just worked out 'Rock

'Around the Clock' by Bill Haley and the Comets. Bo told them what Mrs. McCoy said--people considered that one the first rock-and-roll record. Everyone felt good about how it came out.

"I have to admit, these old songs," Melissa said, "they do still sound fresh."

"I'm thinking if you picked any one of these and added effects and what not, so the background sounded like today's stuff?" Bo said. "You'd have a hit song."

"Just shows you--good music is good music, period," said Jimmy.

"Can I write that down, professor?" Jenny said.

"Okay," said Bo. "'The Joker', here we go."

They were in the second run-through of the chorus when Adler's phone rang.

Adler was doubling as their "tech" guy now, running the sound board. He was having trouble hearing the caller and motioned for the band to stop playing.

"That's one rule I'm gonna have to make around here," Bo said. "No phones at practice. You guys keep getting calls."

"People need to be in contact with us though," Melissa said.

"Wait a second," Bo said, "Before they invented cell phones, kids didn't go anywhere? Bands didn't practice?"

"But having it with you makes you feel, I don't know, connected," Jenny said.

"Remember that field trip to UCLA?" Jimmy said. "I saw like six college dudes walking together, all texting. They could have been talking to each *other*."

Adler's phone call ended. He was grimacing like someone who had just been punched.

"It's off," he said.

It took a second to sink in, and then everyone was pretty certain what he meant.

"They gave it back to Hamburg and Arrington."

Bo laid down his guitar. Jimmy let his drumsticks fall out of his hands.

"Turns out the principal down there is Arrington's uncle," Adler said quietly. "Must have been how they got hooked up in the first place. Guy found out today what was happening, and he overrode Mr. Lehrer. Mr. Lehrer feels lousy about it, I can tell. He could hear you guys practicing when he called... and..."

"Don't feel bad about it, man," Bo said finally. "Without you, we never would have been in this position in the first place."

No one said anything more. They unplugged the instruments, put away the microphones, shut off the power and left the basement.

23 - All Over the Place

Friday afternoon the Huckabee girls had a home volleyball game against Miramar, and Bo, Jimmy, Adler and Mackie sat in the stands watching.

"What I don't like about regular volleyball," Jimmy was saying, "is the positions. You have your blockers up front, your diggers in the back and your setter. They all have, like one job. Two-man beach is much better."

"I see," said Bo. "This is something you've thought about a lot, then."

"I'm just saying," said Jimmy, "in beach you're all over the place. Setting, spiking, diving. It's a more all-around sport."

"What I don't get," Adler said, "is how you guys can be so upbeat after what happened yesterday."

"Dog, things happen," said Jimmy. "You have to go with the flow. Wow, look at that jump serve from Jen! Ooh, I can't believe they got it back."

"To be honest, I woke up around 2:30 and couldn't get back to sleep," Bo said. "So I turn on the TV, start flipping around, and they're showing this thing about a family that takes a wrong turn in the mountains and gets stuck in their car for ten days in the snow. I start thinking, losing a gig's not the end of the world."

"Course what eats at you--what I'm trying very hard not to think about-- is who we lost it to," Jimmy said.

"But at least they had a few days of aggravation before they got the gig back," said Mackie.

"Whoa, the Mack-man coming alive, throwing down his two cents," Jimmy said, smiling.

"Walter, you got your performance figured out?" Bo asked.

"Not really."

"Good, though--because 'not really' means at least you've decided to play," said Jimmy.

"Mr. Riggins pretty much made me feel I didn't have a choice."

"So just get up there and crank something out that you've got memorized," Bo said. "That way, even if you did have the problem again with the glasses--which you won't--it doesn't matter."

"I don't know. I feel like people might be laughing or something when I play classical."

"I've never heard any of that," Bo lied, "but if you're worried about it, then play something pop or rock or jazz, or whatever. You've got the weekend to work it out."

"Maybe," said Mackie.

"That's game," Jimmy said. "And match. Pretty sure we beat 'em three-zip. Anyone hungry? How about we see if the girls want to get a bite somewhere?"

"Sure, thanks for offering to treat us again," Bo said.

"Now that," Jimmy said, "was so funny I forgot to laugh."

By Monday things were pretty normal. Bo wasn't thinking about the band much, so he therefore could turn his attention back to just how boring school was.

Some song lyrics started to take shape in his head, to go along with the ones he'd written in Mr. Hacker's English class:

"I sat there in history, checking out El Salvador..."

"I sat there in science class, breaking down some CO₂..."

"I stood there in PE class, trying hard to barely move..."

"I sat there in algebra, fractions jumping all around..."

At around four o'clock, Bo was sitting in The Box with a pad and pencil when Jenny and Melissa showed up with Adler.

"You just stop over for a visit?" Bo said. "Or you thought we had practice?"

"I guess we're kind of used to the routine of coming here every day," Melissa said.

"Well, now that you're here," Bo said, "Nick, could you run up to my room and get my acoustic guitar? I was afraid of trying to get it over the wall by myself."

"Walter said he had to practice for tomorrow," Jenny said. "He seems quite nervous."

"I got something here," Bo said. "A long shot, but maybe it can become a song."

Adler handed up the guitar and climbed over.

"What's it about?" Melissa asked.

"A kid in school. He can't take it, he wants to be the heck out of there. You know, be at the beach or something. I have a rough melody for the verses, which goes something like this."

