



The Perfect
BLINDSIDE

Leslea Wahl

The Perfect **BLINDSIDE**

By Leslea Wahl

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Summary: Told in their separate voices, Jake, an Olympic snowboarder whose fame has gone to his head, and Sophie, a high school junior and big fan of Jake's, connect at high school and soon find themselves working together to uncover who has framed him for drug possession and other misdeeds.

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*To my husband for his unconditional support,
my children who inspire me daily,
and to God for leading me
on this amazing journey.*

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Chapter 1

Jake

I have a theory. Every person I've ever met in the past year fits into one of three categories. They're either Walkers, Talkers, or Stalkers.

Walkers are those who stare from a distance, completely lacking the guts to approach me, then slowly walk away pretending they don't care.

Talkers include my parents, coach, and advisors. They have this obsessive need to always tell me what to do.

Stalkers are the most common, and they all want something. It could be an old lady at the grocery store wanting an autograph for her grandkids. It could be little kids making a scene in the middle of a restaurant when they recognize me. It could be an executive wanting me to sell hair gel . . . or jeans . . . or whatever. Or it could be a girl at the mall, who slips me her phone number. (Okay, that one I actually like.)

I get it. I'm Jake Taylor. Snowboarding phenom. But sometimes a guy just wants to eat his burger in peace, away from the autograph seekers and camera flashes.

Journalists are by far the most annoying group. They're usually a combination of all three: Stalkers because they need me; Walkers since they try to act indifferent when meeting me; and Talkers because they always finish with a piece of useless advice.

And can their stupid interviews be any more annoying? To think I used to be excited about them. Hard to believe they get paid to ask dumb questions. Sure, I have a cool story, but do you have any idea how mind-numbing it is to repeat it 150 times?

It never fails. The reporters have this obsessive need to ask what it feels like to ride the halfpipe. At first I would try to explain the rush of wind and adrenaline as I soar up the twenty-two foot wall, how my board keeps rising, and for a moment everything stops and I'm flying. Pulling my rotation high above the lip, gravity does its thing and I hurtle back toward the edge in a freefall. I hang on to the landing, then rocket up the other side with even more momentum and speed, anticipating the next trick. It's a mix of feeling totally in control one second and completely out of control the next. My coach calls it physics in motion. I call it awesome.

But after answering the same questions endless times, I got bored with my explanation. So the last time a reporter wanted to know how it felt, I answered, "The mix of fear, adrenaline, and excitement make an addictive high." Unfortunately my agent got on my case because I said "addictive high." "Jake, those words don't portray the sparkly clean image we're going for."

Whatever.

Then there are stupid questions, like, “How does it feel to be the Olympic Silver Medalist?”

Seriously? How do you think it feels? Freakin’ amazing.

Or, how about the original, “Tell us about your Olympic experience.” I stick with the polite, “It was incredible,” mostly because I don’t know how else to answer. I’ve spent a lot of time trying to remember that week, but I can’t. Training runs, marching in the Opening Ceremony, hanging out at the Olympic Village—it all runs together.

Six months of insane frenzy later, I’m in a new town ready to start the first day of my junior year of high school. Thrilling. Not. After traveling around the world and hanging out with celebrities, sitting in a classroom with a bunch of nobody kids is pointless.

I’d rather ditch the whole school thing and get a private tutor like other athletes and actors. I mean, they are the kind of people I should be hanging out with anyway. But no. My parents want me to have “the high school experience.” Just because they loved high school back in the day doesn’t mean it fits my life.

Before I leave my bedroom, ready to get this day over with, I glance at my reflection, but barely recognize my now famous face. It’s been such a whirlwind that sometimes I wonder who I really am.

The bare walls of the hallway and staircase lead me down toward the kitchen for breakfast. At the base of the steps, I pass the living room, still bulging with moving boxes. The stone fireplace with the near life-size portrait of me mid-air,

pulling a back-scratcher is the focal point of the room. That picture and my silver medal in its display case on the mantel are the only evidence of my sport. All the other stuff—trophies, awards, framed magazine covers—will soon line the walls of the new rec room in the basement. My own little shrine.

The scent of frying bacon steers me the rest of the way to the kitchen. My dad sits at his usual spot at the head of the table. He stabs the newspaper with his finger.

“Have you seen the headlines?” he asks, not bothering to wait for an answer. “Apparently there’s a growing drug problem in resort towns around here. The authorities are trying to figure out where the supply is coming from, but so far they haven’t had any leads.”

“Just one more reason to live here in Silver Springs, away from all the problems of the touristy areas,” Mom says as she works at the stove.

