

Chapter 6 - Legend

"Do you ever think about dying?"

"Is this the drugs talking?"

"I think it's got more to do with the fifty foot drop over there."

"Forty-eight."

"Whatever. Do you?"

"Not really. You?"

"Sometimes. You know. Ever since Dad."

"Oh. ...right. Sorry."

"No, it's okay."

"I just—"

"No, *really*. It's fine. It's been long enough, you know? I'm okay."

"Okay."

"I just—I think about it sometimes. Not just Dad. All of it. What it would be like. Whether it actually matters."

"Matters?"

"Whether it makes any difference."

"Being dead? Or dying?"

"Either. Both."

"Dude. You're not suicidal, are you?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Why's everybody always get so uptight about this? Mom's like, 'Stop talking like that, you're twelve years old for Christ's sake, you don't have to worry about that kind of thing for a long time.'"

"Well, you don't."

"Says you. What if we fall off the roof?"

"We're not going to fall off the roof!"

"But we *might*. Or we might get hit by a bus on the way home. Kids die all the time. It's at least worth *thinking* about, don't you think?"

"I guess so."

"I don't think it would be all that bad."

"Dude!"

"Seriously, though. I mean, it's not like you'd *notice* or anything. You'd just—stop, you know? No more. Nothing."

"Unless you don't. What about ghosts? Or heaven?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

"No way do you believe in ghosts or heaven."

"Hey!"

"You don't."

"You don't know that."

"You don't. Admit it."

"I don't know. I just—look, dude, I just don't *think* about this kind of stuff!"

"Well, think about it now. Decide."

"Ashleigh—"

"No joke. Right now."

"Why? Why's it matter?"

"Because I'm not letting you run off that edge if you think there's a second chance waiting for you at the bottom."

"Do they make us sit in that fucking circle *every* day?"

Conor smiled faintly as Ashleigh slammed his locker closed and straightened, rebalancing the stack of books he was carrying as it lurched threateningly toward the floor. Around them, the hallway was packed with students heading for first period. "Yeah," Conor answered. "They're not even calling it homeroom anymore. It's 'morning meeting,' and there's always some kind of group share or touchy-feely thing."

"We had to write down something we thought nobody knew about us on a little piece of paper," Ashleigh grumbled as they began making their way down the hall. "Dropped them all in a hat. Then we pulled them out and tried to guess who was who."

"Yeah—us, too. Turns out Michael has a glass eye. Nobody noticed. What'd you put down?"

Ashleigh shrugged. "Pet fox. Classy. Believable. Keep 'em guessing."

"Anybody peg you for it?"

"Bell rang before it came up."

They joined the line of kids waiting outside Ms. Palmano's classroom. Her door was still closed, the students within finishing up their own morning meeting, and Ashleigh nodded toward it, shifting his stack of books to his other hand. "What's this one like?" he asked.

"Don't fuck with her."

Ashleigh raised his eyebrows. "That a warning, or an order?"

Conor shook his head. "For real. Don't fuck with her, you'll regret it. She went off on Meredith yesterday, and it was scary. Personal, almost. She doesn't play fair."

"Meredith," Ashleigh said slowly, his tone skeptical.

"Whatever," Conor answered. "I warned you—don't expect backup if you pull something stupid and she nails you."

The stack of books fell to the floor as Ashleigh clutched at his own chest, a look of mock betrayal spreading across his face. "Abandoning me—for a *teacher*?" he gasped. "I never thought this day would come."

"Shut up," Conor said, nettled. Together the pair of them bent down and began gathering up the scattered textbooks. "I *like* this class, okay? She's a good teacher—better than Mr. Marowitz, even. I've got a B right now. I don't want to mess around just because."

"Oh, no, I get it," Ashleigh said, peering ahead as the door opened and Ms. Palmano's homeroom began streaming out. "It's all becoming clear to me now. It's *boobs*, isn't it? You've been mesmerized by her tits."

Conor ignored him, fighting back a surprisingly powerful wave of irritation. Ashleigh's irreverence, his *irrelevance*—it was the usual banter, no different than it had been on a hundred other mornings. But the ease and ignorance with which he had set his sights on Ms. Palmano was like a spotlight on the gulf between them, a glaring reminder that they'd just unshared a pivotal stretch of personal history. It was like talking to Eddie—not only did Ashleigh not understand, he also lacked the context to recognize just how much he was missing. It was unsettling, and Conor had no idea how to go about fixing it.

Lost in thought, Conor followed the other boy as the line began moving, then bumped into him as he came to a dead stop just inside the doorway. Someone else ran into Conor from

behind, and there was a moment of confused shuffling as the line ground to a halt.

“Don’t stop and gawk, get in and get out of the way.”

It was Ms. Palmano’s voice, ringing out sharply from inside the classroom. Slowly, the traffic jam loosened, the students in front of Conor stepping hesitantly into the open space.

Everything was different. The neat rows of forward facing desks were gone, replaced by two long ranks on either side of the room, turned inward like the bleachers on a soccer field. Atop each desk was a sheet of paper, annotated in red. The center of the floor was clean and empty, the handful of seats that hadn’t fit along the walls clumped together near the back, giving the whole setup the look and feel of a thrust stage.

“Find your résumé and have a seat,” Ms. Palmano continued. She was standing at her usual post in the corner of the room by her own desk, watching them as they fanned out and began searching.