Bo played the first verse, with the lyrics from the English class.

"Interesting," said Adler.

"Wow, cool," said Jenny. "You wrote that?"

"I'd love to hear more of it," Melissa said.

"Thing is, I'm stuck on the chorus," Bo said. "I need surfing words."

"You mean the slang and what not?" Adler asked.

"Exactly. How about you guys throw out whatever words come to mind and I'll write them down?"

"Okay, well first of all there are the boards," said Jenny. "'Shortboards', which are 'new school', and 'longboards', which are 'old school'."

"Okay, good," said Bo, taking notes. "How about some of the moves?"

"Let's see now--you 'cut back', you get 'locked in' and if you switch your feet you're riding 'goofy foot', right Jen?" said Melissa.

"Right, and you have your 'tail slide', your 'swallow tail', your 'bottom turn', your 'cross step'--let me think what else," Jenny said.

" 'Endless Summer' might work as a general expression," Adler said.

"Oh yeah-- you have 'in the soup', 'close out', 'caught inside', what else..." said Jenny. "Oh, also there's a 'slash turn'."

"You guys are beautiful," Bo said. "What about places now--the names of surf spots?"

"The Pipeline is one of the most famous, right?" said Adler.

"It is, it's in Hawaii," said Jenny. "Around here, you have Malibu and then Huntington of course, which they call 'Surf City'. Dirk Lefroni was saying Capitola's pretty good, up north."

"Lefroni? What was he doing up there?" Adler asked.

"How should I know?" Jenny said. "And don't forget about Manhattan. We take it for granted because we go there all the time, but people come a long way to surf there."

" 'Manhattan' doesn't sound right in the lyric though," said Bo. "You got anything else?"

"How about Laguna Beach?" said Melissa.

"Laguna...yeah, that might work," said Bo.

"Work for what?" It was Jimmy, dropping over the wall.

"Hey, dude," said Bo. "It's a serious struggle, but we might miraculously be coming up with our first Z Street Band original song."

"There's still a band?" Jimmy said.

"Well, not right now, but there will be," Bo said, "probably."

"Hey, definitely!" said Jenny

"It was not a good a scene today," Jimmy said.

"Ooh, that's right, Fancy Freeze," said Adler.

"Our boys were having a good old time, all stretched out with their feet up on the table, their two hundred dollars in their pocket," Jimmy said. "They know about us, too."

"You're kidding!" said Adler.

"How could they?" said Melissa.

"Ah, they're not stupid, and word gets around," Bo said. "They're not going to bother us though. They got the last laugh."

"Let's hope you're right," Adler said.

"He is right," Jimmy said. "Dude, if they were going to do any bothering, I seriously don't think I'd be standing here all comfortable, chatting with you right now."

"Which might not be the worst thing," Bo said.

24 - Friday Night

Bo got the emergency call from Mackie at ten-thirty that night.

"Walter, I'm trying to sleep here," he said.

"I can't do it," Mackie said. "I just called Mr. Riggins."

This got Bo's full attention. "You...called...Mr. Riggins, AT HOME?!"

"So what--I had to!" said Mackie. "He's in the phone book, he lives in Santa Monica."

"And you told him what, exactly?"

"That I wasn't getting up there tomorrow. And if that wasn't all right, then he could go ahead and throw me out of school."

"Un...believable," said Bo. "So what'd he say?"

"He was, I don't know, different. Sort of understanding. He asked me if there was anything he could do to change my mind."

"So you told him there wasn't."

"I told him I'd play if I could bring my band with me."

"What?!"

"So that's why I'm calling you," Mackie said. "The assembly's at 2:20--7th period."

"Wait a second--Walter--you can't just sign us all up like that, cold!"

"What, cold? We've been practicing like maniacs for the Jasper gig. And it's just one song."

"Uh, man, you're throwing me a giant curveball here," Bo said. "It's too late to even notify everyone."

"All's we need is my keyboard and your guitar. We can use the school drums. Tell Jenny and Melissa and Jimmy at lunch, that's all."

"Walter, I have to admit, you're starting to sound like me," Bo said. "Okay, so we're doing 'Brown-Eyed Girl', right? It's our best song."

"I was thinking 'I Fought the Law'. I like my solo on that one. Plus Green Day did a version of it, so everyone might not think of it as such an oldie."

"Dang, dude," said Bo. "Of everything you could have chosen, that's our least polished song."

"You know what?" Mackie said. "We'll deal with it. Goodnight."

"I got to hand it to you Walter," Bo said. "First the marathon run, now standing up to Mr. Riggins. You may be a geek, but you have some serious backbone."

"Gee thanks, Bo. I think."

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Jimmy was eating a barbecued chicken sandwich at the picnic tables, talking to Myers and Allison Sturgeon, when Bo got there.

"The thing about fly-fishing," Jimmy was saying, "it's a slow sport, but it's an exciting one at the same time, if that makes sense."

"Hmm," said Myers.

"More important than that right now," said Bo, "is you better get your act together. We're playing 7th period."

"Come again, dog?"

"You see Jenny and Melissa before I do, tell 'em," Bo said, and he took off.

"What was that all about?" Allison asked.

"I don't know--but I think maybe I do," Jimmy said.

"I Fought the Law" had a strong, driving intro that Bo had extended from four to eight bars, to hopefully grab an audience before the verses began.

