

chapter 1 ~

As I opened the car door in the parking lot of boot camp, a sodden cloud of hot sulfur slithered in. The noise followed soon behind it. The parking lot, the wide dirt track that led into the thick squat trees, the clearing I could glimpse in front of the largest tent I'd ever seen—they were all teeming with people. Sweaty, smiling people in khaki pants, T-shirts, and leather boots. Like mine.

“Yuck,” said Tanya, wrinkling her nose.

“This area of Florida’s mostly swamp,” Dad said. “That’s the smell.”

Somehow, I didn’t think that was all she was referring to. I was starting to wonder if this had been a very bad idea. By the time my family had all climbed back into the car after hugs and tears—Mum’s—I was almost sure of it. Standing beside my new team leader, surrounded by

a thousand strangers, I had never felt more alone.

“Now you’re here, we’re just waiting for Mark,” Gary said, prompting me to pick up my backpack and follow him into the massive tent, silently resenting his cheerfulness.

“Cori, Brendan and Kyle.” Gary dispensed with introductions in four whole words as we reached two guys lounging on the floor by a tent pole the size of a sequoia. He moved on to more important matters. “Where are Drew and Elissa?”

“Talking to friends, and bathroom,” Kyle answered economically, pointing right, which gave me a clear view of the snake tattoo that wound down the inside of his forearm. It didn’t quite fit with the short blond hair and blue eyes, although the dusty bandanna tied around his forehead did give him a certain rakish air.

“Y’all wait here until I get back with Mark.” Looking harried, Gary disappeared into the crowd.

Brendan jumped to his feet and held out his hand. I think my mouth actually fell open.

“Six foot five,” he preempted with a wry smile, “and pure muscle.”

“Half muscle, half Oreo cookies,” Kyle corrected, without getting up.

We’d progressed all the way through where we came from—San Diego for Kyle, Colorado for Brendan—and started in on hobbies when a living Barbie doll strolled in and sat down, fanning herself gracefully with a sheet of paper. She was small; her T-shirt was neatly tucked in; her long blonde braid hung straight down her back. She was even sweating elegantly. I felt grubby just looking at her.

“I already know what Elissa’s favorite hobby is,” Kyle said with a wicked grin. “His name starts with C.”

She blushed. “He’s more than a hobby, Kyle! Colin’s my boyfriend,” she said to me, pulling out a picture and passing it over.

“The way you talk about him, I didn’t think you had time for anything else,” Kyle said.

“I do ballet,” she said.

That explained the perfect posture.

“What about you?”

“Oh,” Kyle said, sighing. “President of the student body, captain of the debate team, captain of the track team . . .”

I thought he was serious until he started to laugh.

“Well, I will be, next year when I’m a senior. What about you, Cori?”

“Underwater basket weaving.”

Kyle was the only one who laughed. Elissa just looked politely interested.

“Okay,” I capitulated. “Horseback riding.”

“Riding!” Brendan said. “We’ve got horses on our ranch. There’s nothing like riding alone at sunset. God’s so huge; it’s awesome!”

“What’s awesome?”

Another girl had arrived in an untidy tangle of arms, legs, and red hair. She crashed down, practically in my lap, and introduced herself as Drew.

“Cool!” she said when she heard my accent. “Another non-American to keep me company. I’m Canadian. Elissa, can I borrow your comb? My hair will not stay put. So, what’s awesome?”

“Brendan asked Gary if we could have extra practice on the obstacle course every day because we’re a backpack team, and Gary said yes. That’s what’s awesome. We’re all real excited,” Kyle said casually, looking to the rest of us for support.

Drew, both hands occupied scraping back her hair, looked appalled. “Brendan! Are you crazy?”

Elissa stared at the ground, and I stifled a smile. Elissa buckled first.

“Kyle’s just teasing, Drew.”

Drew went from mad to amused in two seconds. She laughed and threw Elissa’s comb at Kyle. It bounced off him and landed in the dirt.

“Oops, sorry,” she said as she retrieved it, wiped it off, and handed it back. “Hey, where are the bathrooms?”

Elissa pointed to several port-a-potties near the trees, each one pinpointed by a long line in front of the door.

“Where are the real bathrooms?” Drew asked.

“That’s it,” Elissa said, not without sympathy.

“Have mercy!” Drew muttered as she got up and left.

“I don’t think she has much idea what she’s in for,” Elissa said thoughtfully.

