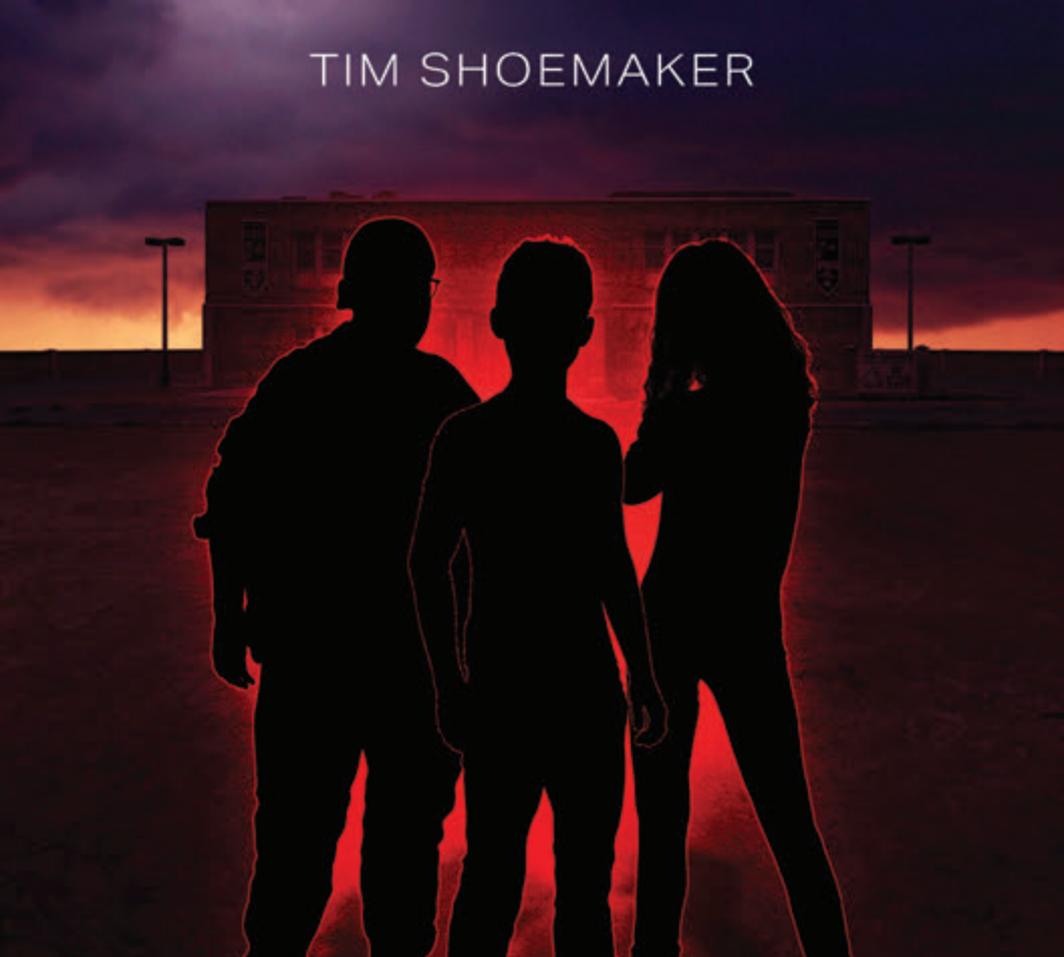


TIM SHOEMAKER

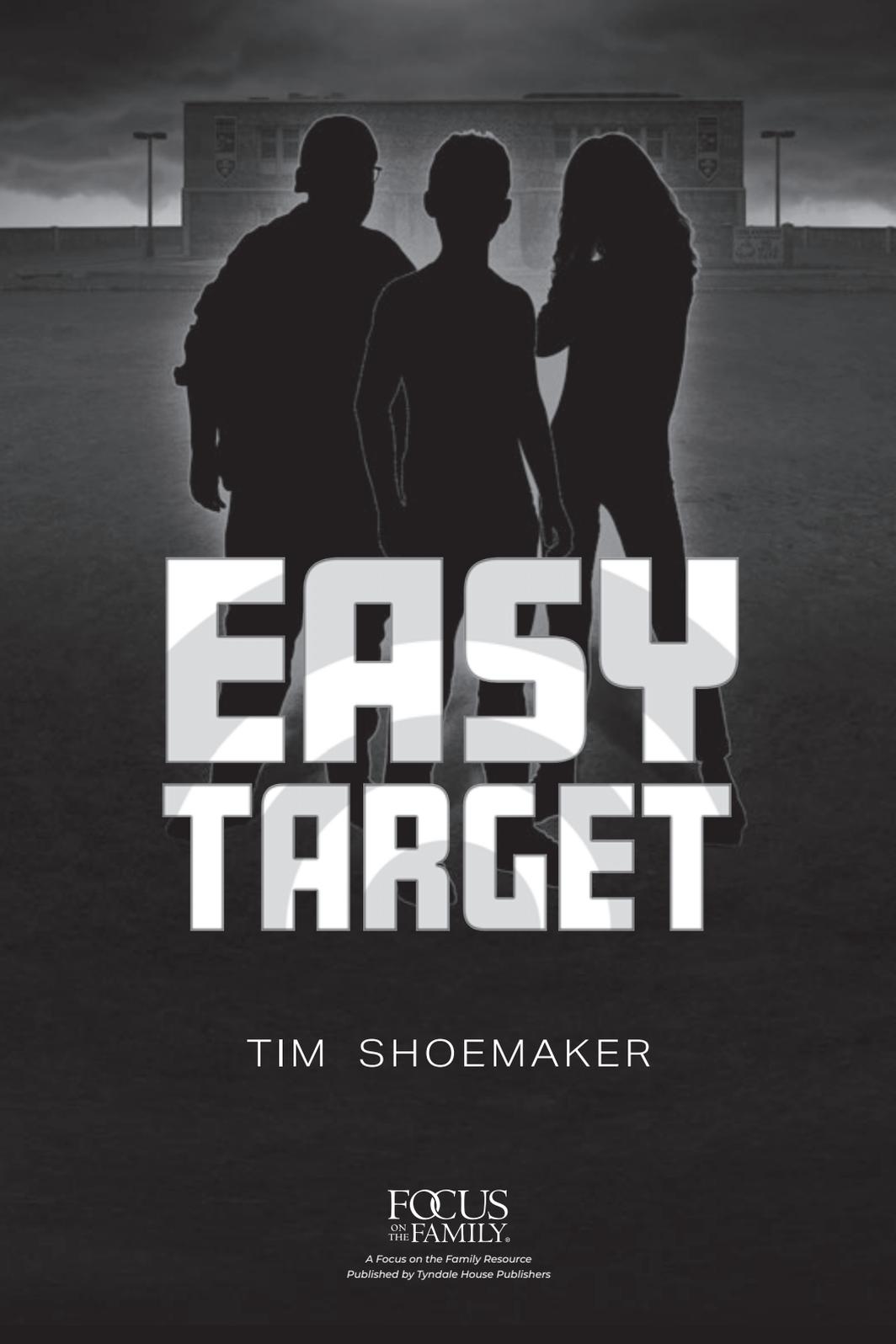


**EASY  
TARGET**

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY<sup>®</sup>

**EASY TARGET**



The image features a dark, atmospheric scene with the silhouettes of three people—a man on the left, a boy in the center, and a woman on the right—standing in a large, open area. In the background, a school building is visible under a cloudy, twilight sky. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

# EASY TARGET

TIM SHOEMAKER

FOCUS  
ON THE FAMILY<sup>®</sup>

*A Focus on the Family Resource  
Published by Tyndale House Publishers*

*Easy Target*

© 2021 Tim Shoemaker. All rights reserved.

A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

*Focus on the Family* and the accompanying logo and design are federally registered trademarks of Focus on the Family, 8605 Explorer Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

*TYNDALE* and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of Focus on the Family.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise marked, are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2001 by CrosswayBibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Michael Harrigan

The author is represented by the Cyle Young Hartline Literary Agency

The characters and events in this story are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at [csresponse@tyndale.com](mailto:csresponse@tyndale.com), or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-64607-019-0

**Printed in the United States of America**

27 26 25 24 23 22 21

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Dedicated to you, my readers.*

*May you have the strength to stand strong—even when you feel weak.*

*May you have courage to be kind—even to those who aren't kind back.*

*May you have wisdom to help the hurting—  
even those who don't seem to want help.*

*And to those who feel despair pressing in on you.*

*Hang on, my friends. There is always hope.*

*“There is always a way, if the desire be coupled with courage.”*

ROBERT E. HOWARD, CONAN THE BARBARIAN

# CHAPTER 1

HUDSON DIDN'T ACTUALLY *hear* anyone in his bedroom. But he woke sensing someone was there. He held his breath and listened. Crickets. Cicadas. The usual night sounds drifted through his open window. But something felt off.

Dim light filtered in from the hall—enough to know the door was definitely open wider than when he'd gone to bed.

