

Chapter 5 - Morals

"Fuck, I'm hungry."

"Yeah. Me, too."

"You got any snacks in your bag?"

"No."

"Dammit."

Conor's big conversation with Guyler did not go according to plan.

There had been multiple chances to speak with the other boy. Besides math class and the cafeteria, they passed each other regularly in the halls and stood close in the afternoon bus lines. They had even shared a somewhat uncomfortable hour at soccer tryouts, confined to neighboring benches, neither able to participate though both were ultimately accepted. Guyler, as it turned out, had long been a forward on the Jaguars.

Each time, though, Conor had hesitated, unable to contrive a pretense for conversation. Half of the moments felt too intimate, the other half too public; some would have been rushed, while others would have dragged on interminably. By Monday, with Ashleigh's return looming on the horizon, he began to fear that his brain's ability to come up with excuses

might be inexhaustible.

Fortunately, Guyler took the initiative out of his hands. They came face-to-face by chance in the courtyard before first bell; with no benches to sit on or walls to lean against, the seventh graders tended to wander and drift. There was a tense moment during which the two of them considered each other, eyes locked and hands in pockets, oddly mirrored across a boundary of mutual uncertainty. Then Guyler spoke.

"So, where were you?"

Conor blinked. "What?"

"I saw you both go up, but only *he* came back down. What took you so long?"

Guyler's tone was level and serious, pitched for relative privacy in the crowded open space, but he didn't sound openly hostile.

"I was...trying to find a different way down."

Guyler's head tilted fractionally, and Conor could tell that the other boy had noticed the hesitation. "Well, you missed the show," he said, the barest hint of acrimony seeping into his voice.

"I'm sorry," Conor said. "About what happened." He waited for a reaction, but the other boy's face was giving away nothing. "If I'd known—if I'd been there—"

Guyler scoffed quietly, and Conor broke off, but the other boy made no move to interject. Another silence stretched out, this one more uncomfortable than the first.

He decided to try a different approach. "How's your rib?"

"How's your mom?"

Another pause. The hostility was overt now, and growing thicker. Conor couldn't fathom the rapid shift—if there was some test of Guyler's that he was failing, he had no idea what it was.

He switched gears again. "You didn't tell," he said, letting the question mark imply itself.

"What, and let him come back here and brag about it? Turn my concussion into street cred?" Guyler scoffed again. "I was surprised he didn't turn himself in, just so he could get it all on record."

He did turn himself in, Conor wanted to say. But that was a whole other conversation, with its own set of unconnected dots, and since Conor didn't really understand why Ash-

leigh had done it, there was no point in bringing it up. His goal was to elicit information, not supply it, and Guyler's resentment was making things hard enough already.

He decided to be a little more direct. "What were you guys fighting about?"

"Other than whether or not my face needs more fist? Nothing." Conor's skepticism must have been evident, because Guyler immediately threw up his hands. "Hey, *you're* asking *me*, sidekick. Believe what you want."

"You didn't say anything first?"

"Of course I said something. I told him I owed his mom about three fifty and asked him where his boyfriend was."

The usual, in other words. Conor frowned. Could he have been thinking along the wrong lines this whole time? Was the answer as simple as Ashleigh being fucked up on drugs and pissed about bailing on the Gap?

But that doesn't make any sense. It wasn't that kind of drug.

Just the Gap, then?

Guyler was watching him closely. "That why you've been eyeballing me since I got back?" he asked incredulously. "You've been trying to figure out a way that this is all *my* fault?" He lifted up his shirt, revealing a hurricane of yellow, green, and purple bruises swirling around his midsection. A few of the nearby students turned to look, morbid curiosity on their faces. "This is what your psycho butt buddy decided to do *after* he knocked me out." He dropped the shirt and crossed his arms, leveling a glare at Conor. "Unless that was *you*, showing up fashionably late."

A bubble of disbelief pushed its way up through the reservoir of Conor's vicarious guilt. "I'm the one who *rescued* you," he spluttered indignantly. "That was my shirt holding your forehead together!"

More students began paying attention as their voices rose in volume. A ring began to form, centered on Guyler rather than on the point between them; this was the first the other boy had spoken since his return to school. "Yeah—nice trick," he snarled. "Perfect way to keep from getting suspended. But you skipped the part where you wouldn't have *had* to hold my forehead together if your lord and master hadn't split it open in the first place."

"Which wouldn't have happened if *you* weren't sneaking around following us, waiting

for a chance to pick a fight!"

"You're right, I was totally asking for it. I mean, when's the last time you called somebody a faggot and *didn't* end up in the emergency room?" Guyler spread his arms wide, an exaggerated expression of contrition punctuating his riposte. "Poor Ashleigh. If only I hadn't *forced* him to give me a concussion and crack my rib. I mean, look at what it got him—two whole weeks suspension! He's the *real* victim here."

The bell rang, and the rest of the crowd began pulling away, leaving the ring to draw closer around the two boys. Guyler continued, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "What do *you* think, Conor? Will you apologize to him for me? Will you tell him how *sorry* I am that he had to go through all of this? Do you think I can ever make it up to him?" His lip curled as he crossed his arms again. "I'd offer to suck his dick, but I wouldn't want to put you out of a job."

All eyes turned to Conor, who was struggling to hold a neutral expression on his face even as he reeled internally. The sight of Guyler's ribs, still livid and discolored, had a raw and visceral effect on him, dragging him back to the horrifying moment when he hadn't been able to find the other boy's pulse, or hold his fingers steady enough to unlock his phone. He wanted with all his heart to disagree, to contradict, to find some argument that he could hold up as a shield against Guyler's caustic attack, but there was nothing. A shiver seemed to pass through the assembled witnesses as Conor's silence became an admission; the moment stretched out, reached its breaking point, and splintered into two, the one in which Ashleigh might yet be vindicated giving way to one in which no such vindication could ever be possible.

I'm sorry, Ash. But he's right.

There was a second shiver as the circle of onlookers read the concession in his face. They sucked in a collective breath, turning back to Guyler.

The other boy let the silence thicken, choosing his words carefully. There was a sense of immutability in the air, as if the next few moments would pass out of history and straight into myth—such was the scale of Guyler's trauma, in the eyes of a handful of seventh graders. Here was a rare chance to define himself, and to have that definition remembered.

"Two weeks isn't enough," he said. "Two *months* wouldn't be enough. He's not going to

get what he deserves out there, he's going to get it in *here*. Here, where everybody's going to know exactly what he did — exactly what he *is*. And everybody's going to get a chance to decide whether they're the kind of person who's okay with that — okay with *him* — or whether they think that kicking another kid while he's down, kicking him so hard that he ends up in the *hospital* —"

Guyler broke off, his jaw clenched, eloquently expressing an outrage too large for words. He took a step forward, so that he stood nose-to-nose with Conor. Somewhere on the edges of the circle, a student cried "Heels!" in warning, presaging the heavy footsteps of a teacher. No one moved.

"I'm fed up with this stuff washing off, like it was all some kind of a joke — like it doesn't count if you only do it once, or if you do it to somebody that nobody likes, or if you get punished afterwards. He doesn't get to *pay* for it. He doesn't get to *apologize*. He doesn't get to move on and pretend it never happened. From now on, you talk to him, you're friends with him, you're saying you're cool with what he did, you think it's no big deal. And everybody's going to know that *you're* that kind of person, too." He paused, sweeping his gaze over the silent audience, including them in his proclamation. Turning back to Conor, he drew an imaginary line on the concrete with the toe of his sneaker. "Pick your side."

There was just enough time for it to become clear that Conor had no answer, and then the teachers were upon them, breaking the circle apart, chivvying them inside. The silence became a storm as a dozen arguments sprang up, voices tumbling over one another, their owners quite pointedly looking everywhere except where Conor happened to be. He floated among them, untouched and untouchable, not sure whether their attitude was to his credit or his detriment. He had made no statement, cast no vote, yet one and all, they had leapt to the conclusion that he stood alongside Ashleigh. It was a testament to his loyalty, a mark of distinction — their friendship was such an institution that it could be assumed as a given.

