



Come on, Mom, Dad, Get Healthy!

Teens Against Parent Addiction Squad Take Action



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Chapter One



Josh studied the sky and pondered, *If I could just hop on one of those clouds and drift off to some other land and start a new life and ...*

“All right class, get with your lab partner and browse through the list of scientists I’ve handed out. By next week, you’ll have to choose one for your research paper,” said Mr. Bryson, the biology teacher.

Kim glanced at Josh, who cradled his head in his hands. She grabbed her notebook and moved toward him.

“Yo, partner,” Kim said, amazed that Josh didn’t even notice her approach.

She knocked her knuckles on his desk. “Earth to Josh!”

“Oh, hi, Kim. What’s up?”

“Duh, our science project ... Josh, you feel okay?” Kim asked. “You seem, like, foggy or something. Did you even hear what Mr. Bryson told us?”

“Sorry, Kim,” Josh said and shook the fantasies out of his mind. “I was off somewhere else.”

“Josh, can I ask you something straight out?”

“I guess so,” Josh replied hesitantly.

“Are you okay with me as your partner? I’m not as smart as you, but I’ll pull my weight,” Kim

promised. “All of it!” She slapped her chunky hip.

Josh smiled and relaxed. “I’m not so sure I am smarter than you, Kim. If you can write as well as you cut up frog guts last week, we’ll be an awesome team.”

Josh stole one final peek out the window at the clouds.

Josh’s eyes focused on the kitchen wall clock. He asked himself, *It’s ten o’clock ... do you know where your mother is? No idea!*

Earlier in the evening, he had phoned her office. No answer. After fixing a cheese sandwich for dinner and attempting to do his homework, Josh considered checking the local hospital but dialed the office again. When her answering machine began its leave-a-message speech, he hung up.

What do I do now? Josh wondered. *She’s been late before, but never this late. I sure can’t talk to Dad about this. And you can’t report a ‘missing mom’ to the police when it’s only been a few hours. I don’t know if I’m more scared or furious.*

The ring interrupted his thoughts. He bolted from the sofa and sprinted to the phone in the kitchen.

“Hello?”

Josh listened to the unfamiliar voice on the other end of the phone and leaned his back against the wall until the talking stopped. “Okay, thanks.” He reflexively hung up the phone.

“Geez!” His knees buckled, and his body slowly slid to the floor. Thanks a lot, Mom, he muttered.

Chapter Two



Kim glanced around the cafeteria to check out where she could sit by herself. She was in a serious funk and wanted to sulk in peace.

Ah, there's a table in the corner.

At breakfast, Kim had argued with her mom ... about doughnuts of all things. Her mom was downing another doughnut at the same time she complained about her slacks being too tight.

I should have kept my mouth shut, Kim considered. Rather than point out that eating a bunch of chocolate cream-filled doughnuts before 8 a.m. just might explain why the woman couldn't zip up her pants.

Kim set her lunch tray down at the empty cafeteria table. As she plopped down on one of the stools, she felt her own jeans pinch into her flesh. *Man, I am on my way to becoming as fat as my mom.* Kim rolled a meatball around her plate as she contemplated what to do about her problem. She didn't notice Matt coming up behind her.

"Hey, Kim, okay if I join you?" he asked.

"At your own risk," Kim sighed. "I'm in a crappy mood and not good company."

Matt and Kim had attended elementary school together and played on the same softball team, and they enjoyed each other's company.

“Perfect,” Matt said. “You’ve described my frame of mind. Let’s just eat our lunches and not talk.”

“Deal.”

Matt dropped his lunch bag on the table and peered inside it. He wrinkled his nose and groaned “Uck, my food smells like smoke! Oops, sorry, Kim. I forgot our deal.”

Kim shrugged her shoulders. “It’s okay. I can smell the smoke, too ... even on your clothes, I’m sorry to say.”

“My dad and mom are smokers. I hate it! This morning I went into the bathroom and found a butt in the shower. I yelled at my dad, ‘What’s up? You can’t take a shower without a cigarette!’ And I can hear Mom hacking all night. It’s disgusting.”

“You ever tried it?” a voice behind them spoke.

Kim and Matt spun around to see who asked the question.

“Hey, guys, what’s happening? You two seem way too serious,” said Josh, as he placed his tray down next to Kim’s. “I spotted you over here in the corner and decided to check in with Kim about our science project. But I don’t want to interrupt anything.”

“Hi, Josh,” Kim and Matt said in unison.

“We’re feeling grumpy today, so we’ve stashed our sorry selves in the corner,” Kim explained. “What’s up with you?”

“Honestly, if this is the down-and-out table, I’ve sure come to the right spot,” Josh confided. “I’m so mad at my mom, I can hardly think straight today.”

“Why’s that?” Matt asked. “And, by the way, I have smoked a cigarette and found it nasty. Plus, I’m on the cross-country team and no way do smoking and running go together.”

“Well, it’s sort of personal. Can I trust each of you not to blab?” Josh scanned the area to make sure no one could eavesdrop.

“Sure,” Kim said.

“Not to worry,” Matt reassured their friend.

“I got a call from a bar last night,” Josh whispered, “and they tell me that my mom’s there and too drunk to drive herself home. Some woman from the bar gave her a ride home.”

Josh hung his head and rubbed his eyes. “I was so embarrassed ... and upset. It took me forever to fall asleep. I’m exhausted.”

“Ouch, I’m so sorry for you, Josh,” Kim said. “Where’s your dad during this?”

“Aw, he left Mom and me last year,” Josh answered. “That’s really when my mom started drinking too much and too often.”

“Sounds rough, Josh,” Matt said.

The lunch bell interrupted their conversation.

Josh stood up from the table. “Gotta go. Thanks for listening, guys. Kim, we never heard the cause of your funk, girl. Maybe we can meet up for lunch tomorrow. It feels good to off-load a little frustration with friends.”

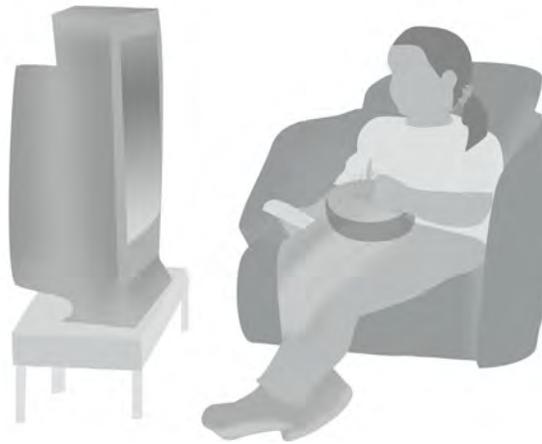
“Yeah, maybe,” Kim said. “See ya in science, Josh.”

Matt and Kim carried their lunch trays to the trash area.

“Kim, you sure didn’t eat much today. Are you on a diet or what?” Matt asked.

“Well, I’m trying to lose some weight, but it’s not that easy,” Kim said. “Maybe I’ll explain tomorrow. Take care.”

Chapter Three



Kim pushed herself out of her seat as the school bus squealed to a halt.

“Kimmy, this isn’t our stop!” yelled a voice from the rear of the bus.

“I’m walking the rest of the way, Anna. I’ll be there soon,” Kim replied to her younger sister. The walk would give her some much-needed exercise and time to think.

“You’re gonna be in so much trou—”

The bus door shut, muting the rest of Anna’s words. The bus lurched forward, and Kim waved to her sister.

Kim knew she’d get flack for not going directly home. Even though her brothers were older, she had the responsibility of making sure “baby Anna” got home safe and sound.

Anna’s only 1 year younger, Kim rationalized. And all she’ll do is get some soda and chips before turning on some stupid TV show. Not much can go wrong when all you do is eat and watch TV.

“No wonder we’re all so fat,” Kim asserted. “And I’m sick and tired of it.” She picked up her pace.

Both her parents worked, so takeout dinners were the norm. Last night, her mom carried home burgers and fries, which were devoured by her parents and siblings in nanoseconds. Then the group

migrated into the family room where the TV blared all evening. Her brothers were in high school and ate as if each meal was their last. They played football, so at least they got some exercise, but as hefty defensive tackles, their goal seemed to be to get bigger and not necessarily fitter.

What Kim really worried about was her parents' health problems, especially her dad. Last month, he passed out watching a football game and was rushed to the hospital.

A chill shook Kim as she remembered that day. I was so scared he was dead! It was a diabetic coma. And he's supposed to follow a careful diet so it won't happen again, but he doesn't.

How can I eat right, if no one else at home cares? What if Mom and Dad get really sick and can't take care of themselves ... or their children? Kim worried. They're the adults. They're supposed to care about being healthy, not their kid!

Kim turned the corner onto her street and peered down the road to see if her mom was home from work yet.

Maybe I'll go on a hunger strike, Kim thought. That might get their attention.

Matt quietly unlatched the front door and tiptoed into the house. He wanted to escape to his room and work on the new computer game he was creating.

"Is that you, Matt?" his mom yelled from the kitchen.

Matt continued on his escape mission and almost reached the stairs when Buddy caught his scent and bounded into the foyer with a wagging tail and a raucous welcoming bark.

"Aw, Bud, you blew my cover," Matt sighed. He scooped up his dog to give him a cuddle. "Phew, even you smell like smoke, puppy. Gross!"

"I thought I heard you, Matt. Come say hello."

Matt headed toward the kitchen. His mom was sitting at the kitchen table helping his 10-year-old twin sisters, Maryann and Michelle, with their homework.

"Hi, all," Matt said and opened the refrigerator. "What's up?"

"I've got a spelling test tomorrow. Can you quiz me?" Maryann asked.

"Nope, I've got my own work to do upstairs," Matt said, not mentioning that it wasn't school work. He chugged a glass of milk, grabbed a box of crackers from the counter, and started to backpedal to the door.

"Matt, I need you to stay with the girls while I run to the store. I'm down to my last cigarette,

and your dad won't be home for hours."

"Come on, Mom, you can wait a couple of hours. Or, better yet, just quit! You always say you want to give up smoking. So, how about stopping right now?" Matt challenged.

Maryann and Michelle glanced up from their books.

"Matt, you make it sound so easy. If it was, I'd have quit ages ago," his mom said as she stood up and grabbed her purse. "Michelle needs help with her math, and Maryann needs help with her spelling. I won't be long."

"Mom, did you know that secondhand smoke is harmful to those breathing it? Like your kids! And pets!" Matt said as his mom hurried to the garage.

"I won't be but a few minutes." Mom blew them all a kiss as she closed the door behind her.

"Geez, cigarettes rule in this house," Matt grumbled. "What can I do to make them stop smoking? It's gonna kill them!"

The twin's eyes were riveted on their older brother. This was not the first time this argument about smoking had come up.