I did my best to look as though I knew exactly what I was in for.

“She’ll be fine,” Brendan said. “She seems like a good sport.”

Elissa didn’t look convinced.

Five hours later I’d stopped wondering whether Drew was going to prove to be a good sport and started wondering whether I was. After Mark had finally arrived, Gary had us on our feet before we’d even finished introductions, although it turned out we had plenty of time for those as we stood in line after line collecting everything from drama costumes, mime makeup, and a portable puppet theatre to canteens and waterproof waist packs.

Mark turned out to be a small, wiry, pugnacious kid from New York. He looked thirteen, although he answered fifteen in response to Kyle’s subtle query.

“We’re going to spend the summer babysitting,” I heard Kyle complain to Brendan as we stowed all our new possessions and hurried to line up at the start of the obstacle course.

“See you at the wall!” Gary yelled, as someone entirely too close to my ear blew a very loud whistle.

“Which way? *What* wall?” Drew looked as frazzled as I felt.

“I was on the England team last year,” Elissa said, leading the way at a run. “Follow the arrows. Jacob’s ladder is the first obstacle.”

I’d always wondered what Jacob’s ladder looked like. As a kid I’d pictured a wide sweep of steps like the ones leading up to the Sydney Opera House but made out of marble, with angels hovering over them, reverent and silent. According to boot camp, however, Jacob’s ladder was a forty-foot-high rope cargo net that we had to climb up and over.

After that disappointment, I shouldn’t have been too shattered to learn that Mount Sinai was apparently made out of tires, that the main task of Egyptian slaves had been to transport bricks in a wheelbarrow and build mini-pyramids, and that the Slough of Despond wasn’t just a figment of John Bunyan’s imagination. It was a large moat blocking our path and filled with muddy water. It was also the last straw for Drew.

“Fun, huh, Drew?” Kyle said, pacing back and forth as Elissa explained that someone would have to jump for the two ropes dangling over the middle of the water.

Drew, sitting in the dirt beside me and struggling to catch her breath, snapped. “This is not fun!” she yelled. “Fun is going shopping. This is torture!” Then she burst into tears.

Silently, I agreed. Where were the sandy beaches? Where was the scent of cinnamon?

Kyle was quick to apologize, and Brendan stuck out a hand to help her up. She batted it away.

“Since you think it’s so much fun,” she said to Kyle, “you guys can get the ropes.”

“No problem,” Kyle said, backing up alongside Brendan for a running start. Brendan made it, but Kyle didn’t. He snagged his rope just below a large knot, and his hands slipped. He was swinging forward with the force of his jump, and when he went to wrap his legs around the rope he fell. He hit the water with a dull smacking sound and disappeared.

He stood up, looking glazed in chocolate milk, to find all five of his teammates laughing.

“It’s slippery,” he said defensively, grabbing the end of the rope and swinging it across to us. “You try it.”

“Cori, hold it for me,” Elissa instructed. “I’ll show you how it works best.”

She took a run-up, launched herself at the rope, sailed across, and jumped. Brendan caught her on the other side and narrowly saved her from a dunking. Mark wasn’t so lucky; he slipped on the bank and ended up wet to the waist, looking decidedly unhappy.

“I hate it here,” Drew said.

I nodded slowly, but the expression on my face must have been more transparent than I’d intended, because she looked at me and suddenly, unexpectedly, giggled.

“You can do it,” I said. “I’ll hold it for you.”

She might have made it, except that she forgot to jump off when she reached the other side. Soon she was hanging off the knot above the middle of the pit, barely keeping her feet clear of the water.

“Help! What do I do?” she screeched.

On the other side, Mark was helpless with laughter, and the other three were calling out advice.

“Swing your body to get some momentum,” Elissa shouted.

Drew tried, but only succeeded in flopping back and forth, barely even twitching the rope. “I don’t want to fall in that disgusting water!”

“It’s not that bad,” Kyle said. “Just drop off and wade out.”

Brendan took a step forward. “I’ll come get you.”

“Wait,” Kyle said reluctantly. “I’m already wet; I’ll do it.” He waded back into the pit and slogged over to Drew.

“Kyle’s right there,” I called. “Sit on his shoulders.”

“But my boots will go in the water,” she said, unwrapping one leg and trying to hook it over Kyle’s shoulder.

“Choose.” He grunted as he helped her swing the other leg over. “Your boots or you.”