Now he was up there singing the first line:

"Break-ing rocks in the...hot sun, I fought the law, and the...law won"

and it felt like the audience--the Huckabee student body and teachers--was actually paying attention.

Jenny and Melissa came in on the refrain, and Mackie's solo was next. Bo glanced over, Mackie took the cue, and he began. He started with a couple bars of the straight melody, progressed to a country riff, then turned it into lightning-fast boogie-woogie piano, before bringing it back to the melody and leaving it there just right for Bo to begin the second verse.

You couldn't hear the first couple lines of the verse though, because people were clapping and cheering and whistling for Mackie. After the final refrain, the band repeated the eight bar intro, and that was it.

Mr. Riggins came up on stage smiling.

"That really was...something special!" he said. "Let's hear it for Walter Mackie and The Z Street Band--YOUR Z Street Band!"

The applause continued, and when Mr. Riggins motioned Mackie to come up front, it got a little louder.

"You guys have to play the dance!" said Allison Sturgeon, as the band was breaking down.

"Seems like I might of heard that before, someplace," Jimmy said.

"Really, you should," Marty Zuckerman said. "I'll admit I'm envious that it's not me up there, but you rocked!"

"I liked the tempo of that song," Dirk Lefroni said. "The way you kept everyone kind of, like, off-balance."

"Thanks dude, appreciate it," Bo said.

Eva Loggerman was off to the side talking to Mackie as he was folding up his keyboard stand.

"What was that, Walter?" Jimmy asked when she left.

"Oh, not anything really," Mackie said. "She plays classical too."

"We know, we heard her at the talent show," Bo said. "That all she wanted to talk about?"

Mackie didn't say anything.

"Walter, you're turning red!" Jenny said.

"Dudes, seriously, we need you at the spring dance!" said Jason Bruno, as he passed the stage. "That was off the hinges!"

"He's right," Rachel Wainwright said. "Mel, we need to have a special committee meeting tomorrow and talk about it."

"The only problem being," Melissa said, "I'm in the band."

"Okay then, but I'm going to talk to Mr. Riggins first thing, and try to make this happen," she said, and was gone.

"When is the dance, anyway?" asked Mackie.

"A week from Saturday," Jenny said. "The 28th."

"The good thing about playing school dances," said Jimmy, "is we don't have to play them."

"This one might be different," Bo said. "Just maybe, we're back in business."

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Friday night they were jammed into the front booth at In-N-Out, celebrating.

"Things have a way of working out, don't they?" said Jenny.

"All that's gone down," said Adler.

"You can say that again," said Melissa. "This has been some roller coaster ride."

"What I like," Jimmy said, "is we don't have to fill up the whole two hours and start repeating songs, since they got us rotating with the DJ."

"Is THAT what you like, Ringo Starr," Bo said.

"Ridley, after this is all over with, you know what I'm probably going to do to you?" Jimmy said.

"Who's the DJ?" Jenny asked.

"Pablo, the same guy we always have," said Melissa.

"Any chance he has anything to do with--our two friends?" asked Mackie.

"No, he's older," Melissa said. "I think he goes to the JC."

"So, everything says this should be a clean gig, right?" Adler said.

"Not 'should be'," Bo said. "Dude, will you stop worrying? The Z Street Band is in the house!"

"Okay, everybody, hands in," said Jimmy. "One--two--three..."

And they all belted out: "Z STREET BAND!!"

For a split second, In-N-Out went silent and people looked around. Then it went back to being a normal Friday night.

25 - Have a Snack

Late Sunday morning Bo was at Jenny's kitchen table, just having finished off a huge Belgian waffle topped with fresh strawberries and a side of link sausages.

"This is getting embarrassing," Bo said to Mrs. McCoy. "Every time I come over here, you feed me."

"Oh nonsense," she said with a smile. "To be honest, it's quite rewarding to watch a growing boy eat as much as Cameron used to."

"That's why he's on a diet now, at college," Jenny said.

"Well anyhow, here's what I have so far," Bo said, taking his acoustic guitar out of the case.

"I'm anxious to hear this," Mrs. McCoy said. "Jenny has talked about this song a lot. You must know, she's quite in awe of you."

"Mom!!"

Bo took his time digesting this unexpectedly amazing piece of information. He glanced over at Jenny, who wouldn't meet his eyes.

"I'm not sure there's any great meaning in this song or anything," Bo said. "In fact, there definitely isn't."

"Not important," Mrs. McCoy said. "Many--if not most--of the classic songs through the years don't have any deep meaning either."

"The melody's pretty simple," Bo said. "Just four chords--A, D, B minor and E. See what you think."

And he began:

*"I sat there in English class
Reading from some way old text
Teacher prancing 'round the room
Get me outta this mess*

*I sat there in History
Checking out El Salvador
Tried hard to find the meaning
But staring at the door*

*I sat there in Algebra
Fractions jumping all around
Filling in a formula
Watching the clock tick down"*

And then came the chorus:

*"Give me a:
Short board, bottom turn, cut back in the soup
Tail slide, locked in, close out, Malibu
Goofy foot, beach break, slash turn, caught inside
Pipeline, swallow tail, new school, one last ride
Cross step, Huntington, Capitola and Laguna*

Long board, endless summer, dreaming of a simple tune."

