



THE JUNGLE WITHIN



BRIAN FORRESTER

JUNGLE

THE
W I T H I N

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*With all my love to
Jessica, McKenzie, Luke, Jake, Kate, and Sam*

*May God give you the wisdom to know what is right
and the courage to do it even when it's hard.*

CHAPTER 1



She was the kind of beauty that took my breath away. Like the time in high school football when a blindside tackle knocked my wind out and I saw twinkling stars and a sparkly montage of bursting crystal thingees while trying to suck in my next desperate gulp of air.

Yeah, beautiful like that.

And better yet, she lay on a smoothed-out purple towel, glistening in all her glory under a warm North Carolina sun.

A day for the history books. All the ingredients were there: at the lake with my buddies and Miss America tanning twenty yards away, showing her curves to an appreciative humanity and reminding everyone that God, hallelujah, was a great Creator.

I'd never seen her before, which was odd, since I hung out at the lake every sunny afternoon playing ultimate frisbee. One of my friends, Stanley, apparently noticed my eyes googling out.

"Pace, you know what's next." He pointed to her. "It's page one of the Guy Code. Gotta make your move. Show her you're the pot of bubbling manhood she's always dreamed of."

I shook my head. "Look at her, she's so out of my league. It's like Zeus sculpted her on Mount Olympus."

“I can’t believe it.” Stanley’s face dropped in disappointment, making his double chin more pronounced. “You’ve lost your legendary swagger. Come on, where’s the guy who once put the move on Lucy Skyler?”

“Lucy? That was in seventh grade. Her retainer fell out of her mouth. All I did was give it back to her.”

“Yeah, with your lips.” He gazed back toward the goddess on the towel. “This may be your only shot. Destiny hinges on this moment. What do you have to lose?”

A handful of other friends joined in, ragging me to “be a man” and to win one for the Gipper, and in their own dumb, rah-rah testosterone-filled cheers, reminding me how I’d be an embarrassment to the future of the male chromosome if I didn’t at least try. Like whatever.

None of their immature taunts worked, and I could ignore those horndogs all day. That is, until Stanley rolled out the Secret Weapon, a singular force of mass destruction known to incite even the most yellow-bellied of cowards:

The Triple Dog Dare.

Where else do nineteen-year-old guys still use the Triple Dog Dare (TDD)? We may have biologically grown out of puberty, but we were somehow frozen in perpetual middle-schoolism. Refusing a TDD was akin to saying your momma had curly hair on her back.

Stanley cocked his arms on his hips. “So there you have it. I Triple Dog Dare you to talk to her.”

I glanced across the field toward her again, and a strange braggadocio stirred from somewhere deep within. “Alright. I accept the challenge. But only if it will shut you morons up.”

Which began their sophomoric series of approving guttural growls and barking sounds; the universal signals of male stupidity.

I waved my arms and quieted them. “Need a game plan. I can’t just walk over to a suntanning girl and interrupt her. It’d kill the vibe. Not to mention it’s borderline creepy.”

Stanley nodded. “You’re right. We’ve got to make it look accidental.” He picked the frisbee off the ground. “Step One is accidentally

throwing this frisbee in her direction, on purpose, enough to startle her. You go retrieve said frisbee, then boom! The love sparks start flying.”

“An *accidental* throw? That’s the oldest trick in the book.”

“But it’s proven. Just like the “fake-yawn-I’m-stretching-my-arms-to-hug-you” maneuver. Trust me, girls love this stuff.”

“And you’re the expert? You’ve never had a girlfriend. You play video games all day in your parent’s basement.”

“Excuse me.” Stanley feigned mock anger. “I’m saving myself for the right woman, bro. And girls are turned on by my amazing hand-eye coordination. Only video games can perfect that.”

I rolled my eyes. “So what do I say to her?”

“Don’t overthink it. Let the words flow, be natural. But here’s the trick: you need to carry a baby or a small child with you. Every woman loves something cute.”

“Where are we supposed to get a baby? Out of thin air?”

“No, but calm down.” Stanley rubbed his hands across his crew cut. “We do have a close second option: a cute, cuddly animal.”

He pointed toward Mr. Roper, his lovable eighty-five pound sheepdog who always joined us at the lake. Mr. Roper epitomized the opposite of cute and cuddly; he was big and clumsy and smelly. And blind. He bounded everywhere, like a lumpy, happy-go-lucky potato sack, and he crashed into everything. Because he was blind.