Conor glanced briefly at Ashleigh, who shrugged and made a beeline for the front of the room. Turning, Conor found his own paper almost immediately, on a desk just a few feet from his usual spot. The ever-present 85 was circled in red at the top, followed by Ms. Palmano’s favorite tagline—the letters NSNB, meaning *not special, not bad*.

He settled into his seat, noticing as he did so that Holt, William, and Jennifer had all found their papers in the same row. Looking up, he saw Ashleigh waiting in silence as Ms. Palmano scanned a sheet of paper. She spoke to him briefly, then put the paper down, pointing toward a desk on the opposite side of the room, directly across the central space from Conor.

It could have been Conor’s imagination, but he thought he detected another ripple of hostility as Ashleigh walked down the row—a slight tightening of lips, a barely noticeable shift as the students already seated leaned back in their chairs. More than one of them turned to follow the other boy as he deposited his books in the rack beneath the desk, their expressions blank and closed. A few threw furtive looks at Conor, their eyes flickering away when he tried to catch their attention.

Guyler. One more layer to deal with, on top of everything else. Maybe he could talk Ashleigh into skipping the bus, catch up on the long walk home.

Out of habit, Conor turned to the board, looking for the instructions Ms. Palmano usually

left there. There were none, but the blurbs from the previous lesson had been rewritten in a corner in smaller lettering. Beneath them were two neat lines of text; squinting, Conor was just able to make them out:

THEMISTOCLES OF ATHENS
HUANGDI, THE YELLOW EMPEROR

The-mist – no – them-is-toc –

He shook his head. Athens – that was either Greece or Rome, and Hu-whatever sounded pretty Chinese. There was nothing else written on the board, no hints or clues visible in the rest of the room.

Ms. Palmano spoke abruptly, her voice cutting off the low chatter as if it were a switch. “I have divided you into two groups based on a very specific principle,” she said, without preamble. “Your first task for today is to figure out what that principle is.”

Conor and Ashleigh exchanged a look across the dividing line as the rest of the students took stock of their neighbors. There was no immediately obvious pattern – boys and girls were mixed, as were heights and races, and the uniforms were the same on both sides.

Holt raised his hand. “Do we get a hint?” he asked.

“Have you earned one?” Ms. Palmano countered.

Ashleigh’s eyes widened slightly at this, and Conor allowed himself a small, smug smile. William was the next to raise his hand. “Ages?” he suggested.

“No.”

“Grades.”

“No.”

“Alphabetical?”

“Stop guessing and *think*. Someone else.”

Rami spoke up, from the far side of the room. “Does it have something to do with our résumés?”

Ms. Palmano winked, and thirty chins dropped downward, thirty pairs of eyes hastily scanning the papers before them for anything that might resemble a clue. Only Ashleigh

remained motionless, his desktop empty, his expression restive.

"Is it — did you split us up pass-fail?" one of the girls on Conor's side asked.

"Did you pass?" Ms. Palmano returned, craning her neck as if to check the score at the top of the girl's paper.

"Um. I don't know, you never tell us. I got the same grade I always get."

"Oh, right." Ms. Palmano tapped a finger against her chin, considering. "Raise your hand if you feel like you did well enough to pass."

No one moved. Conor glanced up the row at Jennifer, who was biting her lip, looking torn.

"Okay then — raise your hand if you feel like you failed?"

Again, nothing.

"Raise your hands."

The hands went up.

"Glad to see your arms aren't broken," she said dryly. "Hands down — no, it wasn't pass-fail. You all failed, although that's not necessarily your fault — it's pretty hard to stretch a seventh grader's qualifications far enough to fill a whole résumé."

"Then why'd you make us do it?" Susanne demanded. She was two seats down from Ashleigh.

Ms. Palmano looked at her as if through the lens of a microscope. "Extra credit assignment," she said cryptically. "Write me 500 words on George Dantzig, D-A-N-T-Z-I-G. Due Friday. In the meantime, let's just say I was hoping you'd surprise me. Anyone else?"

Jennifer spoke up. "Can we have a minute to look at each other's papers?"

"Aha — logic *and* initiative. Good idea. Let's do this, though, it'll save time — instead of milling around the room, each one of you pick an item to share, and we'll make a couple of lists." She reached into her desk drawer, pulling out two boxes of markers, one red and one blue. "Everybody on this side of the room, write in blue under this line." She nodded toward Jennifer and drew a long horizontal line near the top of the left side of the board. "Everybody on this side, red." Adding another line beside the first, she dropped the markers into the tray and stepped back, waving them forward.

There was a moment of hesitation as everyone waited for someone else to step up first,

and then Holt rose out of his seat, followed swiftly by the rest of the class. Board space quickly proved to be the limiting factor, and Conor and Ashleigh came together at the back of the pack as their classmates posted their accomplishments two by two.

"Everybody's acting terrified," Ashleigh remarked, keeping his voice low.

"Told you."

"You know this just makes me want to try something even more, right?"

"Your funeral."

They shuffled forward. The red list was filling up faster than the blue one, its entries tending to be shorter. At the top was *Juggled four eggs*, followed by *12 point buck*, compared with *All-county first chair clarinet* and *Published local newspaper article* in blue. As Conor watched, a girl he didn't know very well finished writing *Toght myself gitar* and handed the red marker to Ashleigh.

The sound of a brisk double knock drew Conor's attention away, and he turned along with most of his classmates as the door to the room swung open, revealing the solemn, unsmiling figure of Mr. Sykes. There was a collective stiffening as he entered, sharing a curt and professional nod with Ms. Palmano and proceeding silently toward the back of the room.