And then two more verses:

"I stood there in PE class

Trying hard to barely move

Teacher blowing a whistle

He doesn't have a clue

I sat there in Science class

Breaking down some CO₂

Looking outside the window

Don't have an ocean view"

Bo repeated the chorus and the song ended.

Jenny and her mom didn't react right away. Mrs. McCoy looked like she was thinking hard.

"And that's the title--'Dreaming of a Simple Tune'?" she said.

"Yeah."

"Honey, I think it's absolutely fantastic!" she said.

"Mom, don't call anyone 'honey', remember?" said Jenny.

"Actually, the chorus is pretty much Jenny," Bo said. "She came up with most of the surfing expressions."

"Would you mind running through it one more time?" Mrs. McCoy asked.

"Sure," said Bo, and he did.

"Okay, now I absolutely do not mean to interfere in any way," she said.

"So then don't!" said Jenny. "It's a great song, just the way it is."

"No, tell me," said Bo.

"Well, it all works for me--the lyrics, the melody, the chord changes, the transition to the chorus. But I think it needs a bridge."

"What's a bridge?" asked Jenny.

"Wow," said Bo. "And where would you put it?"

"I'd put it after the second chorus," she said. "Right where you ended the song. Then come back in with one final refrain."

"And the bridge--maybe slow it down, so when you come back the chorus sounds fresh again?"

"I think you're right, yes."

"Gee, thank you so much!" said Bo. "I couldn't put my finger on it, but the song wasn't quite there."

"Oh, it's definitely there, even if you don't change a thing," Mrs. McCoy said. "I'm extremely impressed with your work."

"Mom, there's five people in the band though, remember?" Jenny said.

"Of course," said Mrs. McCoy. "And a business manager, I'm told."

"He's very good, but he worries a lot," Jenny said.

"So that we don't have to," said Bo.

+++

It turned out to be an enjoyable week of practice for The Z Street Band.

They worked on all 17 songs that they had picked out for the Jasper dance, and they added Bo and Jimmy's talent show instrumental, "Wipeout".

What was most exciting to Bo was hearing his friends play and sing on the run-throughs of "Dreaming of a Simple Tune", treating it no differently than a real song by a famous star. Bo had come up with a bridge, and Mrs. McCoy was right--it sounded more complete now.

Bo wasn't telling anyone yet that he had managed to crank out two more original songs, "Days Go By" and "Closer to the Edge", to go with "Dreaming of a Simple Tune". Those would have to wait.

They were all relaxing in The Box on Saturday afternoon, having just finished their final rehearsal.

"What I'm liking about this gig tonight," Jimmy said, "is for some reason I'm not feeling a lot of pressure."

"I know," said Bo. "I think it's because they've already heard us."

"And we know they aren't going to laugh us off the stage or anything," said Mackie.

"The dance starts at what time again?" said Jimmy.

"Eight," said Melissa.

"So here's what I'm thinking," said Bo. "We get there around five-thirty, set up, test everything, set the levels and whatever, and then we just hang out and have a snack or something."

"That early?" asked Jenny.

"Not a bad idea, actually, to have plenty of extra time," Adler said.

"No last second surprises," Jimmy said.

"Not tonight," Mackie said, and everyone left The Box to get ready.

26 - What the Heck

A few hours later, Mr. McCoy arrived with his truck and picked up Bo and Jimmy and the P.A. system and drums. Mrs. McCoy drove everyone else.

"I must say, you all look very professional tonight," Mrs. McCoy said.

The band had decided to wear matching black and white, and Bo and Jimmy both had their hair neatly combed, which was unusual.

"Are you going to stick around for the action?" Bo asked. "They always need chaperones."

"No, honey, thank you," she said. "We're going out to dinner and hopefully catch a movie, and we'll see you afterwards. You all have fun!"

By 6:30, The Z Street Band was pretty much set. They were plugged in on the gym stage, the drums were adjusted, they'd gotten the microphones and speakers positioned, and Adler had put them through several sound checks.

They were glad they brought Bo's sound system, which was clearer and more powerful than the school's. Now all there was to do was wait.

Pablo showed up at 7:15 with his DJ gear.

"Thanks for trading off with us tonight," Bo said.

"Hey, dude, no problem," Pablo said. "I'm getting paid either way."

What they were about to discover, none of them--not even Adler--could have imagined.

At ten to eight, Jimmy went into the lobby to get a drink of water, and, to his absolute alarm, only six people were in line for the dance. Normally, this close to when the doors opened, the line would stretch outside the gym entrance and snake all the way back to the picnic tables.

People always lined up way before eight, especially with Gardner Garrison working the ticket booth. You didn't want to miss half the dance standing in line.

Garrison saw Jimmy, knew what he was thinking, and shrugged his shoulders.

This is worse--more embarrassing--than being locked in the Freeze situation, Jimmy thought.

All he could say to Bo when he got back on stage was: "No one's here."

When it sunk in, they all went outside and looked for themselves. There were three more people in line--that was it. Rachel Wainwright was one of them. The parking lot was dead.

"It is the correct night, the correct time, all that, right?" Jenny said, though she knew the answer.

"I just...can't...understand it," Rachel said.

"You've got 65 or 70 in a grade, so that's 200 kids in the school," Adler said. "A normal dance, if half the school shows up--let's say even only 40%--that's still 80 kids."