It meant he walked alone.

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Ms. Palmano was having a bad morning.

They could see it in the set of her shoulders as they trickled in from the hallway, in the line of her mouth as she took attendance. There was a forbidding slant to her eyebrows, etching dark lines that looked out of place on her soft, young face. They waited with bated breath, uncertain of procedure—mercurial in even her kindest moments, she could easily be capable of murder if tested.

Closing the door, she turned to regard them, her eyes like twin obsidian knives. A few of the more nervous students flinched; others merely sank a little lower in their seats. She registered their anxiety with a slight twist of her lip, but made no move to alleviate it, instead picking up a marker and turning it over in her hands as she studied them, clearly on the verge of a decision.

“Essays out,” she barked. “You may have ten minutes to confer with your classmates and ensure that they are free of errors. I’ll be at my desk if there’s anything you can’t figure out on your own.”

Holt raised his hand. “When you say ‘free of errors,’ what exactly do you—”

“Nine minutes fifty seconds.”

They moved. Standing, Conor took a step toward Holt, but was beaten by William, who looked panicked and slightly sick. All around him, students were pairing up, papers changing hands like a primitive mating ritual.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to see Jennifer, the girl who sat in front of him, waiting with a pair of erasers. “Any idea how you spell ‘ignominious’?” she asked. “I heard my stepdad say it this morning, and I didn’t have time to look it up.”

Conor shrugged, sliding back into his seat and handing her his own essay. “Dunno. What’s it mean?”

“No clue, but it sounded bad, so I threw it in.” She smiled. “Anything you want me to look for in particular?”

“Um. Commas, I guess. And spelling.” He glanced down at her paper, covered in neat and legible handwriting, and felt a sudden urge to grab his own back. “How about you?”

“Spelling, too. And I’m not sure if the order makes sense. I think some of my paragraphs might need to be switched around. Check back in once we’ve read them?” He nodded, and she smiled again, spinning away from him as she placed his paper on her desk and began

reading.

He looked down at hers again, trying to force his eyes to focus on the words. He was still on edge after the confrontation with Guyler, and homeroom hadn't helped—they'd gone around the circle, and each of them had been asked to share something positive about their weekend. Unable to think of anything, Conor had mumbled "video games" and then excused himself to the bathroom, where he'd barely finished scribbling his essay before the bell rang for first period.

"Eight and a half minutes."

He shook his head and started over. *The worst part about slavery, he read, is that it's kind of like your already dead. You don't have control of your life, and if you can't control your own life, then what's the point of living?*

He squinted. As far as he could tell, the apostrophes were all in the right places, and the sentence itself made sense. There was some promise in the three *yours*—he felt almost certain that one of them should be different—but he didn't want to level a false accusation, so he simply wrote a question mark in the margin and moved on.

Much to his surprise, upon reaching the end he found that he did, in fact, have an opinion on the arrangement of the paragraphs. Her paper was a lot like the first draft of his own, the one he'd thrown away, and after numbering in a new order, he scribbled a couple of sentences to ease the transitions and added a cleaner, more final conclusion, fixing one or two misspellings along the way. There were three minutes left when he finished, and he set his pencil down and looked at the piece of paper warily, unsure whether he'd overstepped his bounds.

"Here's yours back," Jennifer said, turning around again. "I really liked it! Your spelling *really* sucks, though. I fixed everything I saw, but I don't know if I got it all. What did you think of mine?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but she had already plucked it out of his hands. He watched her as she read, feeling oddly defensive whenever her eyes narrowed and disproportionately relieved each time her head gave an absentminded nod. It was, he realized, the first time he'd ever offered real feedback—usually he had barely enough interest to complete his own work, and none to spare for someone else's.

"I didn't mean to," he stammered as she reached the end of the last page, her brow furrowing. "I mean, they're just suggestions."

"No, it's okay," she said vaguely, flipping back to the beginning and frowning at the first paragraph again. "What's the question mark for?"

He explained, pointing to the three suspicious *yours*. She nodded immediately, grabbing her pencil and adding an apostrophe and an e to the first of them. "Thanks," she said, and this time when she looked up the smile was back. "I like it. I think you made it a lot better, actually." She tilted her head toward his own paper, lying on the desk between them. "You're good at this."

He shifted in his seat, feeling faintly uncomfortable. "I dunno. I'm not really a good writer," he hedged.

"You've just got to work on your spelling. And handwriting. And grammar." He raised an eyebrow, and she laughed sheepishly. "But your main idea was really cool. I get why Ms. Palmano —"

"Time's up!" came the call from the front of the room.

Throwing him one last smile, Jennifer spun back around in her seat, facing forward as Ms. Palmano came around to collect their work. Conor followed suit, noticing as he did so that the teacher had added some words to the dry erase board while they worked:

UNDERSTAND

Yourself

CHANGE

Yourself

UNDERSTAND

The world

CHANGE

The world

"I realized this morning," said Ms. Palmano loudly, quelling the general murmur as she set the stack of papers down on her desk, "that we sort of dove in headfirst, and never took the time to talk about the big picture." She reached into a drawer and pulled out a shiny and official-looking folder, bringing it with her as she took up her usual post at the front and center of the room. "Goals. Methods. Main ideas. And while we don't have a *lot* of time for

discussion, I think a quick overview will help you make sense of your next assignment.”

She opened the folder with a flourish and began to read. “One. Students will use text to understand characters and themes, such as by citing textual evidence to support an analysis of what the text means both explicitly and implicitly. Two. Students will understand word choice and use, such as by analyzing how a particular sentence, chapter, scene or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.”

Conor cast a sidelong glance at Holt, who was sitting transfixed, his mouth gaping, an expression of exaggerated horror on his face. Around the room, reactions were ranging from strained attentiveness to open bewilderment. Ms. Palmano paid no attention.

“Skipping ahead to seven. Students will produce clear and coherent texts in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience, such as by writing arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence that demonstrate a thorough understanding of the topic.”

Up at the front, William was scribbling notes furiously, while in the back corner opposite Conor, a bored-looking girl began folding a paper airplane.

“Skipping to twelve. Students will gather and report information in writing, such as by conducting short research projects which draw from multiple print or digital sources, require assessment as to the credibility of each source, and provide opportunities for quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and developing proper bibliographic citation skills.”

Pausing, Ms. Palmano lowered the folder, looking out across the rows of baffled students. “I trust everyone is following this?” she asked.

“You trust *wrong*,” Holt blurted. Laughter rippled across the room, stifled at first, then more open as Ms. Palmano cracked a sympathetic smile.

“Were those the goals for this class?” one girl asked.

“Ostensibly – which is a word you should all look up someday. This is what the district hands down to you when you sign up to teach seventh grade. It’s not as bad as it sounds – there are a lot of useful things in there, once you get past the surface. The problem is, as goals, they don’t really mean anything. They’re a great list of *whats*, but they miss the *how*

and the *why* completely.” She tossed the folder onto her desk, where it landed solidly, like a heavy magazine. “And it’s the *how* and the *why* that gets you—of your own free will—to put forth your best effort in class.”

She leaned back against the dry erase board, careful to avoid smudging the words. “How many of you have that uncle or that grandfather or that elderly next door neighbor who has a garage that’s just absolutely *full* of tools? Like, easily upwards of a thousand different tools? And there’s lots of grease and dust and a million little glass jars holding all kinds of bolts and washers and things?”

About half of the hands in the room went up, and she nodded, continuing. “And one day, you went to your grandfather with a request—some toy you were building, or some project for school, and you needed to do something outlandish, real square-peg-in-a-round-hole kind of stuff. And he disappeared into the back, and he came out with this terrifying looking mishmash of clamps and levels and spinning metal parts, and he set it all up and turned it on, and *voilà*—like magic! Thirty seconds later, the job was done.”

A couple of students were grinning now. Conor thought of his father’s shop, of the time he’d helped them put together a working catapult for Medieval March during fifth grade.