*Terrific.* He wasn't imagining this.

How often had he dreamt of being a hero? Imagining how great it would be to fight off some sicko who'd busted into the house? But now he didn't feel so courageous.

Barely opening his eyes, he scanned the shadows of the room without lifting his head. *I don't want to be a hero. I don't want to be a hero.* He struggled to keep his breathing steady.

*Lizzy.* He had to make sure his little sister was okay. Mom, too.

With Dad working late at the second job, Hudson had to step up. Had to. *God help me.*

He slid one arm off the side of his bed and reached for the Louisville Slugger on the floor. He'd grab it and bolt—and if anybody got in his way he'd swing for the fence. He felt the cool maple handle. Slid his fingers around it.

A faint rustling noise. Hudson tightened his grip—and someone stepped on the bat, pinning his hand to the floor.

Jerking free, Hudson kicked off the covers. “Ahhh—”

A hand clamped over his mouth. “Easy—it's Dad. I don't want you waking everyone.”

Hudson twisted away and stood—his whole body shaking. “You trying to scare me to death?”

His dad raised both hands and motioned for him to stay quiet. “So, you're awake?”

“I was going for the bat. What if I'd hit you?”

Dad laughed in a whispery sort of way. “But you didn't. Come with me.”

“What?”

He tapped a finger to his lips, motioned for Hudson to follow, and headed for the door. Even in the faint light he could see Dad was still wearing his Lowe's work shirt. Hudson trudged after him.

Dad tiptoed through the kitchen to the basement door. He looked back once as if to be sure Hudson was following, and then disappeared down the stairway.

Hudson stood at the top of the stairs. “Why down there?”

“I need to show you something,” Dad whispered. He bypassed the light switch, and used the flashlight on his phone instead.

Okay, this was getting weirder by the second.

Hudson took the steps slow—scanning the blackness of the basement as he did. The dank smell seemed especially strong, and the dampness circled and clung to his legs. He paused at the bottom

of the stairs. The chill from the concrete floor seemed to go right through him.

The flashlight swung around, blinding him for an instant. “You coming?”

“What are we doing down here?”

Without answering, Dad wove his way around stacks of boxes still waiting to be unpacked from the move. He made his way to the furnace and turned off the flashlight.

Dark as a cave. And just as creepy.

Hudson heard the ratchet of the pull string, and a single bulb flicked on. He squinted and looked around for any clue as to what Dad felt was so important to show him at this hour. Furnace. Slop sink. Hot water heater. Nothing looked different.

Dad stepped in front of Hudson and squared his shoulders. “Hit me.” He looked dead serious.

“What?”

“Keep your voice down.” He patted his gut. “Right here. I want to see what you’ve got.”

*What I’ve got?* Hudson took a step back. Okay, a lot of stuff had changed for the family—especially Dad—but he’d seemed like he was handling it alright.

Until now.

“I’m not going to hit you.”

“Yeah, you are.” He motioned Hudson toward him. “You’ve never gone to a public school before. I have to make sure you can defend yourself.”

So that’s what this was all about. “Seriously?”

“We’ve raised you in a bit of a bubble, and eighth grade can be brutal. I haven’t slept good in the last two weeks since you started.”

Hudson snickered. “You woke me up—because *you* can’t sleep?”

“C’mon, wise guy. Let’s see what you’ve got. Hit me.”

There was no way. “I might hurt you.” *Might?* No, he *definitely* would.

Dad laughed quietly. “What do you weigh now, one-twenty?”

“One thirty-two.” Maybe more after the spaghetti tonight.

“Okay, so I still outweigh you by sixty pounds. Trust me, you’re not going to send this guy to the hospital.” He tapped his stomach. “C’mon. Right in the breadbasket. Take a swing.”

“I don’t see the point.”

“Made any friends yet?”

Hudson shook his head. Not that he hadn’t tried.

“With no friends, some will see you as an easy target.” Dad shrugged like the solution was obvious. “You’ve got to know how to take care of yourself. Just in case.”

For some reason the whole thing struck him as incredibly funny. “You always taught me to solve problems *without* fighting. Does Mom know you’re doing this?” Dumb question. Why else would Dad be doing this in the middle of the night?

“Stop stalling. Hit me.”

Hudson pictured Dad going to school in a day when hallway or cafeteria brawls would break out. He was so out of touch. “It’s different now.”

Dad’s face got dead serious. “Times change. People don’t.” He hesitated. “I’ll bet you already know who the alpha male is at Southfield.”

He pictured a wolf. Zachary Wolfe to be exact. PTO president’s son. Brainy. Charmer. All-around jerk.