“Let me get this straight. I’m taking your blind sheepdog with me?” I asked.

“Mr. Roper is a veteran. He’s helped me dozens of times with the ladies. Kind of a good luck charm.”

“Can’t believe I’m actually gonna do this.” I tussled my hair. “How do I look?”

Stanley gave me the once-over. “Let’s see — the surfer blond hair. Chicks dig that. Nice tan, blue eyes, tight butt. Impressive biceps. If she says no, then I’m available.”

“I’m gonna throw up in my mouth.” I whistled to Mr. Roper and he bounded over. “Alright guys, take some notes. One day you’re gonna tell your grandkids how I swept Miss Beautimus off her feet.”

My 100% fake bravado fooled no one.

“Wait...” Stanley handed me a small bag. “Mr. Roper does better if you carry along his doggie biscuits. If the conversation lags, just feed him. It’s adorable to watch.”

Too nervous to argue, I walked the first ten yards toward Sunbathing Beauty and convinced myself to act confident, even with snickering friends in the background.

Ignore them. Shoulders back, head up.

I had never actually “picked up” a girl before, but how hard could it be? A little small talk, make her laugh, compliment her looks, and then hopefully some chika-chika-wah-wah fireworks. Of course, that was just theory.

My skin flushed with a cold sweat, so I inhaled a deep breath and soaked in the surroundings, forcing myself to calm down.

Beside me, the Silver Lake lived up to its name. The early afternoon sun glimmered across the water and a cloudless blue sky reflected a magical sheen. Many couples and families sprawled around the acres of grass enjoying picnics and the twangy chords of country music.

Mr. Roper bounced faithfully by my side, trusting for guidance. Sometimes I’d forget about his doggie disability and he’d tumble into innocent bystanders, like a rolling fur ball.

Patting his head, I tried untangling his wet fur, but to no avail. He looked like one of those dirty mops in a janitor’s closet.

Fifteen yards away and time to throw the frisbee. The success or failure of Operation Hot Woman came down to the toss. Throw it too short or too long and she wouldn’t budge. It had to land really close, so she could hear it plop beside her, and by the time she raised her head, I’d run up with an apology, a smile, and a blind dog.

But before throwing it, I gazed once more at her beauty; her ebony skin, smooth as untouched butter, with dark hair twisted back and highlighting the delicate facial features of a golden-gilded seraph.

She wore white shorty-shorts and a string bikini on top, with a necklace sparkling under the sun in the crook of her neck, like a glowing starburst at the top of a constellation. The whole wondrous

sight glowed perfectly in symmetrical line and form. Be still my beating heart.

I concentrated on a spot beside her hip, aiming the frisbee for close-but-not-too close. And I let it fly.

Showtime.

The disc zipped across the lawn with a perfect spin and felt good leaving my hand. It fluttered gently, bobbing along in the air, all the way to where she lay... hovering... as if it were preparing for the perfect landing... until it fell abruptly, like a trapdoor suddenly opened, dropping flat on her forehead with a loud *ker-blunk*.

Good God.

CHAPTER 2



She sat up and raised her shades, confused, until she saw the frisbee lying beside her.

Rubbing her head, she turned and looked at me.

Since first impressions are critical, smart people always have a plan for those important moments. Here was mine:

Plan A: The plastic frisbee lands perfectly close to her. She turns and sees me, the wind gently blowing my hair, kind of like a slow-mo shampoo commercial. I smile sheepishly and offer a wink of apology for the nearby disc landing too close and rustling her from blissful slumber. Romantic conversation commences.

Plan A didn't work.

So now *Plan B*, which wasn't good because I hadn't thought of a Plan B. Caught off guard by the misfire, my facial expression was stuck somewhere between horror and *hello-nice-to-meet-you-I'm-the-dweeb-who-threw-the-frisbee*.

Bad first impression.

She stared, her cute manicured eyebrows crinkled in frustration, and her arms raised in a "What was that all about?" unspoken question.

I read somewhere that you have ten seconds to impress a new person, and if you fail, somehow the planet spins off its axle and the relationship takes a turn for the worst. Apparently an immutable law like gravity.

Ten seconds and the clock ticking.

I half-ran toward her, and before offering an apology, Mr. Roper got excited about the action and barreled away from me and straight on top of her with all eighty-five pounds of his good-natured but misguided love.

It was like watching someone fight a cloth carwash.