"If either of you dare to light up a cigarette, I'll become your worst nightmare." He wagged a scolding finger at the girls.

"So, will you help us with our homework?" Maryann asked.

"Tell you what I'll do, Maryann. I'll write a little game ... let's name it SISI for Say It Spell It. You can record your spelling words, and then SISI will read them back to you, just like a real person would. I'll even set it up your room and you can use it anytime you have a spelling test coming up. Sound cool?"

"Very cool!" Maryann said. "But what about helping Michelle?"

"Mel, do you need any help?"

"Nope, not really, but if I get stuck on an arithmetic problem, can you help me?"

"Sure I will. In fact, I'll give you guys a secret knock to use on my door, which only the three of us will know. Okay, little M and Ms?"

Josh's stop was the last one on the school bus route, and he was the only student picked up and dropped off from this neighborhood. He and his mom had moved here after the divorce. Josh hated it. He was trapped in the boonies without even a canine friend. His dad had kept Willy, their

black lab.

“See ya, tomorrow, kid,” the bus driver said.

“Sure, George. Thanks for the ride.” Josh jumped off the last step and gave the driver a mock salute.

He dreaded dealing with his mom and hoped she had gone to work today. When he left this morning, he sneaked a quick look in her room to determine if she was awake. But no, she was slightly snoring and no doubt seriously hung-over.

Josh narrowed his eyes and peered up the driveway. *Drat, her car is still here. Bet she took another “sick” day.*

He entered through the back door and found his mom sitting at the kitchen table with her head propped up by one hand. She glanced up when Josh spoke.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Oh, Josh. I’m not feeling well. Must have a touch of flu or something.”

“Uh, Mom. Maybe a touch of booze is more like it. Don’t you remember last night? Like when some lady called Eva drove you home because you were too drunk to drive?”

“Josh, don’t you talk to me in that tone! I must have already been catching something yesterday. I only had a drink or two, which just hit me wrong with this virus coming on. I do appreciate Eva offering me a ride home, although I could have driven myself just fine.”

“What’s in the mug you’ve got there, Mom?”

“Coffee, of course.” His mom grabbed the mug abruptly and took a sip.

“So how did you get the car home?” Josh asked.

“I took the bus to get it and then went to work for a few hours, but it was obvious to Mr. Burke that I was sick, so he insisted I go home.”

“Lucky for you that the company allows so many sick days,” Josh said. He was concerned that it was just a matter of time before Mr. Burke canned his mom. Then what would they live on?

His mom glared at him.

Josh changed the subject. “Well, I’ve got a ton of homework, so think I’ll grab a snack and get started.”

“Josh, I ...” his mom whispered. “I’m sorry about last night. I really am. I should have just come home after work ... you know ... since I was feeling poorly. I’m just struggling with being

on my own and all.”

“Mom,” Josh said forcefully. “You’re not alone! You have me.”

“Yes, yes, I know. It won’t happen again.” Tears seeped out of her eyes, and she added, “You’re a good one, Josh.”

Josh poured himself a glass of milk and grabbed some peanuts before heading to his room. *Mom, he thought, what happened to you? Where is the mom I used to laugh and play with? Why can’t you see that it’s your stupid drinking that’s messing up your health ... and my life? It’s not fair.*

Josh pulled out his biology book and tore into the assignment. *Man, I do love this stuff. I hope I can be a scientist, or maybe a doctor, someday.*

Chapter Four



Kim found herself looking forward to lunch hour and hoping to eat with Josh and Matt again. She had decided to tell them her problem, even if it didn't appear as serious as their family situations. Particularly Josh.

Yes! Kim said to herself. Josh and Matt were already seated at the same table as yesterday. "Hey, can I join you guys?"

"Counting on it Kim," Matt patted the stool next to him. "Looks like you're eating rabbit food." He pointed to her plate filled with salad.

"Hey, don't give me any grief about that! I'm trying to eat healthy. Okay?"

"Hmm, seems we've hit a nerve," Matt said. "What's that about, Kim?"

"Well, my situation is probably not as bad as yours, but it feels terrible to me. My parents are ... well, fat ... I mean we're talking 'obese,' and it's causing all sorts of health problems. My dad's sick with diabetes, and my mom has high blood pressure and arthritis so bad in her knees that she hobbles around. Their doctors have told them that they must lose weight and eat healthy or ..." Kim took a deep breath and wiped away a tear. "... or ...they could get really, really sick ... maybe even die. I'm both scared and mad at them."

"Anyway, that's why I want to start eating healthy and lose weight. So I won't be like them when I grow up," Kim said. She felt lighter just by talking to someone about what was weighing so heavily on her shoulders.

“Wonder why they won’t try to eat healthier?” Matt asked.

“I think obesity is an addiction to food, just like your parents are addicted to tobacco and my mom to alcohol,” Josh said.

For a few moments, the three friends sat in silence and munched on their lunches.

“You know, we all share a common problem with our parents. Matt’s and my parents’ bad health habit may not have an immediate effect like your mom’s drinking, Josh,” Kim said. “But being overweight and smoking can cause all sorts of serious health problems.”

“Yeah,” Matt agreed. “Like smoking makes you much more likely to get lung cancer. And Mom and Dad don’t act like they care.”

Josh pounded his fist on the table and leaned forward. “Well, I say we take action to make them change their ways.”

“Like how? We’re just kids. They’re supposed to be the responsible adults,” Kim said. “We can’t change them ... can we?”

“Maybe. I’ve got an idea,” Matt said

The bell buzzed, announcing that the lunch period was over.

“See ya tomorrow. Same place? Same time? And be thinking of something you can do to convince your parents to quit their bad habits.” Matt waved as he left the table.

“Hey, Josh,” Kim asked, “Did you come up with a name of a scientist for us to research for our biology project? I didn’t get around to it last night.”

“I checked out some of the names on our list and came up with someone who sounds interesting to me. Dr. Michael DeBakey. He was a world-renowned heart surgeon, inventor, teacher, and international medical statesman. What’s really awesome is that he performed the first successful implantation of an artificial heart back in 1966, and he—”

“I’m sold,” Kim said. “This DeBakey guy sounds good to me. Lucky for me that you actually like doing this research stuff. See ya in science class.”

Chapter Five



The next day Matt met Kim as soon as she entered the cafeteria. “I got a plan! Grab lunch and meet us at The Table.”

Kim turned to see if anyone was seated at The Table, and Josh waved back at her.

All morning Kim had been craving a meatball sub and soda, but after Matt’s greeting she felt stronger. She chose a turkey wrap, apple, and iced tea.

“Tell her, Josh,” Matt said as she parked herself on the stool next to him.

“Okay, I asked Matt last night if he’d look up Michael DeBakey on his computer. He found this quote from the famous doctor that says ‘Good information is the best medicine.’”

Matt continued, “And I thought, ‘Hey, let’s get real, scientific facts about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco, and obesity and give them to our parents’ ... then, they’ll understand why we want them to change.’”

“Hmm, maybe,” Kim hesitated. “But, I doubt my parents will listen to me, and where would we get all this information?”

“I discovered an awesome Web site browsing the Internet,” Matt said. “Libraries are a great place for information. Right? So, I typed in ‘largest medical library’ and found a listing for the National Library of Medicine, which is part of the U.S National Institutes of Health or NIH. You would not believe all the information on zillions—well, at least hundreds—of health topics, in-

cluding our three.”

“What’s the Web site? I’ll check it out,” Kim said.

“Best source for our purposes is MedlinePlus, and then just search whatever you want to know about,” Matt said. “If you guys wanta come to my house over the weekend, I’ve got a sweet computer setup in my room. I know, I know ... fits right in with my nerd personality.”

“Works for me,” Josh said. “Could Kim and I use your computer to check out more about Dr. DeBakey? Gotta be lots of info on the Internet about him, and maybe NIH and its National Library of Medicine would be a starting point.”

“How about it, Kim?” Matt asked. “Want to come over Saturday and do some research?”

Kim was excited to be included. Matt was a computer whiz. The math game he wrote last year had won a national technology award. She didn’t know Josh as well. Sort of serious, but really cute and nice. She smiled and quickly replied, “Great, but don’t tell any of my friends ... I don’t want to get the nerd label stuck to me ’cause I’m hanging around you guys.”

Chapter Six



Kim grimaced at the glob on the platter. It didn't look at all like the photo in the cookbook.

On the way home from school, she had called her mom at work.

“Mom, how about if I cook dinner tonight?”

“Kimmy, what's with the sudden interest in cooking?” her mom chuckled.

“Well, I've decided I want to learn. I'll stop at the grocery store on the way home. Okay?”

“Sure, dumpling. Just remember you need to fill up three boys' bellies—your brothers and your dad. And bring Anna with you to the store. I don't want her going home alone, like yesterday.”

“Mom, stop with the 'dumpling' bit. I hate that nickname!”

“Oh, we are touchy today, aren't we? I'm going to be starved! Haven't had a chance to eat lunch, just vending machine snacks.”

Anna stepped into the kitchen and stared at the mass of yellow goo. “Yuck, don't tell me that's dinner,” she said. “No way anyone in this house is gonna eat that!”

Kim shrugged. “I know. I know. It’s gross. It’s supposed to be a tofu turkey, but something must have gone wrong. Now what am I going to do?”

The back door opened and her dad, mom, and brothers entered the kitchen. They caught sight of the dinner platter and eight eyes flashed to Kim.

Before they could utter a word, Kim apologized. “Okay, this dinner idea hasn’t worked out quite like I expected, but this,” she pointed to the blob, “might taste better than it looks. It’s very healthy. And I’ve made broccoli and low-fat coleslaw to go with it.”

“Well, this is real sweet of you, Kim,” her dad said. “Let me take a bite. I bet it tastes great.”

Her dad took a modest bite and grimaced as he swallowed.

“Kimmy, to be honest, I can’t eat this for dinner,” Dad admitted. “It tastes like ... paste. Anyone want takeout?”

“Yes!” her siblings roared.

Tears started to stream down Kim’s face. “I want us to begin eating healthy. That’s all I want. Not just fattening food from a fast food joint, not all the time.”

Her mom put an arm around Kim, “Kim, dumpling—”

Kim glared at her.

“Oh, honey, you’ve got to appreciate the humor in this. Your heart was in the right place, but we’re starving, and this meal isn’t going to cut it. Come on, cheer up. What do you want us to pick up for you?”

“Nothing. Leave me alone.” Kim stormed out of the kitchen.

One of her brothers poked a hole in the mock turkey and said, “Hmm, wonder if the cat will eat this? Nah, probably not.”

As Kim flew up the stairs, she heard the family laughing and placing orders for fried chicken and biscuits. She dashed into her room and slammed the door. With frustration propelling her fingers, she texted to Matt, “dinner wz a totL dZaster. Tell u 2moro.”

