

Chapter 4 - Decisions

"Are you feeling anything yet?"

"Are you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. My stomach...."

"Nauseous?"

"Yeah. You, too?"

"Yeah. Is that normal?"

"What, like I should know?"

"I've never done this before, either. Maybe we didn't get enough of it."

"Or we got too much. I kind of feel like I've got a fever, too."

"Do your arms and legs feel weird?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mine feel kind of—floaty. They're not tired anymore. In fact—oh. Oh, wow."

"What?"

"Try standing up."

"What do you—oh. Holy shit."

"Okay, I'm pretty sure it's working."

"Yeah, no kidding. Maybe we should sit back down."

"Hang on. I want to—to—"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm *trying* to stand on one foot."

"Why?"

"I dunno, I just feel like messing around. Don't you?"

"You're going to fall off the fucking building."

"And that's *funny* to you?"

"You're laughing, too!"

"I can't help it."

"Oh, man. We are so screwed. We're going to die up here. We're not going to be able to stop laughing long enough to get down."

"You could always jump."

"Four stories?"

"Just do an extra roll. You'll be fine."

"And now you're trying to get *me* killed."

"Hey, you're the one who dragged us up here in the first place, Batman."

"Me. I dragged me. You dragged yourself. Totally different."

"Just saying. If it was up to *me*, we'd be safe and sound at ground level right now."

"I don't know if playing around with dry ice bombs counts as *safe and sound*."

"Come on, you didn't even need stitches!"

"Or mixing gas and styrofoam."

"Which worked *perfectly fine*—"

"Or getting lost in the sewers."

"We weren't even a block away from—"

"Or hiding from a *fucking bear*."

"Oh, come on! You can't blame the *bear* on me."

"It was your idea to go climbing in the rock quarry."

"And it was *your* idea to bring peanut butter and honey sandwiches!"

"Exactly. Just like it was *my* idea to come up here, and *your* idea to bring rolling paper and a lighter, Mr. Bad Influence."

"Well, it was your *mom's* idea to come over to my house last night."

"We stayed at my house last night, retard."

"Oh. Right."

"I'd invite *your* mom over tonight, but we're probably going to be stuck up here until dinner time."

"Conor."

"Mmm?"

"You don't think—I'm not really a bad influence, am I?"

"Depends on if we make it down in one piece or not. Two pieces. Whatever."

"Seriously, though."

"Are you kidding me?"

"I just said seriously."

"Ashleigh, you peer pressured me into doing drugs like, not even twenty minutes ago. We are fucked up *right now*."

"You could have said no."

"I *did* say no—that's why you had to peer pressure me!"

"But you're not mad—right? I mean, this is okay, isn't it?"

"Sure, it's okay. I mean, I still feel like I'm going to throw up and my brain is folding in half, but it's not getting any worse and I don't regret it yet."

"Yet."

"Dude, what's bugging you?"

"Bad influence. Like, *bad*. Like not good, and messing up your life."

"Ashleigh, we're *friends*."

"But all those things you were just complaining about. When the dry ice bomb cut your arm, and getting treed by the bear. And—well, *this*."

"What about it?"

"If you get in trouble, it'll be my fault."

"So what else is new? I mean—oh, hell. Ash? What did I say?"

"Nothing. I just—I don't want to—I mean, I don't *mean* to get you in trouble all the time."

"It's not like you're throwing me under the bus. You get nailed just as hard as I do."

"But it's always my *fault*. Like, it's always my idea that gets you grounded or suspended or sent to the emergency room."

"Ashleigh, I've been trespassing on rooftops all summer."

"Yeah, but that's new. And that's *one thing*. I'm talking about overall."

"Talking about *what* overall?"

"Being a bad influence."

"Ash—who cares? You don't care. I don't care. Where is this coming from?"

"I don't know. I just don't want you to be mad at me, I guess."

"So you're getting all emo as, like, a preemptive strike?"

"I'm not emo, I'm just—"

"Eeeeeeeeeemo."

"Shut up."

"Eeeeeeeeeemo."

"Come on, Conor. I'm serious."

"Me, too. What are you getting all weird about? I didn't want to smoke this thing, you made me do it, fine. Here we are. What do you want, forgiveness? 'I forgive you for dragging me into stuff that usually turns out awesome and sometimes gets me in trouble.' Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Yeah."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

"Jeez, man, *duh*. I wouldn't hang out with you if I didn't want to."

Conor's eyes snapped open at the first chime of his alarm. He had slept dreamlessly for three hours, during which the fire in his blood had cooled, leaving behind nothing but ashes and smoke.

Everything hurt. He staggered as he rose out of bed, an icepick pain in his heels, a dull millstone grinding in his knees. It took him a full minute to peel off yesterday's clothes, uncovering dark bruises blossoming across his hips and shoulder blades. He spent another minute limping slowly to the bathroom, where the movement of his reflection in the mirror brought a rictus smile to his face.

Hello, Guyler.

He turned on the shower as hot as it would go and leaned against the tile wall, watching the water as it ran down his body, carrying away the dirt and dried blood to form a murky whirlpool in the bottom of the stall. Bit by bit, the heat leached its way into his joints and muscles, loosening him up until he was able to reach for the soap without wincing.

It occurred to him that he may have pushed things too far. These weren't the usual next-day aches and pains—where normally there would be tightness and a dull, muted agony, he now felt a series of short, wild spasms with every movement, as though muscles that had been pushed past the brink had lost the ability to control themselves, and were one misfire away from contracting into black holes. The worst of them was in his back; when he reached up to lather his armpit, everything to the right of his spine seized up, threatening to drag his vertebrae out of alignment. As if that weren't enough, the bruises on his palms—nearly healed in the week and a half since the first day of school—were back, accompanied by razor slashes of pain in each wrist.

So, this is a problem.

Slowly, carefully, he bent to wash his shin, where a shortcut through a thornbush had left a messy, tangled web of cuts.

But I didn't do anything new yesterday. It was all stuff I've done before—even the Gap.

Which left two possibilities: either he'd simply pushed himself too hard, or there was something fundamentally wrong with the way he was doing things, something that put a natural limit on how much could be accomplished in a single session. He cast his thoughts back, trying to match the twinges in his body with the impacts and landings of the night before, but aside from the obvious consequences of the jump, nothing stood out. It was all too similar, both the injuries and the obstacles overlapping and cumulative.

Okay, fine. Trial and error. It would mean adding a new type of training to his regimen once he was recovered—neither individual movements nor careful climbing nor straightforward running, but a hybrid of all three, with fast scrambles coming in the middle of longer jogs. He'd have to be careful not to overdo it, push the boundaries slowly so his body had time to adapt.

Jungle running.

He filled his palm with shampoo, dumping most of it onto his head and saving a few drops for the wisps of hair on his groin. Closing his eyes, he pictured the route to Ashleigh's house in his mind, considering the possibilities, the brick mailboxes and wooden fences —

Still running to Ashleigh's in the afternoon, then?

The thought cut through his ruminations like a knife, dragging him away from the hypothetical and back to harsh reality. By now, Ashleigh's mom would have no doubt come home, seen the window, and —

And what?