Mr. Roper flat-out tackled her, though in his defense he didn't see her, and upon his discovery of a new human person, he slobbered her face with his big pink tongue.

For a split second, I actually felt jealous.

"I'm so sorry!" My voice pitched high due to nervousness, like in seventh grade with retainer-challenged Lucy.

I pulled Mr. Roper off her, too much in shock to realize the catastrophe in the making.

Her charcoal eyes bore into me. "Is this how you say hello to all the ladies?"

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hit you with the frisbee... and Mr. Roper is blind."

"It's okay, no harm done." She rubbed Mr. Roper's wet fur. "He's cute. Though a little smelly. What's your name?"

"Pace. Pace Howell."

"Pace. Hmm... that's different. And I thought my name was unique."

"What's yours?"

"Sage Collins."

"That is beautiful. Nice to meet you." My voice resembled a soloist in the Vienna Boys Choir.

"So were you trying to hit me with the frisbee or what?"

Busted. "Wh... What do you mean?"

She pointed toward my ever-supportive friends, standing in the distance and doubled over, laughing hilariously and enjoying the

show. The moment they realized she saw them, they tried playing it off, unconvincingly.

I hung my head. “They dared me.”

“Were you scared? Did you think I’d bite?”

And then my worst fear: clamming up. A complete loss of words, due to the triangulation of her stunning beauty, her razor wit, and my utter embarrassment.

The insides of my head resembled a dystopian wasteland of smoke and fire, like the naked desolation after a nuclear blast, and I had nothing to say, especially with her divine eyes piercing into me.

I do dumb things when nervous. Almost like I’m out of body. And the Dumb Thing happened that defied explanation, taking place in less than two seconds.

Noticing a bag of chips on her towel, no doubt her afternoon snack, brain waves must have sent a signal to my hand that said, “Eat!” or either my mouth sent a message to my brain saying, “Help!” since no syllables or words formed on my paralyzed lips.

So I lifted a hand, subconsciously, and crammed something in my mouth. A nervous, knee-jerk reaction in the face of crisis. And I took a bite.

It was a gritty, bland taste, like stale Melba toast, and a terrifying shudder instantaneously rose up my spine.

Mr. Roper’s doggie biscuits.

She looked at the half-eaten biscuit in my hand, then gazed at me. And laughed. *Hard*.

“If you were that hungry, I could have shared some chips with you.” She smiled, biting her lower lip, like trying to hold back another laugh.

There was no witty reply, no one-liner to save face, and if the earth had cracked open and swallowed me whole at that exact moment, I would’ve died a happy man.

We’re talking an epic fail of historic proportions, and in the long history of pick-ups-gone-bad, this would’ve won the Golden Raspberry Award. Crash and burn. Five-alarm fire. The poster boy of losers everywhere.

All I managed to say was, “I got nervous because you’re so pretty.”
Such a doofus.

She stopped laughing and stared with a deep smile, one that didn’t part her lips. A beat of silence. “That was sweet.”

She rubbed her forehead. “I guess it was worth the bruise you gave me.”

Packing her towel and belongings, she slung a bag over her shoulders. “I need to go, Pace. But let me give you something.”

She pulled a small card from her bag. “Maybe we’ll bump into each other again. But without a wet dog.”

With a wave, she walked away into the golden sunshine, a silhouette fading into the distance like a melting dream. And looking at her card, I never expected the words I read:

Defender Church
Sundays 9AM & 11AM
A Band That Rocks
Come As You Are
Practical Messages
www.defenderchurch.org



IN THE DAYS AFTERWARD, my friends gave me a hard time about the Silver Lake disaster, well deserved, especially after almost killing a girl with a freight train mutt and going all Fear Factor on her with a Milk-Bone.

The guys joked me like a pack of wild animals on red meat:

I hear doggie biscuits help clean teeth and freshen breath.

You’re messing with one of God’s girls!

You two should get married and become missionaries.

Yeah, there’s a missionary position you need to learn about.

Get together and practice tongues!

Be careful about the laying on of hands.

And on and on it went. But respect was earned since I took a chance and had something to show for it. Her church invite card felt like winning a Willy Wonka Golden Ticket.

So after checking out Sage's Insta page — full of more stunning pictures and zero evidence of a boyfriend — and then the church website, I tried talking Stanley into going with me the next Sunday.

“Tell me I'm not crazy for doing this.”