They watched with bated breath as the assistant principal settled himself at the only desk without a paper attached to it—the one where Ashleigh had been sitting. Heedless of the apprehension his appearance had caused—or perhaps simply accustomed to it—he pulled out a tablet and began to tap quietly.

Conor turned back to the board, hoping to catch Ashleigh's reaction, but the other boy was already stepping away, heading for Ms. Palmano's desk. Conor opened his mouth to call after him, but stopped short, the words in his throat catching as the ones on the board caught his eye.

In the red column, right at the bottom in Ashleigh's tight, blocky capitals, was a single sentence:

I CAN JUMP FROM THE AUDITORIUM TO THE GYM

Dumbfounded, Conor actually reeled, and had to take a small step backward to avoid losing his balance. Someone—he didn't even register who—passed him a blue marker and made space for him at the board. He stood gaping for several seconds until the sound of Ms. Palmano clearing her throat penetrated his astonishment, and he realized that he was alone at the front of the room. Fumbling with the marker, he scribbled something about his sixth grade science final and lurched back to his seat, only thinking to look for Ashleigh when his brain no longer had to devote most of its power to keeping him upright.

The other boy had made for the spare chair next to Ms. Palmano's desk. He was sitting slightly hunched, his fingers laced together under his chin as he eyed Mr. Sykes warily. His expression was one of sudden sobriety and second thoughts, and Conor realized that he must have written his line before registering the presence of their AP.

Conor wasn't the only one looking. Though Mr. Sykes seemed indifferent, the rhythm of his tapping unbroken, at least half the class had made the connection between Ashleigh and his entry, and the other half was quickly being told in wordless nods and taut whispers. There was consternation behind their open stares, and no small measure of incredulity. The only student who seemed unshaken was Holt, who had a look of trepidation on his face and was trying unsubtly to catch Conor's attention.

Conor didn't want to look at Holt, though. He didn't want to see Holt, or hear from Holt, or spend one single quantum of energy assuaging Holt's concerns. It was not Holt's job to accommodate Conor's feelings, or to take responsibility for them. That was *Ashleigh's* job, and it was toward Ashleigh that Conor directed all of his attention, as if to force the other boy to acknowledge him through sheer mental pressure.

Look at me.

Look at me.

God dammit, Ash, look at me.

But his friend remained oblivious, willfully or otherwise, his focus every bit as singular as Conor's as he continued to watch Mr. Sykes. Ms. Palmano cleared her throat again, stilling the hushed conversations. "I believe we were looking for a pattern?" she reminded them mildly.

Gradually, grudgingly, the class refocused, discussion sprouting anew between the

desks.

"Is it, like, school stuff versus sports stuff?"

"No, look, it can't be — there's soccer stuff on both sides."

"I've got it! Half of us wrote in *red*, and the other half wrote in *blue*."

"Shut up, Holt."

That was a secret, Ash.

"Maybe the blue side is, like, jobs? And the red side is hobbies?"

" — just for fun — "

" — you *can* get paid to juggle, though — "

A secret, and it belonged to both of us.

"It's got to be something simple."

"She didn't say simple, she said specific."

"Same diff!"

It belonged to me. I'm the one who found it. I'm the one who did it.

"There's no pattern. She's messing with us again."

"There's totally a pattern. Look — blue is stuff your parents want you to do, and red is stuff *you* want to do."

"What does that have to do with how we're sitting, though?"

You have no right. You can't — you haven't even — you're giving it away and it's mine. Mine.

"Maybe something about groups versus just you — "

" — the diabetes thing, would that be — "

"Doing what you're told," said Ashleigh.

Preoccupied though they were, most of the students had left some small scrap of attention tied to Ashleigh's corner, so that when he spoke, they noticed, their heads twitching toward him as if tugged by strings. Seething, Conor watched as the other boy took a deep breath, steeling himself, and turned away from Mr. Sykes to face the board. In the corner, Mr. Sykes' tapping skipped a beat before resuming its steady pace.

"Go on," Ms. Palmano said, her voice neutral.

"All the stuff on the blue list — it's stuff your parents tell you to do, like Ben was saying. Study for the big test, get a bunch of donations for the walk-a-thon. Stuff they tell Grandma

about when she comes to visit.”

“They don’t tell Grandma that you can juggle four eggs?” Ms. Palmano asked.

No one laughed, and Ashleigh shrugged, silent. Ms. Palmano looked to the rest of the class. “Thoughts?”

William raised his hand. “My parents didn’t tell me to take Tae Kwon Do. They wanted me to play football.”

“*Bullshit,*” Holt blurted. “*You’re* the one who broke a cinderblock?”

Several students gasped, their eyes darting to Mr. Sykes in the back of the room, who stopped tapping altogether and looked up, his face unreadable. Realizing his blunder, Holt stiffened, his eyes darting back and forth as he attempted to watch both adults without moving his head.

Mr. Sykes said nothing, however, his gaze on Ms. Palmano as she crossed the room to add Holt’s name to a small list in the corner of the dry erase board, under a placard reading *Minor purchases*. “Price, Mr. Avery?” she asked calmly.

Holt swallowed visibly. “Silent lunch?” he replied, a mixture of hope and apprehension coloring his tone.

“Just one? I don’t know if I can go that cheap. Maybe if we added a call to your mom?”

“Um. Three lunches instead? Please.”