Matt contemplated the risk in his plan, and with a sigh clicked the “Print” icon. He read through the list of facts he discovered on the Environmental Protection Agency’s Web site on secondhand smoke.

- In the United States, cigarette smoking is responsible for about

1 in 5 deaths annually, or about 438,000 deaths per year.

- An estimated 38,000 of these deaths are the result of second-hand smoke exposure.
- Secondhand smoke exposure causes respiratory symptoms in children and slows their lung growth.
- Secondhand smoke contains at least 250 chemicals known to be toxic, including more than 50 that can cause cancer.
- Secondhand smoke causes coughing, phlegm, chest discomfort, and reduced lung function in nonsmokers.
- Children exposed to secondhand smoke at home are more likely to have middle ear disease and reduced lung function.
- There is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke exposure. Even brief exposure can be dangerous.
- For every person who dies of a smoking-related disease, 20 more people suffer with at least 1 serious illness from smoking.

“Okay, time to take action.” Matt rubbed his palms together. His parents would return from the Town Hall meeting, and this deed must be done before they got home.

Maryann peeked through the half-closed door to her parents’ bedroom and whispered, “What-cha doing, Matt?”

Matt startled. “Oh, geez, Maryann. The better question is what are you doing sneaking up on me?”

“Not sneaking,” Maryann defended herself. “Thought Mom and Daddy had come home early. Why are all those loose cigarettes in that bag? You’re not going to smoke them, are you?”

“No! Of course not,” Matt said. “And neither are Mom and Dad. Now, scat! ...and, Maryann, if you and Michelle hear some yelling later tonight ... do not leave your room. Okay?”

“Why not?”

“You don’t want to know. Trust me on that one. Promise?”

“I guess so ... you gonna be in trouble again, Matt?”

“Yep, big time. Now, off you go. Back to bed.”

Maryann trotted to her room, and Matt continued his mission.

“Matthew! Come down here, now!”

Matt heard his dad shouting from the kitchen and knew they had discovered his surprise. “Here we go,” he whispered and took a deep breath.

“What is the meaning of this?” His dad held up an empty cigarette pack and crumbled it.

His mom’s expression of horror told him they realized he’d emptied every cigarette pack.

“Did you look inside the packs, Dad?”

His dad pulled out the folded paper from the pack and opened it. He read out loud, “Second-hand smoke contains at least 250 chemicals known to be toxic, including more than 50 that can cause cancer.”

“Hear that, Dad? Your smoking is not only hurting your health. It’s—”

“Matt, stop! This has got to be one of the dumbest stunts you’ve ever pulled. Cigarettes are expensive, and we don’t have money to throw away. You’ll pay back every penny of what you’ve destroyed tonight. I’m very disappointed in you.”

His dad slammed the door shut. His mom stared at Matt with her arms crossed as they listened to the car squeal out of the driveway.

“Not smart, Matt. What were you thinking?” his Mom asked.

“That just maybe you’d read the facts about what smoking is doing to your health ... and your kids.”

“Well, this certainly wasn’t the way to get us to stop smoking, son. Now go to bed before your dad returns home. We’ll discuss the consequences of your action tomorrow.”

“Can’t wait,” Matt muttered under his breath, as he hastened toward his bedroom.

“Are you okay, Matt?” Maryann and Michelle asked through the crack in their bedroom door.

“Just fine, little Ms.’night.”

Matt sat down at his desk chair and checked his phone for messages. He read Kim’s message and replied, “We can compare disaster stories. I’ve just had a whopper.”

Josh flung his backpack on the table. His mom wasn't there. He hoped that meant she was at work and would come home for dinner.

Why can't I have my old life back? Somehow I've become the victim in this life story, Josh thought. Kitchen cabinets banged open and closed as he hunted for a snack.

Josh snatched a cookie box from the shelf and spied several bottles resting on their sides and hiding in the corner. "What's that?"

"Ah! So this is where she stashes her liquor!" Josh carried the bottles to the sink, preparing to empty each one and replace them back on the shelf. He unscrewed the top of the first bottle.

Dumping them probably won't make any difference, he told himself. *She'll just buy more.*

He sniffed the bottle's content and recoiled at the unpleasant smell.

"Hmm ...," Josh's forehead wrinkled. He opened the refrigerator and snatched a soda.

"Josh, are you home?"

No lights were lit in the house, and Josh's mom tried to remember if she was supposed to pick him up at the library on the way home from work. She didn't think so.

She flicked on the kitchen light. No Josh, but on the table sat a can of Coke and a bottle of her vodka. A bolt of fear shook her body. She hurried into the living room and switched on more lights. No Josh.

"Oh, hel-looo there, Mommeeee," slurred Josh from the top of the stairs.

"Joshua, come down here immediately!"

Josh proceeded to sit, then bumped his butt down each step. "Whee!" he giggled and grinned broadly at his mom.

"What the hell have you done?"

"Juss felt a little under the water ... er ... weather, Mother, so ingested-ed some of your special medicine," Josh explained. "Boy, oh, boy! Sure does make me feel bedder."

"Josh, how dare you get drunk! How could you do this to me? I ... I depend on you." Her eyes swelled with tears.

Josh's demeanor suddenly transformed. The drunken stagger transformed into a sober stance. He said softly, "Mom. I'm not drunk. I'm acting. I wanted to show you what it's like when the shoe is on the other foot."

She stared at him and then glanced at the kitchen door.

"And Mom, there is no more booze hidden in the kitchen. I dumped it all. Every drop. The stuff is making you sick, and ... not yourself. Please stop drinking, Mom. Please."

Josh noticed his mom's shoulders quaking as she wandered toward the kitchen.

Terrific, I've made her cry. Way to go, Self.

Josh shook his head and slowly ascended the stairs. He slammed his bedroom door shut and pressed his fingers to his temples.

Chapter Seven



Josh plopped down at The Table and groaned, “You guys are never gonna believe how bad I screwed up last night.”

Kim said, “You’re in tough competition, Josh. My evening was a total fiasco.”

“I pretended to be smashed, thinking I’d show my mom what it’s like to be on the receiving end of a drunk encounter. I’m kinda ashamed ... I made her cry.”

“But maybe your act worked, and she’ll quit drinking, Josh,” Kim offered.

“Nah, I don’t think so.” Josh’s brow wrinkled. “She wasn’t awake when I left this morning, so I’m betting there was another hidden liquor cache. I’m out of ideas.”

Matt said, “Sounds like the planets were aligned for a series of major mess-ups yesterday. Kim texted me last night about her disaster, and I’m in a heap of trouble from my ‘immature actions.’”

“I don’t have your e-mail address or cell number, Josh,” Kim explained. “Or I’d have contacted you as well.”

“Yeah, well, this is embarrassing. We don’t have a computer at home and I don’t have my own cell phone,” Josh said. “I’ve gotta get an after-school job so I can earn some money and join the rest of you in the 21st century.”

“Guess what Kim did?” Matt chuckled. “She made a tofu turkey for her family’s dinner.”

“No way!” Josh managed his first smile since he’d sat down. “What happened?”

“Well, it wasn’t a hit. And I stormed out of the kitchen in a huff,” Kim admitted.

Josh bit his lip to ward off an emerging laugh. “Um, maybe you could cook something a little less ambitious next time.”

“No next time! If they want to stay fat and sick, so be it.” She crossed her arms and scowled.

“If we buy the parts separately, I can build you one,” Matt said.

The other two stared at Matt and responded in unison, “Huh?”

“A computer. If Josh wants a computer, I can build one cheap. Done plenty of them,” Matt added.

“I’ll take you up on that, Matt. Thanks!” Josh said. “By the way what was your screw-up?”

Matt smirked. “Oh, I tried to educate my parents about the dangers of smoking and second-hand smoke, and they were not very receptive to my creative methodology.”

The bell rang, announcing the end of the lunch period.

“So are you both coming to my house tomorrow? I’ll power up ‘the lab’ and we’ll have some fun surfing the Web.”

“Yep, I’ll be there,” Josh said.

“Me, too,” Kim added.

“And, Kim,” Matt teased. “No need to bring any food.”

Kim shoved him and laughed, “How about some cauliflower cookies?”

“Your room is awesome.” Josh admired the array of computers and electronic games with piles of equipment pieces stacked in each corner.

“How do you find anything in this mess ... oh, sorry ... in this collection of ... stuff?” Kim asked.

Matt changed the subject, “Listen, we need a strategy for how we can persuade our parents to change their bad health habits.”

Josh shook his head. “My mom is in total denial. I doubt she’ll listen to me.”

“My parents are stuck in a rut. They know the junk they eat isn’t good for them. My worst fear is that something happens to one of them ... or both of them!” Kim confessed.

“Yeah, it is pretty amazing how even when they are presented with the evidence, they won’t change. My mom and dad always talk about how they need to stop smoking, but nicotine is a strong addiction,” Matt said.

Minutes passed as the trio shared a contemplative silence.

“Hmm, a wild idea is percolating in my brain,” Matt said.

“What?” Josh and Kim’s eyes locked onto Matt’s.

“Okay, we need action to get our parents’ attention. And what do our parents fear the most ... about their children, that is?”

“There are obvious things, like their kids getting sick or even dying, but, duh, we’re not going to do that!” Josh said.

“My parents worry that I’ll get bad grades or ... make dinner.” Kim giggled.

“I’m thinking along the lines of a bold, risky action,” Matt said in a sinister tone and rubbed his hands together.

“Like what?” Josh said.

“Listen up,” Matt spelled out his inspiration.

“Running away would certainly get my mom’s attention,” Josh said.

Kim frowned. “Matt, do you really think your aunt would be okay with us hiding out at her house?”

“Don’t know,” Matt replied. “But I do know Aunt Judith hates my parent’s smoking habit.”

“This is starting to sound like a plan of action!” Josh extended his hand.

Matt slapped his palm to the back of Josh’s hand, and the boys looked at Kim.

“I’m in!” Then Kim smacked her hand on top of the stack.

“Yes!” the friends concurred simultaneously, raising their hands up and into a high-five gesture of enthusiasm.

Chapter Eight



On Monday, the threesome gathered at The Table.

“Matt, you’ve transformed my life by giving me a new computer,” Josh said.

“Not new, and I didn’t give it to you. It’s on loan until you can buy some parts and I build you a lean and mean machine,” Matt said. “Were you able to get it hooked up to the Internet and find the National Library of Medicine site?”

“Sure did, and not only did I find great stuff about the dangers of alcohol, the site had info on Dr. DeBakey. He just died in 2008 at the age of 99, and what an incredible doctor! His specialty was heart and lung surgery, and he performed over 50,000 surgeries. He actually was one of the first experts to publicize a link between smoking and lung cancer, and ...”