He didn't blink. “Oh, you're definitely crazy. But that's what it takes, man. The eye of the tiger.”

“So it's not creepy to show up at her church?”

“A little bit, yeah. But obviously her faith is important to her. So maybe this is some type of test. You get more into Jesus and she'll get more into you.”

“Will you tag along?” I tapped his chest. “You know, be my wingman?”

“The term *wingman* wasn't designed for usage in the hallowed halls of worship.”

“Since when did you get a conscience? You've hit on girls at funerals.”

Stanley thought for a moment. “Point taken. But no way — NO WAY — will I be caught dead in a church. I don't vibe with those holy rollers. Ain't gonna happen.”

“I bet other hot girls are there.”

And that did the trick. Defender Church, here we come.

CHAPTER 3



Driving into the Defender Church parking lot felt like a Disney World experience, minus the mouse ears.

Caffeinated workers in bright yellow “I ♥ My Church” t-shirts waved huge foam fingers and directed us to a parking spot near the front. I half expected “It’s A Small World” to be playing somewhere.

The church building resembled a massive brick movie theater, a multilevel structure with lots of glass and no steeple. Not your grand-mama’s church.

Near the entry door, a white tent welcomed guests with coffee and a “New Guest” present, a gift bag containing a branded travel mug and a flyer promoting the Spotify playlist of the church music team.

A friendly older gentleman opened the door and pointed us toward the main atrium, a buzzing area reminiscent of a Turkish bazaar. Colorful signs draped the walls: Guest Information, Cafe, Kids Check-In area. Dozens of large, flat-screen TV’s dotted the walls and flashed an urgent “Worship Experience” countdown clock. Seven minutes until lift-off.

Carrying that New Guest bag tattooed us as visitors, and everyone went out of their way with waves and hellos. But no sign of Sage. We

attended the eleven o'clock service, a calculated risk, since I figured everyone our age wanted to sleep in as late as possible. Hopefully, she didn't attend the early service.

Stepping into the massive auditorium, an usher led us to our cushioned seats about midway back, and music thumped from the speaker clusters as par cans flooded the stage with theatrical light. Jesus had gone Hollywood.

It had been years since I last visited a church, for a cousin's baptism, a small country church that smelled like moth balls and had uncomfortable pews and orange carpet and an old lady playing organ. How times had changed.

Defender Church resembled a Millennial flash mob, a hipster-fest with a sea of rimmed glasses, pierces and plugs, and mismatched attire that basically screamed, "I didn't try too hard this morning!" and "We're Christians and can still be cool, really!" A lot of the guys wore scarves and some of the beards must have taken longer to comb than their head hair.

So any fear of being underdressed quickly vanished. No one wore anything resembling a suit, fine with me, since I had opted for a pair of comfortable jeans and a teal t-shirt. Another thing... almost everyone there was Wonder Bread white, odd since we lived in a diverse community. At least Sage would stick out.

The jumbo screen flashed four minutes until Showtime, and a wild assortment of wandering beatniks and Bohemian artist types filed into the surrounding seats. It looked like a spiritual Woodstock.

Stanley leaned over. "Alright, you got me here. Congratulations. But it's a one-shot deal. If the amazing Sage doesn't show up, you're on your own. I'm not coming back."

"You never know. Maybe you'll walk the aisle today and get saved."

"Now *that* would take an act of God. Like one of these hipsters shaving off their Fu Manchu mustaches. Not gonna happen."

Stanley and I had never really talked about God and faith, but now seemed a good time. I asked, "Do you believe in the Man Upstairs?"

He paused. "You've heard of circumcision, right?"

My eyebrows raised. "Excuse me?"

“Circumcision. The removal of foreskin.”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Why would God make guys with foreskins then tell them to cut it off? It’s like God saying, ‘My bad, fellas. But do you mind taking a sharp knife and fixing my mistake?’”

“You don’t believe in God because of circumcision?”

“That’s not the only reason.” Stanley flipped through a church bulletin. “It’s also the other stuff. The poverty, natural disasters, evil. Why hot dogs come in packs of ten but buns in packs of eight. You know, the deep mysteries of the universe.”

“So you’re an atheist?”

“I don’t like pigeonholing myself. But to use a floating term, I’d call myself a logicist.”

“I’m guessing that has something to do with logic.”

He nodded. “And math. All the conundrums of the universe can be solved by mathematical computations. No tomfoolery with superstitions about God. If an earthquake happens in India, it probably goes back to some geometric algorithm.”