He paused, feeling an unpleasant weight settle into his chest. Her reaction would probably depend a lot on whatever Ashleigh told her. Up until ten days ago, that would have been absolutely nothing — or at least, nothing that would reflect back on Conor. Even in the middle of a fight, even if Conor had had no provocation at all, the code of loyalty held true: friends kept grownups out of it. But now?

He finished rinsing his hair and shut off the shower, waiting for a moment as the water dribbled off his body.

He wouldn't.

But he might. It would be a betrayal of the first order, a sign of rejection far graver than his ten days of silence. Yet what were those ten days leading to, if not exactly that?

Strangely, Conor felt the weight in his chest ease fractionally. *At least that way, I'll know for sure*, he thought. *They'll probably kill me, but I'll know.* Toweling himself off, he dressed gingerly and headed for the kitchen.

His mother was already there, packing her lunch as the coffee maker gurgled quietly on the counter. Conor shuffled past her, grabbing a stack of frozen waffles from the freezer and dropping heavily into his seat. "Plate," she said lightly, without looking up, and he groaned. Smiling, she took one down from the cabinet and slid it to him across the table. "I'll never understand how you can eat those things cold. They taste like frozen cardboard."

Conor shrugged, immediately regretting the gesture as a spike of pain dug into the base of his neck. "Syrup," he grunted, reaching for the bottle in the center of the table.

"Incidentally, congrats. You're ungrounded today."

He lifted his head carefully. His mother was still smiling as she poured half of the coffee

into her thermos and the other half into a mug. Setting the pot down, she looked over at him. "Surprised?"

"I thought I had four more days."

"Time off for good behavior. Plus, your soccer tryouts are this afternoon, and neither one of us can get off work to drive you." She blew lightly across the surface of her drink and took a careful sip. "Take the trail, not the street, and *wear your helmet*—Linda told me they've had three bike accidents come through the ER just this week."

Conor said nothing, his eyes unfocused, his fork frozen halfway to his mouth.

Soccer.

He had *completely* forgotten about soccer.

It wasn't exactly a big deal—he played in a small rec league, put together by the neighborhood parents. None of the teams were very good, since all of the kids who actually cared ended up playing for school or leaving to join the traveling championship circuit. It was mostly just a cheap alternative to paying for a babysitter, and a way for the grownups to force their kids to *get some fresh air*. Conor had played since kindergarten, but he'd missed the spring season to work with a math tutor after school, and it had been months since he'd even thought about it.

Ashleigh's going to be there.

The sound of his mother clearing her throat startled him out of his reverie, and he looked up to see her standing with arms crossed, waiting expectantly. "Helmet," he said, trying to sound earnest. "Trail. Got it."

Mollified, she turned back to the counter and began rinsing out the coffee pot. "Oh, by the way," she continued, her tone carefully casual, "you'll be going out for the Jaguars, not the Vikings."

Conor's thoughts, which had just begun to move again, ground to a halt for a second time. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "What?" he asked stupidly.

"I've already talked to Coach Matthews and to the Jaguars' coach—I think his name was Pool or something?—so everybody knows what to expect. Your lucky number was taken, so you'll have to settle for jersey number twelve. First practice after today is next Tuesday."

"Why?"

His mother's eyes flickered briefly in his direction, then away. There was a long pause, during which she shut off the water, dried the coffee pot, and came over to sit down in the seat across from Conor. "A few reasons," she answered guardedly. "For one, I've never liked the way Coach Matthews kept you stuck in the same position for year after year."

"I *like* being a fullback."

"You've been a fullback since second grade, though, except for one season playing goalie. You're supposed to run around and get some exercise, not just stand there waiting for the ball."

"I get plenty of exercise. I've been running back and forth to Ashleigh's for like a week. And I was outside all summer—I'm probably exercising more now than I ever have!"

"That's not the point. The point is that sometimes you need to shake things up. Try something new and different."

"Why can't I shake things up on *my* team?"

"Don't you think it'll be nice to get to know some new people?"

"I already know them. We've all been in the same classes since forever. I don't *like* any of them."

"Come on, Conor, half of them go to Blessed Sacrament. You haven't even given them a chance."

"But all my friends are in the Vikings!"

Conor's mother arched an eyebrow, and he shut his mouth with a click, realizing too late that he had come perilously close to shouting. She held his gaze for a moment, then spoke in a steady, level voice. "First of all, that's not even true. You told me last week that Holt and Nolan are going out for the school team. It's just Sam and Ashleigh and Eddie on the Vikings, and you don't even like Eddie—"

"But—"

"Furthermore," she continued, this time with a chill in her voice that made Conor sit very still, "if you'll think back, you made most of those friends *through* the Vikings, and so there's every reason to believe you'll make five or six *new* friends by trying out another team." She waited pointedly, clearly expecting another outburst, and gave a curt nod when he held his tongue. "If you don't like the Jaguars, fine. Try the Stars or the Hawks, or pick a different

sport for all I care. But you're not going back to the Vikings, and that's final."

"But *why*?"

"Because I said so, Conor."

"What if I don't want to be on *any* team, then?" Conor asked, hearing the sullen tone in his own voice and making no attempt to hide it.

"Not an option. You need to get out and socialize. You spent the last two weeks moping around in your bedroom—"

"I was *GROUNDED*!"

"—and you will be again if you do not *immediately* lower your voice, young man." The chill in her words had turned glacial, and her knuckles were pale as she gripped her coffee mug. "This is not a negotiation. Here is what is going to happen. You are going to come home from school and get on your bike. You are going to put on your helmet, and you are going to ride to the park—*on the trail*—where you will find Coach Pool and tell him that you're there to try out for *any* position other than fullback. You're going to make the team—heaven help you if you don't and I think you did it on purpose—and then you're going to ride home and tell me all about it. Is that clear?"

"This is totally unfair! It's *my* life—I should get a say."

"Contrary to what you might think, Conor, you are *not* an adult. You are a child, which means that half the time your brain is physiologically incapable of telling a good idea apart from a bad one. That's why you have parents to look after you. Considering your recent track record when it comes to making decisions, you should count yourself lucky I haven't pulled you right out of East Binder and dropped you into home school." She set her coffee down and laced her fingers together. "You get a *say* once you've convinced me that we're past this little rough spot, and I can trust you to be mature and act in your own best interest. Want to speed up the process? You could start by not throwing a childish temper tantrum over a change in your little league soccer career."

Neatly trapped, Conor could do nothing but fume as his mother raised her mug and drained the rest of the coffee. His thoughts churned furiously, trying and failing to find a way past her cheap obfuscation. It really *wasn't* fair—he'd been with the Vikings for seven years, had played in over a hundred games, knew Coach Matthews almost as well as he

knew his own aunts and uncles. To pull him off now, without warning or discussion, was tantamount to a second grounding, this one lasting all fall. It would be one thing if she gave him the option of dropping soccer altogether, but forcing him onto a different team would do nothing but take up his time and keep him away from his friends—from Ashleigh.

That's probably the point, dumbass.

But that was stupid. She'd been letting him run over to his house, hadn't she? Besides, putting him onto another team wouldn't actually *stop* him from seeing Ashleigh, it would just cut away some of their free afternoons. There was still school, and bus rides, and weekends—

—and all the other times he's been ignoring you.