"So many people seemed fired up for us to play, after the assembly," Mackie said, shaking his head.

"Unless they were just pretending to be," Melissa said. "It sure didn't feel like that though."

"Some kind of huge last-minute party going on somewhere, we don't know about?" said Jimmy.

"No," Rachel said. "There isn't."

"Anyone break Mr. Riggins' rule tonight and bring their phone?" said Adler. "Or we could borrow Pablo's, text someone, see what's up."

"No," Bo said, his voice not much louder than a whisper. "They decided not to come, it's as simple as that. Whatever might be the reason, it doesn't matter now."

The doors opened and the kids in line drifted in, looking cautious, like they might be in the wrong place.

The band got back on stage and waited. By 8:15, two more people were on the dance floor--Lefroni and Myers--bringing the grand total of students attending the Huckabee Spring Dance to eleven. At least Lefroni and Myers had the good sense to not ask the band members what was wrong.

"All the gigs I've done," Pablo the DJ said to Bo and Jimmy, as he began packing up his gear, "this is a first. We got us a serious shortage of live bodies. Nothing I can do to shake things up tonight, so I'm leaving it in your hands."

Mr. Gustaf and Mrs. Matters, who were in charge of the dance, came over and said a few words to the band--how this was most unfortunate, and so on. But there was really nothing you could say. Soon, the two teachers retreated to the little office behind the snack bar.

"We have to play something," Jenny said when it got to be 8:30. "It's not fair to the few of them that did make it."

So The Z Street Band started playing.

They went right down the set list: "Brown-Eyed Girl"; "Sweet Home Alabama"; "Down on the Corner"; "Hound Dog"; "Summer in the City"; "Hello, I Love You", "Solitary Man", "Surfin' USA". They may not have been performing with a lot of emotion, but they were on key and on beat.

Lefroni and Myers were trading off dancing with Rachel Wainwright, The other eight kids seemed to be moving around too.

"Look at everybody," Jimmy said. "We can't be that bad, can we?"

"No," Bo said. "We're good. In fact you guys are sounding awesome. It's a shame..."

At 9:30, after "All Right Now", the band took a break. Bo and Jimmy went outside, and Lefroni and Myers were standing on the lawn. They noticed the south parking lot was now full of cars.

"What the heck!" Jimmy said.

"It's a Peabody meeting," Myers said. "They're planning out an overnight trip to a Shakespeare festival."

"That figures," said Lefroni.

Peabody was a specialized charter school that was on the same campus as Huckabee. There was almost no interaction between the Peabody kids and the Huckabee kids.

As a rule, the Huckabee kids resented Peabody because it provided special perks, like bottled water--while they had to drink the rusty tasting stuff out of the fountain--plus all kinds of field trips and guest experts who came in to class. The parents were very involved in running the school.

"I don't know any of those kids, so I shouldn't say anything," Jimmy said. "But one thing that kills me is when I see a mom or dad walking one of them to class."

"I know it," said Myers. "How can you let your parent even get out of the car?"

"Think they like school dances?" Bo said.

"Oh, no," said Jimmy "Even *we* don't go that low."

"We got 25 minutes left," Bo said, "to try and salvage the night."

"Oh boy," Jimmy said.

Bo charged across the lawn and into the Peabody meeting like a military commander on a mission.

It was a large room, a science lab, and there were about 40 kids seated in the middle, with the parents standing around the perimeter. Bo marched to the front, waved his hand to silence whoever was talking, and cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to have to interrupt you," he said, "but there's a Huckabee dance next door in the gym. My band is playing. For some mixed-up reason, almost nobody came tonight. We only have 25 minutes left. Is it possible you could all come over there right now? For just the last 25 minutes?"

There was stirring in the room but nothing happened. Bo could see Jimmy back near the door.

"It would mean a lot--a LOT-- to my five friends who have worked really hard for this," Bo said. "And to me."

A woman spoke up.

"The young man certainly makes a compelling case. Those of you wishing to attend this dance, hurry over there right now."

To Bo and Jimmy's absolute amazement, almost every kid in the room left for the gym.

"Gee, Peabody?" said Mackie, as the charter school kids filed in.

"I recognize that kid with the pony tail," Adler said. "I beat him in a tournament."

"Okay, listen," Bo said, strapping on his guitar. "They're supporting us. We've all made fun of them probably--I know I have. Forget all that. Let's give this our best shot."

The band played straight through the remainder of the set list: "Rock Around the Clock", "The Joker" "Centerfield" and "Surf City", which featured high harmonies that Jenny and Melissa sang beautifully.

The Peabody kids, Bo realized, had been dancing and having fun just like regular Huckabee kids, and now they were applauding. It was five to ten.

"Thank you very much," Bo said. "You've been a great audience. We are...The Z Street Band, and before we go tonight we're going to play one more. This song comes from one of the pioneers of rock and roll music, Chuck Berry, and it's called Johnnie B. Goode."

The guitar intro to Johnnie B. Goode was Bo's favorite piece of music that the band played. He laid it down solo, matching Chuck Berry note for note, and then the band came in and the vocals began.

When the song ended, everyone stood and clapped, and soon the gym emptied out.

"What can you say," Bo said.

"I don't know what to think anymore," Jimmy said.

"For what it's worth," Myers pitched in, "you dudes were A-List!"

