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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
01 Krystal with a K	1
02 James Bond and Eisenhower High	21
03 The Couple in the Clearing	39
04 The Education of Brad Stuart	57
05 Falling In and Out of Love	73
06 Stalled by the Side of the Road	85
07 Washed Up and Washed Out	105
08 Date for Debate	119
09 Arming for Battle	143
10 The Great Debate	165
11 The State of the Debate	187
12 Winners and Losers	213
13 An Ice Party	229
 <i>Notes</i>	 235

KRYSTAL WITH A K

Something Jason Withers said made Krystal laugh so hard she had to hold her hand over her mouth to contain the drink of soda she'd just taken.

Jason slurped a mouthful from his soda can, puffed his cheeks in imitation of Krystal, and pressed his nose almost against hers, his eyes wide in feigned panic.

Suddenly Krystal jumped up from her seat around the campfire and rushed to the trees. She returned a few moments later, red-faced, wiping her mouth and coughing.

“Thanks a lot, Jason,” she complained. “It went up my nose and everything.”

“What did I do?” he asked in an attitude of perfect innocence.

Krystal slapped his shoulder feebly and picked up her soda can from the ground beside her. She began to take a sip of soda, but, eyeing Jason suspiciously, set the can back on the ground instead.

“What’s so funny?” asked Amber Lockwood, who sat on the other side of Krystal.

Krystal shook her head. “Nothing,” she answered, rolling her eyes at Jason.

Krystal, Jason, and Amber sat around a blazing campfire at Gilligan’s Lake with more than a dozen others from Westcastle Community Church’s growing youth group. It was two weekends before school started, and Liz and Duane Cunningham, the leaders of the youth group, were hosting an overnight outing just like last year’s. The day had been filled with swimming, boating, and water skiing; now they all sat around the campfire and took turns telling funny stories.

Amber sat next to her boyfriend, Will McConnell, who had started the stories by relating how he had lost his swim trunks while waterskiing last year. Next to Will were Darcelle Davis, Buster Todd, and Joy Akiyama, three seniors who had been among the leaders of the youth group in its transformation last year into the “Liberation Commandos,” a group of Christian students committed to finding new ways of sharing their faith with friends at school.

The circle around the flickering fire included some faces that hadn't been part of the group at last year's outing: Hillary Putnam, who had come to the group through her friendship with Amber; Kim Holmes and Debi White, two members of the rally team; and Greg Hooper and Billy Maxwell, who had graduated last June and now sat next to Reggie Spencer, who had helped them trust Christ.

"How many here remember the time that Jimmy Hodges got sick in his birthday cake?" Joy Akiyama asked. "He started feeling kinda queasy toward the end of his party at that restaurant, so he just took what was left of that supermarket cake his mom bought for him and—"

Several in the circle had started giggling as Joy talked. Krystal, however, had stopped smiling at the mention of Jimmy's name. She remembered. In fact, Krystal reflected, the others around the circle had no idea how well she remembered. Only she knew the truth about Jimmy Hodges. No one else had been as close to him as she had.



Krystal had met Jimmy Hodges at a Halloween party in her eighth-grade year. She had worn a long, skintight black dress with full sleeves and a slit up the side. She'd dyed her hair black and parted it in the middle to look like Morticia Addams. Her mother almost didn't let her leave the house; Krystal knew she thought the costume was too "mature." But Krystal didn't feel mature after she arrived at the party, just a little silly: *I'm not tall enough to be Morticia*, she thought.

“Nice costume,” Jimmy said. He’d just walked up to her from halfway across the high school gym. He wasn’t in costume. His short brown hair was perfectly combed, and thick eyebrows shaded eyes that looked unblinkingly at her. The eyes combined with captivatingly full and colorful lips, almost too beautiful for a guy’s face, to form an irresistible combination. “You from Westcastle?”

She nodded a response, followed with a soft “Uh-huh.”

“I don’t remember noticing you before.” His eyes caressed her admiringly. “And I always notice girls like you.”

“I’m, uh—” She didn’t want to say it. She broke his gaze and looked aside. “I’m in eighth grade.” She could feel herself blush. She stole a quick glance at his eyes, still fastened on her, then looked away again.

Behind him a handful of people were dancing. But most of the students were clinging to the walls or hovering around the refreshments.

“Eighth grade?”

Krystal’s heart sank. She glanced at him and saw a flash of hesitation. It was gone in an instant, though, and he eyed her from head to toe and up again.

“I would never have guessed you were in eighth grade. You look *really* mature for your age.”

She smiled and followed his gaze. He wasn’t looking at her eyes.

“I’m Jim,” he continued. “Jim Hodges. I’m a junior.”