Conor felt his shoulders sag as a dark and vicious part of him chuckled. If keeping the two of them apart was really his mother's goal, then switching him to the Jaguars was overkill. Ashleigh was doing a much more thorough and efficient job without any need for disingenuous maneuvering.

He finished his waffles in silence, dropping his plate in the sink as he shuffled back to his bedroom. Moving as quickly as his aching limbs would allow, he gathered his school things, put on his shoes, and headed for the front door, giving his mother a wide berth as he passed through the kitchen. "I love you," she called out after him, her voice still tight and cold. "Have a good day."

He let the door swing shut behind him without reply.

Yeah, that'll show her.

Shut up, Ashleigh.

I notice you didn't tell her about sneaking out and throwing rocks through my window. What's the matter, don't want to spoil the surprise?

Shut UP, Ashleigh.

The voice in his head was like a soft wind, feathering over the embers of his frustration, fanning it into fury. Stalking to the end of the driveway, he threw his bookbag to the ground and kicked it. *None* of this was his fault, *none* of this was fair, and if they *did* find out about the window, it was only going to get worse. Forget being shoved onto a soccer team—given the way his parents operated, his mother's threat of home school was entirely believable.

Fuming, he kicked the bag again, then tumbled to the concrete as a muscle in his calf suddenly tightened into an iron knot. A wordless howl made it halfway out of his mouth before he bit it off, and he lashed out mindlessly, hammering the side of his fist into the driveway until his arm seized up too.

That's right, Ashleigh whispered. Punch it 'til it goes away.

It was like the words were magic. As quickly as the anger had washed over him, it vanished, leaving behind a clinical calm. The tension leaked out of his body and he slumped, lying still for a long moment, his mind quietly blank, the rhythmic throbbing in his arm and leg like the ticking of a clock.

That's what you get for acting like a caveman.

For once, he wasn't sure whether the voice was his or Ashleigh's. Not that it mattered. Pulling himself up into a sitting position, he began to work out the cramp in his arm, kneading and squeezing the muscle until it finally unclenched. He did the same for his calf, then carried on stretching, recovering his composure as he waited for the bus.

He felt almost human again by the time it arrived, and managed to climb the three steep steps without stumbling or wincing. Standing at the head of the aisle, he braced himself against the first two seats as the driver hit the gas, taking advantage of the brief imbalance as he swept his gaze across the terrain in front of him.

If the afternoon bus ride was a hurricane, the morning one was a steady downpour of the forty-days-and-nights variety—less dramatic, but ultimately just as deadly. There was the same social brinkmanship, the same jockeying for position, but it played itself out over minutes rather than seconds, with rules that were subtly but slightly different.

It was common knowledge that sitting down next to someone when you didn't absolutely have to meant that you were either humping them already or you hoped to start soon. As a result, the seats filled up in waves, with the number of available options dwindling until every bench had a rider, then opening up again as students began doubling up. This led to a kind of imperfect mosaic as the last few kids in each wave took whatever spots they could find, displaced refugees blurring the lines of the usual map.

Conor's stop was in the second wave, but Ashleigh's was right at the end of the first, meaning that the pair of them had spent all of sixth grade at the mercy of the system, bounc-

ing around from place to place. This year, with Ashleigh on suspension, the short end of the stick had passed to Timothy, who more often than not found himself deep in enemy territory. Conor sat as close as he dared each day, unwilling to leave the younger boy entirely without backup but also eager to avoid setting him off. That usually put them both somewhere in the back third of the bus, with Conor a few rows closer to the middle.

Today, though, Timothy had managed to snag a spot only ten feet from the door, and he made a point of lifting his bookbag off of the seat as Conor started down the aisle.

Oh. Right.

Great.

Conor sat down, noticing as he did so that Timothy's bag was brand-new, a tag still dangling off one zipper. He shoved his own bag between his knees and waited for the other boy to speak.

"What did you *do*?" Timothy hissed, his voice barely audible over the general clamor of the bus.

Conor studied the other boy's face, looking for clues. "Does your mom know?" he asked.

"Sort of. She thinks *he* broke the window." Conor shot him a questioning look, and he shrugged. "We took all the glass and tossed it out through the hole, together with that bronze Spiderman thing."

Conor winced. The little statuette had been his Christmas present to Ashleigh two years earlier. "Did he say anything?"

"No. He just kept crying."

Conor blinked. *Crying?*

"Same deal when Mom got home. He wouldn't say anything, just sat there. He cut himself on some of the glass—just a little cut on the side of his wrist, but she was super freaked. I think she's taking him to a therapist today." Timothy scowled. "Which we can't afford, so there goes my birthday. What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit."

"No, really, nothing. Just the rock." Timothy's expression grew even darker, and Conor hastened to explain. "I came over to talk. I threw some pebbles up at the window to wake

him up, get him to come down. He just stood there looking at me. So then I, ah...I, um...."

Conor trailed off, his face flushing with the heat of embarrassment. It sounded incredibly, *incredibly* dumb.

Timothy agreed. "That's *it*?" he spat, whisper-quiet and razor-sharp. "That's why you broke my brother's window? Because he didn't want to *talk* to you at one in the goddamn morning?"

"He's been talking to Eddie."

Timothy rolled his eyes. "What are you, spoiled little girls?" he asked. "What is *with* the two of you? Why can't you just fucking text each other like normal people? Jesus Christ, of all the stupid, pathetic bullshit—"

He broke off again, his nostrils flaring. As if to demonstrate an almost infinite capacity for irrelevance, Conor's brain took the opportunity to note that the smaller boy smelled exactly like Ashleigh.

"Look," Timothy said, each word flashing out through clenched teeth. "Here's a brilliant idea: instead of throwing *fucking rocks* at my house, why don't you just give up?"

Conor rocked back as if Timothy had slapped him. "What?"

"*Give up*. He's an asshole, he's always been an asshole, he's never going to stop being an asshole. Case in point, it's been like two weeks and he's *still* avoiding you. Why are you still waiting around? What are you waiting around *for*? And how does throwing ROCKS THROUGH HIS WINDOW accomplish ANYTHING?"

Conor was silent. The full reality of what he'd done was only just now sinking in, and he could hear in Timothy's words an augury of what his mother and father would say, of what Ashleigh's *mother* would say if she ever found out. Just when he'd been on the verge of pulling clear, of putting enough distance between himself and the bag and the fight to start breathing again—

But they're not going to say anything. They're not going to find out. Ashleigh covered for you — you're in the clear.

And in that moment, he knew exactly what he was about to say, knew just how low the words would take him and hated himself for it. But he said them anyway.

"You're not going to tell, are you?"

The look of withering contempt on Timothy's face hit him squarely in the gut. *Because that's what matters, right, Conor? Not that your best friend was up all night crying, or that even his little brother can see that the two of you have fallen apart. No, what really matters right now is that you stay out of trouble, even though you completely deserve to get caught.*

Before he could backpedal, though, another voice cut through the chatter around them, making both boys jump. "Tell? Oh, hell no, man, ain't no way little man's gonna tell. Tell him you ain't that kind of man, little man."

It was Devon, speaking from the seat behind them. He was leaning in conspiratorially, his arms draped across their seat back, and had obviously been listening in. Timothy shifted his glare without losing a degree of heat and snarled, "We were *whispering*, little man. Ever heard of a private conversation?"