“Words are like that,” Ms. Palmano said, pushing off from the board and beginning to pace. “They’re *exactly* like that. Some of them are like hammers and screwdrivers—useful for lots of things, so you keep them in easy reach. Others are more specific—they only do one very particular job, but they do that job ten times better and faster than any other tool, because they’re *made* for it.

“And the more words you learn, the more tools you have in your garage—but you have to practice with them, keep them polished and in working order. Because what good would that tool have done your grandfather, if he couldn’t find it, or didn’t know how to use it? In fact, when you think about it, half the battle is just knowing *which* tool you need. Because you know it’s out there. You know it must *exist*—you can’t be the first person who ever needed to fit a peg like this into a hole like that. But you could go digging through that garage for hours, and it’d do you no good. There are too many tools in there, too many possibilities. You don’t have the experience, the years of practice, to boil it down. You could be holding exactly what you need in your hand, and you wouldn’t even recognize its potential.”

She stopped pacing and turned to face them again. “That’s what English class is all about. A dictionary is like your grandfather’s shop—it’s got everything you’ll ever need. But the dictionary isn’t enough. You need the *practice*. That’s why we write papers and read novels, why we fiddle around with semicolons and split infinitives. It’s all about getting to know your tools, so that when a job needs doing, you’re ready to get it d—MEREDITH! ABSOLUTELY NOT!”

The explosion came without warning, and all of them jumped, Meredith twice as high as anyone else. Instantly, thirty heads swiveled in her direction. Craning his neck to look, Conor saw the girl’s face flush red as she tried to shove her phone back into her pocket.

“Stand up,” Ms. Palmano snapped, suddenly cold as frosted steel. “Get up here. Turn around, face your classmates.”

Meredith complied, the red in her face deepening to purple as she buried her eyes in her shoes. The room was horribly, deathly silent.

“Meredith is not interested in today’s lecture,” Ms. Palmano intoned. “While the rest of you are working hard to keep up and follow along, Meredith is playing games on her phone. Meredith has decided that my class is not worthy of her undivided attention. Meredith has made her choice.” Stepping to the side, Ms. Palmano swept open the door and gestured out into the hall. “Meredith is free to go. I will inflict no more knowledge on her today. Take your phone with you, Meredith—I’d hate for you to be bored out there.”

“I—I’m sorry,” whimpered Meredith, isolated and humiliated. “I’ll put it away, I won’t do it again—”

“Why should you be sorry?” Ms. Palmano asked, her voice like thunder next to the young girl’s terrified stammer. “You’re not being punished. I haven’t called the office. You’ve got—what—forty minutes, to do whatever you want. You simply can’t do it in *my* classroom, which is reserved for students of English.”

Conor chanced a quick look at Holt, whose face was as grave as it had ever been. They both understood on a deep and wordless level—whether by chance or design, Ms. Palmano’s choice of punishment was devastatingly correct. Many students—most, even—would have simply taken her at her word, shrugged, and left. But this peculiar style of shaming was custom-cut for Meredith, who was now choking back tears. “*I’m* a student,” she whispered fee-

bly.

"No," said Ms. Palmano, shaking her head. "You want to *think* of yourself as a student, to be *taken* as a student. But you're not willing to exercise the necessary self-discipline. Perhaps tomorrow you'll make a different choice. Now go—you're wasting valuable game-playing time."

Meredith fled. They sat, petrified, as her sobs receded down the hallway, punctuated by the distant slam of the heavy bathroom door. Ms. Palmano's face was frighteningly dispassionate as she turned to face them and asked, calmly, "Anyone else?"

In the silence that followed, she gave a curt nod, shutting the door with a click and returning to her usual post. "Sorry for the interruption, ladies and gentlemen," she said lightly, the cold steel once again hidden beneath a layer of cool cynicism. "I'll try to speed things up, to make up for lost time."

She turned to the dry erase board, uncapping her marker. "Language is at the center of everything," she said, slowly writing out the letters of the alphabet in the space between the four blurbs. "We can't even begin to *think* about something until we have words for it, and it's the number one way that we get ideas out of our own heads and out to where other people can access them."

Unnerved by her effortless and offhand change in temper, they listened attentively. But there was a new thread of tension in the room, manifesting itself in still hands, stiff backs, and tightly closed lips. Where before she had inspired reluctant interest with her gentle taunts and quiet challenges, now they watched her like cats tracking the silhouette of a hawk, curiosity taking a backseat to an urgent desire for self-preservation.

"Everything you think, everything you write, everything you read—it all comes back to one of these four categories. We use language to understand ourselves, to understand the world around us, to change ourselves, and to change the world around us." She punctuated each phrase by tapping the board with the tip of the marker, bulleting the four points. "The better we are with language, the more clearly we can refine our understanding, and the more effectively we can tailor our messages to others."

She recapped the marker, turning to face them directly. "Your slavery essays," she said, nodding toward the stack on her desk. "Which of the four categories did they fall under?"

They flinched, unprepared for the sudden question. For a wild and unpleasant moment, everyone fought to be the least noticeable student—eyes averted, hardly daring to breathe. They could feel Ms. Palmano’s attention like a shadow overhead, threatening to strike.

“David.”

“I dunno—understanding the world?”

“Susanne.”

“Understanding yourself, I think.”

“Ben.”

“Understanding yourself.”

“Jennifer.”

“Changing yourself?”

She was clearly looking for something she hadn’t heard yet. Conor raised his hand. “Can it be more than one?”

Ms. Palmano smiled. “Exactly—it’s hard to draw the line, because you’re a *part* of the world, and so your understanding of yourself is always inextricably tied up with your understanding of everything else. And the very act of understanding something often leads directly to change, which is why we still talk about authors like Erich Remarque or Harriet Beecher Stowe. Or Heisenberg, if you can’t resist the joke.”

The students exchanged slightly panicked looks, each garnering only faint relief from the fact that nobody else knew, either. Ms. Palmano didn’t notice. She had turned back to the board and was drawing large, overlapping circles around the four points, creating a complex, flower-petal Venn diagram. Speaking over her shoulder, she continued.

“So—long story short, these are our goals, at least as far as writing is concerned. Every assignment in this class will push you toward one or another, and sometimes two or three at once. If you’re not doing any of these, you’re not writing—you’re just blogging.”

She capped her marker and stepped over to her desk, where she pulled a stack of papers out of another drawer. “Given that we skipped the whole name games and icebreakers thing, our next project is going to be about understanding yourself. How many of you have heard the word *résumé* before?” She began passing out the papers, counting hands as she went.

Conor was the last to receive one. He looked down at the first box, where the words *Name* and *Job applying for* stood in front of a pair of blanks.

“How many of you know what it means?” Ms. Palmano asked. Most of the hands fell as she strode back up the aisle toward the front. “Okay, easy enough. A résumé is like a summary of your life that you use when you’re looking for a job. It’s a list of all of your relevant experience, education, and skills. You could think of it as a report card going back years, except it doesn’t just include grades. A grownup’s résumé will say things like where they went to school, what jobs they’ve had, and anything major that looks good—speaks another language, won an award from the governor, earned a black belt.

“Your assignment is to write one for yourself. All of your proudest accomplishments, all of your most impressive skills. Everything you’ve achieved up to this point in your life, and everything that qualifies you to achieve even more in the future. Remember that one of the keys to a good résumé is relevance, so you’ll want to prioritize—put the biggest stuff down first before you get sidetracked by little things.”

“Relevant for what?” asked a boy in the front row. “What’s the job?”

“It doesn’t much matter, for this assignment,” Ms. Palmano said. “Remember, none of you have more than a sixth grade education, so a lot of real-world jobs would be outside your reach. Put down whatever you like. You can pick something ahead of time, and write stuff down with that in mind, or you can brainstorm everything and try to find a job that fits after the fact. I’ll throw you some extra credit if your list is well-suited to your choice.”

“Does it have to be a real job?” Holt asked.

“Give me an example of a fake one.”

“I dunno...dinosaur salesman?”