Ms. Palmano nodded, making a note next to Holt’s name. “Was it worth it, Mr. Avery?”

“No, ma’am,” Holt said, his knuckles white where his hands gripped the edge of his desk. Mr. Sykes began tapping again, and the room relaxed fractionally, Ms. Palmano turning back to the main lists in the center of the board.

During this brief exchange, Conor had continued to stare unrelentingly in Ashleigh’s direction, watching as the other boy followed along, willing him to turn, to look up, *anything*. He heard echoes in his head of Guyler, of Timothy, their condemnations of his best friend’s character finding new purchase as his own thoughts grew thorns.

Liar.

Cheater.

Traitor.

“You were saying, Mr. Thompson?” Ms. Palmano continued.

William finished smirking and returned his attention to the front. “Nobody told me to take martial arts. I did it because I wanted to. So it’s not about doing what you’re told.”

“What if I told you it is, though?”

William frowned, and Ashleigh let loose a short bark of laughter. Conor caught the joke a half-second later, but it wasn’t funny enough to make a dent in his anger. The rest of the class looked on blankly as Ms. Palmano’s lips twitched upward in the ghost of a smile.

“Take a closer look at the lists, with that hint,” she said.

Ashleigh did. Conor didn’t.

“Thoughts? No offense to those of you who are taking your time, but it should be fairly obvious, at this point.”

Ashleigh leaned back in his chair, sweeping his gaze across the room, and locked eyes with Conor.

Nothing. Not even a crack in his easygoing façade. A grin, a nod, a casual disconnect. Already his attention was back on the board, and Conor was left adrift.

You could try the rock thing again.

It was the worst possible time for Ashleigh’s voice to return to his inner dialogue, and something inside Conor snapped. Reaching under his desk, he fumbled around until his fingers gripped the little leatherbound journal, still with him out of offhand habit. Pulling it out, he opened it to the first empty page, a pen materializing in his hand. Without any intercession from his conscious mind, words began to spill out, taking whatever form they pleased on the pristine white paper.

Other students were talking again—Holt, Jennifer, a few more he didn’t know, with Ms. Palmano’s crisp interruptions channeling the flow. Conor ignored them all, his head down as he scribbled. It wasn’t until five minutes and two pages later, when his pen began to run dry, that the roaring in his ears cleared enough for some part of the discussion to force its way through. Looking up, he saw that Ms. Palmano had drawn an arrow between two entries on the board, annotating each with a title:

SYSTEMATIC

(top down)

ANARCHIC

(bottom up)

“— Ben, on the other hand, just ran fast,” she was saying. “Sure, the conventions of miles and minutes are what let us *measure* how awesome he is, but the simple fact is, Ben’s achievement stands on its own, without need for context.”

“Hey, my achievement stands on its own,” Holt protested. His arms were crossed in front of his chest. “Scoring from a goal kick is *hard*. Most people couldn’t do it even if the field was empty!”

Conor looked across the room at Ashleigh, who was still leaning back in his chair, his eyes forward. He felt weak, drained, as if the effort of writing had burned away half of his fuel.

“Right,” Ms. Palmano continued, “but you didn’t say you kicked a ball eighty yards into a five yard target. You said you *scored a goal as keeper*. See the difference? One’s an example of a physical feat that could’ve been slightly different and still been impressive—if, say, you’d hit the goalpost instead. That would’ve taken even *more* accuracy, right? But you wouldn’t write it down on your résumé as a soccer player.”

They were too far in, the thread too difficult to catch, and Conor was just about to turn back to the journal when Ashleigh spoke up again. “So this is about, like, internal and external? Whether you’re doing it for yourself or for somebody else?”

“Probably better to say *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*, but no—not quite. It’s not about *why* you do it. William earned his black belt because he wanted to, but he just as easily could have done it to make his parents proud. The difference is in the game itself. William was playing by the rules.”

There was something familiar in Ms. Palmano’s tone, something about the way her eyes lingered on Ashleigh’s for a fraction of a second longer than they had to, and suddenly the fire in Conor’s chest rekindled, changing from a slow and impotent burn to a flash of focused fury. A once-bitten part of him seemed to surge forward, awakening with a sense of white-hot purpose.

Mine.

His eyes darted about, seeking a connection, settling on the journal. *Rules*. He was late to the conversation, was shooting in the dark, but he had to say *something*, to pull the attention

off of Ashleigh and onto himself. He raised his hand. "What if you're making up the rules yourself?"

Ms. Palmano nodded. "That's exactly the point," she said, and Conor felt a disproportionate rush of satisfaction. "Why does Holt brag about the fact that he scored from a goal kick? Because we *told* him to. We invented this game called soccer, and we built fields for it in our neighborhood parks, and once or twice a week half the parents in the country drive their kids out to them, and meanwhile on television even the *American* soccer champs are making a hundred thousand a year, easy. Holt's achievement comes pre-measured and pre-cut—we know exactly how we're supposed to feel about it. *Holt* knows exactly how he's supposed to feel about it. Compare that to—let's see—built a PC. No trophies for that, not even in seventh grade."

Jennifer broke in. "What if whoever built the computer—"

"Like we don't all *know* it was Jordan—"

"—what if they did it because their parents wanted them to? Or whoever? Like, they're on a team or something."