“Oh, don’t be fooled by this place,” I warn them as I sit down at the table. “There’s plenty of crime here. Do you know there’s a huge cruising problem along that one block of Main Street? Someone actually got up to thirty miles an hour. And rumor has it there’s a gang in town. A cow tipping gang. Maybe we should move to a cave to protect me from the evils of this place.”

“There aren’t any cows around here,” counters Dad, ignoring my sarcasm. “That was back in Kansas. We’re now in the Colorado Rockies.”

“Maybe he means moose tipping,” Mom helpfully adds as she sets a huge mound of food in front of me.

“Technically, I don’t think you can tip a moose,” Dad says, between sips of coffee.

I stare at them. After a summer of constant togetherness, maybe school, no matter how lame it is, would be better than this. “You guys are hilarious.”

“Jake, you’ve got to admit, Silver Springs looks exactly like those towns in the old westerns we used to watch.”

“Dad, that was when I was six. Now I’m sixteen and don’t want to live in an old mining town with no friends. Not cool.”

“Hey, I remember you were as excited about moving to Colorado as we were,” says Mom.

“Yeah, that’s when I thought we would move to Vail and be near my teammates. Who knew you’d choose the most boring town in existence?”

“We’ve talked about this. Silver Springs is the perfect location, fairly close to your training area and not far from Denver and the airport.”

I dig into my breakfast and do my best to ignore them as my dad’s attention turns back to the newspaper.

I hate not being on my own yet. My parents and I have argued about school and this no-where town all summer, ever since they freaked about my fame and went all “family-values” on me. I’m sick of them running my life.

Rachael, my snowboarding teammate, tired of my complaints, told me to ride it out and keep the peace at home. She pointed out that fighting won’t change their minds and will only make the wait to be on my own seem longer. I don’t know if it’ll work, but I’m giving it a try. I mean . . . Rachael’s

cool . . . she's like the big sister I don't have. So my plan is to serve out my sentence at home and train with the team as much as possible. But as soon as I graduate, I'm outta here.

"Hey," Dad says, interrupting my thoughts. "There's something here in the Editorial section about an incident that happened a few months ago up at the mine. It says two hikers were wandering through the mine when they claim they were chased out by a ghost. They were laughed out of town, but it sparked the retelling of a whole bunch of ghost stories."

"Sounds like those hikers took advantage of the rise in drugs here in the state," jokes Mom.

"Wait. Can we go back to the whole 'exploring the mine' thing? That's cool. You mean I can actually get into that place?" I ask.

"No. Absolutely not. There is no way you're going into a mine. You could be bitten by wild animals, get tetanus stepping on a rusty tool, become lost or trapped in a collapse. It's way too dangerous," Mom says and shivers thinking of all the dangerous possibilities. As if snowboarding doesn't have any of those.

Right. The one semi-interesting thing in this town, and she forbids me to check it out. I don't think so. I reach for my car keys on the counter where I tossed them yesterday, but Mom grabs my arm.

"Oh Jake, we're taking your jeep in today to get snow tires. The ones it came with may look good, but you don't want to drive with them when it starts snowing. I'll take you to school today." She smiles at me like this is good news.

“Perfect. The epitome of coolness—being driven to my new school by my mommy.”

“At least it’s not a minivan,” pipes in Dad.

Climbing into the SUV, I wonder if this day could get any more annoying.

“Jake,” Mom says as she steers down our long driveway, “I’ve been thinking. Do you want to invite Rick and Jon to visit sometime?”

Yep . . . more annoying.

“We’ll see,” I answer, turning my head so she can’t see my scowl.

“It must be hard to be away from them. Maybe they can come out over fall break.”

“I’m sure they’re busy.”

“You three were constantly together ever since kindergarten . . . climbing trees or catching frogs or something. You must miss them. And I’m sure they miss you too.”

I glare out the window, clenching my fist as we pass through town toward the high school. Rick and Jon. My so-called best friends. The memory of them purposely ignoring me still burns. In three short months they went from being my constant companions to refusing to return my phone calls. The most exciting time of my life was also the loneliest. I mean, it completely bites having something so incredible happen and no friends to share it with. Nope. Don’t really miss them. It’s mutual.

“Jake, give this place a chance,” my mom continues. “You’ll have friends here before you know it.”

“Mom, I know the drill. Anyone new is automatically the focus of attention. Even if I wasn’t already a household name, I’d be the topic of gossip.”

Although I’ve gotten used to having all eyes on me, constantly being watched gets old. It would be nice to have someone to chill with, I just doubt that can happen here—or anywhere.

As we round the last bend my mom gives me one last piece of motherly advice.

“Jake, just try to fit in.” Then she gasps, “Oh, no.”

My head snaps forward and I groan. So much for trying to fit in.