“No problem. Experience relevant to dinosaurs, experience relevant to sales. Just keep in mind—your objective is to set yourself apart. Getting hired is a competition. Your résumé should focus on the things that make you *uniquely* suited for the job. Any questions?”

She looked around the room, and Conor noted with some unease that his fellow classmates appeared to be almost completely recovered from the incident with Meredith. Half of them were already scribbling, and the rest looked like they were just waiting for the whistle. Ms. Palmano’s lightning turnaround, coupled with the students’ already-entrenched habit of

obedience, had made the return to normalcy so seamless that the thought of Meredith sobbing in the bathroom already seemed slightly unreal. Conor wondered whether that was a good thing or a bad one.

Probably bad. She's probably still in there right now.

"You have—let's see—thirty-five minutes. Work silently; work fast—your first draft is due at the end of the period. Get to it."

There was the usual rustling of paper and pencils, and then the room was quiet again, each student bent over his or her desk, all of them alone with their thoughts. Conor looked back down at his own sheet. Beneath *Name* and *Job applying for* were three large boxes, labeled *Experience*, *Skills*, and *Education*. Besides that, there was nothing.

He looked up again. Although most of his classmates had dived in headfirst, a handful of them had yet to begin. They were scratching heads and chewing erasers, their eyes hooded and downcast or staring off into space. Conor caught Holt's eye, and the other boy jerked his head toward the front of the room, where an empty desk and an open door marked the absence of their teacher.

Meredith? Holt mouthed.

Conor shrugged. It occurred to him that it was a rare seventh grade teacher who would walk out on her class without the insurance of some dire threat, and an even rarer one whose class would behave anyway. He wondered idly what Ashleigh would have done.

Ask him tomorrow, when he comes back.

Returning his gaze to the paper, he considered the three boxes—experience, skills, education—trying to imagine which parts of his life might be worthy of the labels. Education was easy, but given that the point of a résumé was to set oneself apart, it was also the least promising. He was no slacker, but neither was he the type of kid who could put down *Fastest mental multiplier* or *Two-time all-school Geography Bee champion*.

Experience and skills—did he have any of those?

He thought about his father, working in the shop in the garage, building sets and props. He thought about his mother, who worked in finance, doing things he'd never bothered trying to understand. He thought of the jobs they put in children's books, an endless stream of titles all ending in *er*, like a tribal chant—doctor, lawyer, teacher, mayor, driver, farmer,

builder, baker. He closed his eyes, dropping his forehead into his palm.

He wasn't one of those kids whose fathers took them out hunting in the mountains, or whose mothers insisted that they learn piano. He wasn't obsessed with models or engines, and he'd never fallen in love with a sport that had a major league. There was nothing he could point to and say, *this is mine. This is what makes me special.*

Oh, please. Enough with the bullshit – no one's watching.

He opened his eyes again, staring down at the sheet.

What, are you afraid somebody's going to accuse you of bragging? It's a résumé – you're supposed to brag.

He looked up at the header box, where the words *Job applying for* were printed, his imaginary Ashleigh following along over his shoulder.

Is that what you're afraid of? Holt's putting down dinosaur salesman – write whatever you want! Put down fireman or stunt man or circus freak, if you're scared – no one'll know the difference.

He picked up his pencil.

There you go. Now write it down, under skills – I can jump from the auditorium to the gym.

He wrote, feeling the words flow down and out through his arm like blood.

And experience – let's see. There's the sewer, the warehouse, the quarry, the tower. Construction site and old folks' home. Dry ice and Holt's throwing stars. That time we picked the lock when my mom forgot to leave a key. That time when we figured out how to change the digital sign by the work zone on the highway.

Conor wrote and wrote and wrote, each word coming easier than the last as he settled into the rhythm. Soon enough, he ran out of room, and he began adding asterisks in the margins, pointing to appendices on the back. In twenty minutes, he'd filled the entire page—all except for the blank next to *Job applying for*. He stared at it, irresolute, the pencil tip balanced at the start of the line.

Might as well go for it. It's honestly the best fit, unless you'd rather write cat burglar.

He wrote *Superhero*.

Thirty seconds later, the paper was folded into a tiny square in his back pocket, and he was walking back to his seat from Ms. Palmano's desk, a fresh copy clutched in his hands. He felt dizzy and weak, and he imagined he could see Ashleigh out of the corner of his eye,

shaking his head in chagrin.

Forest ranger, he told himself, and even in his own head he could hear the note of pleading. *I could be a forest ranger. Forest rangers are cool.*

Or a pilot.

Or a zookeeper.

Or a computer programmer.

He laid the new sheet out on the desk, picked up his pencil, wrote his name. Hovering over the second box, he stared at the words *Job applying for* until his eyes began to sting.

I can jump from the auditorium to the gym.

• • •

"Well, now we know," Holt muttered as they passed through the doorway and out into the hall. "*Ten cuidado*—don't fuck with Palmano when she's on her period."

"Poor Meredith," said Jennifer, who was right in front of them. "Do you think somebody should—you know, check up on her?"

"I saw Ms. Palmano leave halfway through class," Holt replied. "She probably took care of it then, right?"

Nobody ventured a response. Behind them, William squirmed through the pack at the door and came jogging over. "Okay, so—wow," he said as they walked slowly toward the bathrooms.

"Harsh, right?" Holt said. "I wonder if she'll get in trouble. I mean, the whole thing with the papers was like, barely two weeks ago."

"I don't think she *should* get in trouble," William said darkly. "It's about time one of the teachers actually bothered to enforce the rules."

Holt frowned. "She went a good bit farther than enforcement, man. If that'd been a kid, it would've been bullying, straight up."

"Yeah, but it *wasn't* a kid, was it? It was a teacher—they're *supposed* to be in charge of us."

"Except that Palmano's whole deal is that she's *not* in charge of us."

"Which is why she made it clear at the start—you can't just float by. You've got to pay the price."

"But it's not like Meredith was the only one," Holt argued. "What about Alicia making paper airplanes in the back?"

William shrugged. "Gotta start somewhere, I guess. Maybe she didn't see her."

Holt shook his head. "It's still not right, man." He turned to Conor and Jennifer. "What do you guys think?"

Conor shrugged, looking to Jennifer, who sighed. "I don't think it was nice," she said cautiously, "but I think it was the right move."

Holt's eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "*You?* After tearing into her the other day?"

Jennifer didn't back down. "I still say she's a total bitch, but it's like William said—she's the teacher. She's got to do *something* to keep us in line. I'd rather she come down hard on people who are actually goofing off than let it slide like most teachers do."

"Plus, it's not like it was some kind of misunderstanding," William added. "Meredith *was* blowing her off. She just didn't like getting called out on it."

Holt shook his head again, his face tight with disbelief. "So you guys don't think that was over the top at *all*?"

"I think Meredith got exactly what she asked for. Not Ms. Palmano's fault if nobody's ever given it to her before."

• • •

By the time he climbed onto the bus that afternoon, Conor wanted nothing more than to curl up in a corner and take a nap. For once, his morning classes had actually been interesting—there had been churros in Spanish, an experiment on sound waves in Science, and a bloody video about the Aztecs in Social Studies, followed by a math lesson in which he suffered no public ridicule whatsoever. But after the double dose of adrenaline from Guyler and Ms. Palmano, not to mention the fact that he didn't eat lunch—the macaroni and cheese was so dry it actually crunched—he arrived at Activity totally drained, only to find that they were working on sprints and hurdles. He'd been utterly useless in Art, and had barely even

registered the crowd around him as he waited to board the bus in the parking lot.

It was perhaps not surprising, then, that he failed to notice Devon's absence, or the fact that Eichardt was wearing a look of savage anticipation.

He was among the first dozen students to push through the doors, and he chose the first open seat he came across, for once happy to oblige Timothy's desire for independence. Leaning against his bag, he closed his eyes, waiting for the roar of the engines to lull him to sleep.