"Context," Ms. Palmano said. "Remember, I had your *whole lists* to look at. Sure, there are a lot of things that could fall into the grey area, but not when you put them together, look at the whole picture all at once. Somebody writes down spelling bee champion, they probably also wrote down AB honor roll, cub scout, student body rep, and captain of the sportsball team. Somebody wrote down highest flying paper airplane, I give you ten-to-one odds they also put down arm wrestling champion, slam poet, two-minute breath-holder, and self-taught guitarist—although please, don't demonstrate, Kaitlyn, because there's a pretty low ceiling on how good *any* seventh grader can be at guitar."

There was some scattered laughter.

"Point is, there isn't a lot of overlap. People's choices tend to show some internal consistency—generally speaking, you fall into one of two camps. You value one, or you value the other. Which leads us to Big Picture, Part One, because this doesn't just stop at gold stars versus decoder rings. We're talking about two very different ways of viewing the world, here, and that philosophical divide is the kind of stuff that separates mass murderers from Wall Street millionaires."

What chatter there was dried up abruptly at this grave pronouncement. Ashleigh glanced toward Conor once more, and for half a heartbeat it felt right and normal, the pair of them sharing a private moment in the middle of a crowded classroom. Half a heartbeat, and then resentment cut between them like a knife, and Conor looked away.

Ms. Palmano was now pacing back and forth across the front of the room, her hands clasped behind her back. “Let’s imagine two hypothetical students for a moment, okay? We’ll start with Sid. Sid takes his education very seriously—he’s the kind of guy who already has very serious opinions on what colleges he might go to. He does his homework, listens in class, and tries hard on all his assignments. He’s the guy who gets irritated when you throw the substitute off track and she doesn’t make it through the material, because have you even *considered* the fact that this stuff is going to be on the quiz next week *either way*? If there’s a group project, Sid is the guy you want to work with, even though it’ll probably end up with him yelling at you for not doing your part well enough. When Sid’s mom asks how his day went, he’s got seven different stories, one for each period because that’s the stuff that counts, and then he’ll go wash his plate without being asked. Raise your hand if you guys know Sid.”

Thirty hands went up as thirty pairs of eyes snuck sidelong glances at William.

“Now, let’s talk about Anna. Anna couldn’t care less about school. It’s not that she’s dumb, or lazy—it’s just that it all seems kind of pointless and arbitrary. She goes through the motions, but she’s not fussed about the difference between an A or a C, and she’s not going to get upset if the teacher forgets to take up the homework—it’s not like she spent more than ten minutes on it anyway. She’s got more important stuff to worry about—like the doodle she’s got going on under her desk, or the trip she’s planning to go on this weekend, or her friend who’s dating some jerk and is totally throwing her life away. Ask Anna what *her* day was like, and you’ll start to notice that most of her stories take place in the hallway, or the cafeteria, or the bathroom—because that’s where *real* life happens, not in classrooms where you’re stuck behind a desk doing busywork. I assume you’ve all met Anna?”

They nodded.

“Okay, good. Now, let’s take Sid and Anna and put them on fast forward for about ten or fifteen years. We’re past college—let’s say we’re even past grad school, because let’s face

it, Sid's not going to be satisfied with a bachelor's degree, is he? Where are they now?"

Conor's eyes were back on Ashleigh, watching the other boy like a hawk. He had no idea where Ms. Palmano was headed, but he wasn't about to let his friend get there first.

Do you even hear yourself right now? a small voice asked in the back of his head. Conor's only answer was a wordless snarl.

No one volunteered an answer, so Ms. Palmano answered herself. "Well, the traditional answer is, Sid's doing great, and Anna's doing terrible. Right? That's what your parents and teachers have always told you—focus on your studies, develop good habits, do the right thing now, it'll pay off later. It's not hard to imagine Sid in some high-paying professional job like brain surgeon or CEO, and it's pretty easy to picture Anna passing gossip while she cuts hair for eight bucks an hour. And yeah, we all know about the exceptions where Sid burns out and kills himself or Anna makes it big in Hollywood, but we're talking averages here—we're talking about what's *likely*."

She paused again, gesturing behind her at the words on the board. "For better or worse, society is built for people like Sid. It's *systematic*, and it has to be—you can't get hundreds or thousands or millions of people all living together unless they agree to start following rules. And when you get right down to it, rules are kind of like a road map. They're instructions—do this, and good stuff happens; do *that*, and you'll be sorry. The better you are at following instructions in general, the better off you're going to be. It's a cycle—society rewards people like Sid because people like Sid are what makes society work. I mean, if Anna's just going to ignore her teachers when she's little, why would she listen to her bosses when she's big? Or to the police, for that matter? Not to mention the fact that Sid can actually *contribute* to society. He was willing to put in the effort to learn stuff that makes him useful, valuable, productive.

"But here's the thing—*Anna's not stupid*. At least, not necessarily. Being the kind of person who doesn't like being told what to do doesn't mean she's an idiot. So she can see it all coming—a whole lifetime of boredom, with teachers morphing into bosses, bad grades becoming lousy paychecks, and all the little rules she never cared about turning into laws she can't afford to ignore. It all takes so much work, and it's all so *meaningless*—how is filling out accounting spreadsheets any different from memorizing useless facts about ancient Greece?

It's not so bad for Sid, because all the work he's putting in now is going to come back around someday, with interest. But Anna's already behind, and it's only going to get worse."

Ms. Palmano swept her gaze around the room, drawing attention to the two ranks of desks and the wide floor that separated them. "So, what does Anna do? She chooses *anarchy*. Not chaos-in-the-streets anarchy, just a quiet rejection of the system, seeking satisfaction on her own terms. Meaningful relationships, or fulfilling hobbies. Daring adventures and art for art's sake. Things that make *memories*—what are grades, compared to that?"