A junior! Krystal opened her mouth. *A junior! He’s practically in college,* she thought. Finally she let a weak “Oh” escape

her mouth. *He's a junior and he said I look really mature for my age. And it doesn't bother him that I'm only in eighth grade!*

Krystal had flirted with boys; she'd even had "boyfriends" before. Last year, her mom said she could go to a movie with Justin Mitchell as long as *she* went with them. Krystal had begged her mom to drop them off and let them go alone. No go. Mom did, however, agree to sit at least six rows away in the theater. But Justin had clung to Mrs. Wayne like glue, and when they settled into their seats for the film, Krystal's mom somehow sat between them. Krystal forced Justin to promise never to talk about their "date" at school.

She gazed at the party going on behind Jimmy Hodges. It seemed that everywhere she looked she saw pretty girls standing alone, older and taller girls, girls who looked like high school sophomores and juniors. But Jimmy wasn't talking to those other girls, not even to the blonde that Krystal recognized as a rally girl. She drank it all in and let it warm her like a sip of hot chocolate on a snowy day.

He was still looking at her, in the eyes now, and she waited for him to say something. But he acted like he was waiting for something.

My name! Oh yeah, I haven't told him my name.

"Krystal," she blurted, and knew at once that it was too sudden and too loud. *Softer, stupid. Get a grip*, she told herself. "Krystal Wayne."

"Krystal." He smiled.

"With a K," she added, wondering immediately if she should have said it.

“Krystal with a K,” he echoed. “So, Krystal-with-a-K, do you want to go for a walk?”

She half-shrugged, half-nodded her answer, and Jimmy slid his hand lightly around her shoulders, then placed it in the middle of her back as they walked together to the exit.

They walked slowly around the parking lot. The music and other sounds of the party still carried clearly beyond the walls of the school. Jimmy talked and asked Krystal questions, which she answered shyly. He draped his arm over her shoulders, then gripped her tightly around the waist, then rubbed circles in the small of her back with the flat of his hand.

They came to a stop between a tiny pickup and a dark two-seater sports car. Jimmy turned Krystal to face him with her back against the car. He leaned in close and shot an intense look into her eyes before closing them to kiss her.

The kiss lasted only a moment. They parted. She shivered and crossed her arms in front of her.

“It’s chilly,” she said. Her voice quavered. “I forgot my coat.” He kissed her again, lightly, quickly.

“Why don’t we go for a drive?” he whispered.

She nodded, afraid that if she tried to speak again, he might notice in her voice the strong emotions his kiss had stirred in her.

He reached around her and opened the door.

“No,” she said. “Wait.”

He held the door open.

“My parents are supposed to pick me up,” she explained, thinking as she said it how childish it sounded.

He looked at his watch. “What time?”

“Uh, well, eleven o’clock.”

“Great,” he said, as if there were no problem. “We’ll come back before then. We’ve got plenty of time.”

Krystal hesitated, but his smile convinced her. She slid into the low seat of the car and gathered her long skirt in her hands while Jimmy closed the door.

He sped recklessly to Brackett’s Ledge, overlooking Rising Sun Park. The car slid to a stop and Jimmy cut the engine.

The lights of Westcastle glittered below, and the stars above, as if the sky were the surface of a silent lake, reflecting the white and yellow lights of the city. They sat for a few moments in silence, until Jimmy stretched his arm around Krystal’s shoulders and she leaned into his embrace.

They talked softly and kissed often, each kiss becoming longer and more passionate and their sentences becoming shorter and less frequent.

Finally, Krystal broke off a long kiss with a start.

“What time is it?” she asked, knowing even as she asked it that the news would not be good. They’d been sitting there a long time.

Jimmy looked at his watch in the dark, then shifted in his seat and reached for the control panel. He switched the light on and examined his watch again.

“Uh-oh. It’s after midnight,” he said, reaching for the key.

Krystal’s mom, dad, and sister Kathy faced her as she closed the door behind her.

“Where have you been, young lady?” her mother greeted her. “Do you know what time it is?”

Her dad stomped over to the large picture window and pulled the curtain aside, but Jimmy’s car had already pulled away. “Who was that?” he demanded.

Oh great, Krystal moaned inside herself. Tag team.

“Kathy was there at eleven o’clock to pick you up,” her mom continued, “but there was no sign of you. Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing?”

“We just—”

“We?” Her dad jumped in. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Will you let me talk? I mean, I’m hardly even in the door and you all gang up on me.” Krystal hadn’t moved from her position in front of the door.