Matt and Kim exchanged glances.

Kim raised her eyebrows. “He gets excited about science stuff. Just can’t seem to help himself.”

“Yo, Josh!” Matt gave Josh a mock slap across the face. “Fine that you’re enthused about your science paper, but come on, let’s return to our plan.”

“Oops, sorry. But thanks again for the computer loan.”

“How did your mom react to the computer?” Kim asked.

“She hasn’t noticed yet ... ’course that could be because I’ve got the computer stored on a table in my closet, and I’m connecting to the Internet through a neighbor’s wireless network system. And, yes, I did ask him if it was okay.”

“Okay, back to the plan, guys,” Kim said. “Matt, have you called your aunt yet?”

The lunch bell interrupted their discussion.

“I’m going to call her tonight. My parents are going out to dinner, and I’m babysitting. I’ll let you know after I chat with her.” Matt waved and headed to his next class.

Josh balled up his empty lunch bag and slam-dunked it into the trash.

Kim followed Josh to the cafeteria exit and asked, “Did you know Dr. DeBakey operated on the hearts of famous people, like our Presidents John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon, plus Russian President Boris Yeltsin?”

Josh added, “Awesome responsibility. You sure won’t want to mess up on those guys, would ya?”

“Sleep tight, M and Ms. See you in the morning.” Matt flicked off the twin’s bedroom light. Maryann was still afraid of the dark, so he left the door slightly ajar. He heard the girls chattering as he disappeared into his room and shut the door. He yanked his cell phone from his pocket and called his aunt.

After several rings, the voice on the receiver snarled, “Okay, okay! I told you’d have it finished by tomorrow morning. Quit bugging me.”

“Hi, is that you, Aunt Judith?” Matt asked tentatively. “This is your nephew, Matt.”

“Ha, sorry about that, Matthew,” Aunt Judith laughed. “Thought it was my editor. I’ve got an article due, like yesterday, and he’s nagging me to get it finished. Gosh, is everyone okay?”

“Everyone’s fine, Aunt Judith. I have a favor to ask.” Matt hesitated. “You know how much you hate that Dad and Mom smoke?”

“Gawd, you’re not kidding. That’s why I almost never come visit you all. I can’t stand the stench of cigarettes, and your father gets so mad when I won’t let him or your mother smoke in my house. He won’t even come visit me anymore ... my own brother. Why, I barely know those twin sisters of yours. I remember when your mom brought them home from the hospital. Wee little things and they smelled of smoke. I told your dad then that—”

“Aunt Judith,” Matt interrupted. “I totally agree with you.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I can’t stand it anymore,” Matt continued.

“You can’t? But what can you do?”

“I’ve got a plan.” Matt bit his lip. “And I need your help.”

“Spit it out, but I reserve the right to say ‘no.’ Your so-called plans are legendary, Matthew. Ha, I remember the time you were going to give the twins haircuts and—”

“Let me explain,” Matt began.

After the phone conversation, Matt wiped the sweat from his forehead and texted Kim and Josh. “Aunt is in. Wil Xpln @ lunch.”

The trio agreed on which weekend to launch their scheme and spent their time together in preparation.

“Kim, let’s read through the checklist again,” Matt said.

“Okay ... computer, cell phone, homework stuff ...” She nervously drummed her pencil on her notebook. “You certain this will work, Matt?”

“Nope, not certain,” Matt confessed. “But it should shake things up on the home front. And the time has come to take extreme action.”

“I agree,” Josh said. “Kim, you don’t need to sign on, you know. We won’t hold it against you.”

“Hey, speak for yourself,” Matt said. “I think we must kill her if she backs out or maybe cut her tongue out, so she won’t talk.”

Kim smiled. “You guys can’t get rid of me. Plus, you need me. Neither of you even thought to add toothbrush and deodorant to the list.”

The boys rolled their eyes and in unison said, “Riiiiight.”

Chapter Nine



Okay, tomorrow is D-Day. Everyone ready for countdown? Matt texted his partners.

Yep, my mom thinks I'm going to a friend's house after school, and I've got the last of the supplies stored in my school locker, Kim replied.

All set. Sure hope my mom finds note tomorrow, Josh typed.

"I'm soooo nervous," Kim confessed over lunch. "I had second thoughts this morning, until I went downstairs for breakfast. My dad was digging into a big bowl of sugary cereal drowning in cream and with marshmallows in it! I had heard on TV about how high fiber cereals with whole grains are better for you and can help keep blood pressure lower and cholesterol levels healthy. When I mentioned this to him, he got all defensive and annoyed with me ... I was only trying to help."

Josh patted her shoulder. "Don't take it personally, Kim. Our parents' bad health habits control them. They're addicts, and I'm not positive what it will take for them to be able to change. We can hope our scheme might help and—"

"T-A-P-A-S," Matt interrupted.

“Huh?” said his coconspirators.

“We need a name for our organization,” Matt said.

“We’re an organization?” Kim said.

“Yeah, we’re an activist organization,” Matt continued, “We’re using action to achieve a result, and that is activism ... so, we’re activists.”

“What’s that got to do with ‘tapas,’ or whatever you said?” Josh said.

“Isn’t tapas, a kind of Spanish food?” Kim asked. “I saw the word in a cookbook.”

“I ran across the Sanskrit word ‘tapas,’ which according to a Hinduism dictionary literally means “heat” but is used in the psychic energy sense.” Matt held up his smartphone. “It says here that tapas is about ‘positive change, transformation and, purification of one’s nature.’ And isn’t that what we are demanding of our parents?”

“Ooo-kay.” Josh sounded skeptical.

“We do want them to change in a positive way,” Kim agreed.

“Well, I definitely think we should give ourselves a name, and if we tag ourselves the **Teens Against Parent Addictions Squad**, then the acronym, TAPAS, also has a symbolic meaning. What-cha think?” Matt asked.

The lunch bell interrupted high-fives and grins.

“See ya this afternoon, my fellow TAPAS members.” Matt waved.

“He is one of a kind,” Josh chuckled. “How does one happen to be looking at a Hinduism dictionary?”

“That’s so Matt,” Kim chuckled. “By the way, did you get a chance to review my outline for our DeBaKey report?”

“Looked fine. We can discuss later ...” He swiveled around to ensure no one was in earshot. “at Aunt Judith’s.”

“Right. Ciao for now.” Kim hurried off to her next class.

Chapter Ten



After school, the trio tagged up and hiked three blocks to the J5 bus stop. Once on board, they settled in the back of the bus and stared out the window.

Kim gasped, “I can’t believe we are really doing this! How long will it take us to get there, Matt?”

“We change buses at the Central Bus Terminal, and then it’s about 10 more miles. When we get off, it’s less than a mile to Aunt Judith’s house.”

“And you’re sure your aunt is okay with our plot? Will she be home when we get there? What’s she like?” Kim grilled Matt.

“Aunt Judith is ... um ... well ... a bit of a character. In a nice way, though. You’ll see.” Matt raised his eyebrows. “She doesn’t have any kids, and her job is her life. Said she’d probably be at the office until 7 or 8 tonight. I’m to call her cell phone when we get there.”

“How do we get in the house, if she’s not there?” Matt asked.

“She told me where she hides an extra key. We’re to make ourselves comfortable, but not make a mess.” Matt smiled as he considered the irony of his aunt’s directive.

Matt unlocked the back door, and the teens stepped inside the kitchen. The room was

littered with newspapers and books stacked on the table and chairs. A filing cabinet with a half-open drawer of overflowing files rested next to a littered computer desk.

“Eh, Matt. Guess you inherited your neatness genes from your aunt!” joked Kim.

Matt spotted a note on the counter and read aloud to his friends. “Welcome TAPAS (did I get the name right?) Make yourselves at home but don’t move my papers around. Doesn’t look like it, but there is a system to the chaos. I’m in middle of a project. Help yourself to the chili simmering in the crock pot and any other food you find. I’ll be home sometime after dinner.”

“Okay, let’s get set up.” Matt dropped his backpack from his shoulder and dragged it into the living room. Within minutes, the space was littered with computer parts, resembling entrails from a dissected robot. Matt sat cross-legged on the floor typing into his laptop. “Almost there. I’ve got my WiFi router set up, so we can connect from any room.”

Josh reclined on the sofa and propped his feet up on the coffee table. He aimed the remote at the TV. “Awesome, we get the movie channels!” He glanced over at Kim and asked, “You hungry? Let’s fix dinner!”

“No tofu, pleeeeeease, no tofu!” Matt gagged.

“Okay, okay!” Kim laughed. “I spotted some lettuce in the ’frig, so I’ll make a salad. You guys dish up the chili. Deal?”

“Deal!” said Matt and Josh.

Kim’s mom glanced at the sealed envelope on the kitchen counter. She placed the grocery bag down next to it. “Anna, Kim, I’m home!”

Anna’s eyes were glued to the TV screen. Cheese puffs filled her mouth.

“Hi, hon.” Her mother kissed the top of her younger daughter’s head. “Is Kimmy around?”

“Nope. Said she was going to a friend’s house.”

“Oh, that’s right. Probably working on her science project again with that new boy. What is his name?”

The back door slammed. John, Jr. and George poured into the kitchen, stripping off football pads and cleats as they chattered, “I’m starved, mom! We had an awesome football practice today. We are definitely going to clobber those Wildcats tomorrow. When’s dinner? Let’s get pizza!”

“What’s in the envelope?” Kim’s dad asked as he joined the crowd in the kitchen.

“Oh, I forgot to look,” Mom said. “Who is it for?”

“This is odd.” Dad noticed the sealed envelope was addressed in fancy script and held it out for his wife to read.

To Mr. and Mrs. Thompson

“What in the world?” Kim’s mom grabbed the envelope and tore it open. She read the note out loud.

Dear Mom and Dad,

First, I love you both very much. Please don't be angry with me, but I can't live at home any more and watch you get sick and sicker from being overweight and not eating healthy.

I've gone to live temporarily with my friend Matt's aunt. All future communications will come via e-mail messages. I am safe, so don't worry about that. Worry about yourselves and your other children.

Much love,

Kimmy

Only background noise from the TV was audible. The Thompson family silently digested the words.

Mr. Thompson reached for the phone. “What is Matt’s home phone number? I’m calling his parents.”

Mrs. Thompson opened the kitchen drawer and pulled out the school’s phone directory.

Maryann and Michelle heard their dad come in the front door and dashed down the stairs to greet him. One arm encircled the girls in a hug. With his other hand, he sorted through the day’s mail pile on the foyer table.

“Hmm,” he said and extracted one of the envelopes. It was a used envelope with a new mailing label, addressed

To be read only by
Matt Stern’s parents

He carefully opened the envelope and removed the typed note.