Ms. Palmano nodded toward the hallway, still visible through the door that Mr. Sykes had left ajar. "The problem is, there isn't really a *real life* waiting down the road, where rules and grades don't matter and the people around you are suddenly different in unexpected ways. There's just another bunch of systems, most of which are every bit as stuffy and arbitrary as seventh grade, and the people who are good at working inside them are going to continue to be the most successful. To put it another way, Sid and Anna are both going to grow up, replacing the people who used to tell them what to do—except that Sid's going to be moving into a slot with a lot more power than Anna's.

"Which is why the tendency toward anarchy feeds on itself, snowballing. That's why kids who skip class and fail grades turn to drugs and gangs, and grow up to become rebels or criminals or hippies—why bother supporting a system that's clearly going to place you on the bottom rung? Better to tear it down, rip it off, or build your own system that doesn't have to follow anybody else's rules.

"It's funny, because in a way, Anna's more grown up than Sid will ever be—she's taken control of her own life, recognized her power and started to exercise it. Sid's just doing what he's told, and he's going to *keep* doing what he's told as long as society keeps rewarding him for it. That limits how far Sid can go, because he'll never achieve anything unless society's already defined the shape of that achievement, built a slot for it to fit into. He may cure cancer, but he's not going to *surprise* us. It's people like Anna who break the mold—starting revolutions, discovering continents, writing songs that make generations weep. But Sid's route is a lot safer—for every Anna in the history books, there's a thousand more sleeping under bridges."

Ms. Palmano turned to face them, her hands clasped behind her back as if she stood at an

invisible podium. "Look around, kiddos. The people next to you, the people across from you. Sid and Anna. Like it or not, change it or not, this is who you are *right now*."

"Come on, you can't start cutting people up on stereotypes like that!" a girl protested.

"Says someone sitting on the anarchist's side," William pointed out.

Conor's anger was wavering, unable to sustain itself as his brain diverted energy to pondering Ms. Palmano's assertions. He looked over toward Ashleigh, met the other boy's gaze, noted a small frown furrowing his friend's brow and felt its mirror on his own face. For a moment, the two friends weighed each other from opposite sides in the room, the space between them suddenly heavy with meaning.

What had Ashleigh written down? Ms. Palmano had barely glanced at his résumé before assigning him to Anna's side. Ashleigh, the math wizard, who'd earned more merit badges in his single year of scouting than half the teenagers in their troop. Who had sung in the church choir for years before his dad passed away, and who still refused to jaywalk.

But he was also the same kid who'd passed Conor a joint on a rooftop two weeks before, who'd written cuss words into his fifth grade graduation speech and delivered the whole thing, who'd cut power to their entire elementary school because he'd found a big red switch behind the cafeteria and wanted to find out what it would do. He was sitting where he belonged, all right—it was just the reasoning that seemed weak, suspect. The flip of a coin, the choice of one set of accomplishments over another.

That's the point, though, isn't it? Which ones you pick to write down?

Conor looked down at his own résumé, the empty sentences he'd scribbled after tearing up his first draft. He'd chosen them because he knew he was supposed to, because they were the sorts of things the grownups gave you points for. They weren't really *him*.

But you wrote them down, didn't you? When it came down to it — when you had the choice — you threw away the first one and turned this in instead.

Did that mean anything?

He raised his hand. Ms. Palmano called on him.

"What if we lied?"

For a moment, she was speechless, her mouth hanging open around an unspoken word. Then her breath escaped in a laugh, and she shook her head. "That...honestly didn't occur to

me as a possibility," she said, sounding rueful. "I sort of took it for granted that everyone would tell the truth. Touché, Mr. Morton—that'll teach *me* to underestimate seventh graders. Care to switch sides?"

Conor shook his head, uncomfortable with the way she'd taken his question. "I was just wondering," he said, feigning indifference as best he could. "It's just—some of the stuff on the board looks like it might not be true."

There was a shift, and suddenly everyone was looking at Ashleigh. Ms. Palmano glanced over her shoulder at the pair of lists and shrugged. "Generally speaking, Anna's a better liar than Sid. But that doesn't mean she lies *more*."

They digested this for a moment, Ashleigh pointedly holding eye contact with the more obvious gawkers until they folded, one by one. In the stillness that followed, Ms. Palmano picked up a marker and popped the cap, drawing a line under the words THEMISTOCLES OF ATHENS. "I hope you haven't all died of boredom while I've been going on and on," she said. There was a brief rustle as they straightened in their seats, and she acknowledged it with her usual knowing smile. "Because now we've arrived at Big Picture, Part Two, and this one's a doozy. When it comes to understanding the world and your place in it, there's nothing more important than what I'm about to say over the next five minutes."

She took a moment to gather her thoughts, and Conor snuck another look at Ashleigh. It had taken them several days to get used to Ms. Palmano's peculiar brand of harsh pomposity, and Ashleigh was coming in cold. The still-smoldering part of him almost hoped the other boy would be mocking or dismissive, would double down on the ignorance he'd shown just before the start of class. But Ashleigh was merely watching, quietly attentive.

Since when did this become a competition? the small voice asked.

But too late—Ms. Palmano had begun to speak. "Who's the most important person you can think of, in the last hundred years?" she asked. "Overall impact—don't worry about whether they're good or bad."

"Einstein."

"Hitler?"