Devon grinned. "I think you might want to look up the word whisper some time, friend. Besides," he said loftily, leaning back and striking a stately pose, "knowledge is power."

He turned to Conor. "Which is exactly why ol' Tim here ain't telling *nobody*, Rocky. You only get to spend that card once, and you don't get change back, neither. No sense wasting it, know what I'm saying?"

Conor felt a trickle of fear as he caught the implication of Devon's words. He opened his mouth but said nothing, unsure of how to respond.

"Leave us alone," Timothy snapped. "We're not talking to you."

Devon looked back at the younger boy. "You know, you're kind of a grumpy kid, Tim. Surly. Hell, I might even go so far as to say *mean*. Anybody ever told you that before?" He shook his head sadly, pursing his lips. "It's a damn shame. You're going to hurt somebody's feelings some day, you keep hatin' like that." Pushing away from their seat, he settled back into his own, lacing his fingers behind his head. "That's okay, though. I don't need to interrupt. I'll just sit back here by myself and whisper, and you can sit up there and whisper, and we can be *secret* friends."

Timothy's face was a mirror for Conor's own as he flushed red, his mouth working soundlessly. Once again, Devon turned his attention to Conor. "You ain't got nothing to worry about, kid. I seen ol' Tim here get his head swirled, lunch stole, books soaked, and gut punched, and he never said a word to nobody. I don't think he's a very big fan of authority,

far as I can tell. I mean, imagine somebody shitting in your shoes in the locker room, and you don't even ask the coach for another pair." He glanced at Timothy and flashed an expression of exaggerated horror, covering his mouth with one hand. "Oops. Don't think I was supposed to *tell* you about that, kid. But no worries. I mean, we're all just whispering, right?"

Conor felt movement at his side and looked down to see Timothy's fists clenched and trembling. His face, though, was oddly calm, a closed sort of expression coming over it as he fixed Devon with an empty, emotionless stare. "How did you know about that?" he asked quietly.

"Like I said, friend, knowledge is power." Devon flashed another grin, then paused, glancing up and past the two of them as the bus ground to a halt and a taller boy began making his way down the aisle. Holding up a finger to Conor and Timothy, Devon dug into his pocket and pulled out what looked like a pair of bills, tightly folded. He handed them off as the tall boy walked past, giving Conor a glimpse of a 20 printed in the corner, then leaned back into his seat as if nothing had happened. "And I'll let you in on a secret," he continued smoothly. "There's a lot of knowledge floating around in schools, man. Shit's just everywhere. Eight times eight is sixty-four, the capital of Djibouti is Djibouti. Facts out the ass...people be, like, *giving* them away."

"What was that?" Conor demanded, pointing down the aisle.

"Oh, just paying some debts is all. Man did me a favor last week, and I'm not a big fan of hanging out in the red."

"Forty bucks doesn't sound like a favor," Timothy said flatly. "Sounds like a job."

Devon shook his head. "Nah, man, just thirty. Big bills on the outside, only way to roll." Reaching into his pocket again, he produced two more folded twenties, opening them up to reveal the tens inside. "And I don't expect nobody to do no *job* for anything less than a C-note. Thirty's a good rate for favors. Means they remember to get themselves done." He winked as he tucked the money away again, clearly enjoying the younger boys' consternation.

"Are you selling drugs?" Conor asked quietly.

"Not much of a salesman if I'm the one giving up the money, wouldn't you say?"

"Then what kind of favor is worth thirty bucks?"

"Oh, you know, this 'n' that. It depends, know what I'm saying? Tell you what—you want to guess, start naming things you might could do for me for thirty bucks, and I'll let you know when you get warm." He winked again, lifting his legs to stretch out longways, his back against the window.

Conor glanced at Timothy, but the younger boy's eyes were still locked on Devon, a look of hard suspicion on his face. "How about if I volunteered to terrorize some little kid for you?" Timothy asked. "That the kind of thing you pay people for?"

Devon's ever-present smile slipped, and his answer came out with none of its usual lightness. "Cold, son. If a job like that needs doing, I do it my fucking self. Type of thug you can buy for that shit ain't usually smart enough to stay bought, and then we *all* got problems." He held Timothy's gaze for a long moment, then tipped his head toward the back, where Eichardt was sitting. "Besides, if I remember right, I think my last offer was to get that motherfucker *off* your back, not pay him to stay on. An offer that still stands, by the way."

"And that costs what?"

"Well, I don't know. Kind of depends on whether calming him down works out to be a *favor* or a *job*, know what I mean?" The easygoing drawl returned to his voice as he tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Last I checked, you weren't exactly encouraging the man to leave you alone. Could be pretty tough to convince him to find another hobby." His gaze flickered over to the bully, then back to Timothy, and he smirked. "Want me to do you an estimate?"

Timothy's only answer was to spin around and settle back into his seat, eyes front and arms crossed. Devon chuckled softly and turned to Conor. "How about you, Rocky? Looking to get the little man an early Christmas present?"

"Don't you fucking dare," Timothy murmured under his breath.

Conor shook his head, and Devon laughed louder. "Well, damn. Blue balls again. Remind me not to start conversations around here unless I'm ready to finish 'em off myself." Still smiling, he laced his fingers behind his head once more and closed his eyes.

Nonplussed, Conor slid back into his own spot. He threw Timothy a sidelong glance, but the other boy continued to stare straight ahead, his expression dour. They rode in silence for a while, moving only in response the jolting and lurching of the bus as it trundled down the

poorly paved roads. When they stopped on a hill at the railroad crossing, Conor's bookbag slid out from between his feet; bending down to retrieve it, he saw that Timothy was wearing a pair of Ashleigh's old shoes.

Come on, Conor, say something.

But there was nothing to be said. Where would he even begin—with Eichardt? With Ashleigh? With Devon's bizarre overture? There was more he could say about last night, surely—he could ask for more detail, or give a better explanation, or at least offer an apology. But the words wouldn't come. Each time he formed a sentence, the other half of his brain raced ahead to Timothy's imagined response, undermining his resolve.

Fuck off, Conor.

He fidgeted uncomfortably.

Maybe Timothy has a point, whispered the small voice in the back of his head. *Maybe it's time to give up. Maybe they can both take care of themselves.*

He tried to imagine it—letting go of his need for answers, of his desire to fix things, to talk to Ashleigh again, be *friends* with Ashleigh again. It was easier to picture than it would have been ten days earlier. Back then, his friendship with the other boy had been unquestioned and unquestionable—it simply *was*, like his relationship with his parents.

Yet things had changed. *Conor* had changed. Much that had been unthinkable was now not only within his grasp, but right in his face, demanding to be recognized. Ashleigh *was* being an asshole. And realistically speaking, there wasn't anything Conor could do to make him stop. At some point, the price would climb too high, and there would be more pain to be found in staying loyal than in moving on. At some point, Ashleigh would cease to deserve that loyalty.

But not yet, Conor thought fiercely. Having just gone through a week and a half of life without his best friend, he was more aware than ever of exactly what he stood to lose. He looked over at Timothy—so angry, so determined, and so very much alone.

Not yet.