“Michelle, Maryann. Please go up to your room. I need to speak with your mom alone for a few minutes.”

As the girls reached their bedroom, they heard a muffled wail from their mom, “Call your sister, now!”

“Uh-oh,” Michelle whispered in a shaky voice. “I bet Matt’s in trouble again.”

The girls sat silently on the edge of their bunk bed. The quiet was disrupted by the telephone ringing.

Josh’s mom got home from work later than usual. The house was dark, and she wracked her brain to remember if he’d arranged to go out with friends tonight.

I’m glad he’s happy at school. He was so angry about moving and the whole divorce business. He blames me for the divorce, which isn’t fair, she thought.

“Josh, you home?”

No answer. *I wish I had asked for the full names of those new friends. I don’t have any way to contact them.*

She flicked on the kitchen light and opened the refrigerator. Food remained on the shelves. *Well, he definitely hasn’t set foot here this afternoon.*

I’m so exhausted. Think I’ll have a little nap until Josh arrives.

She poured a Scotch on the rocks and strolled through the shadowy living room to her bedroom. The letter propped on the couch went undetected.

Chapter Eleven



The trio sat clustered around Matt’s computer. It was 8 p.m., and they had been tweaking and wordsmithing the e-mails for the past 2 hours.

The front door banged open. “Hello, hello!” roared Aunt Judith, who carried an overflowing briefcase under one arm and a stack of folders under the other. She tossed the load on the floor and spread her arms open in a welcoming gesture. “Aha, so here dwell the three musketeers! Assembled and armed with authoritative information from the National Institutes of Health, the TAPAS prepare to use the art of persuasion in a valiant effort to help their parents confront their bad health habits. Can the children convince their parents to conquer their addictions for the good of their own health and their children? The crusade is about to commence.”

Aunt Judith laughed at her mock news bulletin. “Welcome to my humble, and alas a bit cluttered, abode!”

Matt dislodged himself from his friends and sprinted over to give his aunt a hug. “You’re awesome, Aunt Judith! We really appreciate your support. Kim and Josh, say hello to my amazing Aunt Judith.”

Kim and Josh eyes remained transfixed on Matt’s aunt as they said in sync, “Hi!”

“Aunt Judith, your phone rang a couple of times,” Matt added. “It could be Dad. He’s gonna be fuming.” Matt rolled his eyes. “We’re about to send our first e-mail messages to our parents. Do you want to read them first?”

“No,” she answered. “This is your campaign and should be written with words emerging from your own hearts and souls. I’m going to get some supper. And I never check my phone messages until after I satisfy my hunger.”

The teens regrouped around the computer and Matt asked, “Okay, do we all agree with the message?”

“Geez, my parents are going to be so mad!” Kim said.

“We want to get their attention. If it takes getting them angry, then maybe they’ll listen up,” Josh said. He wasn’t as worried about his mom being mad as her being baffled ... and drinking to numb that confusion.

Kim reread her e-letter.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I don’t understand why you refuse to try to lose weight and eat healthy when your doctors tell you how your weight is causing serious health problems. I am scared something bad will happen to you.

You are addicts—food addicts. Did you know that obesity is a killer? According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Among adults, overweight and obesity are associated with increased mortality rates, as well as elevated risks of heart disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer.”

I demand that you pledge to lose 10 percent of your current weight during the next 6 months. According to the NIH National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, this amount of weight loss can delay or maybe prevent some of these diseases.

Come on, Mom? Dad? Get healthy. You owe it to yourselves and your children to be as well as you can be.

Matt, Josh, and I created a group called the TAPAS (Teens Against Parent Addictions Squad) and we have written some “Get Healthy” contracts. One is attached. Sign the contract, and then I will come home.

I love you and want you to live long enough to enjoy your future grandchildren some day.

Love, Kim

“It’s kinda dramatic, guys,” Kim fretted. “Demand? Future grandchildren? I wonder if I should soften it a bit.”

“Kim,” Josh sighed. “We’ve been through this a hundred times. If we don’t come on strong, they won’t take us seriously. Do you want your parents to change or not?”

“Okay, okay. I hear you.” She turned her head away to hide the tears. “They will be so mad at me.”

Kim hit SEND and sank down into the couch. Suddenly, she felt exhausted.

Matt reviewed his e-note one more time. He knew his parents would be furious with him, but that happened a lot. His e-mail was similar to Kim’s, but insisted that his mom and dad quit smoking entirely within two weeks of signing the contract.

In his research, the National Library of Medicine’s (NLM’s) MedlinePlus Web site on quitting smoking had a link to the government’s Department of Health and Human Service’s Web site at <http://www.smokefree.gov/>. Its proposed process included “thinking about quitting” and “preparing to quit” phases before the actual quitting day. A couple of weeks seemed sufficient. He included the Web site address in his message, hoping they’d look at it.

“Here goes,” Matt said and hit SEND. He was pumped about finally taking action and jogged a victory lap around the room.

“Okay, my turn.” Josh traded places with Matt and parked himself in front of the computer.

How to communicate with Josh’s mom had presented a dilemma. He could send e-mails to her work computer, but Josh didn’t want to get her office involved. They decided to set up an e-mail account for her on Josh’s new computer. He would leave the computer powered on with detailed instructions on how to retrieve the e-mails. As long as she found the first note and didn’t panic, it could work.

“I sure hope she’s strong enough to handle this,” Josh said. “But I can’t stand watching her self-destruct.”

Josh’s e-note demanded that she acknowledge her addiction to alcohol and seek professional help. He provided the link to the MedlinePlus site on alcoholism. The site provided an impressive list of informative links, including to support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous.

Maybe if she can read about the symptoms of alcoholism in the privacy of her home, then maybe she’ll recognize that she is an alcoholic and needs help.

“It’ll be okay, Josh,” Kim said. “Your idea of our demanding a contract forces our parents to face reality. Your mom will need to recognize that she has a problem.”

“I got the idea from the Student Behavior Contract we had to sign at the beginning of school. Seems as if we kids must be held accountable for ‘acceptable behavior,’ then why shouldn’t parents be accountable for healthy behavior?” Josh said.

Josh smashed the SEND key. Kim and Matt exchanged glances.

“Let’s watch a movie. Next action is theirs.” Josh stood up.

The phone rang, and the trio’s attention was redirected toward the kitchen. Aunt Judith answered, “Hello? Oh, hi, Mike, thought you’d be calling soon.”

“Uh-oh,” Matt groaned. “That’s Dad.”

Chapter Twelve



Aunt Judith held the receiver away from her ear. Her brother’s voice projected across the room. Individual words were not distinguishable, but the anger was evident.

“Mike,” Aunt Judith said when he paused to breathe, “I’m going to put you on the speaker phone, so we can all hear you.” She pressed a button and hung up the receiver unit. The teens collected around the kitchen table.

“What the heck is going on, Judith?” Mike asked. “Are Matt and Kim at your house? I got a call from Kim’s parents hours ago. They are frantic with worry. Is this another of Matt’s hare-brained ideas? Wait ’til I—”

“Bro, just shut up for a second and take a deep breath,” Judith interrupted. “The kids are hanging out with me for now. They’re okay. Matt and his friends needed a safe haven to use for their control center.”

“Their WHAT? Control center? To control what?” Mike roared.

“Look, Mike,” Judith appeased. “Matt sent you an e-mail a few minutes ago. You and Mary need to read the message. Please call Kim’s parents and Josh’s mom, will you? Let them know their children are safe and sound. Tell them to read their e-mails. These teens are trying to convey an important message to you parents. So read and think. And then we’ll discuss tomorrow. Okay?”

“Hold on, Judith. Did you mention another name? Who’s Josh?” Mike questioned.

Aunt Judith glanced over at the teens and raised her eyebrows. “Mike, I’ve got three of ’em here. Josh, better give him your mom’s name and phone number.”

Mrs. Thompson hung up the phone and said, “That was Mike Stern.”

“What’d he say?” Mr. Thompson looked up from the sink where he was washing the dinner dishes.

“Well, Kim and Matt are at his sister’s along with another friend. Mike said the teens are communicating through e-mails, and we should read Kim’s.”

Mr. Thompson wiped his wet hands on his jeans and turned to his wife. “Is she okay? Where does the aunt live? I’m picking her up right now.”

“Let’s read her e-mail first and then decide what we want to do.”

Josh’s mom opened her eyes. *What time is it?*

She glanced at the clock on her bedside table. *Oh my, it’s after eight! Josh must have let me sleep through dinner again.*

She sat up on the bed and stretched. Her extended hand collided with the bedside telephone, which toppled to the floor.

“Oops.” She picked up the phone and placed it back on the table with the headset upside down.

She tottered into the living room. “Josh? Josh?” No response. *That’s odd. Maybe he dozed off as well.*

When she spotted the paper on the couch, she felt relieved that he had left her information on his whereabouts. She read the handwritten words from her son.

Dear Mom,

I have gone away with some friends. Don't worry about me. I am fine. I have decided the time has come for me to take action.

I will be communicating with you via e-mails. Look in the closet of my room. I have left a computer in there with

instructions on how you can read the messages I will send
shortly.

Love you, Josh

“Action? Take action about what? If Josh leaves home, I’ll ... I’ll have nothing to live for!” she said with a tremor in her voice.

She dropped the note and sprinted into her son’s room. A computer sat on a small table inside his closet, with typed instructions resting on the keyboard.

The paper trembled in her hands. *I can do this! I’ll get a little drink first to calm my nerves.*

With glass in hand, she hurried upstairs to read his e-mail message. She gawked at the computer screen in disbelief. *Alcoholic? I’m not an alcoholic. Where did that idea come from? I can stop drinking any time I want. I wonder if I should get in touch with Bill. No, he’ll blame me for losing his son. Or make Josh come live with him.* She started to compose a response, but deleted every attempt.

I’ll send a response in the morning. I’ll be thinking clearer then. She took another generous swallow from her drink. Some liquid trickled down her chin, and she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Chapter Thirteen



When the alarm buzzed at 7 a.m., Josh’s mom rubbed her eyes and moaned. Slowly, the memory of last night rebooted in her brain. She supported her throbbing head between her hands and deliberated about what to do next.

I’ll call Lara. She hoped it was not too early, but her sister was an early bird. Their relationship was a bit shaky at the moment, but who else could she contact?

She reached for the phone and placed it to her ear. The line was dead. *What now?* She fumbled with the headset, shaking it and clicking all the buttons. The dial tone returned with a buzz signaling a new message. *Guess the phone was off the hook.* She dialed her answering service number.

There were three recordings from Mike Stern, the father of one of Josh’s friends. He sounded more aggravated than worried about the kids. Or was he annoyed that she hadn’t answered her phone? She gingerly tottered to Josh’s room to reread his e-mail.