I could see what was coming. She was sitting on his shoulders with her arms wrapped around his head, trying to keep both feet out of the water by holding her legs out straight.

“Drew, put your feet down!” I yelled.

Kyle took one step and staggered. She clutched at his head, covering his eyes.

“Drew! Let go!” He swatted at her hands, took one more step, and fell over sideways.

It was like watching a tree fall in slow motion. Drew was screaming as she hit the water. On the other side of the pond, Mark folded gently to the dirt in a heaving, wheezing pile.

Drew only had one word to say when she came up.

Whistle man looked appalled. So did Elissa.

“Young lady,” whistle man called, making a notation on his clipboard. “No swearing, please.”

“You dropped me!” she accused Kyle, pushing long ropes of hair away from her face.

“I couldn’t help it!” he said. “You had your hands over my eyes!”

“I swallowed some of that filthy water,” Drew said as Brendan helped her up the bank. “I’ll probably get malaria.”

“Guys,” I called, indicating the ropes, now hanging serenely over the middle of the muddy pit once again.

Kyle started to wade into the water for the third time.

“I’ll come and get you,” he said, sounding as though he were offering to swim the English Channel on my behalf.

“I can do it by myself,” I said.

He retreated, his sudden grin a challenge. “Okay, then, do it.”

Suddenly the ropes looked a long way away.

“Cor-i. Cor-i . . .” Brendan started the chant while I backed up.

At least I made it to the rope when I jumped. But it was wet and slick and hard to get a firm grip. Before long I was hanging off a knot in the middle of the slough, up to my knees in water. I could feel it pouring, pleasantly cool, into my boots.

“Want me to rescue you?” Kyle cloaked his taunt in an offer.

“No.” It was tempting, but I let go instead, shuddering as the water lapped at my chin and my boots settled into the sticky muck.

“C’mon,” Elissa said as I waded out. “We’re almost done. Jericho’s wall is just around the corner.”

“I thought the wall around Jericho fell down,” I grumbled as we jogged into a large clearing and I saw the last obstacle, a ten-foot-high wooden wall we were supposed to scale.

Elissa laughed. “Only after days of marching and blowing trumpets. In the meantime, Brendan and Cori, you go over first. Kyle last.”

With Kyle boosting from below, and Brendan and me lifting from the elevated platform on the other side, we hauled Drew, Elissa, and Mark up fairly easily. Kyle, however, was another story. Even with a

running start, he barely managed to grab one of Brendan's hands. Brendan gave a tug, and I snagged Kyle's other hand. My shoulder felt like it was about to be rudely separated from its socket, and the top of the wall dug painfully into my ribs.

"Cori, no. I'm too heavy," Kyle said.

"Get up here, then."

He planted his feet on the wall, and with Brendan doing most of the work, we managed to heave him to the top. Then we collapsed on the platform, too wasted to think about climbing down the ladder and joining the others. The two guys high-fived each other over the top of my head.

On the ground below us, Gary clicked a stopwatch.

"Thirty-seven minutes and twenty-four seconds," he said. "Not bad for your first try. By the end of boot camp you should knock more than ten minutes off that time."

Drew whimpered. "Can we change clothes now?" she asked.

"Oh, you'll dry out soon enough," Gary said. "We don't hike out to our campsite until after the evening rally. Now, let's hustle. You're late for puppetry class."

I closed my eyes and thought of home. Within two months I would remember how miserable I was on that first day and find it hard to believe I was once soft enough to get teary over an obstacle course.

It was very dark that night on the track out to our campsite. A thick, moist darkness, as if the swamp were breathing around us. It was either raining, or the invisible trees looming above us were crying. Large warm drops hit my shoulders and soaked into my hair. I couldn't see anything beyond the small pale circles cast by our flashlights, but I

could hear the others ahead and behind me. Both groups were talking about home.

“. . . live with my aunt and uncle,” I heard Kyle tell Brendan in front of me. “They’re cool. Mostly.”

“My folks are the best,” Brendan said.

“I’m homesick already,” Elissa said quietly. “I miss Colin.”

“I miss my bed,” Drew said.

Only Mark and I were silent. I was trying to decide whether or not I would eat a live worm if it meant I could go home, when we finally reached our campsite. The small log circle and three tents nestled among the bushes didn’t manage to appear cozy, just bedraggled.

“Okay, team. Gather round,” Gary said.

His wife, Diane, reached out to take his hand and mine as we made a circle.