Fifteen minutes later, he awoke with a jerk as the bus screeched to a halt, painfully smashing his face and shoulder against the seat in front of him. He was immediately aware of several different kinds of shouting – the giddy reaction to the sudden braking, the well-practiced bellow of friends in separate seats, and the high-octane roaring of the witnesses to a fight.

Before he could collect his bearings, the driver tore past him down the aisle, headed for the back, carving a path with the sheer weight of adult authority, his movement magically unhindered by bags or stretched-out legs. Conor's eyes leapt ahead of him, to a rowdy cluster of boys in the opposite corner, and his heart sank.

It was clearly too late to do anything, but he stood anyway, watching as the driver snatched the shredded bookbag out of the hands of one teenager and the sobbing boy out of the grip of another. Thrusting them both behind him, the man began to make his fury known, shouting past purple cheeks as he waved his arms threateningly. Stunned, the revelers retreated, settling back into their seats as his tirade crashed down upon them.

Squeezing his way past the curious students crowding the aisle, Conor found Timothy sitting sideways on the floor between the two rows, his head in his hands, his whole body shaking as tears streamed past his fingers. A horrible stench filled the air, and Conor saw that his shirt and pants were soaked in what looked like half a gallon of urine. Beside him, his bookbag lay in pieces, completely empty, the tag still dangling off the broken zipper.

Grabbing the younger boy by the arm, Conor half-pulled, half-guided him back up the aisle and straight off the bus, lifting his own bag out of the seat as they went. The driver took no notice, his attention fully occupied by the cowering teenagers before him as he continued to castigate them.

Stepping down onto the sidewalk, Conor saw that the driver had pulled over in the middle of a quiet downtown street, in the early part of the route where the Central students got

on and off. He knew the area well, having trained there multiple times over the summer, and he steered Timothy down the block and around the corner to the small neighborhood YMCA.

The man behind the counter was instantly sympathetic, swiping them in to the shower room and showing Conor where to find spare gym shorts and t-shirts. Timothy had recovered enough by this point to look after himself, and Conor let him shower while he dug through the bins, looking for clothes that weren't too big or too threadbare. Returning a few minutes later, he found Timothy sitting on a bench, wrapped in a towel, his expression empty and tired.

He threw the other boy the clothes he'd found, and soon they were back out on the sidewalk, the feeble warmth of the September sun drying Timothy's still-damp hair. They stood in silence for a moment, watching the cars pass through the intersection.

"Thanks," Timothy mumbled, without turning his head.

Conor tried to communicate, through stutters and hand-waving, that it was nothing, and that he was sure Timothy would have done the same for him. There was another long pause as he worked up the courage to ask for details.

"Eichardt," Timothy said quietly, and Conor nodded, not wanting to press too hard. "Him and about six other guys. They had a jar—I think they'd all been—been using it. They got ahold of my bag—one of them pulled out my books. My homework...."

He trailed off, looking utterly dejected, and Conor felt a sharp stab of guilt. *What was that about bad luck being unlikely?* Ashleigh asked.

Conor ignored him. "Timothy, I—"

He hesitated, not sure how to put it into words. "I'm sorry," he said simply.

Timothy shrugged, a slow-motion lifting of the shoulders followed by a cut-string slump. "Mom's going to kill me," he said flatly. "That bag cost twenty dollars."

Conor began to feel a sort of rising panic as Timothy stared blankly at the ground. He had an urgent need to *do* something, to accomplish something beyond just sitting there watching the younger boy fall apart.

"What time does she get home?" he asked.

"Eight. Maybe later. She locks up on Mondays."

They were perhaps an hour away from their neighborhood, walking. For a brief moment, Conor considered calling his parents to ask for a ride, but then another idea occurred to him. "Come on," he said, taking Timothy by the shoulder. "I want to show you something."

• • •

For reasons unclear to Conor, the tiny courtyard tucked away between the bank and the police station was called Freedom Plaza. There was nothing particularly patriotic about it—no flags, no eagles, no stern presidential monuments. Only a handful of marble benches, a few scattered low walls, and a dry and empty fountain with a huge and brutally abstract sculpture in its center.

It was one of Conor's favorite places to train. The giant slabs and angled surfaces of the fountain provided almost limitless opportunity for jumping and scrambling, while the walls and benches were built in a range of sizes and shapes perfect for vaulting and striding. There was a water fountain over in the corner that ran pure and cold, and a pair of large oak trees that had shielded it from the blistering summer heat. Unlike the bank itself, or the grocery store around the corner, he could practice there for hours and no one would bother him. The police came through regularly to chase off the skateboarders, but they left him alone, sometimes even stopping to watch. Once, one of them had brought him a donut from inside the lobby, along with a plastic cup filled with lemonade.

It took Conor a while to get Timothy moving. At first, the younger boy could barely even be convinced to watch, the look of dead apathy on his face like a splash of cold water every time Conor caught sight of it. He tried to interest Timothy in pop-ups, switchovers, and cat vaults, all to no avail. His highest wall climb met with indifference, and he was disappointed to see that even the big running gap jump between the benches, which had taken him three weeks to break, left the younger boy unimpressed. It wasn't until he dropped down from the fountain, tucking and rolling to absorb the shock, that Timothy showed any sign of life.

"Can you do that again?"

Holding in his smile, Conor nodded. He turned and clambered back up the fountain,

crouching at the edge of one of the large, overhanging blocks, roughly seven feet up from the concrete below. Stepping smoothly off the edge, he stretched his feet out to receive the ground, controlling his collapse and falling forward onto his hands as he tucked his head and tumbled over. The roll passed behind his left shoulder and across to his right hip, giving his movement a diagonal slant that propelled him back to his feet with one leg in front, already running.

He jogged back over to where the younger boy was sitting. "How did you do that?" Timothy asked.

Conor extended a hand, pulling him off the bench and onto his feet. "Over here," he said, jerking his head toward a small lawn off to the side of the courtyard. "You'll want to start on something soft."

He began to explain the mechanics of it, the principles that he and Ashleigh had worked out over the summer—stay tucked and tight, lean rather than twisting, and let the point of contact pass over the spine rather than traveling along it. After a few tries, Timothy had the basic pattern down, and they moved back out onto the concrete.

"It hurts," Timothy complained, rubbing his shoulder and his hip as he came up from his first careful attempt.

"Only until you get it right," Conor reassured him. "The shoulder thing comes from going too straight ahead, so the ground crunches over the bone instead of going around behind it. And you banged your hip because you were too stretched out. You kind of flopped down instead of—well, *rolling*." He demonstrated again, slowly, so that Timothy could catch the finer details. "It takes a lot of practice, but once you figure it out, it doesn't hurt at all."

Timothy tried again, managing to bypass the shoulder but hitting his hip even harder. Conor made him crouch down, his hands ready, and adjusted the positioning of his feet a little. "Now *stay tucked*," he said. "Don't straighten out, just roll over like an egg."

This time, the younger boy came up smiling. "Hey, I did it!"

Conor smiled back. "Yeah—that time. Try ten more."

They continued to roll around for the next half hour, Conor gradually progressing his protégé toward running starts, and then standing jumps off one of the lower stone walls. He noticed that Timothy was using his knee as he climbed up, putting his shin down on the

sharp edge at the top of the wall and levering himself over, and he gave a gentle correction, showing the younger boy how to post off of his foot instead. "You won't notice it right away," he explained, "but every time you put your knee down, you bruise it a little more, and by the time it catches up to you, it's too late. Ashleigh couldn't walk for a whole day afterward." Timothy nodded, his next attempt much better.

When they tired of rolls, Conor began teaching him vaults, the two of them crisscrossing the plaza in a game of follow-the-leader that left them both winded, but exhilarated. The younger boy had trouble with the cat vault, which Conor had modeled after the leap of a hunting tiger, but when practicing the pop-over, where you rebounded off the wall with a foot to boost yourself up and over, he got it so quickly that he actually overtook the older boy, tagging and passing him with a whoop of delight.