Her head pulsated as she dialed Mr. Stern’s phone number. “Hello, this is Katia Anders, Josh’s mom. Sorry for not calling back last night. My phone ... was out of order. Do you know where Josh is?”

Kim opened the guest bedroom door and yawned. “Morning, guys. How’d you sleep?” While Kim enjoyed the luxury of a comfy bed, the boys camped out on the sofas in the living room.

“Matt snores ... big time!” Josh complained.

“Maybe, but you kept waking me up with explosive farts all night! No chili beans for dinner tonight,” Matt said.

Kim laughed. She was accustomed to boy talk from her brothers. “Oh, I could so use a cup of coffee right now.”

“Fix anything you want for breakfast. Makings are in the ’frig.” Aunt Judith spoke from the kitchen table. “Have you checked if any parents responded to the e-mails you sent last night?”

“I’m gonna log into my account right now.” Matt swung his laptop onto the coffee table and flipped the top up.

The trio huddled around Matt’s computer.

“Hi, Sara and John,” welcomed Mary Stern. “Come on in. I’m glad you came over, so we can talk in person.”

Mike Stern walked in the foyer and shook hands with Kim’s parents.

“Hi, Mike, we took your suggestion and agreed not to ‘negotiate’—I guess that’s what you’d call it—with Kim until we parents had a chance to discuss their ‘rebellion.’” Sara bit her lower lip. “Are you sure they’re okay?”

“Oh, yeah.” Mike frowned. “They’re quite comfortable at my sister’s house. Unfortunately, Matt has an ally with my sister, who detests that Mary and I smoke.”

“We finally heard from Josh’s mother this morning,” Mary added. “Apparently the kids each have a grievance toward us. Smoking is our ‘bad habit,’ and Matt is ‘demanding’ we stop.”

“How dare my son demand anything of me, let alone quit smoking! Who the heck does he think is?” Mike inhaled cigarette smoke deeply into his lungs before letting it escape out his nose.

Sara watched him. Her eyes stung from the secondhand fumes. *I can’t believe how nasty their house stinks and how stained his fingers are. Yuck.*

The parents relocated into the kitchen, and Mary offered coffee.

“Are Josh’s parents coming over?” Sara asked.

“Seems to be just his mother in the picture,” Mike answered. “She sounded a bit frazzled but indicated she’d drop by this morning.”

“Anyone like a sausage biscuit?” John asked. He and Sara had grabbed a couple of breakfast meals on the way to the Stern’s. They bought extras in case anyone else was hungry. He unwrapped the double-decker cheese, sausage ’n egg sandwich and poured ketchup into the bag of fried hash browns.

Mary shook her head. “No, thank-you.” *I think I know what Kim wants her parents to stop.*

The doorbell buzzed. “That’s probably Katia, Josh’s mother,” Mary said. She placed the coffee pot back on the stove and hustled to the front door.

Chapter Fourteen



// **A**h, geez, listen to this reply from my dad,” Matt said. “You have outdone yourself this time, Matt. Have you forgotten that WE are the adults? WE are the parents? WE tell YOU what to do, not the other way around. And now you’ve gone and gotten other kids and your aunt involved.”

Matt huffed and grumbled to himself. His fingers flew over the keyboard and typed a reply.

My demands are firm. If you don’t meet them, you’ll continue to kill yourself and put your children’s lives at risk.

“Come on, Matt. Don’t send that. It’s way too melodramatic,” Kim argued as she read the e-note over Matt’s shoulder.

“Kim, if they don’t alter their health behavior, which is the only thing we’re asking, they **are** endangering our health ... me to the effects of secondhand smoke; you to a hazardous diet of fatty, toxic foods; and Josh to the depression associated with a negligent, alcoholic mom,” Matt replied.

“Ouch!” Josh winced.

“Sorry, Josh. But we’ve got to stick together or everything is going to backfire. We’d be in a load of trouble, and our parents would become more defiant about changing their bad habits.” Matt massaged his temples with his fingers. A headache was brewing.

Kim stood up abruptly, toppling her chair. “Okay, let’s blast them with fact after fact about obesity, smoking, and alcohol addiction,” she said. “Every hour we’ll send out new data.”

“Great idea! We’ve got their attention, so let’s take advantage of it,” Josh agreed. “Matt, bring up that NIH MedlinePlus site again. We’ll fling facts at them nonstop. Then, maybe they’ll understand why we’re insisting they get healthy!”

The door opened. “Hi there. You must be Katia, Josh’s mother. I’m Mary. Isn’t this business with our teens wacky? Kids being kids, I guess! C’m on in and meet the other parents.”

Michelle and Maryann sat perched on the top step. Michelle yelled down, “Mommy, who’s that?”

“Oh, honeys, I’ll come up and explain in a minute,” Mary replied. She whispered to Katia. “I’ve arranged for the girls to visit with a neighbor until all of this excitement is over.”

As Katia entered the house, the stench of nicotine made her stomach queasy. *Oh, those poor little girls ... being exposed to so much secondhand smoke.*

John Thompson checked his smart phone. “We’ve got a new message from Kim.”

“I’ll check my e-mail.” Mike walked over to the computer positioned on the countertop. “It’s probably another stupid ‘get healthy’ message. Matt has no idea how much trouble he’s in!”

Katia entered the kitchen with Mary and introductions were exchanged.

“Read aloud what Kim wrote,” Sara said to her husband.

“Well, okay. She says **‘Do you want to live long enough to play with your future grandchildren? If yes, then you’d better change your behavior immediately. Did you know heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States for both men and women? Each year, more than half a million Americans die from heart disease. Being overweight is a major risk factor and increases the likelihood of you dying from a heart attack, and maybe never seeing your children become adults or holding your grandchildren in your arms. The choice is yours!’**”

All eyes in the room shifted to Sara and John. Sara paused in midbite and gazed at her pile of hash browns and breakfast sandwich. Her husband pushed aside his third sausage biscuit and self-consciously stirred his coffee.

Sara lowered her eyes and nervously chuckled. “Kimmy wants us to lose weight and eat better. We’ve had some health issues lately.”

Mike cleared his throat. “Here’s one from Matt. It says **‘Smoking cigarettes also increases the risk of heart disease. In fact, cigarette smoking is the biggest risk factor for sudden death from a heart attack, and a smoker who has a heart attack is more likely to die within an hour of the heart attack than a nonsmoker. Your smoke**

is also bad for other people—they breathe in your smoke secondhand and can get many of the same problems as smokers do. Your smoking is harming your children’s chances for a healthy life. Overcoming your cigarette addiction can reduce your risk (and your children’s risk) of having a heart attack. The earlier you quit, the greater the health benefit. The choice is yours.”

Matt’s dad realized he was about to light up a fresh cigarette using the lighted end of the one he was now smoking. The ashtray on the table was cluttered with butts. His wife fidgeted with the half-empty pack of cigarettes and skimmed the room. The others watched them.

“What?” he asked, putting down the new cigarette. “Okay, so it’s a bad habit ... it’s not easy to stop ... it’s a bloody addiction!”

“We’ve tried to quit. Honestly, we have,” Mary added.

“Katia, has Josh sent you any messages?” Mike asked.

“Yes, last night I got one. If I can use your computer, I’ll check to see if he sent anything this morning.”

“Sure,” Mike answered. She reached in her purse and pulled out Josh’s instructions.

Katia continued to rummage around in her purse. “Gosh, I left my reading glasses at home. Would you mind checking for me?”

Mike typed in the relevant information and retrieved a recent e-mail from Josh. “Do you want me to read it out loud?”

“I ... I guess so,” Katia murmured hesitantly.

“It says **‘Research has also shown that heavy drinking can increase the risk of heart failure, stroke, and high blood pressure, as well as cause many other medical problems, such as liver cirrhosis. Do you know that alcohol dependence and related medical problems, such as brain, heart, and liver damage, progress more rapidly in women than in men? Luckily, there are many national and local resources that can help an alcoholic. The National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service provides a toll-free telephone number, 1-800-662-HELP (4357), offering various resource information. The choice is yours! Mom, I love you. Pledge to get healthy. Now!’**”

Katia blushed and wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead.

“I can’t imagine why Josh is accusing me of being an alcoholic.” She changed the subject. “Could I bother someone for some orange juice? I’m so thirsty.”

Mike fetched the juice and noticed the tremor in her hand when he handed the glass to her.

“Thank you so much,” Katia said. “Oh, and which way is your bathroom?”

Mary pointed to the powder room. Mike observed that she carried the juice with her and

tucked her purse under her arm for the trip to the bathroom.

“I’m bettin’ that O.J. is gonna be fortified with some 100 proof by the time she comes back,” he said.

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” John agreed.

“Poor thing. She’s in total denial, isn’t she?” Sara said. “I wonder when was the last time she had a decent meal. Ha. I would worry about that, now wouldn’t I?”

“Oh, man, I knew smoking was bad news, but it’s worse than I thought. Listen to this.” Matt read from MedlinePlus.gov **“Smoking harms nearly every organ of the body. Cigarette smoking causes 87 percent of lung cancer deaths. It is also responsible for many other cancers and health problems. These include lung disease, heart and blood vessel disease, stroke, and cataracts.”**

“Okay, queue up that fact for our next e-blast,” Josh suggested. “Kim, what’s next on obesity?”

“Wow, here is an amazing fact! It says that in 2001, **‘experts concluded that cancers of the colon, breast (postmenopausal), endometrium (the lining of the uterus), kidney, and esophagus are associated with obesity. Some studies have also reported links between obesity and cancers of the gall bladder, ovaries, and pancreas.’** She added, **‘obesity and physical inactivity may account for 25 to 30 percent of several major cancers—colon, breast (postmenopausal), endometrial, kidney, and cancer of the esophagus.’**”

“Josh, anything on the alcohol front?” Kim asked.

“Check this out.” Josh pointed to the computer screen. “Did you know one of the institutes at NIH is the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism—NIAAA?”

From the NIAAA home page, Josh followed the link to FAQs about alcoholism and said, “Look at this list of symptoms! Maybe if she reads these, she’ll see how it matches with her behavior. It says **‘(1) Craving: a strong need, or compulsion, to drink; (2) Loss of control: the inability to stop drinking once a person has begun; (3) Physical dependence: withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety, when alcohol use is stopped after a period of heavy drinking; and (4) Tolerance: the need for increasing amounts of alcohol.’**”

Kim noticed her friend’s voice cracking as he read through each of the warning signs. She rested her hand on his shoulder. “Sound familiar, Josh?”

He nodded.

The TAPAS trio continued to bombard their parents with health e-messages all day, every hour on the hour.

