

# **WAYWARD PATHS AND GOLDEN HANDCUFFS**

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S.J. Thomason

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## Dedications

This book is dedicated to my sons, my husband, and my Lord, Jesus Christ. I am grateful to those I've encountered in my life who have shaped my opinions and thoughts about our Savior and have helped me to learn about His truths. I am also grateful that I've been blessed with the opportunity and ability to write this book. Finally, I'm grateful for my husband and two sons, my greatest blessings.

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“A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump. A God-shaped life is a flourishing tree”  
Proverbs 11:28 (MSG).

Being a CEO's son in the top one percent of income earners certainly has its perks, yet such diversions fail to impress Nick. Success to Nick is defined instead by helping those less fortunate and embracing Christianity. Success to his mom is defined differently, through a passion for work, a capitalization on assets, and a drive to accumulate wealth. Convincing his successful mother to follow Jesus' example is nearly impossible, though, since she feels that Jesus is only a myth, immortalized to control the masses. Then fate steps in and Nick finds himself clashing with the obstacles of alcohol, abundance, and adultery as he strives to outrun time and alter fate to present a compelling argument in support of Jesus to the mother he loves.

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# **WAYWARD PATHS AND GOLDEN HANDCUFFS**

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## Chapter 1

### *Waterskiing in a Lightning Storm*

Nick clutched the ski rope with ease as he slid across the salty water on his slalom ski. The sun was only a memory in the dark sky and the moon was all that lit the sea under his ski. Rain was drizzling and he could feel it collapsing against his upper torso and his legs, just under his khaki shorts. Nothing like warm, sticky rain on a hot night.

The thrill of the adventure engulfed him. Night waterskiing was fun. He'd never skied at night before, and it seemed particularly enjoyable in his beer-fueled body. As his friend Bob, or "Bobnoxious," maneuvered the boat in a wide circle around Orange Bay, Nick gripped the rope and stayed in its wake.

Bob yelled something, but Nick couldn't hear what he said over the boat's purring engine. He watched Bob as he pointed to a few big waves heading towards the boat, and felt himself hopping over them with ease when they arrived. His other friend Tanner was standing next to Bob, yet turned towards him with his beer in hand.

"Start taking notes!" Nick O'Brien boasted to his friends, yet he knew they couldn't hear him either.

He skipped over the wake behind the boat and made a wide circle to their right, carving a thick wall of water, which showcased his many years as a skier. Angling himself slightly, he skidded over to the other side of the boat and duplicated his masterful spray. His muscular body was in perfect shape for a battle on a ski with the water and the elements. Feeling proud and strong, he skimmed back to his friends' right side and sprayed his highest wall of water yet.

It was hard to see the stars since the sky was covered in clouds and the air was thickened by the misty rain. Though the light of the moon seemed to be fading a bit, he remained confident in his abilities; he was familiar with the ocean water and its waves. Chuckling to himself, he figured he'd probably be able to ski without a problem if blindfolded. He closed his eyes for a few seconds before realizing that skiing blindfolded would be impossible. The moon's reflection still guided him on the water as he moved about. The rain started to get a little thicker so he blinked his eyes a few times to free them from the blurry moisture.

“Yippee-yi-yay!” He screamed as he hit another wave and leapt into the air before landing perfectly once again. Nothing could stop him now, not even the beer rolling through his blood and playing with his mind.

The moon’s light started to dim even more and the stars were no longer present. Traversing across the boat’s wake was becoming more difficult as he strained to see the waves in the water past the newly thickened rain. The fun factor was fading away.

Seconds later, thunder rolled in and roared across the sky. Nick, who was well familiar with Florida’s notoriety as the lightning capitol of the world, shuddered. Time to get back on the boat. Being on the water in a lightning storm was toying with death.

“Hey, stop the boat!”

They didn’t hear him. The boat was still traveling at full speed.

He watched Bob as he turned around to face him briefly and pounded his fist into the air.

“C’mon! Stop the boat!” Nick demanded. “Lightning!”

Bob smiled and pounded his fist again. The boat kept traveling at full speed. More thunder. More lightning. Blinded by anger, Nick could barely make out the waves as they struck him.

“Oh God, please help me,” he said in a panic. “What’s wrong with him?”

He watched his friend, Tanner, as he grabbed Bob’s arm and shook him.

The boat finally stopped. He popped off his ski in a second and swam at breakneck speed to get back onto the boat. As he climbed in, he could feel his blood boiling, along with a sudden desire to kill Bob, who should have cut the engine the moment the lightning started.