Conor then led them both over to the handicap ramp, where Timothy watched, bug-eyed, as he leapt and spun on the metal railings, shifting his balance from one foot to the other in a complex dance. Eager to impress the younger boy, he went faster and faster until eventually he slipped, barely catching the rail with one hand before crashing to the ground. Undeterred, Timothy clambered up, spending two tense minutes trying to find his balance before Conor noticed that he was standing on his arches instead of the balls of his feet. It was a quick and easy fix, and soon the younger boy was wobbling up and down the ramp, even summoning the courage to try the smallest jump, from the left rail to the right.

They ended with the fountain, where a fearless Timothy ignored Conor's words of caution and scrambled straight to the highest point, letting out a triumphant war cry that echoed through the courtyard. His elation was infectious, and Conor found himself grinning, too.

He's really not a grumpy kid, Conor thought, watching as the sixth grader descended in a series of daring bounds, his feet sliding and scraping on the sloped concrete. The past two weeks were something of an anomaly; if anything, the opposite was true. In the way of younger brothers, Timothy carried himself with an exuberance that could be wearing. It was circumstance that had driven his happiness underground, and Conor found it gratifying to be a part of its return.

They left the plaza as the shadows began to lengthen, the sun disappearing behind the tall silhouettes of the downtown high rises. Following the line of the tracks, they made their

way out of the city and into suburbia, exchanging chain-link fences for low brick walls, maple trees for sculpted hedges. They were tired, both of them—physically drained and emotionally spent. But they were far from silent, the mutual thrill of their exploits fueling Timothy's curiosity and drawing Conor out of his usual quiet shell.

"So this is what the two of you have been up to all summer?"

"Mostly."

"Where else do you go?"

Conor told him about the warehouse, the tower, the old folks' home—everything but the Gap, which he felt for some reason was not his secret to tell, or at least not his alone. Timothy drank it all in, his visible awe making Conor blush.

"But you don't actually have to go anywhere," Conor added. "I mean, it's more fun if there's more stuff—you can *do* more if there's more stuff. But I spend a lot of time just practicing in my backyard, too." He explained about his daily drills—the target jumps on the roots of the oak tree, the topovers on Mr. Baker's wall, all of the little movements he'd practiced over and over until they flowed from his body like thought. "Stuff like that you can do anywhere." He pointed to a crack in the sidewalk in front of him, planted both feet on it, and leapt lightly forward, landing on the next one with hardly a sound.

Timothy tried as well, making the distance with ease but landing with a heavy thud, flat-footed, his upper body tipping forward so that he had to take another step to steady himself. "Quieter," Conor said, and he jumped again, looking back as the younger boy squared off on another crack. "Try to land on your toes."

"Why?" Timothy asked absently, this time making less noise but still stumbling forward. "What difference does it make, so long as you land it?"

Conor blinked. Ninjas were quiet, Batman was quiet—therefore Conor had always striven to be quiet himself. It was a decision he'd made early on and never revisited. "Um," he said, filling the silence as he struggled to think of an answer.

He set himself for another jump, landing with difficulty on flat feet, his well-trained muscles reluctant to execute the unfamiliar movement. He felt the impact in his knees and at the base of his spine—unpleasant, but certainly not painful, and no worse than the roughest of his normal landings. "I don't know," he admitted, turning back to the other boy. "It just

feels better to me.”

“Yeah, but it’s harder,” Timothy said, his arms windmilling as he fought to maintain his balance. “It’s like you’re landing on a railing on *every* jump.”

Conor smiled. “Which means you’re *practicing* for landing on a railing on every jump.” Together, they leapfrogged down the sidewalk, jumping until their aching legs could take no more and they reverted back to their ambling pace. “It kind of depends on whether you want to just do it, or whether you want to get *good* at it,” he elaborated. “Like, if you want to just do it, then whatever, who cares. But if you want to get it right on the first try, every time, then you’ve got to work on it a *lot*. And harder’s better, in that case, because the harder it is when you’re practicing, the easier it’ll be when you’re not—when it’s the first time you’ve ever tried the jump and you’ve only got one shot and you don’t have time to get ready.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes as Timothy digested this. Coming upon a long, low railing, they hopped up, edging slowly along the narrow metal surface, Timothy in front. “But when would that ever happen?” the younger boy asked.

Behind him, Conor said nothing, considering his answer. Thus far, they’d made it through the whole conversation without touching on motive, the obvious allure of the movement speaking for itself. He felt oddly reluctant to mention Batman, somehow certain that the other boy would scoff, challenging him as his brother so often did.

So argue back, Ashleigh said, shrugging in the back of Conor’s mind. *Convince him.*

But that was just it—it wasn’t the kind of thing you could persuade someone to accept. There was a fundamental flaw in the philosophy, an economic fallacy. *It just doesn’t work that way*, Conor had said on the rooftop, and it was true. Endlessly preparing yourself for an emergency that might never come, and for which your particular brand of readiness might not even be useful—it was a ludicrous proposition, and if you lacked a certain romantic forgiveness, no amount of argument could justify it. Ashleigh had remained unconvinced for months, and Timothy’s newfound respect for Conor was too young and too fragile for Conor to risk sounding silly.

“Eh, I guess it doesn’t,” he conceded, hoping that Timothy would interpret his long hesitation as a need to concentrate on his balance. “Just, like, when you’re playing tag, and stuff.”

Timothy nodded, then fell off the rail, the small motion having been just enough to break his fragile equilibrium. Conor continued to the very end, crouching and dismounting in a single, fluid motion.

"I wish you guys had *told* me," Timothy grumbled, sticking his hands into his pockets as they turned a corner and passed into a new subdivision. "Would've been better than just sitting around bored all summer."

Conor gave him a sidelong glance, not sure what to say. In all honesty, he had never even considered inviting Timothy, Ashleigh's disdain for his younger brother's presence being older than their entire friendship.

Timothy was obviously thinking along the same lines. "He never lets me do anything," he continued bitterly. "Never. Even though I cover for him all the time. Even though I've never ratted him out for *anything*. He wouldn't even let me come along when you guys did dry ice bombs, and I'm the one who told him how to make them." He kicked at a piece of gravel on the sidewalk, his ebullience fading.

Again, Conor said nothing. He hadn't known that, and he doubted it would have made much difference if he had. He'd always sort of liked Timothy, but mostly as a part of the background, an entertaining NPC. Even now, his concern for the other boy was largely motivated by the fact that he was Ashleigh's younger brother—had it been some other kid getting shredded in the back of the bus, he would have simply let the driver take care of it.

There was another pause. "I hate him," Timothy said, quietly and with finality. "He's a terrible brother."

That last all but demanded a response. "What do you mean?" Conor asked, faintly bewildered.

"All he cares about is himself. Big brothers are supposed to look out for you, right? Help you along?" He gave a hollow laugh. "We went to Disney World one time, for Ashleigh's birthday, back when Dad was still around. We were there for like three days, on those passes that let you go to all the parks. On the first day, we rode that golf ball ride at Epcot, the one that's all about the future and stuff. I kept begging and begging to go on it again, but nobody else wanted to go back, so we never did. On the last day, like two hours before we were supposed to leave, we're eating lunch at Epcot, the golf ball is *right there*, and Dad says

Ashleigh can pick any ride he wants, any one at all. And he picks Splash Mountain, and we have to get on the monorail and go all the way back to the Magic Kingdom for this ride that he's been on *seven times*. And when I start to complain about it, he just goes, 'Shut up, it's *my* birthday.'"

Timothy kicked the piece of gravel again, and it skittered off the sidewalk and out into the road. "It's always like that. He's always, like, just *barely* justified, so you can't really do anything about it. We'll be getting pizza, and Mom'll be short on money, and he'll point out that plain cheese is cheaper than what *I* want. Or he'll do something stupid, like stick gum under the seat in the car, and Mom'll find it and go berserk, and he'll swear up and down it wasn't him, and then we both get punished, because it's either that or rat him out, even though the whole keeping quiet thing only goes one way because I never *do* stupid stuff that gets us both in trouble. Did you know he got a new bike when I wrecked and bent his handlebars? And then I had to ride the broken one for, like, two years? And the only reason I wrecked it in the first place is because *four times* he didn't show up to teach me when he said he was going to, and I had to try to figure it out on my own."