As I bowed my head for the prayer, I felt a trickle of cold water creep down my back. Despite Gary’s proclamation of collective gratitude, I didn’t really feel very thankful for the day. In fact, I was dreading tomorrow.

chapter 2 ~

On day ten of boot camp I woke early, still exhausted but unable to drift off again, already anticipating the shrill whistle I knew would come at five thirty. The birds were offering their first tentative calls, and it was peaceful and cool in the darkness. I started to ease on the same khaki pants and shirt I'd discarded the night before, moving quietly so I wouldn't wake Drew and Elissa. My clothes felt stiff and grainy, but at least they were dry.

I wondered what Scott was doing. Sleeping, probably, like most of the other sane people in this world who hadn't bartered away their entire summer on the strength of a whim. Well, maybe *whim* was a bit strong, but when I compared my "I thought it would be fun" to Kyle's "God told me to come," that's what it felt like.

"God really told you to come on this trip?" I'd asked him, wondering

why I sounded so skeptical. If I didn't believe a person could hear from God, what was I doing traipsing off to Indonesia to build a church?

"Yeah," was all he'd said. But his tone implied, *Why, didn't you get the same message?*

Before boot camp I would have said that I was sure that God wanted me to do this. But ten days of blisters, aching muscles, heavy backpacks, no showers, and disgusting food had sent me scrambling hourly to remind myself exactly why. However I looked at it, my decision seemed to have been based on the following syllogism: 1) God wants us to do good things; 2) This is a good thing to do; 3) Therefore, God wants me to do this. If there had been any specific message for me about the trip, I was no longer sure I'd sat still long enough to listen for it.

It seemed I wasn't the only one who had relied on that particularly versatile equation. Drew had collapsed beside me in the drama tent the day before and looked up plaintively.

"I knew this summer would be different, but I didn't know it would be freaky Christian army camp different. I thought it would be . . . I don't know . . . romantic different."

"So that's why you two are really here," Kyle said, laughing. "Romance."

"That's not the only reason." Drew defended us. "We had lots of excellent reasons for coming, right, Cori?"

"Right," I said, trying to remember at least one in case Kyle demanded specifics.

Romance. Lying there in the pre-dawn darkness, I reached up to touch Scott's ring. Getting some space from him wasn't the only reason I was here, though, I reminded myself. I wanted to help people. I wanted adventure. I rolled over and groaned as my aching thigh muscles

protested. I just hadn't banked on adventure being quite so much *work*.

It's not like there hadn't been warning signs that it might not be a stroll in the park. In the months after I signed up for the trip, Indonesia was hit with one crisis after another—a drought (which meant bad rice harvests), a huge economic wobble with a 600 percent currency devaluation (whatever that meant), and student protests that culminated in riots in Jakarta that left twelve hundred people dead and the president being forced out of office (which meant, among other things, that I had two very worried parents).

Mark and Drew hadn't even heard about the riots.

"You can't just have a riot if you don't like your president," Drew said when she heard this news on day three.

"What would you do?" I asked.

"Wait until the next election and vote in someone else."

I didn't even try not to laugh.

"He'd been president for thirty years," Brendan said. "And he wasn't elected, either. The election scheduled for next year will be Indonesia's first ever."

"My parents would die if they knew all this!" Drew said.

"I can't believe you didn't know," Kyle said in a tone usually reserved for siblings. "It's because you don't get any decent news up in Canada."

"We do so! I just don't listen to it. Do your parents know, Mark?"

"I don't know," he said, his normally expressive face going suddenly blank. "Maybe."

I didn't miss the glance Kyle and Brendan exchanged, but Drew did.

"Yeah, maybe they shipped you off on purpose," she said.

Mark chewed on his bottom lip and stayed unusually quiet.

“That sounds more like a Canadian family tradition,” Kyle teased, diverting her back to herself.

“No,” Drew said, a sadness passing over her easy flippancy like a gauze veil. “My parents wouldn’t do that.”

Mine wouldn’t either. Despite the fact that relative stability had returned to Jakarta when the new president took office after several days of riots, I’d had to work hard to convince Mum and Dad to let me stay on the team. Only the facts that Ambon and Seram were five hundred miles from Jakarta and that the embassy reported no trouble in that region had swayed them in my favor.

By a week and a half in, however, I felt I’d learned less about drama, puppets, singing, hiking, teamwork, and the obstacle course than I had about being more cautious in my decision making. If boot camp was what could happen when we got something we asked for, I resolved to be a darn sight more careful about what I prayed for in the future.