Taking a deep breath, he tapped the younger boy on the shoulder. "Timothy?"

"What?"

There was no fire behind the word, just a tired, deflated apathy.

"Will you do me a favor?"

"You got thirty bucks?"

That was either a good sign or a bad one. "Just—look, I know you're not about to start passing notes or anything, and I'm not trying to put you in the middle. But can you—would you just say thanks? To your brother? For covering for me. He doesn't have to say anything back, I just want him to hear it."

The two boys looked at each other for a long moment. "You want to say sorry, too?" Timothy asked.

Conor hesitated, biting his lip.

"To *me*, dickhead. For waking me up in the middle of the night."

"Oh, right. Yeah. Sorry, Timothy."

The younger boy studied him for a moment, then turned back to the window. There was another silence, and then Timothy spoke again, keeping his eyes on the trees and houses flashing by. "One condition," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Stay the fuck away from my house. You guys want to play angry boyfriends, get a room and take turns slamming the door on each other's dicks."

"Thanks, Timothy."

"Better save it. You owe me one."

• • •

The best that could be said about the morning was that Conor survived it.

The tone was set when he tried to stand to get off the bus, and realized that every one of his muscles had turned to stone. Hobbling as quickly as he could, he made it out the door and as far as the front circle before he had to stop to work out the cramps in his legs. It took him the full five minutes between bells to make it to his homeroom, where he sat at his desk just long enough for everything to seize up again.

This went on for five more periods, during which he also failed to turn in two homework assignments, got told off for napping in Social Studies, and miserably bombed a math quiz.

That last might not have bothered him except that Guyler Stevens — who shuffled in late only slightly more stiffly than Conor and handed a note to Mrs. Atkins — finished it in under ten minutes and was writing *in pen*.

Conor hoped that he might have a chance to talk to the other boy at some point during the period, but after the quiz they dove straight into the material for the next unit, and by the time the bell rang his limbs were so unresponsive that even Guyler beat him out the door. He had no option but to lurch awkwardly toward the cafeteria, where Holt and the others had saved him a seat and were kind enough to act as though the previous day's outburst had never happened.

Still, Conor sat quietly and took only a cursory interest in the conversation. He spent most of the period with his eyes focused on the corner by the silent lunch tables, where Guyler had once again settled himself far away from the rest of the students.

Conor was fascinated by the realization that he couldn't say whether this was unusual behavior for the other boy. If he'd been asked to write a list of the twenty kids he knew best at East Binder, Guyler would have made it simply by virtue of the number of times he'd squared off with Ashleigh, often with Conor in the middle. The two boys had gotten off on the wrong foot on the first day of sixth grade, and had been at each other's throats ever since.

Yet outside of those frequent but insular encounters, Conor had never really paid attention to the other boy. They had shared no classes the year before, and try as he might, Conor couldn't picture Guyler in any context that didn't also involve Ashleigh. He watched as other students trickled past the boy's table, waiting for someone to stop and sit down—or at least say hello—but none did. Nor did Guyler seem to be bothered by this. For the most part, he kept his eyes on his food, but in his occasional scans of the room around him, his expression revealed nothing in particular.

Doesn't he have any friends?

The fact that he couldn't answer made Conor feel vaguely uncomfortable, like someone who has just received a birthday card from a cousin he doesn't remember. Guyler was at the center of everything that had taken place over the last ten days, and Conor was only just now discovering that he didn't really know anything about him.

Except that Ash can take him in a fight, apparently.

He surveyed the other tables near Guyler's corner, looking for anyone else who might be paying attention—a buddy giving him some space, maybe. There was no one.

All right, so none of his friends are in third lunch. Doesn't mean anything. Ash and Sam aren't here, either.

Widening his search, he turned his attention to the silent lunch tables. There were six kids there today, only two of whom were in Conor's grade. Two more looked to be younger, and another older. The sixth—

Conor frowned. The sixth was the high schooler from the day before, once again bent over a book, shoveling food into his mouth and ignoring the chaos around him as if separated from it by a brick wall.

Conor turned to the other boys at his own table. They were talking about the math quiz; apparently every class had received the exact same questions, and Holt and Nolan were comparing answers while Eddie scribbled examples on a scrap of paper for Nicholas. Conor waited for a lull in the conversation, then pointed them toward the displaced teenager.

"Is he on silent lunch?" Nicholas asked.

"No, that's just for middle schoolers," Holt replied. "High schoolers do lunch detention in the detention room. Or they do it after school."

"Well, the teachers aren't murdering him, so he's gotta be there for a reason," Eddie pointed out.

"He was there yesterday, too," Conor said. "Nobody stopped him then, either."

"It's got to be silent lunch," Nicholas insisted. "Look, he's not talking at all."

"Trust me, Nick," Nolan said. "*Nobody* crosses the line. Something else is going on."

"Only one way to find out," Holt said, and he promptly stood, pushing back his chair. The four of them held their breaths as the other boy marched jauntily across the crowded room and headed straight for the high schooler's table. He reached out to tap the boy's book, and the two of them spoke for a few moments before one of the teachers swooped in. There were a few more seconds of back and forth in which all three of them seemed to be speaking, and then Holt and the teacher turned and walked away, her back to the central table and him back to his seat.

"Dude, that was ballsy," Eddie exclaimed as the other boy sat down with a flourish. "You

could've gotten *nailed*."

Holt shrugged. "It's okay. He's not actually on silent lunch. Miss Daniels just told me not to bother him. His name's Oliver; he's one of the seniors from Central."

"What's he doing there?" Nicholas asked.

"Nothing. Said he just sat there a couple of days ago and nobody said anything. Didn't even know it was the silent lunch section."

They digested this for a moment. "*Why?*" Nolan asked.

Holt shrugged again. "Beats me. Peace and quiet?"

"No, why didn't they say anything? The line...."

"Maybe they figure it doesn't matter, since he's off to the side and he's not bothering anybody," Nicholas ventured.

"You don't understand, man. I saw a guy *trip* across the line and they gave him detention."

"Isn't that the same kid who was getting thrashed last week?" Eddie put in. Conor raised an eyebrow, surprised the other boy had made the connection. "Could have something to do with that."

"What, like witness protection?"

"But he said he sat there himself, right?"

"Maybe he's got some kind of special needs thing."

"Or the teachers are just getting lazy."

"No way—you saw how quick they came down on Holt."

Conor felt his attention waning as the conversation drifted further into speculation. Turning back toward the corner, he saw that the teenager had returned to his book and Guyler had finished his lunch. He watched the pair for another minute, then sighed and began packing up his lunchbox. Maybe if he got a head start to the door he could make it to Activity on time.

Reaching under the seat, he brought up his stack of textbooks. He had been carrying all of them since first period—with the way he was limping through the halls, he hadn't dared to risk the detour to his locker between classes. On top of the stack lay the little leatherbound journal, retrieved from the bottom of his bookbag, an avatar of Ashleigh's presence. He had

tried to write in it in each of his classes so far, netting four pages redacted with sharpie and a fifth torn out entirely. He had halfway decided that this would be his final entry, and he wanted to strike just the right balance between *I'm so sorry* and *screw you*.

He must have been staring, because a few seconds later Holt nudged him with an elbow and nodded toward the little black book. "Extra credit?" he asked, talking around a mouthful of Swiss cake roll.