"I enjoyed that so much!" Rachel Wainwright said. "All I can say is, people are idiots--they have no idea what they were missing."

"Thanks you guys," said Jenny.

"I hear you've been working on an original song," Lefroni said, "and you got 'Capitola' from me."

"That's true," Bo said. "In fact, it was going to have its debut tonight, except no one showed up. It's now the only song ever written that's been retired before anyone heard it."

"Whoa, dog!" said Jimmy.

"Don't talk like that!" said Mackie.

"You ever listen to that radio show late at night, 'Coast to Coast'?" Bo asked. "People come on there and tell you that some things are already set a certain way, before they happen. There's reasons for it."

"I think they call that 'paranormal'," Mackie said. "It can't be explained by regular science."

"Maybe that's it. All I know is, this music thing we keep trying--it's way out there somewhere. It's not normal."

"Okay whatever, B," Jimmy said. "But don't be retiring "Dreaming of a Simple Tune" before we've even played it!"

"Fine, you want it?" Bo said. "Take it. It's yours."

27 - We Get Smoked

Bo spent Sunday afternoon sleeping.

He had a strange dream that his parents took him on a vacation up to San Francisco. They dropped him off at a motel, but the doors of the motel rooms didn't have handles on them, and he couldn't get into a room.

"Yo, B-Dog! Get up! On your feet, now!"

Bo woke with a jolt and went to the window. Jimmy and Jenny were sitting on their bikes, laughing. Bo thought back to a similar scene, and it felt like so long ago.

"Time is it?" Bo asked.

"3:30, you doofus!" Jimmy said.

"Uh, okay, give me a minute."

They rode down to the Boardwalk. There were hundreds of skaters and bikers and longboarders and bodybuilders and street performers, all doing their thing. One guy was balancing a stove on his chin for tips.

They stopped for a slice of pizza near the basketball courts.

"Okay, B, we're gonna tell you what happened," Jimmy said.

"Not that we're expecting you to change your mind about the band being jinxed, or whatever," Jenny said.

"Which I might be agreeing with you on," said Jimmy.

"I talked to Allison Sturgeon this morning," Jenny said. "I asked her why she decided not to come to the dance. She said because the dance got cancelled."

"What?!" said Bo.

"She said her parents got a call last night around six o'clock from a fire department person, saying the Huckabee Dance had been called off because there was an emergency gas leak in the gym."

"I ran into Zuckerman at 7-Eleven," Jimmy said. "They got the same thing."

"But we got there at 5:30," Bo said, trying to make sense of it. "I mean, could there actually have been a leak, like outside the building, that they were fixing, and we didn't notice?"

"No," Jimmy said. Serious. "There was no leak."

"So Melissa and I started texting more people," Jenny said. "And everyone got the same phone call. Except for Rachel. She came to the dance from her cousin's house, and didn't get the message."

"And Lefroni and Myers came from a Dodgers game," Jimmy said. "Nobody picked up when someone would have called. Or for whatever reason they didn't have their phones. I'm guessing those other few kids that showed up, something similar slipped through the cracks."

Bo just stood there, leaning against the metal pizza counter. He'd been holding his slice for a while, but he hadn't taken his first bite.

"Scott and Stick--as Jenny likes to call them--are clever dudes," Jimmy said. "You have to give 'em their props. They wait until the last couple hours before the dance, when everyone's home getting ready."

"You sure it was them," Bo said, but he knew.

"One of the girls--Becky Hamm--her parents have a landline in the house, so she answered," Jenny said. "She said she heard laughing in the background when the fire department person was talking."

"So all that those pond scums needed," Bo said slowly . . . "was the Huckabee Directory . . . With every family contact number right in your face. And there's a stack of them on the counter inside the office."

"And a bunch of football player friends," Jimmy said. "Have a little party, each dude phones 10 or 15 people, and you've just shut down a dance."

Bo looked out past the bright beach toward the ocean. He still hadn't touched his pizza. Finally, he nodded and smiled.

"So the big, tough, clever Z Street Band tries for a little payback," he said. "And we turn around and get smoked."

"At least we know that people didn't not show up because of us," Jimmy said.

"That's right," Jenny said. "There will be other opportunities."

"Not with me there won't," Bo said. "I'm retired. And even if I ever thought about un-retiring--which isn't gonna happen--I sold the P.A. system."

"You what?!" said Jimmy.

"I put it on Craigslist last night after the dance. Guy came by this morning and hauled it away."

28 - Rumbling Over

The "non-dance" was a hot topic of discussion at school on Monday until about lunch, when it started to die down, and by the end of the day no one was talking about it anymore.

Bo rode over to the public library after school. He thought it would be good to check out something that was the furthest thing from all that had gone on.

He found a book called "Engineers of the Western Plains". It was about railroads and steam locomotives and the adventures they had back in those days. There were great black-and-white photographs.

He went home with the book and stretched out on the couch in The Box. Five minutes later, Adler and Mackie showed up.

"We're not bothering you or anything?" Adler asked, as he dropped over the wall.

"Not at all," Bo lied, as he watched Mackie now, too, come dropping down into The Box.

"Walter!" Bo said. "You made it!"

"Hey, Bo," Mackie said. "Jenny's been working with me at school. It's helped my confidence."

"You keep on surprising me, man," Bo said. "When you're famous, don't forget about me."