“Who were you with, Krystal?” Her mother took a turn. Krystal imagined Mom and Dad in a big-time wrestling ring, one slapping the other’s hand for a fresh shot at their opponent.

“I went with Jimmy—”

“Jimmy?” her mom asked.

“Jimmy Hodges.”

“Jimmy Hodges? Who’s this Jimmy Hodges? Where do you know him from?”

“Just some boy. I met him at the party, okay? All we did was—”

“You mean you didn’t know him before tonight? Where’s he from? Where’s he live?”

“Was that him driving the car?” Her dad pointed toward the window. “How old is he?”

Krystal strode between her parents and sister and stopped in the center of the living room. She whirled to face them.

“I don’t know where he lives.” Krystal was surprised at her own answer. “I *just met* him.”

Krystal twisted her shoulders and shook Kathy’s hand off. “Nothing happened, okay? I met Jimmy, we walked around the parking lot for a while, and then we went for a ride.” She had their attention now. No one interrupted her. “We just *talked*, okay?” She paused a moment. “We didn’t realize how late it was. He brought me straight home when we saw that it was after midnight. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” Her mother’s voice pierced Krystal like fingernails on a chalkboard. “Krystal Marie, when we take you somewhere like a Halloween party, we don’t expect you to go driving off with a boy. We trusted you to stay at the party.”

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?” She was nearly screaming now. “You act like I did something really terrible. All I did was go for a ride and you—”

“You watch your tone of voice with me, young lady!” Her mother matched her volume. “You can’t talk to your mother like that!”

“You’re right, Mom! I *can’t*. That’s the whole problem. I can’t talk to my mother, I can’t talk to my father, I can’t talk to anyone, because all you want to do is yell at me and I’m sick of being yelled at!” Krystal wheeled around and ran up the stairs to her room. She flung the door closed behind her, sat on the edge of her bed, and yanked a tissue from the fuzzy box on her bedside table.

When Krystal heard her bedroom door click open, she knew it was her sister. She dabbed her tearful eyes and blew her nose without looking up. She felt the bed sink as Kathy sat beside her.

Kathy waited a few moments before speaking. “They’ll cool down, Krystal. They just worry about you.”

Krystal eyed her sister. “Why do you always take their side? Why can’t you just *once* be on my side?”

Jimmy called her the next day, Sunday, and Krystal told him the story of the night before.

“They told me this morning,” she said, forcing the words out. “I’m grounded for a month.” Her stomach tightened as she said it. She feared that this would ruin everything. She had the idea that if they couldn’t see each other for a whole month, it would all fall apart and she would lose him.

“That’s rough,” he said. They talked a while longer, but Krystal hung up feeling that Jimmy would find someone else, some girl who wasn’t grounded. Someone prettier—and older, probably.

Krystal drooped all the next day at school, thinking constantly of Jimmy. *I should have known*, she told herself. *There’s just no way he could really like me. He probably thinks I’m a little kid, especially from the way my parents treat me. Why would he want to go out with me when there are all those girls at the high school who are older—and more “experienced”—than me?*

She thought she recognized his car parked by the flagpole when school let out that afternoon, but the driver’s seat was

empty. Then she noticed him, walking toward her. His thin frame made him seem taller than he was.

He greeted her with a kiss and a strong arm around her waist. “How long’s your lunch period?”

The kiss and the question surprised her. “Uh, 11:30 to 12:15,” she answered.

“Good. I’ll pick you up tomorrow. Right here.”

He met her every day that week and the next. Krystal would slide discreetly out the side door of the cafeteria, through the doors at the end of the hall, and into Jimmy’s waiting car. Sometimes they would sit in a parking lot or walk together in a park; other times they would find a secluded spot where no one would disturb them.

On Friday of the second week of her grounding, her parents came into her room. Krystal knew immediately by the serious looks on their faces that they had found out what had been going on with her and Jimmy. They had also discovered that he was almost seventeen and a junior in high school. After another shouting match, Krystal’s father counted off his decrees on his fingers.

“One, you will not see this Jimmy Hodges again. Two, your grounding is extended for another month. Three, you will be eating your lunch in the guidance counselor’s office until we have some reason to start trusting you again.”

Krystal cried and shouted protests, but her parents stood their ground stubbornly. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to me. You’re acting like I committed some horrible crime.” She stormed over to the telephone.

“What are you doing?” her father asked.

“I have to call Jimmy to tell him, don’t I?”

“No,” her father answered. He snatched the receiver out of her hands. “You’re to have no contact with him at all. If he calls, I’ll tell him that myself. I’ll tell him a few other things, too; I can promise you that.”

The next few weeks became a gray, frozen landscape for Krystal. She hadn’t seen or talked to Jimmy since their last lunch period together. She didn’t even know if Jimmy had called or if her father had talked to him.