My only comfort was that I wasn’t the only one struggling, or—if daily bouts of tears were anything to go by—even the one struggling the most. Elissa missed Colin ferociously. He’d started sending her letters before she even left, just so she’d have mail during her first week away. Even after a week of seeing her face light up every time she got a letter, I was still shocked when she confessed that they were unofficially engaged and planned to get married as soon as she turned eighteen.

“Are you *serious*?” Drew had said, sitting up in her sleeping bag in our little tent. “You’re only sixteen!”

“Almost seventeen,” Elissa said. It was clear she thought eighteen couldn’t come quickly enough, and equally clear that Drew thought she was insane. They both turned to me to back them up.

“It’s . . . legal. I guess,” I said, trying to think.

Drew had not interpreted this as an overwhelming show of support. “You two are boy crazy.”

“Us?” Elissa said, incredulous.

It was hard to miss Drew’s glances toward Brendan, her total attention when he spoke, the way she maneuvered to sit next to him.

“Yeah,” I said, rushing in where Elissa feared to tread. “We’re not the ones who came looking for romance this summer.”

I’d thought Drew would welcome the opportunity to giggle and debrief.

I was wrong.

“Whatever,” she said, prickly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on.” I laughed. “You mean you didn’t come here for the guys? Could have fooled me.”

These sudden shifts of Drew’s felt like summer storms blowing through our tent—intense while they lasted, but usually gone just as fast as they’d arrived.

She wasn’t the only one who was intense; Kyle wasn’t short on that quality himself. It took us six days to get the real story behind his tattoo out of him. He’d strung us along by concocting all sorts of ridiculous scenarios. My personal favorite was the “apprenticed to a snake charmer in India” version of the tale.

Day six’s plot involved his running away from home at fourteen, hitching to San Diego with two friends, shoplifting cigarettes, smoking pot, and living on the streets for three weeks before being caught spray-painting a church. He got three months in a juvie halfway house.

Brendan, Drew, and Elissa all laughed on cue when he finished, but I shook my head, suspicious. He looked nervous. Kyle never looked nervous when he was lying.

“That’s it, isn’t it? You really ran away.” This was more story than even I had bargained for.

Mark, who up to this point had been a study in nonchalance, looked deeply impressed.

“What happened next?” Brendan asked, still not sure this was finally the truth.

“The pastor asked the court to assign us to clean it up ourselves. So every Saturday we’d work on that, and every Sunday until we finished we had to go to the morning and evening service, and eat lunch with one of the families in the church. It took us ten weeks.”

He looked around, checking that he had our undivided attention as he prepared to deliver the punch line.

“I became a Christian at that church.”

“Then did you go home?” Elissa asked, still stunned.

The grin disappeared. “No. The court said I could go live with my aunt and uncle instead. Dad took off eight months ago, and we haven’t heard from him since. Mom’s probably still as drunk as the last time I saw her.”

That was sort of a conversation stopper.

After the high drama of Kyle, Drew’s out-of-character reticence, and Elissa’s stated intention to become a child bride, Brendan’s wholesome stories about growing up on a ranch in Colorado complete with an older sister and a dog named Buster and wearing a suit to church every Sunday seemed straight out of *Little House on the Prairie*. On the topic of home and family, Mark was silent. It was about the only topic he *was* silent on.

In the pre-dawn hush, I reached into my waist pack and pulled out my flashlight and the first letter from Scott. I’d read it so many times in the three days since it had arrived that I practically had it memorized,

but there was something about touching the paper and seeing his handwriting that brought him closer than just thinking of him.

My eyes skipped straight to the first sentence of the second paragraph. *I've done pretty well at getting on with life and only wishing once or twice (an hour) that you were here.*

The ache felt almost physical. I closed my hand over his ring as I heard a sound I was coming to loathe—Gary's whistle.

Four more days, I reminded myself. Four more days, then eight more weeks.

Every one of those remaining four days of boot camp felt like a week on its own, but we survived. We could put on a puppet show, perform four dramas, sing twenty songs, and recite fifteen Bible verses flawlessly. We could lay concrete, tie steel, and build a brick wall. We could run the obstacle course in twenty-three minutes and forty seconds. We could scale tall buildings with a single bound—or something like that anyway.

We had some bad times those last four days.