"That's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about," Mackie said, not meeting Bo's eyes. "I hear there's no more band now...and that you sold the sound equipment, so I know you mean it."

"Yeah, yesterday."

"Yeah, well, just so you know, I want to thank you for including me. These last few weeks have been probably the most exciting of my life."

The words hung there, taking Bo by surprise, and he didn't know what to say.

Adler picked up on the awkward situation and tried to lighten the mood.

"That's only because you have a two-game winning streak against me," he said. "That'll be ending on Wednesday."

"In your dreams," Mackie said, and the serious moment had passed.

Jenny and Melissa arrived a few minutes later.

"Well, you might as well join the party," Bo said. "This is getting to be like old times."

"No, actually we brought a little something that we left in your refrigerator," Jenny said. "Let's wait until Jimmy gets here, though."

"Jimmy too now," Bo said.

"Fancy Freeze," Melissa said. "I think it's his last day there."

Soon they heard the screen being pulled off the secret entrance, and Jimmy came rumbling over the top of The Box and plopped down in a bean bag chair.

"Saw our friends," he said. "Believe it or not, I think Arrington actually felt a little bad."

"Give me a break," Bo said.

"He didn't say anything, it's just a feeling I got," Jimmy said.

"He always was such a caring individual," Adler said.

"Okay, knock it off," Jimmy said.

"Let's go upstairs," said Jenny.

When they were all sitting at the kitchen table, Jenny opened up a pink box and brought out a chocolate cake. It had the messy look of something homemade.

On top of the cake, in white script, it said: "To Bo--thanks from The Z Street Band!"

"What are you doing?!" Bo said.

"It's nothing," Melissa said. "Just a token of our appreciation."

"Come on--appreciation for what?"

"For bringing us all into the band...," Jenny said.

"You mean 'forcing us'," Jimmy said.

"...and figuring out the songs, and teaching us the parts, and taking care of all the details."

"And always telling us we sounded good, whether it was true or not," said Melissa.

"Wow," said Bo, and Jenny cut the cake.

"But before the B-dog starts getting all choked up here," Jimmy said, "let's face it--it's just as well the band's breaking up now, rather than later."

"Right, because of 9th Grade coming up," Adler said.

"Who knows if we'll even see each other next year," Mackie said.

"I hear they give you a lot more homework," Melissa said.

"And high school volleyball's going to take up much more time," Jenny said.

Everyone was quiet while they ate. The doorbell rang.

"Hmm, now who might *this* be?" said Bo.

"Mr. Riggins, deciding to expel Mackie for calling him at home," said Jimmy.

"The Freeze manager, telling Jimmy he missed a dish," Adler said.

"Pretty funny, you guys," said Jenny.

Bo opened the door. Standing there was a man with a kid Bo thought he recognized from Peabody.

"I'm sorry to bother you," the man said, introducing himself as Mr. Paris. "Quentin wanted to talk to you. We found your address in the school directory."

"Yeah, that's a useful book," Bo said. "Please come in--we're sort of having dessert."

"Before dinner," Jimmy said.

"You want a piece, Quentin?" asked Bo. "Sit right there."

"Actually, we try to limit the sweets," said Mr. Paris. "It's part of the the philosophy of the charter school, Peabody."

"I see," said Jimmy, sticking a huge slice of cake and a fork in front of Quentin.

Mr. Paris laughed nervously and Quentin started digging into the cake like he hadn't eaten in a week.

"Anyhow," Mr. Paris said, "My son spoke very highly of your band performance the other night."

Everyone waited.

"Quentin, you want to tell them your idea?"

The kid shook his head.

"You play chess, right?" Adler said. "I've seen you at the rec center."

Quentin looked up from his cake and said he did.

"He felt bad for you, not having an audience," Mr. Paris said. "And I'm told the guitar work on the song you played at the end was quite outstanding."

"Gee, thanks," said Bo.

"I thought maybe you could play in front of my uncle's shop," Quentin said finally, in a thin voice they had to strain to hear.

"We're actually kind of--retired," said Jimmy, ". . . but where is it?"

"It's on the beach," Quentin said. "It's a surf and rental shop. You probably know it--'Top Gear'."

"Wow, that place!" Adler said. "That's like the prime spot on the whole beach!"

"When you say 'in front of the shop'," Jimmy said, "you mean the little cement area where they put out all the rental bikes and boogie boards?"

"No, you can play on the beach," Quentin said. "Facing the ocean."

It took a moment for everyone to picture this.

"But aren't there regulations about that?" Melissa said. "I mean you never see any bands playing on the beach, unless it's a special city festival or something."

"Yes, there are regulations. But not for my uncle. He says you can play this Sunday."

"I'll elaborate just a bit," said Mr. Paris. "A few years ago my brother-- Quentin's uncle--was jogging on the beach at dusk when he saw someone in trouble in the water. It turned out to be a tourist from Iowa who had never been to the ocean.

"The lifeguard stations were closed by then, so he went in after the guy. There was a rip current and they couldn't get back to shore, so my brother floated the guy on his back until someone saw them. They got rescued by a helicopter."

"I remember reading about that," said Adler.

"Afterwards, the lifeguards told my brother he could do whatever he wanted on the beach, whenever he wanted to. The police go along with it. I guess you'd call it 'carte blanche'."