"But that's just brothers, right?" Conor said feebly. "I mean, a lot of guys don't get along with their brothers. He still looks out for you. He punched Eichardt for you, remember?"

Timothy gave another empty, humorless laugh. "Oh, yeah, Ashleigh's big fight scene. The one where he didn't stop me from getting roughed up or getting all my stuff dumped out on the ground, but he *did* show up in time to keep *you* from getting pounded."

Conor frowned. That didn't exactly seem fair.

"And then the next day, everybody's talking about him like he's some big hero, even though he threw *one* weak punch—not to mention that you're the one who actually stepped up and put the whole thing on pause. And I'm stuck being that stupid little sixth grader who can't take care of himself."

"Come on," Conor objected. "You can't pin *that* on Ashleigh. It's not like that's the reason he stepped in."

"Of course that's why he stepped in," Timothy shot back. "That's the only reason he ever does anything, is to make himself look good, to show off. Or to impress *you*—though I guess that's over, now."

"So you'd rather take a beating than let your brother help you out?"

"I already said, didn't I? I don't want *protection*."

You could've used some today, Conor thought. But he held his tongue—that would be a low blow, and besides, there was a good chance things never would have escalated to that point if Eichardt had gotten it out of his system sooner. "Then what *do* you want?" he asked. "You can't blame him for not taking care of you, and then get pissed when he does."

"It's not about whether he is or isn't looking out for me. It's about the fact that he decides one way or the other based on what's convenient for *him*, instead of what's happening to *me*. He doesn't *care* about what happens to me—he doesn't give a shit about what happens to *anybody*, unless it's going to make him look bad, or get him in trouble, or mess up whatever plan he's got going on. He only sticks his neck out if he's getting something out of it."

Conor shook his head. It was as if they were talking about two entirely different people. It wasn't much of a stretch to accept that Ashleigh was a shitty older brother—Conor had witnessed some of that himself, though he hadn't realized the extent to which it had bothered the younger boy. But even off the top of his head, he could think of half a dozen occasions in which his friend had put his freedom or his reputation on the line without hesitation—taking the fall for this or that bit of mischief, or making a fool of himself for the sake of solidarity, or to provide a distraction, or simply to make Conor laugh. He listed a few examples for Timothy's benefit.

"Yeah—he'll do that stuff for *you*. You're his friend. I'm just his brother."

Conor had no answer to that.

"Besides—what about the past two weeks? Hasn't gone out of his way to help you much lately, has he? I mean, last I checked, he still hasn't even *talked* to you. Doesn't matter what *you're* going though. Doesn't matter that you might have a right to know what's up with him. He just—made the decision. Whatever Ashleigh wants, Ashleigh gets. I'm telling you, this is what he's like with *everybody*. You just aren't immune anymore, for some reason."

There was too much truth in that to ignore, and Conor's brow furrowed as he fell silent, considering. For a while, they walked without speaking, the only sound the soft whisper of their shoes against the sterile, pressure-washed sidewalk. Crossing the bridge over the highway, they started on the last leg of their journey, with about a mile to go before the point

where they would part ways.

Timothy's assertion was an uncomfortable one. Of all the people Conor knew, none held a higher place in his personal pantheon than Ashleigh. He had never before had cause to question whether or not his friend deserved that respect—whether or not the other boy was *good*.

Was it possible that he wasn't?

The back of his head echoed with sardonic laughter.

Okay, fine, of course it was *possible*—most things were. And Timothy's claim—that Ashleigh was, at his core, selfish and egocentric—fit enough of the facts that it couldn't be dismissed offhand. Perhaps a better question was: did it matter?

Ashleigh had always been the kind of kid who gave no fucks—at school, he was notorious for it. In many ways, it was his superpower, the common thread behind his most daring exploits, his most audacious pranks. He simply didn't care what anybody else thought of him, and along with that came an enviable degree of freedom.

But was that a bad thing?

People who cared about *nothing* were psychopaths; Conor had seen shows about them on the Discovery Channel. They tended to be smart, funny, capable, and good liars—all of which could apply to Ashleigh. They also tended to be ruthless, even vicious—and that could apply to Ashleigh, too.

But he doesn't care about nothing. He cares about you. You guys are best friends.

Or were. What if they weren't any longer?

Have you been giving him a pass just because he's nice to you?

Conor wrestled with that question for the next half mile. He thought of all their adventures together, their experiments with mayhem, the rules they'd bent or outright flouted. He thought of all the scraps they'd gotten into, the various vendettas they'd orchestrated against other students and teachers—the petty acts of vandalism, the subtle insurrections, the occasional memorable nickname. He thought of the lies they'd told together—some for their own protection, some as means to an end, and some just to see if they would be believed. None of it struck him as being fundamentally corrupt. Selfish and immature, maybe, but most of it took place under circumstances where selfish and immature were very much the norm.

There was one exception, though—one monumental and terrible act that seemed beyond all rational defense:

Guyler.

There was no question that Timothy would point to that as evidence of moral deficit. Guyler certainly had, with his ominous branding of Ashleigh's character earlier that day. He had spoken of the incident as definitive, like murder or rape, the kind of conduct that forever became a part of your identity. And standing there, looking at the aftermath still splashed across his torso, Conor had been hard-pressed to disagree.

But there was still the question of *why*, and surely that had to figure into any final judgment—didn't it? Everything had its context, and while Conor couldn't imagine one that would make what Ashleigh did *right*, there must be explanations that would cause it to fall short of actual evil. A mistake, to be sure—perhaps even a crime—but understandable, forgivable.

Yet it was up to Ashleigh to produce such an explanation. Until he did so, Conor had no answer to the accusations of Guyler and Timothy, nothing to go on but loyalty and blind faith, both of which were wearing thin.

"Maybe you're right," he said, breaking the silence as they walked past the brick signs flanking the entrance to their neighborhood. Timothy glanced at him, but said nothing. "Maybe he is just a self-centered jerk. But if so, he's not the only one." Conor thought about the other kids in his grade, most of whom he'd known for years, none of whom seemed even half as alive. "And I'd still rather be friends with him than anybody else."

"Oh, were we talking about *you*?" Timothy asked sarcastically, though without much heat. "In that case, problem solved. I guess I'll just get over myself—not like I can go pick up a new big brother anyway."

"Sorry," Conor said, sheepish. *Not the only one, indeed.*

"Never mind," Timothy said. He sighed. "It's not like it's anything new. I should be used to it by now. It's just—East Binder is nothing like Littleton, you know? It's a whole different world, and whatever—I can handle it. But you have a big brother, you kind of expect you're going to have a leg up on the whole situation. Friends in high places, that sort of thing. Just once, it'd be nice if Ashleigh pulled his head out of his own ass long enough to

make my life a little easier. I'm not saying he owes it to me—he didn't get to pick me any more than I got to pick him. It'd just be nice, is all."

Conor had no reply, and Timothy didn't seem to expect one. They covered the last quarter mile in just a few short minutes, each lost in his own little corner of thought, stopping only when they reached the neighborhood playground that lay between their two houses. Turning toward one another, they hesitated, uncomfortably aware of the web of intimacy that had formed between them and uncertain how to detach themselves from it.

"Well, anyway," Timothy said, staring awkwardly at Conor's chin. "Thanks."

"No problem," Conor replied. "Anytime." He winced. "I mean—you know."

"Yeah." Timothy looked over at the playground, where a few families were still frolicking in the fading light. "He's coming back tomorrow. What are you going to do, if—?"

Conor shrugged. "Punch him, I guess. Somebody's got to do it."

Timothy smiled weakly. "Yeah." He drew a deep breath in through his nose, his hands in his pockets. "Well, if he does, and if you want to—you know, after—I wouldn't mind jumping around some more."

Conor nodded. "Definitely," he said, doing his best to sound unconcerned. "See you tomorrow, Timothy."