Conor shot him a questioning glance.

"For English," Holt clarified. "You had it out in first period. I thought maybe you were doing something extra for Ms. Palmano."

"No. It's just kind of a notebook."

Holt nodded. "How's your slave paper coming?"

"Not great." He had written almost a full page in class the day before, but it had seemed flat and unoriginal when he reread it that morning. In a fit of pique, he had scrapped the whole thing, hoping to hit on something better the second time around. Instead, he'd wound up spending half an hour staring at a blank sheet of notebook paper before pulling out the journal. "You?"

"Same. I got the not-embarrassed-to-read-out-loud part, but I'm stuck on the not-gonna-make-everybody-else-fall-asleep part." He finished his dessert and licked his fingers. "You going to work on it tonight?"

"Can't. I've got soccer tryouts."

"Oh, right. Good luck with those, I guess."

Conor sensed that Holt was waiting for something, and racked his brain for an appropriate response. "When do you hear back about the school team?" he asked.

Holt grimaced. "First cuts come Monday. Then callbacks."

"So who do you have to blow to make the cut?"

"More like, who are they sending to blow *me*, pendejo. I got offers from two challenge teams."

"Nolan got offers from three."

"Eh, he gets affirmative action for being white."

They bantered back and forth until the bell rang—Holt easily, Conor a step behind, his

comebacks constructed rather than inspired. As the others joined the mass of students heading for the exit, Holt hung back, waiting while Conor slowly unfolded himself from his chair. Together, the pair of them drifted to the rear of the pack, letting the scrum at the doors clear before pushing out into the hall.

"Hey, hold up a sec," Holt said, grabbing Conor by the sleeve. "I want to talk to you." Moving to the side, he pulled Conor out of the flow of traffic.

Conor shifted uncomfortably. "I'm going to be late for Activity," he said.

"Just a second, man." Holt nodded toward the last group of stragglers emerging from the cafeteria. "After they're gone."

Feeling exposed and self-conscious, Conor leaned against the wall, pretending to search through his armful of textbooks. He could sense the curiosity of the other students as they passed, and he shot Holt a baleful glare.

Holt didn't notice, his eyes on the rapidly thinning crowd. Judging it sparse enough for privacy, he cleared his throat. "Listen," he began. "I know this isn't really any of my business. And I don't really know what's going on. But it's pretty obvious you've been messed up about something, and I got ten bucks says it's got something to do with Ashleigh."

Conor stiffened, a slow sort of panic creeping up his spine.

"Yeah, I thought so. You guys pissed at each other?"

Conor said nothing.

"Okay, right, like I said—none of my business. But look. Whatever it is, you decide you want to talk about it—you got friends, okay, man? I mean, Sam, Eddie, whatever, but me and Nolan, we're not taking sides. We've been worried about you. Worried about you both." He looked at Conor searchingly.

Conor turned away, unable to maintain eye contact. The panic in his spine had moved around to his stomach, where it blossomed into a squirming, animal discomfort. Holt wasn't supposed to talk about things like this. Holt wasn't supposed to *notice* things like this. Holt was a part of the old world, the pre-Gap world, and his intrusion into Conor's private struggle was a violation, an obscenity.

"Whatever's going on, you can trust me."

Worlds were colliding, and Conor couldn't afford to lose the one where he pretended

that nothing was wrong.

"I'm here if you need me — here to help."

Conor's composure was a house of cards, and Holt's words the beginning of a hurricane.

"I'm your friend — yours, and Ashleigh's, too. We stick together, sabes?"

Conor nodded, his throat tight, terrified of speaking lest Holt take it as encouragement to continue. He felt the other boy's gaze linger on him for a pair of centuries, felt the thud of a comradely punch on his arm, and then he was finally, blessedly alone. A breath he didn't know he'd been holding tore its way out of his lungs, and he spun on his heel, walking as quickly as he could in the opposite direction.

It wasn't until he made it all the way out to the commons that his brain recovered enough to start forming coherent sentences again, the first of which was *Wrong way, Batman*, followed swiftly by *Leave me alone, Ash*. He kept walking, his aching limbs on autopilot, turning the encounter over in his mind.

He was disturbed by the intensity of his own reaction, by the abrupt and disproportionate need to escape. He had never felt that way before — beleaguered and harried, as though Holt were an inquisitor tightening the screws. Somehow, without meaning to, the other boy had struck a nerve that ran straight to Conor's core.

First the window, then the driveway this morning — maybe you're just cracking up.

He arrived at the gym from the wrong side, where the equipment shed butted up against the vast and empty expanse of brick. Stopping at the corner, he leaned against the wall, listening to his heartbeat as it slowly dropped back to normal.

No. There had to be a reason. Even if it was a bad one, even if it was something that wouldn't normally bother him. He might be walking around with a short fuse, but that didn't remove the need for a spark. Last night, the spark had been Ashleigh; this morning, his mother. Two minutes ago, it had been Holt — the question was *how*.

The bell rang again, and Conor squeezed his eyes shut, holding back a groan. Practically crippled, and now tardy to boot — for a moment, he considered just walking straight to detention. But the thought of facing Mr. Sykes made him shiver and so, on the spur of the moment, he decided to ditch instead. There were sixty kids in Activity, two full class groups — he had a better chance of avoiding trouble by not going at all than by showing up late.

Straightening, he checked both ends of the breezeway. All was quiet—the doors shut, the sidewalks empty. He was in the clear, at least for the moment.

Okay, Ash. A little help, here.

He shrank back into the shade, drawing away from the windows around the commons, waiting for his imaginary friend to offer up some advice. Though he'd played hooky on a number of occasions, he had never actually skipped a class and—embarrassing as it was to admit—he didn't really know what you were supposed to *do*.

Don't get caught.

He held still for another long moment, but having provided this blunt and thoroughly unsatisfying piece, the voice that was Ashleigh fell silent, leaving Conor alone in his head. He ran his fingers nervously through his hair, once again checking both ends of the breezeway.

Great. Just great.

Okay, fine—one step at a time. Getting caught would mean a) being spotted by a teacher, and b) being recognized by that teacher as an out-of-place student. So he needed to either avoid notice completely, or make himself look as unsuspicious as possible.

Bathroom.

The problem was, bathrooms at East Binder were regularly patrolled, and all students going to and from them were expected to have a hall pass. But it was better than standing out in the open, so he moved, carrying his lunchbox and his stack of textbooks and trying his best to look like something other than an escaping fugitive.

The nearest bathroom was located in the atrium between the cafeteria and the auditorium, and as such was one of only a handful where both middle schoolers and high schoolers were allowed. Breathing through his mouth, Conor shuffled to the stall at the end of the row and locked himself in, standing on the seat as he pondered his next move.

It was something like 1:17, meaning that he had almost an hour to kill before seventh period. If he could make it to his locker, he could ditch the books and lunchbox, giving him a little more freedom of movement. But to do that, he would have to either walk out by the front office, or take a long detour through the electives building and the eighth grade wing.

Maybe he could ditch his stuff somewhere, and come back for it? But no—even as he

thought of it, the door to the bathroom slammed open, and he heard the deep voices of a pair of upperclassmen over by the urinals. The hallways might be clear for the moment, but they wouldn't stay that way — anything he left would be fair game for thieves and vandals.