There was a long silence. It was a lot to handle. Here they were, in the middle of their "retirement" cake, and now, out of nowhere, this incredible opportunity.

Bo realized everyone was waiting for him to say something.

It was that simple. It was all on him now.

He took his time.

"We need a P.A. system," he said.

Jimmy stood up and gave Adler a high-five.

Mr. Paris and Quentin soon left, and Jenny and Melissa cleared the table.

After a few minutes, the Z Street Band headed back down to the basement.

It was time for practice.

29 – Simple Tune

There may have been a cloud somewhere in the sky, but from their vantage point on the beach in front of Top Gear Surf Shop, Bo and Jimmy couldn't see one.

They were tuning up-- ten minutes until showtime, the beach packed-- and Jimmy was rating various sports.

"You take golf, for example," he said. "You're not forced to deal with anything the other guy does."

"Same with surfing, though," Bo said, strumming a G chord. "They have judges."

"Okay, but at least surfing's physical. You can wipe-out easy."

"Speaking of that," Bo said, "you notice the volleyball tournament going on over there?"

"I did," Jimmy said. "Our two favorite friends are in action. I got Lefroni keeping an eye on 'em, just in case they decide to come over this way."

"I knew you were always smarter than me," Bo said.

"Jen," said Jimmy, "You see anyone out there we know?"

"Are you blind?!" Jenny said. "There's at least a hundred Huckabee kids! Then you have all of Peabody and the parents . . . Plus I see Mr. Riggins, Mr. Gustaf, Miss DePiazza, Mr. Hacker, Mrs. Matters and Mr. Camino, and I thought I saw Mr. Heffenstern a little while ago . . . And it's not even one o'clock yet!"

"That it?" said Bo.

"Oh, cut it out," Jenny said

"Good," said Jimmy. "For a minute I was worried we had the wrong day."

"Just ignore them Jen," Melissa said.

Five minutes later, Bo stepped up to the mike and turned to the band.

"Let's get this," he said, and The Z Street Band's first ever beach concert was underway.

Two and a half hours later, when the band played "Brown Eyed Girl" for the third and final time, nearly everyone was still there.

"I'd like to single out a couple people today," Bo announced. "First, an 8th grader from the Peabody Charter School, who I'd never met until a few days ago: Quentin Paris. He made this possible."

Bo waited while people applauded.

"And I'd also like to thank Mr. Stewart Riggins. We all know how strict Mr. Riggins is, and all the procedures he makes you deal with, and how there can never be an exception to any rule. But when you get to know Mr. Riggins--really get to know him--I can tell you this... he really IS that bad."

There was a lot of laughing. Mr. Riggins waved. Bo smiled and waved back.

"We're going to close with one last song," Bo said. "This is our first Z Street Band original song, and we've never performed it before. It's called 'Dreaming of a Simple Tune'. We'd like to dedicate this song to the student body of Huckabee Middle School!"

All the Huckabee kids stood up. The band played the intro and the first verse began:

"I sat there in English class, reading from some way old text..."

After the second chorus came the bridge that Bo had added:

"And, when I close my eyes

I can see the sunny skies

I can taste the ocean breeze

I can put myself at ease

I feel sand around my feet

I can put myself, at ease."

Everyone stopped playing for one measure.

Then Bo strummed a soft, rhythmic E, leading the band into the final refrain. The song ended on an A chord.

When it was over, many people came up to congratulate the Z Street Band: Allison Sturgeon, Becky Hamm, Jason Bruno, Richie Linares, Marty Zuckerman, Eva Loggerman, Makena, Ashley Rasmussen, Myers, Hale Blalock, Rachel Wainwright, Lefroni. Henry Pacheco from the "The Destroyers", along with Stanza and Denzell. Mr. and Mrs. McCoy. Quentin Paris with a group of Peabody kids. Some parents. Several of the Huckabee teachers.

And finally, Mr. Riggins.

"Absolutely splendid," he said.

"Mr. Riggins, we really appreciate it that you announced this all week, even though it wasn't an official school event," Bo said. "And about that little joke..."

Mr. Riggins was smiling and choosing his words carefully.

"Though you'll all be moving on to greater challenges, just remember, you'll always be a part of Huckabee," he said, and they watched him trudge off through the thick sand, carrying his beach chair.

Soon, it was just the six of them, packing up the equipment.

"P.A. system worked great!" Adler said. "I'm glad the guy sold it back to you."

"What did you tell him?" Melissa said.

"I told him I made a mistake, and I needed it back," said Bo.

"And the guy understood?" said Mackie. "Simple as that?"

"He understood," said Bo.

"Well," said Jenny, smiling, "Mel and I are thinking of going in. Who wants to come?"

"You guys all go," Bo said. "I'll keep an eye on the stuff."

"Nah, I'll stick around too," said Jimmy. "Nick, you and Walter go ahead."

Bo and Jimmy watched the four of them run across the wide beach toward the water.

They soon looked small against the sky, and Bo and Jimmy could hear their faint laughter.

"They may be out there a while," Jimmy said. "Not that I'm in a hurry, though."

"I'm not in any particular rush myself," Bo said.

"But just so you know, B-dog--the next time you try and talk me into something pretty crazy?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll probably let you," said Jimmy.

"I'll remember that," Bo said.

THE END

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Author Contact: tedgross54@gmail.com

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