"Martin Luther King."

"Junior."

"Bill Gates."

"Gandhi?"

"Harry Potter."

Laughter. Ms. Palmano brushed past it. "Okay. Now, can anybody tell me who was Einstein *before* Einstein? When Einstein was growing up, who was the guy everybody pointed to as the world's most influential thinker?"

Silence.

"How about Hitler? Who was the Hitler of the 1800s?"

Jennifer raised her hand. "Napoleon?"

"Not the worst guess. How about the 1700s?"

Nobody ventured a response.

"Let's try another tack. Who invented the computer?"

Nothing.

"Vaccines?"

Nothing.

"Plastic."

Nothing. She was darting around, following no pattern that Conor could see other than the fact that she was clearly striking at their ignorance, looking for answers she knew they didn't have.

"Oh for three. How about something more recent? Who ended the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?"

"Barack Obama," said Meredith. A slight rustle announced the shared sense that no one had expected her to speak up for another week.

"And who *ran* those wars? Who was the general in charge?"

Again, nothing. Conor looked around at his classmates. The ones in his row were shifting guiltily, while the ones across the room looked mostly bored, many of them slouching in their seats. Ashleigh was one of only a handful who were still completely focused.

"These are all shadow versions of the same question," Ms. Palmano continued. She pointed at the board. "Who was Themistocles of Athens?"

"Somebody important," Holt offered helpfully. A few Annas chuckled, while most of the

Sids scowled.

"You don't know," Ms. Palmano said levelly. "Which is at the core of what I want you all to understand. Here it is: *nothing* you accomplish in life will matter."

The silence that greeted this pronouncement was a testament to the changes she had wrought in them over the weeks since school began. Absent were any cries of indignation, any shrugs of apathy. The Annas sat up straighter, their curiosity piqued, while the Sids processed the words carefully, rolling the idea over in their minds. Conor noticed that Mr. Sykes was no longer tapping, and wondered how long ago he had stopped.

"Who was Themistocles?" she continued. "He was a politician and general in Athens, around the time of the Persian invasions of Greece. Before the wars, he spent most of his political capital convincing the Athenians to expand their military power, and *during* those wars, he used that power at Marathon, Artemisium, and Salamis to turn back forces that outnumbered them three to one. In short, for people whose cultural heritage traces back to the ancient Greeks—like us—Themistocles basically saved the world. Without him, maybe the Persians win, democracy gets dismissed as a failed experiment, Rome has nothing to copy and never rises to prominence, and the whole path of history looks different. And none of you know his name."

"No fair," Jennifer said immediately. Her voice was calm, matter-of-fact, but she spoke firmly, without hesitation. "We're in seventh grade. We're not *supposed* to know stuff like that yet—we're here to learn it."

Ms. Palmano shook her head. "A good argument, except for one thing—I didn't know who he was, either. I spent half an hour on the internet last night, looking for a good example to use in class today. And it *took* half an hour, too. It's just not common knowledge. Neither is the name of the first guy to *actually* circumnavigate the globe, the way Columbus hoped to. Or the guy who invented the X-ray. Or the first man to go up in space. Ask an average adult the questions I just asked you, and they'll be lucky if they know the answers to a quarter of them. At best, we recognize these people because we see their names pop up on quiz shows, or because we remember them from biography book reports in grade school. At worst, we never hear about them at all.

"That doesn't mean they don't *matter*, though," William objected. "Just because you

don't get recognized, it doesn't mean you weren't important. The guy that invented the X-ray made a *huge* difference."

"Also true, until you take into account the size of the known universe. Which is a bit like shooting a mosquito with a cannon, I know, but even if we stick to just the Earth, mass extinctions and dark ages and Nicola Tesla are proof that worthy contributions don't necessarily stick. But there's a simpler, more direct way to prove my point."

She looked up and down the ranks of desks, at Sid on one side and Anna on the other. "Any of you harbor dreams of being a doctor?" she asked. "Don't worry, I promise not to crush them. At least, not on purpose."

Two students cautiously raised their hands. Meredith, and a boy whose name Conor couldn't remember. Ms. Palmano called on the boy.

"Mr. Brewer. I'd like you to picture a medical situation in which you're saving someone's life. Let's say you work in a hospital—a big, fully staffed one." She waited for a few seconds, then asked, "Got one ready for us?"

The boy nodded.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"Car accident. Somebody got crushed."

"You're the surgeon?"

The boy nodded again.

"Okay. What would've happened if you were sick that day, and hadn't come in to work?"

The boy frowned for a moment, then shrugged. "Somebody else at the hospital would've done the surgery."

"And if you'd never worked there at all? If you never became a doctor? Would that person have just died, for lack of medical care?"

"Probably not."

Ms. Palmano spoke to the class as a whole. "You see where I'm going with this? Part of the reason Sid's systems work is that they aren't dependent on any one person. Redundancy—if Mr. Brewer decides not to be a doctor, somebody else will take his place. If the president gets shot, the vice president is there as a backup. Sure, if *nobody* decides to go to med

school, we'll run into trouble, but that doesn't really happen in a society like ours, where upwards of two hundred million people can move around until they find a place where their skills are appreciated. Instead, what we've got is a situation where doctors are needed, but if one doesn't show up, there's almost always another one."

"Not in places like Africa," said Susanne.

"True. Which is why a lot of doctors go there—to *make a difference*. Because here, they don't—not really. But barely a third of our population ever makes it out of the country at all, vacations included, so you'll forgive me if I assume most of you aren't heading to Africa."