“Why’d it take you so long to stop?” What were you thinking man?” He said as he glared at Bob and panted.

“Hey, you looked like you were having fun. Didn’t want to cut you short,” Bob replied. “Let’s get outa here.”

Thunder was still roaring and lightning flashing in the sky as the three young men headed back to the boat docks at full speed. The night had become wrathful and it was no time to be on a boat.

Nick tried to contain his rage. He wanted to pound Bob, yet took a few deep breaths to calm himself down. Bob was much smaller than he was and he knew that he could probably level him with a couple of punches.

After a long while and seconds before arriving at the docks, he said, “It was fun at first. Then it sucked, Bob. It sucked.”

“Yeah, too much lightning. You guys up for heading back to my house? I’ve got more beer in the fridge.” Bob didn’t seem to comprehend his ordeal; he’d probably had too much to drink.

“Works for me,” Tanner said.

Nick was still fuming. But he was still alive. He took a deep breath and found himself thanking the Lord in his thoughts.

“Okay, I’m game too.”

A year would pass before he’d see Bob again.

## Chapter 2

### *Her Act Will Be Hard to Follow*

With her chin held high, she surveyed the crowd from their table in the front of the room by the stage. Nick compared her movements to those of a regal lion as it surveyed its jungle court from its perch on the side of a mountain. And just as the lion deserved the respect it received from the animals in the jungle, she deserved her position presently. She'd worked hard. Soon she'd be called to the podium to receive her award as one of West Florida's three most distinguished women of the year.

She was also Nick O'Brien's mom. He sat by her side at her table, surrounded by a group of women from the organization for which she worked: Fox 'n Fields. All were dressed in suits, yet none wore them as well as his mother. It was clear which of the bunch sat atop of the corporate food chain.

He was proud to be by her side, proud to be by the epitome of success. And she played the part well with her perfect posture and make-up, professionally manicured fingernails, coiffed blonde bob haircut, and crisp red designer suit. Her new gold Rolex watch with its diamond bezel sparkled against both the lights in the room and her office white skin, as did her diamond necklace. *She-power.*

According to the women at his table, celebrating the accomplishments of the filthy rich was always a treat in Orange Bay. And the Orange Bay Women's Awards Ceremony offered average folks that "delightful indulgence" each year. Having the opportunity to marvel at the designer outfits of the world's female millionaires in the top 1% stirred feelings of pleasure and wonder among those at his table, along with those they'd termed the "bourgeois" at other tables in the packed auditorium.

The event was kicked off with the introduction of the keynote speaker, Barbara Collins. She arrived at the podium in a dark green knit suit, which accented her silver grey hair as snow accents pine trees in the Colorado Mountains in the winter. Her appearance seemed a bit frail and her voice slightly quivered as she began her key note address.

"I'm excited to have this opportunity to let you know about the excellent work that we've done in our home over the past twenty years in service of the good Lord. The Collins' Foster

Home provides a safe haven, support, and therapeutic and loving care for abused, neglected, and abandoned children. Its campus includes five homes on fifteen acres of land and it's located just outside of the city of Orange Bay in a rather rural part of the county. Each home features ten bedrooms: eight for sixteen children and two for the overnight caretakers. In all, we serve eighty children at a time."

Pictures of young children, teenagers, and adults whose lives she had touched were streamed on a large screen, tugging at the heart strings of all in the audience, particularly Nick, who noticed boys and girls of every race, some healthy and some disabled. All had two things in common: they'd been both challenged and blessed. Life had thrown them a curveball and Barbara batted it away and blessed them with a loving and secure environment. Nick felt inspired. As the pictures flashed before him, he noticed one more commonality: all wore smiles.

"Each and every one of the children in our home has a special gift and is a special blessing from God. It's been our job to find that gift and to make sure that they use it effectively in their lives. Some were gifted with the ability to write, so we've encouraged writing and the expression of their thoughts. Others were blessed with the ability to understand and empathize with others, so we've encouraged sales or teaching or counseling or social work. Others were gifted with mathematical skills, so we've encouraged pursuits in engineering, accounting, science, and finance. Still others were blessed with musical or artistic abilities, so we've encouraged advancement in the arts. Everyone has a gift. And everyone needs to know that. People need to know that they're special in their own way, blessed by our Lord." She paused and looked over the audience.