I waited for him to smile, but he looked serious. Not a surprise. Stanley thought logically about everything and could have been the founding member of the Spock fan club. He must have inherited it from his dad, a straight-laced engineer who always had cool tech toys lying around the house.

“So what about you?” he asked.

“Well, uh...”

I had every intention of answering, until the sanctuary doors parted and my frontal lobe jolted into a breakdance.

Sage walked in.

And for a brief moment, the world stopped spinning and my heart skipped a beat and angelic choruses filled this orbital ball we call the Earth.

She entered with a group of friends, smiling and radiant, a queen with her entourage. And if possible, she looked more stunning than at the lake. Floating along in a breezy tank and a summer skirt, she wore her hair out, all natural and big and beautiful, like it was asking

my fingers to run through it. An aura of celestial light surrounded her.

Sage didn't see me, not that she was looking. She'd probably forgotten about the invite or at least didn't think I was crazy enough to take her up on it. She sat near the front, at the perfect angle for me to stare at the side of her face, so smooth and caramel.

"I do believe in God," I whispered to Stanley. "Since he created something as beautiful as her."

A moment later, the countdown clock struck 0:00 and the lights faded and an electric guitar started screaming. Eleven o'clock at Defender Church.

For the next ten minutes, the crowd stood in participation, immersed in a multimedia mishmash of sight and sound, singing under the direction of a spiked-haired singer with holes in his pants and an assortment of head-bobbing musicians rocking and rolling with hillbilly sensibility in honor of the holy J.C., blessed be He.

Stanley and I actually enjoyed the show, but since we didn't know the songs, we simply took in the sights, in my case, Sage, who clapped and punched the air with a passion that made me want to yell *Sweet Jesus*.

With a flourish, the band wailed on a final, dramatic note before the music guy told us to have a seat. A cool-looking, twenty-something pastor stood and welcomed everyone with a few announcements and a lame attempt at PG-rated church humor, followed by another song by the band — this one slow and introspective and sang on a stool — and then a short video introducing the sermon of the day.

And that's when we met Vin, a middle-aged-still-valiantly-trying-to-hold-onto-youth Lead Pastor. He sported a too-tight jersey T-shirt and a dark pair of skinny jeans. He wasn't fat, but he hadn't ran any marathons lately, either.

The more passionate he became, the more heavily he breathed, and all I could think of was that poor button on the front of his aforementioned skinny jeans, holding on for dear life, pushing back against the

girth of his Gospel passion. If that little guy lost the fight than someone in Defender Church would lose an eye.

“Too many chicken potluck dinners,” Stanley said, way too loud.

But Vin turned out to be a likable guy, and a good speaker, and holding my attention was no small task. He spoke about how “God has a purpose for your life” with the main point being, “Are you in step with His purpose for you?”

It was a question I’d never thought about. If God did exist somewhere up there, with some heavenly plan, than I must be really sucking at it. It had been a tough first semester away at college, and my parents brought me home at Christmas because of grades, or my lack thereof. It’s not that the work was too hard. I just didn’t go to class. Too many parties. I screwed up.

My plan was to study animal biology, a lifelong passion, but the rigid university structure and boring lectures squeezed the life out of me. So my parents forced me to move back home and get a job, earning back the privilege of higher education by commuting to a nearby community college. Couldn’t blame their reasoning.

Over the past spring semester, I acknowledged my immaturity and worked to get back on track. My job at Luigi’s Italian Restaurant paid the bills, but being a career busboy wasn’t on the bucket list. Plus, I hated meatballs. My life needed a jolt, a challenge, an electric zimzum.

So God’s purpose? *Hmmm*. Vin waxed eloquent about a Bible guy named Abraham who left his home and embarked on an adventure, shaking his life from the routine. Then he closed the sermon by highlighting Defender Church’s “missions” team.

I didn’t have a fat clue about a missions team. Was that like a church special forces unit? A religious SWAT team?

He explained how a volunteer team was heading to the Amazon and helping sick folks living on the banks of the river. Vin mentioned last-minute team openings and how an informational meeting was taking place after the service.

Sounded interesting, but I didn’t give it much thought. That is,

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until he asked for team members to stand and be recognized, and Sage rose with a handful of others.

Hello, my beautiful Amazon woman.

And right then and there, a missions meeting was in my immediate future.