Okay, what about this — you could head for the electives building with all of your stuff, leave it in the lost and found, and pick it up when you go back for Art. The stack of textbooks would be almost as good as a hall pass for any teachers he ran into on the way, and he'd be that much further away from the office and the teachers' lounge.

Over on the other side of the bathroom, the upperclassmen finished their business, the pair of flushes followed by the sounds of the sink, the paper towel dispenser, and the door. Conor waited for a count of thirty, then climbed down from the toilet and pushed his head out of the stall.

Clear.

Sixty seconds later, he was inside the electives building, burying his lunchbox and textbooks beneath the pile of bags, binders, and hoodies that were overflowing from the lost and found bin. The little leatherbound journal he kept, tucking it into the pocket of his khakis. So far, his luck had held — other than the two upperclassmen, he hadn't seen anyone, student or teacher.

But that wouldn't last. He needed a place to go. Ordinarily, he would have headed to the roof, taking one of the less conspicuous ways up and biding his time until the next bell. With the current state of his body, though, climbing anywhere was out of the question. He needed something simpler, someplace innocuous and safe.

The library?

It was populated — he could blend in with the crowd. And it was a common destination for students who finished their work early, so a loner without a chaperone wouldn't be questioned. Most importantly, it was a good place to be if he *did* get caught — *I know I'm not supposed to skip, but I wasn't feeling well and I was already late, and I just figured nobody would mind if I caught up on some reading in the corner....*

He was halfway down the hall, headed in that direction, when another, more intriguing possibility occurred to him. Slowing, he looked back over his shoulder at the doorway he'd just passed. It was cracked open, the sounds of semi-productive chaos within tumbling out

into the empty corridor. That was Mr. Riemann's room, Art, where Conor had seventh period.

No, he told himself firmly.

Come on – it'll only take a second.

No. It was too risky.

Riskier than going the whole hour without a hall pass?

Conor moved closer, flattening himself against the wall as he peered into the room. There were at least thirty kids crammed inside, applying papier-mâché to large, unidentifiable shapes made from honeycombed chicken wire. Half of them were buried up to their elbows in newspaper and glue, while the other half shouted instructions or rummaged through supply bins. Mr. Riemann was standing in the far corner, bent over a frame that had collapsed under the weight of its skin, leaving its creators inconsolable.

Holding his breath, Conor nudged the door wider with his foot, pulling back out of the line of sight as he listened for a reaction. There was none.

What would Batman do?

Summoning his courage, he threw back his shoulders and walked through the doorway, strolling as nonchalantly as his stiff limbs would allow.

As he'd hoped, none of the overworked students even batted an eye. With measured haste, he wove between the desks, heading for the dry erase board. There were two small hooks on the wall beside it, on which Mr. Riemann hung his two yellow plastic hall passes. One of them was missing, but the other was there, and Conor palmed it smoothly, the scuffed surface rough against his fingers as he changed direction and made his way back around the edge of the room. Ten harrowing heartbeats later, he was back out in the hall, armed with the key to freedom.

Kid stuff, Ashleigh whispered. Come on, my mom could've done that.

Conor smiled, heading for the exit. *Oh, what, now you're back?*

Now's when it gets interesting.

• • •

It was remarkable just how much activity there was in the hallways of East Binder. Either Conor had been incredibly lucky before acquiring the hall pass, or the first ten minutes of the period was the intermission. For the rest of the hour, he was almost never alone.

He began his odyssey with a visit to the eighth grade wing, where he spent five fruitless minutes scanning the lockers, hoping to identify Eichardt's. There were three girls in the hallway with a school camera, alternating between collecting footage for a history report and posing for selfies and headshots. They glared at him as he walked past, but said nothing.

He had a brief moment of terror when one of the eighth grade teachers suddenly emerged from a darkened classroom, startling him, but the man saw the plastic square clutched between his fingers and merely nodded, brushing past him and heading for the bathroom.

Emboldened, Conor continued in the opposite direction, skirting the office and entering the high school. The hallways were wider there, the lockers taller, the classrooms arranged by subject rather than by grade. He took a quick circuit to familiarize himself with the layout, then went back for a closer look.

A part of him knew that he was asking for trouble. Alone, out of bounds, and unable to run, he was breaking every rule of survival, not to mention the fact that the stolen hall pass would only add to his guilt if he were caught on the wrong side of campus. But the successful heist had left him feeling heroic and invulnerable, and he ignored the quiet warnings of his sensible side, instead tuning his mental radio to Ashleigh's continued exhortations. As long as he kept moving and kept his distance, he should have nothing to worry about.

There were students everywhere—some rushing from place to place, some working on papers or projects, some with no apparent destination or purpose. Conor saw a range of activity, spanning the full spectrum from innocent and academic to outright criminal. In a corner of the science wing, two underclassmen were doing experiments with a gyroscope and a stopwatch while their partners copied answers from the teacher version of a textbook. He passed a couple making out by the English classrooms, only to stumble on a group of juniors rehearsing oral presentations on current events. Once, he spotted what he thought was a Central student tagging lockers with a sharpie; the teenager sent a suspicious look his way and he spun on his heel, heading back the way he had come.

At first, he was astounded by the brazen disregard for authority, but as he watched, he saw that the teachers were fighting a losing battle, and in many ways had given up. Two of them passed by a girl who was loitering before a third stopped to question her; the girl's ruse of twiddling with her combination only failed because the teacher already knew her locker was in another building. Each time a grownup stepped out of a classroom, a calm and covert rustle worked its way through the ranks, the various contraband and paraphernalia vanishing into bookbags and pockets, leaving evidence of nothing but group projects and collaborative research. Conor was forced out of the math department when a teacher came through and cleared the hall; two minutes later, he was back, along with every one of the students the man had scattered.

By far, the worst of it was in the bathrooms. Conor waited until they were silent before venturing in to explore, but it turned out that silent rarely meant empty. The first he visited held a lone student who was indifferently filling in bubbles on an entire stack of answer sheets. Around him was what looked like an entire roll of toilet paper, unwound and soaked, a constellation of pulp. In the second bathroom, soft wet noises were coming from a locked stall; bending down, Conor saw two pairs of legs, one standing and the other kneeling. The third was unoccupied, but a strange and acrid smell lingered in the air, and as he entered, his shoe sent something clattering toward the far wall. Picking it up, he saw that it was one of the cafeteria spoons, folded back on itself and scorched black on one side.

It wasn't as if the grownups were doing *nothing*—in addition to the man who'd swept through the math building, Conor saw three phones confiscated and watched an elderly woman in a bun drag two spluttering boys out of another bathroom and straight toward the office. But the sheer volume of misbehavior, coupled with its generally petty and unpunishable nature, seemed to discourage most of the teachers from making more than a token effort. Only when a fistfight broke out between a pair of girls in the civics building did the grownups show any sense of urgency—Mr. Sykes was on the scene within minutes, and Conor beat a hasty retreat out the other door.