Chapter Fifteen



It was 3 p.m. The parents sent frequent messages to their teens telling them to come home immediately and then they'd talk about these private family matters. Matt, Kim and Josh e-mailed back more factual medical information about their addictions and insisted they would not return until each of their parents signed a Get Healthy contract.

"Seems like you've reached a stalemate, Matt. How about I give your dad a call and test the mood?" Aunt Judith suggested.

"Sure. We'd appreciate that." Matt leaned back from the computer screen and stretched his arms above his head.

The phone was picked up on the second ring. "That you, Matt? Will you quit with this childish e-mail communication and get the hell home? The Thompsons and Josh's mom, plus your own mother, are exhausted by your tomfoolery."

"Mike, it's your sister. Can you put me on the speaker phone?" With some reluctance, he did as requested. "Can everyone hear me?" A chorus of "yeses" responded.

"Look, I know this is uncomfortable for everyone, but I believe you're not giving your children the credit they deserve. Their actions are motivated by their love for you."

The parents exchanged glances.

"In fact, they love you enough to risk the consequences of your fury. Their goal in running

away to a safe haven—my house—was to interrupt your day-to-day status quo. The intention being to capture your attention long enough to explain why they’re concerned about your unhealthy habits ... why they want you to quit harming yourselves. And I’ve got to admit, they’re providing some persuasive information about why you might want to consider signing the contracts.”

Matt’s dad’s astonished voice rose. “What? Are you implying we should let them win? They’re just kids!”

“No offense, brother,” Aunt Judith said. “But you act like you care more about your ego than what your son is proposing—an honest effort by you to get healthy. Not such a bad demand really.”

Her audience remained silent.

“We have talked about losing weight. And I do want to live to see my grandchildren,” Sara confessed. “After all these e-mails, I don’t think I can ever enjoy another french fry.”

John rested his hand on his wife’s shoulder. “One of those notes said that losing even 5 to 10 percent of your weight can delay or prevent diseases like diabetes, heart disease, stroke, arthritis, and some cancers. We could do that.”

“Well, I don’t like the idea of caving in to Matt’s demand,” Mike persisted. “He’s the kid. I’m the adult. If any ‘demanding’ is going to happen, it should be my role.”

“With all due respect,” Katia slurred slightly, “given the evidence we’ve heard today, I’d say your son has presented a solid case for why you and Mary should stop smoking. You’re inhaling poison directly into your body and exposing Matt and those darling little girls to the toxic fumes.”

Mary nudged her husband’s arm. “We have quit before ... many, many before. Maybe this is the perfect opportunity to finally do it. And we could go on a family trip with all the money we’d save not buying cigarettes.”

Mike scrunched up his face. “Okay, okay ... I’m in. Let’s do it.”

Katia could feel everyone’s attention directed toward her and anticipated what was coming. She reflected on the day’s flood of information on alcoholism.

She sighed and looked up at the expectant faces. “My name is Katia Anders, and I’m an alcoholic.” Sara clapped her hands together, and spontaneously each person in the room began applauding. Katia burst into tears, laughing and crying in the same breath.

The trio sat on the edge of their chairs listening to Aunt Judith’s half of the conversation with their parents.

“Mike, I’m proud of you, Mary, Kim’s parents, and Josh’s mom! And you should be equally proud of your offspring. I say we celebrate the contract signing with a ceremony and party.”

The teens’ eyes bulged. Aunt Judith placed her index finger over her lips to hush them. “And let the kids spend another night here. Give everyone a little time to absorb the magnitude of your decisions and emotions to calm down. I’ll drive them back to your house tomorrow.”

Aunt Judith slowly lowered the phone to its base.

“Oh, my gosh!” Matt bolted from his chair and danced around the kitchen. “I can’t believe it. They’ve agreed to our demands. They’ll sign!”

Kim’s hands covered her gaping mouth. Tears trickled down Josh’s face.

An explosion of laughter and hooting and dancing and merriment ignited the house. Faces shiny from tears, they collapsed in a heap on the sofa.

“Sooooo,” Josh said. “Do you think they’ll keep their promises? I mean my mom might have good intentions, but I wonder if she can really stop drinking on her own.”

“I have an idea along those lines,” Aunt Judith chimed in. “As this drama has unfolded over the last couple of days, I’m thinking your actions make a compelling human interest story. Here’s my proposal.”

Chapter Sixteen



The teens had insisted that all their parents and their siblings be present for the signing ceremony. Mr. and Mrs. Thompson arrived with Kim’s sister and two brothers. Anna rang the doorbell. Buddy greeted them with woofs and wags when the door opened.

“Oh, you’re adorable!” Anna hugged the dog.

“Well, here we are again.” John Thompson shook hands with Matt’s dad and glanced at his watch. “Are the kids here yet?”

“No. They are probably on my sister’s timetable . . . always late,” Mike grumbled. “This group signing ceremony is absurd. My sister is in cahoots with these kids. I never should have agreed to—”

“You are committed to quit smoking, though, aren’t you?” his wife interrupted.

“You know . . . I really am. I hate to admit it, but the medical information that Matt sent us is compelling.”

The twins chattered with Anna and her brothers conversed with the dads about football. Mary guided Sara toward the kitchen. “I’ve marinated chicken for grilling and we can mix up a big salad for the after-signing celebration.”

“Sounds great. Thanks!” Sara smiled.

Buddy heard the soft knock and erupted into a friendly bark greeting. The girls followed the bouncing pup to the door.

“That must be Josh’s mom,” Mike said. “Girls, let her in, please.”

The trio packed into Aunt Judith’s sedan with their backpacks tucked among piles of loose papers, folders, canvas bags, magazines, and books. “Sorry about the mess, kids.” She gathered an armful of folders from the front passenger side floor and handed them to the boys in the back. “My car is also my mobile office.” Matt searched the back seat for a spot to place the items and gave up. He rested them in his lap.

“I’m kinda nervous about this blog article idea.” Kim chewed her fingernails.

“I hear ya,” Josh agreed. “My mom won’t like her problem being exposed to the world one bit.”

“Could be a positive,” Matt interjected. “Might be embarrassing, but it will be even harder to break a promise if your friends and coworkers know you’ve signed a contract with your child.”

“I agree with Matt,” Aunt Judith added. “And keep in mind that I can’t go to press without their permission. That’s my job—to convince them of the value in publicizing their bold step toward a new and healthier life with the love and encouragement of their empathetic children, Ah, there’s Jerry, my cameraman!”

Aunt Judith swung her car in front of a dusty jeep parked around the corner from Matt’s house. She alighted from the car and jogged over to the driver’s window. The two conversed for a few minutes before she returned.

“He’ll follow me to your house, Matt.” Aunt Judith depressed the accelerator. “Okay. It’s show time!”

The girls positioned themselves on the front porch and waited eagerly for their siblings. “I see ’em!” Michelle and Maryann yelled in unison. Anna dashed into the house to announce their arrival.

The teens marched across the front lawn toward their families, who were congregated on the Victorian wrap-around porch. Silence draped the homecoming. Josh spotted his mom at the door and waved. He knew her courage was fragile.

Anna broke the spell with a shout. “Kim, I missed you!” Kim’s brothers jumped off the porch and high-fived her. As the parents and teens reunited, hugs, kisses, and tears were interspersed with awkward dialogue.

Mike was the first to detect the unfamiliar man with the camera on his shoulder. “Who the heck are you?”

Aunt Judith positioned herself between Jerry and her brother. She announced, “Okay, everyone, we clearly have a happy ending—or should I say beginning—to this drama. You are participating in a unique experience, one that other parents and teens can relate to and find inspiration from.” Her extended arm panned the gathering. “You are establishing a partnership with your children involving difficult changes in your life style—a commitment to be as healthy as you can be—to benefit your well-being and that of your children. Congratulations to you!”

All eyes were transfixed on Aunt Judith. She continued, “It’s crucial to record the contract signing ceremony and to summarize the initiative your teens took on your behalf and the weighty decision you’ve made to conquer your bad health behaviors. Let’s capture his magical moment of transformation and share with others your journey.”

Matt whispered to Kim and Josh, “Mission accomplished!”

The TAPAS contracts were placed on the dining room table. The cameraman zoomed in on Kim and her family as they walked to the table. The Thompsons sat down and extracted their contract from the pile.

“Kimmy, we were so scared when we first knew you’d run away, and then furious about what seemed to be unreasonable demands. But all the information in the e-mails made us think and reflect. We are food addicts, and our health is being harmed by our overeating,” Mrs. Thompson said. “Plus, we are passing along our bad eating habits to you children.”

“So, we sign this contract acknowledging that modifying our habits will be difficult.” Mr. Thompson put his arm around his daughter’s shoulders. “But your mom aspires to live long enough and be healthy enough to play with her grandkids, and so do I.”

“Just one thing, Sis,” John, Jr., added. “No more tofu turkey. Deal?”

Kim laughed and punched her brother’s arm.

Mr. and Mrs. Thompson smiled at one another and signed their names. They promised to implement a weight loss program for the family, and the agreement was for a minimum of 6 months. Anna hugged her sister and handed her a present. She said, “I’m glad we’re going to get skinny together.”

“Not skinny, Anna,” Kim corrected. “Healthy and fit.” She tore away the wrapping paper and unrolled a hot pink jump rope. “Awesome!”

Michelle and Maryann were each clinging to one of Matt’s arms.

“Hey, M and Ms, how am I going to sign the contract if you don’t let go of me?” Matt said. He gave them both a squeeze and gently maneuvered them to the side. He sat down at the table ... alone.

“Okay, Dad, I know you’re mad at me, and you think this whole contract business is stupid. But ... I love you and Mom and can’t stand to see you pollute your lungs and destroy your health.” Matt locked eyes with his father.

“You’re right, Matt. I am ... I was angry at you.” Mr. Stern walked to the table. “Enraged, in fact. But during the last 24 hours, I’ve come to grasp that I’m mostly mad at myself for not being able to stop this disgusting cigarette habit.”

Mrs. Stern joined her husband at the table and poked his side. “Come on, Mike. Say it.”

“Okay, okay ... er ... thanks, Matt,” he mumbled. “I’m proud of you ... But don’t think that—”

“Hon—” Mrs. Stern interrupted. “Sign it.”

Across the mom, Josh’s mom was feeling queasy. She moistened her dry lips. *Oh, I wish I’d not thrown away my flask. I was feeling so strong earlier today.*

Josh patted her shoulder. “Mom, you can do this. I know you can. And you don’t need to face it alone. There are lots of support groups. And you’ve got me!”

She glanced tentatively at her son. “Oh, Josh, I’m so ashamed. I’m supposed to be the adult in this family, and I’ve not been acting like one.”

“Are you okay with the contract?” he asked. “I’ll go with you to the support group meetings if you’d like.”