On day eleven Mark hid Kyle and Brendan's shirts in the bushes, which made us late for the start of the obstacle course, which meant we spent free time that day cleaning thirty portable toilets that had been sitting in the sun for ten days. It was undoubtedly the nastiest experience of my entire life. No one had much to say to Mark that night.

On day twelve we had a huge argument about whether women should be allowed to join the army and fight in combat situations.

"No way," Kyle said.

Not that I wanted to join the army, but I wasn't about to let him get away with that. "Women are just as capable as men," I said.

Surprisingly, it was Elissa who backed me up. “We can do anything you can do.”

“No, you can’t,” Kyle said. “Women aren’t as strong. And you’re more emotional. Just face it; there are some things only men should do. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“The big deal is that you’re acting like a sexist pig!” I snapped.

“Girls cry all the time too.” That was Mark, being spectacularly unfair.

Elissa actually lost her temper. “At least I can go more than one day without getting everyone in trouble!”

“If I had to fight, I think women would be distracting. I’d be more worried about them than about the other guys,” Brendan said.

“We don’t need to be fussed over just because we’re women,” Elissa said, flicking her long braid over one shoulder with an angry jerk.

“I think it’s sweet,” Drew said quietly.

“Well, no one asked you,” I said.

“Fine then,” she said, glaring at me.

After ten more minutes of this, having to stand next to each other in singing class and practice “Amazing Grace” felt like more of a punishment than a privilege.

On day thirteen Drew ran out of the mini Snickers bars she’d smuggled into boot camp. We huddled in a tight circle, licking the last melted chocolate from the wrappers and keeping a wary lookout for the sudden appearance of Gary or Diane. We weren’t interested in cleaning any more toilets.

“Once upon a time . . .,” Mark began, looking sadly at his empty wrapper.

“Once upon a time there was a boy named Jip,” I said, looking at Mark’s dark, matted curls and the freckles on his dusty face. “Jip was

twelve years old and loved chocolate,” I added, then paused.

Mark caught on first. “But Jip lived in a land ruled by an evil king named Gary, who hated chocolate,” he said.

“Maybe the king wasn’t really evil,” Brendan said, joining in. “Maybe he was just allergic.”

“Well, did he really have to spoil everyone else’s fun?” Mark asked. “Besides, he didn’t like Jip’s pet monkey, Kiki.”

From those humble beginnings, the story game was born. None of us had any idea that Jip and Kiki had just become our seventh and eighth teammates, or how far they would travel with us.

Boot camp wasn’t *all* bad. But for some reason, even in thinking about all that came later, the good times are not as easy to put into words as the bad ones. Perhaps that’s because the good times tended to come in glimpses. Often, right when I felt like I’d been pushed to the edge, there would be a look or a word or a shared laugh that would tilt the scales back the other way.

The commissioning ceremony on the last night was definitely one of the good times. We’d run the obstacle course for the last time that morning, sweated impatiently through our classes, and spent the afternoon packing duffel bags with things like canned food, a portable stove, tent kits, and toilet paper. As I stuffed the first aid kit in and pulled the last strap tight, I finally felt as if we really were going somewhere.

When I walked into the main tent that evening, the usual turbulent roar of two thousand voices all talking at once was muted to a low, rolling hum. Everywhere I looked there were skirts and ties. Faces had been scrubbed and boots shined.

“Everyone looks so different,” I said, dropping into a seat next to

Kyle and trying not to stare. The bandanna and his favorite blue shirt were nowhere to be seen. Between the tattoo and the tie, he looked like a preppy gang member.

“Clean?” he said, yawning. “I’m beat. Poke me if I fall asleep.”

“Like this?” I gave him an elbow.

“No, more like this,” he said, returning the gesture with interest.

When the floodlights suddenly went out, it took us all by surprise. Up on stage a fragile, mesmerizing speck of light appeared.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

The bright pinprick moved, and then there were two, four, ten, as the flame was passed quickly from candle to candle and the light started to creep through the gathering. I could feel the others close by, tell who was standing where from the sound of their breathing. The singing started softly and swelled. Exhaustion, the smell of hot wax, dancing yellow fragments flickering around us, harmony a thousand voices strong—it all came together in an intoxicating God-buzz.

That sweet combination of peaceful certainty and confident anticipation lasted exactly twenty-one hours and fourteen minutes, just long enough to take me from Orlando to 33,000 feet above the Pacific, 1,704 miles from LAX, and heading toward Indonesia.