"What you may not know is that I've been battling breast cancer over the past few months. I was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer in late February and told that I only had a few months left to live. I chose to forego chemotherapy, since it would make me too sick to use my last days on this earth the way I want to use them. My life has been very rewarding and I now feel that I'm ready to meet my Father in Heaven." She paused and surveyed the room before turning her head towards the screen, which displayed children's pictures from her foster home.

"Don't worry about the fate of the community foster home. Jesus has blessed the home in remarkable ways and it will grow and thrive under new leadership, whom Jesus will inspire, to serve the growing needs of our community. We haven't closed our mission gap of serving *all* of

the children in need in our community as we can only serve eighty at a time. There is still much work to do.”

Tears poured down the faces of the audience as they experienced an unusual blending of her pain, her passion, and her faith. Nick’s eyes welled up with tears, which he quickly wiped off. He hated crying in front of others. Pulling his stomach inward, he drew a deep breath and tried to relax his thoughts. Again, his emotions were getting the best of him.

“Relax. Show control,” he muttered under his breath as he looked down into his lap. After a few moments, he felt a bit of strength and again peered up at the podium.

He noticed that Barbara wasn’t crying. Instead, she said, “Please hold back your tears. You should be rejoicing. I’ve completed what God called me to do and will soon walk with him in Heaven. And let me tell you that I can’t wait to thank Jesus.” Nick was surprised by the sudden change in her voice, which now exuded strength and power. It was clear that her frail body was no match for her inner strength.

The audience clapped and stood up in an ovation as she ended her speech and walked back to her seat at the first table. A press photographer followed her and shot photos.

Nick watched her as she arrived at her table and sat down. Her table was occupied by both women and men, and...

“Piper McCoy,” he whispered to himself as he sat up straighter in his chair. “Beautiful.” She was sitting at Barbara’s table and looked radiant in her red suit jacket, black and white scarf, and upright posture. Nick always admired Piper, from the first time he saw her in high school in his freshmen year. He’d asked her out a few times, but she’d always rejected him saying she didn’t date football players. He couldn’t figure out why she didn’t realize that they would be the perfect couple. They were meant for one another. He knew that from the moment he saw her and from the way she walked, and the way she talked, and the way she presented herself to others. No other woman was comparable to Piper.

He didn’t want to give up on her. She was perfect, both on the outside and within. Her straight, mocha-colored hair and olive skin shone in perfect contrast to her pearly white smile and full cherry-colored lips. Nick stared at her for a few minutes before catching her attention. As their eyes met, he couldn’t help but wink at her. She looked away. Ouch. Again.



“One day she’ll realize what I know,” he thought as he took a small sip of water from an icy stemmed goblet in front of him. A few drops of perspiration on the glass fell onto his lap, which he pushed off before penetrating his pant legs.

His mother was by his side, sitting in a somewhat stoical way. She turned to him and whispered, “Barbara Collins’ act will be hard to follow.” He looked at her and felt her thoughts. Unlike Barbara, she donated little to the poor and supported few, if any, charitable causes.

Fortunately for his mom, the two other award recipients were called to the podium first and one had a background more in line with hers. Candace Schwartz was also the chief executive officer of a Fortune 500 organization with over 200,000 workers. She shared her experiences with the crowd before closing with a few “words of wisdom.” Her words were well received and the crowd erupted in applause as she exited the stage and returned to her table.

Nick’s mom was introduced next. Catherine O’Brien stood up and walked to the stage in her red high heels, which precisely matched the shade of her skirt suit. After arriving at the podium, she began to share her experiences with the crowd, highlighting the ways she had advanced in her company through “determination, drive, passion, and working half-days.” Half-days were twelve hour days, often seven days a week.

Little time was left for a personal life, but that was okay since her only son was now in college.

“My son Nick is off to a good start in life. He’ll be graduating from State this December with a dual major in finance and business management and I expect that he’ll earn his MBA in the next few years. Nick plays football for State, but he’s more likely to capitalize on his intellectual skills and assets and follow my footsteps in the corporate world. Nick, please stand up.”

Nick grinned as he stood up and waved at the crowd, noticing that many were smiling at him and clapping. Except Piper. She was no longer at the Barbara Collins’ table.

“Must be using the restroom. What timing!” Nick lamented to himself.

“At Fox ‘n Fields, we value a strong work ethic, an achievement-orientation, innovation, and good ethical values, so we hire and promote candidates who share our values and who aren’t afraid of working hard and working smart. Those who succeed with us are promoted often and compensated generously. Those who fail are documented for poor performance and terminated.

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