Her grounding was almost over when she made her decision.

She stuffed a few articles of clothing and other necessities into her bookbag one morning and tossed a cheerful “good-bye” to her parents as she left for the school bus.

She never reported to class that day. Instead, she trudged the distance from the middle school to Eisenhower High. The weight of her overstuffed bookbag seemed to increase with each step, but she eventually plunked it down on the sidewalk in front of “Ike.”

Leaving her bag where she’d dropped it, she trotted through the parking lot, seeking Jimmy’s little black car. When she found it, she ran to it and tried the handle; the door opened. She returned to retrieve her bag and flung it onto the driver’s seat before sliding in and closing the door.

She sat and dozed and dreamed the day away in Jimmy’s car. She watched for him when the lunch periods began and

students streamed from the exits and rode off in their cars while others hung around outside or walked beyond school property to pass a cigarette around a tight clump of people. When the crowd had completely trickled back into the school, however, Krystal still sat, chilly, alone, waiting for school to let out.

When the door on the driver's side finally creaked open, Krystal sat up, surprised. She uttered a sound somewhere between a grunt and a word. Jimmy pushed her bookbag off his seat and against her thigh.

"I guess I've been asleep," she explained, moving the bag to the floor at her feet.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. He held his door open and sat only half on the seat.

She searched his eyes and tried to read what he was thinking. "I ran away," she answered.

He looked unblinkingly at her and seemed to hold his breath. "To where?"

"To you," she said.

They both fell silent again, and she felt a twinge of fear of what he might say. She lowered her head slightly, then managed to break his gaze. She stared at his right shoe, which rested against the brake pedal.

"Wait here. I'll be right back." Jimmy sprung from the seat of his car so fast she thought he might have hit his head. She watched him stride over to the edge of the parking lot. He approached a girl with short brown hair, shorter than Jimmy's, in a denim jacket. He turned her with a hand on her arm so

they were both facing away from the car. They seemed to talk for a few minutes, their heads close together, and Jimmy turned around and jogged back to the car. The girl disappeared around the corner of the building.

Jimmy spoke again when he had pulled into traffic. “What do you want to do?” He paused. “What happens now?”

“I don’t know, I just had to get out of there and I had to see you. I thought maybe you’d have an idea.”

Jimmy swerved to avoid a car turning left and jerked the car back with two swift moves. Krystal’s gaze never strayed from his face, but he seemed engrossed in the traffic and didn’t meet her eyes.

“Jimmy, didn’t you miss me?” she said finally. “Did you try to call me or see me? Didn’t you wonder how I was doing or anything like that?”

He glanced at her shortly. “Yeah, I did. Of course I did, Krystal. I’m just surprised to see you, that’s all.” He looked back at the road. “You ran away, huh?”

“I’ve got a few things in my bookbag,” she said. She began feeling uncomfortable. This was not how she had pictured their reunion. Her thoughts drifted to the girl in the denim jacket. *Maybe I messed up his plans for this afternoon*, she thought.

“You, um,” he started, falteringly, “you have any friends you could stay with?”

Her head sagged slightly as she said, “No. My parents know all their parents.”

“Relatives?”

She answered flatly, “Same thing. They’d never let me stay

without telling my parents.” She lifted her head to look out the window and see where they were. They were on some side street she didn’t really recognize.

“Well,” Jimmy pronounced with an air of finality, “I guess we’ll have to figure something out then.” He pulled to the curb and jumped from the car. Krystal peered out her window at a ranch-style duplex with two garages in the middle. Jimmy opened her door.

“Bring your bag inside,” he told her.

They entered through the back door, which was unlocked. Krystal looked around shyly at the kitchen, clean but cluttered. She started to lower her bag to the floor, but Jimmy strode to a door across the room and said, “Bring it with you.”

He disappeared through the door and she followed, down the stairs to a paneled basement.

Posters—most of them picturing heavy metal rock groups—covered the walls, and an unmade bed extended from the farthest wall. Clothes, food wrappers, CD and cassette covers and a large bottle of aftershave littered the floor. Wires draped around the walls and over the floors, leading from distant speakers to a massive stereo system in one corner.

“I can straighten this up a little,” Jimmy said, shoving a pile of objects against the wall.

Krystal tiptoed to the bed, sat, and balanced her bag on her knees. Jimmy stood before her, as if each of them were waiting for the other to move or speak.

“You can stay here,” he said. Then he added, slowly, “For now, anyway.”

“What about your parents?”

“It’s just my mom. She’ll be home late tonight. She hardly ever comes down here.” He looked at her wide eyes staring at him. “I may even tell her. She’s not like most parents.”