He’d seen Wolfe torment Steve Adashek just because he smiled too much. Adashek hadn’t done much smiling since. But Wolfe did—along with Mitch Zattora, Brett Scurto—aka Skirt—and others he’d seen following Wolfe like a pack. It made Hudson want to puke. “I haven’t seen one fight. Nothing physical like that. Just verbal stuff.”

“It may not come to this,” Dad said as he made a fist, “but there’s

a social order—and the kids in power expect you to respect it . . . or they'll make sure you do.”

“It’s not like that,” Hudson said. “But if something changes I’ll sign up for your self-defense lessons, okay?”

“That’ll be too late. Be nice. Be kind. I’m all about that. But when somebody gets all in your face—you have to deal with it right then. It’s a pop quiz. It comes without warning—and the grade will stick. If they push, you need to push back. You never let them get the last word in. That’s all I’m saying.”

Hudson had no intention of becoming a casualty. But Dad had to be wrong about all this. “How do you know so much about it?”

“Dads know, okay? Maybe I’ve been there.” He took a wide stance and bounced a couple of times on the balls of his feet. “Let’s say one of them shoves you.” He pushed Hudson’s shoulder with the flat of his hand. “What are you going to do?”

The hot water heater kicked on with a whoosh—casting an orange glow on the pale concrete floor.

Dad poked him. “Stay focused when somebody faces off with you. Don’t let him score a sissy shot on you.”

This would be a perfect time for Mom to walk down the stairs. Hudson glanced behind Dad.

“Never take your eyes off him. Ever.”

Hudson laughed. “I was just looking—”

“For help? Forget about it. Don’t look for a teacher. Don’t look for a friend. This is between you and the bozo in front of you. Right here. Right now. You’ve been shoved. What are you going to do?”

Hudson shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe—”

“Listen,” Dad said. “You can’t look like you’re lost. Stay confident—even when you’re outnumbered. Like you’ve got a secret weapon they don’t know about. Show no fear.”

“They’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Good. It’ll make them wonder if they really want to take you on. Confident or crazy—either works.”

This whole *thing* was crazy.

He jabbed Hudson’s shoulder—harder this time. “Now hit me.”

Hudson took a step back. Maybe Dad hit *his* head at work. Maybe he was helping some guy load a bunch of two-by-fours and he got clocked. That would explain—

“Don’t back up.” Dad inched closer. “Step into him instead. And the closer you are to him, the harder it will be for him to hurt you with a sucker punch. He can’t haul off and get a full swing on you.” Dad leaned in.

Hudson held his ground this time, his chest against Dad’s rib cage.

“Good. Perfect. The instant he moves to swing at you, you’ll feel it and you can react.”

Dad raised his hand to tag him again. Hudson swung his arm to block him.

“See? That’s what I’m talking about. Nice job.” Dad got in his face. “But now what? It isn’t enough to block, buddy.”

Hudson didn’t budge. “You told me not to back up. Okay. I stood here. I blocked your shot. What more do you want?”

“Play offense, Son. Defense isn’t going to get them to leave you alone.”

The kitchen floor creaked above them. It had to be Mom. Dad held a finger to his lips. “Sometimes you have to fight. And when you do, remember what I’m about to tell you, because everything will ride on this. Everything.”

Clammy fingers seemed to crawl up Hudson’s spine. There was something about Dad’s face. Totally intense—and with that same pained look Hudson had seen the day Dad announced he’d lost the job at Northrop. Hudson rubbed down the goose bumps rising on his arms.

Dad held up one hand and looked at the ceiling. The footsteps were moving toward the basement door.

“Hudson?” Mom’s voice called from the top of the stairs. “Are you down there?”

Dad looked totally disappointed. “We both are.”

“What on earth are you doing down there—at this hour?”

“Teaching Hudson some middle-school survival skills.” Dad gave Hudson a half-smile.

“Right.” She laughed. “Okay, boys. Time for bed.”

Dad took a deep breath and blew it out quick. “Okay. Lesson over for tonight.” He reached for the pull string.

Five minutes earlier Hudson would have welcomed the interruption. Now he wasn’t so sure. “What about the thing I need to remember—you were going to tell me—”

“Tomorrow night.” Dad motioned toward the stairs. “I promise.”

Dad flipped on his flashlight app and pointed it at the stairs ahead of Hudson. “Middle school can be brutal. I worry about how you’ll adjust.”

“You worry too much.” Hudson stood. “I’m not looking for trouble.”

“You won’t have to,” Dad whispered. “Trouble will find you.”