By that point, there was only a little time left until class change, so he decided to head back over toward the electives building. Taking a shortcut around the back of the band room, he emerged into the narrow corridor between the gym and the auditorium, throwing a

respectful glance at Binder's Gap above. He would pick up his stuff from the lost and found, wait in the bathroom until the bell rang, and rejoin the crowd, returning the hall pass during the confusion at the start of class.

Holding the yellow plastic tab at his side like a loaded gun, he eased cautiously around the corner and walked the last few dozen steps to the double doors. Striding through them, he looked over to the lost and found and stopped dead in his tracks.

There was another boy in the hallway, kneeling by the bins with a large bookbag, his eyes wide and frightened as they turned toward the sound of the doors. They narrowed as they registered Conor, and the boy straightened, squaring his shoulders belligerently. One of his hands tightened on the bag; the other was holding an expensive-looking girl's jacket.

He looked to be a year or two older than Conor—an eighth grader at the very least—with short blond hair and pale, freckled skin. The two of them stared at each other for a moment, and then the older boy slowly stood, the mouth of his bookbag sagging open as he did.

"Hey—that's my lunchbox!" Conor said.

The boy glanced down into the bag, then back at Conor. He tilted his head, considering. "What's it to you?" he asked softly.

"It's *mine*," Conor repeated.

The boy glanced at the classroom doors nearest them. Two of them were open, the clatter of cleanup and the strident tone of last-minute instructions clearly audible in the stillness. "It'll be waiting in the bin a week from now," he said, his voice steely. "*If* you can keep your mouth shut." Keeping his eyes locked on Conor, he stuffed the jacket into the bag and tugged the zipper closed.

Conor took a step forward. "You can't just—"

Before he could finish the thought, the bell rang, cutting him off. Instantly, the blond boy spun around, running full tilt for the other set of doors as students began streaming into the hallway. Conor started after him reflexively, his legs managing half a dozen steps before cramping up, sending him tumbling to the floor. A sort of bubble formed around him, growing smaller and smaller as the crowd thickened and the people who had seen him fall were replaced by those who didn't care.

Cursing inwardly, he stood, limping through the crush and over to the lost and found

bins. All of the binders he'd seen earlier were still there, but missing were several of the bags and most of the hoodies and jackets. He dug through the pile, quickly unearthing his stack of textbooks, but no lunchbox — the one he'd spotted really had been his.

Okay, so maybe using the lost and found as a locker isn't the best idea I've ever come up with. He tried to imagine what the blond boy was doing with the stolen goods — selling them? He certainly wouldn't be wearing them, not when any one of a thousand kids might recognize a jacket he'd lost last week.

Are we just going to ignore the part where you got your lunchbox ganked and then kamikazed into the ground? Ashleigh asked.

What am I supposed to do about it? It's not like I know who the guy is. I don't even know what grade he's in. He's probably not even a middle schooler.

How about you catch him next time?

Conor grimaced as he hefted the books and hobbled toward the art room. Right. Next time this exact scenario played itself out again, he'd make sure to be unsore and one hundred percent ready to spring into action.

Well, yeah. Isn't that the whole point?

He frowned as he slid into a chair, setting his stack of books down on a patch of table that was relatively glue-free. Okay, that *was* the whole point, sure, but it wasn't his fault that the situation had arisen on the one day when he was literally incapable of running. That was just bad luck — unpredictable, unavoidable, and unlikely in the extreme.

Besides, even on a normal day, what would he have done if he'd actually caught the guy? The blond boy had outweighed him by at least twenty pounds, and yelling for help would've landed Conor in trouble, too.

Well, what would Batman have done?

Conor snorted, drawing a scandalized look from a girl at the table next to him. Comic books were comic books. It wasn't Batman's *impossible* solutions that impressed him, it was the ones that fit within the confines of reality. Equally incapacitated, equally empty-handed, Bruce Wayne would've done no better than Conor himself.

Except that he wouldn't be caught like that.

Again, comic books. Just because they didn't *talk* about the days when Batman was tired

or sore—or maybe they did, Conor wasn't certain—didn't mean that he wouldn't have them, if he were real.

But you didn't have to be crippled today. It happened because you went nuts last night and started eating every wall in sight. It was your fault.

Conor paused. There was a kernel of truth in that. The mantra of his training—safety before simplicity, simplicity before speed, and silence wherever possible—he wielded it like a knife during practice sessions, discarding this movement or that for being too dangerous, too heavy, too rough on his fragile body. But it could also apply on a broader scale, couldn't it? Not just to the movements, but to the training as a whole—could he really call it safe if it left him crippled for days afterward? Even if it was just soreness, even if he fully recovered, could he really afford to gamble that he'd never need his skills twice in the same week?

If you really want to play Batman, you have to be ready all the time.

That would mean protecting himself on a macro level, not just from the risk of slips and falls, but also from exhaustion, fatigue, overwork. It would mean holding back.

Or would it? He mulled it over in his head as Mr. Riemann shut the door and began talking them through the details of their next project.

What I did last night was too much for my body. That could mean that the session was too hard, or it could mean that my body was too weak.

Or both, he supposed. One example wasn't enough to tell either way. But he should be able to figure it out. He thought back to the plan he'd made in the shower that morning, his decision to add jungle runs into his regular routine. In the past, his experience with new forms of training had always been rough at first, with rapid improvement followed by an eventual plateau as he reached his limit. That was what he was seeing with his afternoon jogs—after only a week and a half, he already felt twice as strong as he had on the first day.

If he stuck to the plan he'd already made, testing out the jungle runs carefully and giving his body plenty of time to adapt, then he could try another marathon like last night's as a test. If it wiped him out anyway, despite his preparation, then he'd know to stay away from it.

And if it doesn't?

The memory of the night before floated up from the back of his head—the exhilaration, the power, the sense of absolute confidence. Even in the midst of his turmoil over Ashleigh,

the run had stoked a bright flame of euphoria deep within his chest. He tried to imagine feeling that way at all times—invincible, unstoppable, completely in control of his body and its relationship to the world around him.

Okay, yes—he wanted that.

Time for a new rule, then. He tinkered with the idea for the rest of the period, jotting down words and phrases, seeking the perfect expression. Twice Mr. Riemann called him to task for not paying attention, but each time he surfaced only briefly before diving back into his reflection. He felt that something important was happening, that he was in some sense gaining greater access to himself as a person—that by putting it into words, he was willing into reality a future Conor who had previously been nothing but one possibility among many.

It wasn't until the bell rang for dismissal that he realized he'd been writing in the journal, the whole evolution of his composition splashed across the page. He reached to tear it out, and then paused, reconsidering. It was the first thing he'd succeeded in getting down all day, and perhaps a better and more honest message to Ashleigh than anything else he was likely to come up with. It had nothing to do with the window, or Eddie, or any of the other issues that lay between them. Yet it spoke volumes about each of them, and came surprisingly close to saying everything that Conor wanted the other boy to hear. He took his hand away, leaving it in.

NEVER SACRIFICE TOMORROW FOR THE SAKE OF TODAY.

Satisfied, he closed the book, waiting for the other students to clear out before gracelessly standing, his enervated muscles twitching in protest. For a day that had started without promise, it had exceeded expectations.

And if you ever find that bitch who stole your lunchbox, Ashleigh added, *you be sure to jack him right the fuck up.*

Conor smiled, pushed in his chair, and left.