“What will she do?”

“Depends on what I tell her. But she doesn’t interfere too much with things I want to do.” He sat beside Krystal, slid an arm around her shoulders, and pulled her against him. “She’ll be okay with this.”

Krystal sat motionless in his arms. *This isn’t how I pictured things*, she thought, and immediately accused herself, *How did you picture things?* She realized that she had no answer for that. All she knew was that hiding out in Jimmy’s basement didn’t feel quite as liberating as she had hoped.

But when Jimmy kissed her, all the warmth and excitement she had felt a month ago flooded her emotions. She sat, practically motionless, as Jimmy set aside her bookbag and helped her slide off her coat. He leaned in to kiss her again.

“Wait a minute,” she protested gently, realizing she didn’t like where this was headed.

“What’s wrong?” he asked between kisses.

She didn’t want to break the closeness they were feeling, but she wasn’t comfortable with what was happening. “I just . . . I just don’t know if I’m ready for all this.”

Jimmy gently brushed her hair away from her face.

“Krystal, I’m just trying to show you how much I love you.”

Those words felt so good. Krystal couldn’t remember the last time someone had told her she was loved. Still, she hesitated.

“What’s the matter, Krystal?” Jimmy asked, beginning to sound frustrated with her. “I thought you loved me, too.”

“I do,” she whispered.

“So then what’s the problem?”

What was the problem? Krystal wondered. Her mind was a maze of contradictions. She hadn’t planned on things going this far, but Jimmy had been so good to her and she didn’t want to let him down. She knew this was something her parents wouldn’t approve of, but she and Jimmy really loved each other and sex was just an expression of her love. So how could it be wrong?

“Come on, Krystal,” Jimmy said, a little more forcefully. “If you love me, why don’t you show it?” He reached over and opened the drawer beside his bed. “You don’t have to worry; I *always* use protection.”

Krystal had so little time to think, but her will to resist diminished at each turn. Finally, with no apparent reason to refuse, she smiled weakly and nodded. She let it happen then, not unwillingly, but with a mind racing with fear and apprehension.

She stayed with Jimmy for five days that seemed to her like an unreal dream. It was romantic at times, almost like playing house when she was not much younger. He would leave in the morning to go to school while she stayed behind and watched television or listened to his CD collection. They ate in Jimmy’s room, either food he brought down from the kitchen or a pizza

he had delivered. They went for a ride in the car every evening, but stayed away from places where she might be seen.

She saw Jimmy's mother only once in those five days, the evening of the second day, after Jimmy told her about Krystal. She came downstairs and greeted Krystal unenthusiastically, sleepily.

"She kinda has her own life," Jimmy had explained.

With each day, however, Krystal became more depressed. She felt close to Jimmy, and when he kissed her she felt wonderful inside. But it felt more and more like his kisses were just his way of leading to the "real thing." Since that first time when he led her to his room and onto his bed, he didn't seem interested in talking or joking or doing fun things together; he only wanted one thing. She wasn't just getting bored; she was feeling used.

Krystal left a note on Jimmy's bed before she left. She knew she would face a scene at home and didn't want to endure one with Jimmy.

She didn't see Jimmy Hodges for weeks after that. He didn't call. She assumed he was mad, but when they finally did meet again, he smiled and chatted cheerfully.



The others around the campfire had changed the subject and were now talking excitedly about plans for the upcoming "See You at the Pole" event, when Christian students at Eisenhower High would gather before school for a circle of prayer and

witness around the flagpole. But Krystal heard nothing of their conversation; she sat silently, remembering Jimmy.

Sometime after her brief romance with him, he and his mother moved from Westcastle and word came back to Krystal—she struggled now to remember how she found out, but that memory wouldn't come—that Jimmy had died in the middle of his senior year of AIDS.

It took her three weeks after she learned of Jimmy's death, but she went—alone, fearful, panic-driven, and humiliated—to a clinic and underwent a blood test herself.

The results came back negative, and she remembered Jimmy's words, "You don't have to worry; I *always* use protection."

Even now, surrounded by her many friends, Krystal shuddered. After Jimmy, things got worse and worse for her until she had not only had many sexual encounters, she had gotten involved with a rough crowd at Eisenhower High and had become one of the most successful drug pushers at "Ike," selling drugs she obtained (and sometimes stole) from her own father, who had begun using drugs himself.

All that changed last year, however, when she had become a Christian as a result of some of the people in the campfire circle. She sighed with relief.

It's bad enough just remembering all that, she told herself. *I could never have survived these last three years wondering, Do I have AIDS?*