"G'night."

They shared a nod, and pulled apart—Timothy heading uphill, Conor down, each walking slowly down the tidy little street, their shadows sharp in the light from the lamps overhead.

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It was six o'clock in the morning, and there were decisions to be made.

Conor rolled out of bed, his body abuzz with a Christmas morning tingle of anticipation. He showered perfunctorily, donning his uniform and slipping quietly into the kitchen, where he forced down a pair of frozen waffles and half a glass of chocolate milk, pouring the rest into the sink.

It was six fifteen, and he wheeled his bike out of the garage, pausing at the end of the

driveway. In one direction lay Ashleigh's house, where no doubt the other boy was already awake, preparing for his first day back. In the other direction lay the school—the courtyard, the shed, the rooftop, a dozen places where Ashleigh might go, each tinged with its own special significance.

It was six thirty, and he was on the road, the morning fog turning his cheeks bright red as it whipped past his face, his heart pounding as he pedaled as hard as he could. Six thirty five, and he was chaining his bike up in front of the cafeteria, considering his next move.

It was a quarter to seven, and he was standing on the roof, looking out at Binder's Gap. He paced back and forth, his thoughts moving in circles, the morning ahead playing itself out in his mind in a hundred different ways. He kicked out a new runway for the jump, heedless of the noise he was making, and when he finished, he turned around and began digging a second alongside the first.

It was five after seven, and he was sliding back down the pipe, lowering himself through the branches of the magnolia and rolling past the roots where Guyler had never really fallen and hit his head. It was seven twenty, and he was standing in the courtyard with the other early birds, shuffling and stamping to stay warm as the buses began to arrive. It was seven forty five, and he was frozen with trepidation as number 134 pulled into the parking lot.

Jeez, man, chill out – it's just me.

And it was. There, emerging from the bus, two hundred yards away but still utterly unmistakable, was Ashleigh. He sauntered across the blacktop, bookbag slung over one shoulder, his neatly combed hair disarranging itself in the stiff breeze.

Conor took a deep breath. This was the first test, the primary node in a branching tree of possibility that spanned the full distance between relief and despair. He stepped away from the nearest clump of students, positioning himself out in the open, directly in Ashleigh's line of sight. If the other boy pretended not to notice him—

Ashleigh waved.

So startled was Conor that several seconds passed before he remembered to raise a hand in answer, and even from a distance he could see his friend's confederate smirk. Cheeks burning, he waited as Ashleigh closed the distance, unrushed and untroubled. He was suddenly hyperconscious of his hands, hanging awkwardly at his sides, and he felt no small

amount of relief when the other boy raised a fist for their traditional greeting.

"Batman," Ashleigh said coolly, brushing his knuckles against Conor's.

Conor felt his mind divide in two, one half dissolving in celebration, the other sharpening into a tense and wary vigilance. After fourteen days, sixteen hours, and nine minutes, Ashleigh had acknowledged his presence—smoothly, effortlessly, without even a hint of hesitation or unease. It was better than Conor had dared to hope, and worse than he'd steeled himself to expect—out of all the angles Ashleigh might have chosen, he'd settled on pretense.

"Hey, Ashleigh," Conor replied, matching the other boy's tone exactly. Calm. Casual. Carefree.

"What's our spot this year?"

"There isn't one." Conor gestured vaguely toward the library. "Holt and them usually chill over by the bushes, but there's nowhere to sit."

"Lame," Ashleigh pronounced, dropping his bookbag and sitting down on top of it. "So, what'd I miss?"

Conor frowned. This wasn't just carefree, it was *careless*, Ashleigh's tone almost offensive in its nonchalance. He bit off an angry retort, felt the words of several others clicking together in the back of his mind. For a heartbeat, he longed to take the question at face value, to unload all of the frustration and resentment of the past two weeks, call the other boy to account. But he was checked by the knowledge of just how fragile the moment was, the weight of their friendship hanging from this one slim olive branch. This was Ashleigh's game—if Conor didn't play along, the other boy might decide he didn't want to play at all.

"A lot," Conor said simply, settling in beside the other boy. He began sifting through the events of the previous two weeks, lifting out memories and shaping them into vignettes, filling Ashleigh in on rumor, suspicion, and happenstance. As he talked, he studied his friend's face furtively, looking for signals and finding none.

"—and there was a ton of crap going on with the new kids from Central, graffiti and bullying and stuff, but that's kind of quieted down. They kicked a bunch of people out in the first week, and Mr. Sykes is pretty much nailing anybody else he catches to the wall."

"How good is he at catching people?"

Conor grinned in spite of himself. "Not very," he admitted. Falling into the flow of the

conversation, he told Ashleigh about his excursion during Activity, and the rampant lawlessness he'd witnessed on the high school side. "I'm pretty sure there's some crossover, too," he added, relating Eddie's suspicions about the pills and his own encounter with the lost and found thief. "It's worse than last year, for sure. They're not even enforcing the line in the cafeteria anymore — at least, not all the time."

"Did you tell?" Ashleigh asked.

Conor blinked. "What?"

"The guy who stole your lunchbox — did you tell?"

"What? — no. I don't even know who he is. All it would've done is get *me* in trouble, for ditching."

Ashleigh smiled knowingly. "Uh-huh. So what's the plan, then?"

"What?"

"Come on — like you're not already planning to catch him if he brings it back."

Conor exhaled slowly. "I — hadn't thought of that, actually."

"You're getting slow, old man," Ashleigh teased. "Losing your grip." He looked out over the courtyard, biting his lip thoughtfully. "Of course, your guy's probably not dumb enough to try putting it back himself, so you'd have to backtrack through whoever he's got working for him. And I guess you can't really stake it out when you've got class all day. So maybe not." Breaking out of his reverie, he threw Conor another mischievous grin. "But seriously, you didn't even *consider* it? Holy missed opportunity, Batman. I've definitely been gone too long."

Conor hesitated, seeing his chance but unsure about seizing it. *Yeah, about that*, he opened his mouth to say, but Ashleigh forestalled him.

"You said we've got English and Activity together?"

Conor frowned. That was right, but he didn't remember mentioning it. "Yeah," he answered slowly. "First and sixth."

"I'm in second lunch. You?"

"Third."

"Damn. What's your locker number?"

"Four four nine."

"I'm four eighty. Bottom—that's going to suck." Ashleigh glanced around at the students in their immediate vicinity. "Wonder who's on top."

Conor shrugged, feeling more unsettled with each passing moment. The conversation between them was flowing far too easily, unnaturally natural in its indifferent banality. Every time a promising pause appeared, Ashleigh filled it, leaving Conor no openings into which he might insert a statement of substance. When the bell rang, the other boy sprang lightly to his feet, holding out a hand; taking it, Conor was irresistibly reminded of a moment two weeks before—Ashleigh, lying flat on his stomach on the roof of the equipment shed, his arm dangling down as Conor leapt up to grab it. The grin on his friend's face looked exactly as it had then, the intervening chaos having left no visible mark.

They set off for the doors together, Ashleigh drifting slightly ahead as the crowd closed in. Sixty more seconds, and their reunion would be over, a critical window closed.

Say something!

It was his own voice, Ashleigh's having disappeared from his head the moment its owner stepped into view. *Like what?* he shot back. *"We need to talk"?*

Well, don't you?

Conor looked around at the other faces in the crowd. Most were preoccupied, incurious, but every now and then he thought he caught a flicker of cool hostility—the legacy, perhaps, of Guyler's speech the previous morning. Ashleigh took no notice, his eyes forward, his attention never drifting to one side of the other.

He came to me, Conor thought. Not to Holt, not to fucking Eddie—Ashleigh had made a beeline straight for the place where Conor was waiting, had greeted him as a friend and ally, shown no desire to go anywhere else. He was back, and if he needed to pretend—if he needed this first day to feel normal—well, Conor could play along. It was little enough, compared to everything else. They could always talk later.

It was eight o'clock in the morning, and Conor walked down the hallway toward his locker, Ashleigh Falhanner beside him.