“Give me that paper.” She smiled and led him to the table. “I want to sign it first.”

Maybe, just maybe, my real mom is back, Josh thought and signed his name under her shaky signature.

The room was hushed.

“Yo, people, this isn’t a funeral!” Matt broke the somber mood. “This is the first day of the rest of your healthy lives. Let’s celebrate!”

Epilogue

3 Months Later



Kim rushed into the cafeteria and looked around for Josh or Matt. She spotted them at one of the middle tables, lunching with some friends.

“Guys, look at this!” She bounded over to their table.

“Whatcha got, Kim?” Josh asked.

“We’re famous! We, the newly founded TAPAS, are featured in the National Institutes of Health *MedlinePlus Magazine*.” Kim waved a copy of the magazine in their face.

“Let me see that.” Matt attempted to grab the magazine.

“Apparently they heard about how we influenced our parents to change their unhealthy habits using information we found at their MedlinePlus.gov site,” Kim explained. “And they commend our contract approach as a—and I quote—‘viable strategy for stimulating conversation about serious family health habits and developing agreements between parents and their children. Bravo, TAPAS.’”

“How about that?” Kim handed the magazine to Matt. “And they have a photo of us taken last month at our first school TAPAS meeting. I wish I’d worn a different shirt. That one looks dorky.”

“Yeah, maybe a little dorkish,” Matt teased. “But check out how slim you look. Congrats on that.”

Kim beamed. Her parents and siblings had fully adopted a healthy eating lifestyle. Her brothers were competing with each other to see who could lose the most weight. She and Anna were walking the 2 miles home from school twice a week.

“Speaking of weight, I’ve got great news on that front. My dad went to his doctor yesterday and no longer has to take insulin medication for his diabetes. His doc says he can manage his disease through a balanced diet and exercise. And mom’s blood pressure is almost down in the normal range.” Kim placed her lunch bag on the table and pulled out a turkey sandwich.

One of the girls at the table confided, “No way can I talk with my parents about their bad health habits, but it’s like comfortable to share my worries with other kids who have similar problems. Thanks for starting the TAPAS meetings after school.”

“To give credit where it’s due,” Matt said, “that was my Aunt Judith’s idea. She recommended we instruct other teens about where to find resources on health topics. Give them ‘information ammunition’ to launch at their parents.”

“Yeah,” Kim added. “She wants the TAPAS publicity to not be about us, but about the power of information as a communication tool between parents and teens.”

“Hey, that reminds me of that Dr. DeBakey quote, ‘Good information is the best medicine.’ I never heard what grade you guys got on your science report.” Matt said.

“An A,” Josh answered with enthusiasm. “Dr. DeBakey was awesome. A role model for wanta-be scientists. And that’s me!”

“Hey, Matt, what’s the latest on your mom? Is she still struggling?” Kim asked.

“Unfortunately, yes. Last night I caught her on the patio lighting up.” Matt shook his head. “But she’s still trying to quit, and at least she doesn’t smoke in the house any more.”

He added, “Kinda wish she’d gone cold turkey like Dad. Except the first few weeks he was so bad tempered that my little sisters begged me to let him smoke again. But he did quit, and now he preaches about the hazards of smoking to everyone!”

Matt and Kim glanced at Josh.

“Things still okay with your mom, Josh?” Kim asked.

“So far, so good,” Josh said. “She’s regularly attending AA meetings, and I go with her sometimes. Plus, I joined Alateen. It’s a support group for teens with alcoholic parents, and I signed up to help with their newsletter. It’s therapeutic to know you’re not out there alone with a problem.”

“Kim, how’s the coaching going?” Matt asked.

“At first I hated giving up my free Saturday mornings,” Kim said, “but now I love being

assistant coach to your sister's basketball team. It's awesome. I'm glad our Aunt Judith suggested it."

The lunch period bell buzzed.

"Matt," Kim asked. "What do you think is next for TAPAS? I'm amazed at how other schools in town are asking for help to start their own chapters."

"I've been thinking about that," Matt said. "Let's make it a virtual organization."

"How so?" Josh asked.

"Well, we'll create a TAPAS Web site where we'll post downloadable examples of our contracts and provide links to good information Web sites, like our favorite MedlinePlus.gov," Matt explained. "Plus, we can create our own blog to share stories and chat with other TAPAS members. Oh, and make ourselves present on some social networking sites, and we could—"

"Geez, I'm exhausted just listening to you, Matt," Kim interjected. "But count me in!"

Josh nodded in agreement. He stretched his hand out, pointed his finger at an imaginary crowd, and said, "Beware unhealthy parents of the world. TAPAS is taking action."

Appendices

A: Health information Web site resources from National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other Department of Health and Human Services sources

NIH: [<http://www.nih.gov/>]

NIH's National Library of Medicine (NLM): [<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/>]

NIH/NLM MedlinePlus: [<http://medlineplus.gov/>]

Obesity: [<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/obesity.html>]

Weight Control: [<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/weightcontrol.html>]

Alcoholism: [<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/alcoholism.html>]

Quitting Smoking: [<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/quittingsmoking.html>]

NIH's National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) Diseases and Conditions Index on obesity: [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/obe/obe_whatare.html]

NIH's National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) Weight-control Information Network: [<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/understanding.htm>]

NIH's National Cancer Institute (NCI) Fact Sheets

Obesity: [<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/obesity>]

Tobacco: [<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Tobacco/cancer>]

NIH/NCI Smokefree.gov: [<http://www.smokefree.gov>]

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Fact Sheet on Secondhand Smoke:
[http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/secondhand_smoke/second-handsmoke.htm]

NIH's National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA): [<http://www.nida.nih.gov/NIDAHome.html>]

NIH's National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA): [<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/>]

NIH/NIAAA The Cool Spot (the young teens' place for information on alcohol and resisting peer pressure): [<http://www.thecoolspot.gov/>]

CDC Smoking and Tobacco Use: [<http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/>]

B: Sample Parent Get Healthy Contracts

Weight Loss Contract

I, _____ *parent name(s)* _____, agree to achieve my goal to lose 5% – 10% of my current weight of _____ pounds by _____ *date* _____.

I understand that I am addicted to food and overeating, and taking control of my eating is a critical step toward improving my health. My child has strongly encouraged me to lose weight because she loves me and wants me to live a long and healthy life.

Upon signing this contract, I make the commitment to myself to take control of my eating and lifestyle habits, which includes following a safe weight-loss program and engaging in physical activity at least three times a week for a minimum of 30 minutes. My success will assure me a healthier future and protect the well-being of my family, who will no longer be exposed to the consequences of my overeating.

I recognize that losing weight will be a challenge, and I promise to solicit support from family, friends, and/or professionals, as needed. I will consider joining a support group, such as WeightWatchers (<http://www.weightwatchers.com>), to help me take control of my eating. I will also take advantage of useful, authoritative information from the U.S. National Institutes of Health's National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus Web site on weight control at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/weightcontrol.html>.

I am quitting in honor of _____ (*names of children/child*) _____

Signed: _____ *parent signature(s)* _____

Co-Signed: _____ *children/child signature(s)* _____

Date: _____ *date* _____

I Quit Drinking Contract

I, _____ *parent name(s)* _____, agree to stop drinking on _____ *date* _____.

I understand that I am addicted to alcohol and to stop drinking is the single best thing I can do for my health. My child has strongly encouraged me to quit because he loves me and wants me to live a long and healthy life.

Upon signing this contract, I make the commitment to myself to live a healthier life, free from alcohol. My success will assure me a healthier future and protect the well-being of my family and friends, who will no longer be exposed to the consequences of my drinking.

I recognize that quitting will be a challenge, and I promise to solicit support from family, friends, and/or professionals, as needed. I will join a support group, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (<http://www.aa.org>), to help me stop drinking. I will also take advantage of useful, authoritative information from the U.S. National Institutes of Health's National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus Web site on alcohol abuse and alcoholism at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/alcoholism.html>.

I am quitting in honor of _____ (*names of children/child*) _____

Signed: _____ *parent signature(s)* _____

Co-Signed: _____ *children/child signature(s)* _____

Date: _____ *date* _____

I Quit Smoking Contract

I, _____ *parent name(s)* _____, agree to stop smoking on _____ *date* _____.

I understand that stopping smoking is the single best thing I can do for my health and the health of my family. My child has strongly encouraged me to quit because he loves me and wants me to live a long and healthy life.

Upon signing this contract, I make the commitment to myself to live a healthier life, free from cigarettes and my addiction to them. My success will assure me a healthier future and protect the health of my family and friends, who will no longer be exposed to the dangers of secondhand smoke.

I recognize that quitting will be a challenge, and I promise to solicit support from family, friends, and/or professionals, as needed. For support, I will take advantage of the National Cancer Institute's smoking cessation counselors at 1-877-44U-QUIT to answer smoking-related questions and will also utilize the useful, authoritative information from the U.S. National Institutes of Health's National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus Web site on quitting smoking at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/quittingsmoking.html>.

I am quitting in honor of _____ (*names of children/child*) _____

Signed: _____ *parent signature(s)* _____

Co-Signed: _____ *children/child signature(s)* _____

Date: _____ *date* _____

C: Book Discussion Questions

Chapters 1–6

1. Kim, Josh, and Matt share a common concern. What is it? How did their concerns differ?
2. The teens share their problems with one another. Do you find talking with friends about your problems to be helpful? Why or why not?
3. What actions did each of the characters take to urge their parent(s) to change their unhealthy behaviors? Why do you think they were unsuccessful? If you were in their situation, what action might you have taken?

Chapters 7–16

4. Was the plan to run away a legitimate way for the characters to attract their parents' attention? Why or why not?
5. What are other ways they could have reached their parents and changed their thinking about their addictions/bad habits?
6. Think about how sons and daughters develop healthy habits if their parents are not good role models. List examples.
7. Kim, Josh, and Matt persevered to reach their goal of helping their parents face their addictions. What does persevere mean? Do you find it easy or hard to persevere toward a goal? Why is it easy/hard for you?

Epilogue and Summary

8. What is Alateen? Would you join a support group of peers whose family problems were similar to yours? Why or why not?
9. What is the National Institute of Health (NIH)? What is the National Library of Medicine (NLM)? What is the NLM Web site with information about health topics? Why would you use or not use this Web site?
10. What do you think of the idea of a parent “Get Healthy” contract in which parents agree to establish and follow healthy habits? Do you think parents would sign a contract? Why or why not?
11. Who was Dr. Michael DeBaakey? Why did Josh regard him as a role model? Do you have any role models?
12. Kim, Josh, and Matt created the TAPAS as part of their plot. How did it evolve after they returned home? What did you think of the idea of a TAPAS Web site? Would it be useful?

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