Ashleigh raised his hand. "Even if it wouldn't matter if we *weren't* there, that's not the same thing as saying it doesn't count when we *are*."

"Also true. But it means you're reduced to being a single drop in the ocean, a single cog in the machine, and that's my point. You're a *part of society*, instead of an independent entity, with your personal contributions effectively rendered insignificant by the fact that everyone else is helping, too."

"But that's a *good* thing."

"Is it? You tell me. Life is better now than it's ever been, at least for people in the nicer parts of the world. For the first time in three billion years of evolution, we don't have to spend every last scrap of time and energy on finding our next meal, dodging the next predator. But individual people also matter less than they ever did. Troy was a city of about seven thousand people, so even if every Trojan took ten Greeks with them when they died, that means that more people died *yesterday* than in the *entire* Trojan war. But nobody's writing epic poems about the people who died yesterday, because they're a drop in the bucket. Three thousand years ago, eighty thousand deaths was a big deal. But fifty-six *million* people died last year. And not one of them had the kind of long-lasting cultural impact that Hector or Achilles did. How could they?"

"But people still *matter*," Jennifer argued. "To each other, and overall, too—what about technology? That only happens with a lot of people making little contributions."

"Sure. It's like the old paradox about grains of sand—how can a bag of sand falling make a loud noise, if a single grain doesn't make any? The solution is that the single grain *does* make noise. But it took us a while to figure that out, because the noise it makes is vanish-

ingly small. Look at it this way—how many of you have been told by your parents that you can be anything you want to be?”

Slowly, reluctantly, the hands went up around the room.

“Logically speaking, that’s the same thing as saying ‘we don’t care,’ isn’t it?”

A harsh silence followed.

“So what’s the *point*, then?” This from William, who was looking even more upset than the rest of his fellow Sids. “Why are you telling us this? Is it just to ruin our day?”

There was a grumble of agreement from around the room. Ms. Palmano spread her hands apologetically. “Would you rather I didn’t? Pretend that every little worksheet is super duper important, let you stumble around for a few years or decades, wasting time, until you came up against the idea all alone, without context or support? None of this stuff is meant to be brilliant or original. Everybody gets nihilism at some point in their lives. I’m just trying to help you get it out of the way early, so you can start making decisions *rationally*—or, at the very least, deliberately.”

“What kinds of decisions?” asked Rami.

“Any of them. All of them. Doesn’t matter what you’re trying to do, having your eyes open can’t hurt.”

“But if none of it matters, why should we do anything at all?”

“Because you WANT to!” Ms. Palmano roared, causing all of them to jump in their seats. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you since day one. Do what you want, because we can’t really stop you. Do what you want, because we don’t really need you. Do what you want, because ten thousand years from now, nobody’s going to remember, but the difference between eighty years of happiness and eighty years of misery will mean a heck of a lot to *you*. Take control of your life, and *spend* it on something, because you *can’t take it with you when you die*.”

Conor felt a small knot form in his stomach, an unpleasant twist that was half anxiety, half shame. He raised his hand. “What happens if you can’t think of anything?” he asked.

“Then you fail seventh grade English, because that’s your next assignment.” Turning back to the board, she wrote the words PROJECT AGENCY and began erasing their two lists, speaking over her shoulder. “*Agency* is what we call it when an individual has power,

control—the ability to make choices and have those choices affect the world around you. Your first job is to figure out how much agency you already have—what can you realistically accomplish, with the resources at your disposal? Once you know, your second job is to get out there and *do* it. Since this isn't exactly an English assignment, you're going to be graded on the quality of your writing as you document this process. I'll want your written brainstorming notes, your written plans and agendas, and—eventually—your written reflections on how it went and what you'll do differently the next time."

Several students began to talk all at once, and she held up a hand. "You have questions. I have answers, but I'm not giving them to you right now. Go ahead and get started—if you're confused, that just means you're that much more likely to head off in a unique or interesting direction. You already have your grade, so don't stress over it. Follow your instincts."

With that, she turned and strode over to the corner, settling herself in the chair behind her desk. There was a slow crescendo of noise as people began pulling out paper and pencils, followed by a gathering quiet as heads turned downward. Conor watched as Ashleigh began writing, his hand moving with an easy confidence, and he scowled. Ms. Palmano's voice echoed in his head—a question, a challenge, a taunt, an exhortation. *What can you realistically accomplish, with the resources at your disposal?*

Picking up his own pencil, he tapped it nervously against his chin.

What would Batman do?

• • •

"You lied."

"Did not. I didn't say I'd *done* it, I said I *can* do it."

"But you can't."

"Can, too."

"I was *there*, Ashleigh. I was there when you chickened out, and I was there when you took it out on Guyler Stevens or *whatever* it was that made you pound his fucking face in. And you sure as hell haven't gone back and done it since. You *lied*, and you put it on the

board where everybody could see it. Where fucking Mr. Sykes could see it. *Why?*”

It had been almost two years since their last fistfight, but some perverse corner of Conor’s brain was replaying the memory over and over, so that it took conscious effort to keep his fingers from curling into fists. Two feet away, Ashleigh slammed the door to his locker and straightened, glaring. Other students flowed around them as they stood there, a rock in the middle of a roaring river. “Because I didn’t realize you’d be such a pussy about it, obviously,” Ashleigh bit out. “What’s the big deal? Who cares?”

“*Me*,” Conor hissed, feeling the anger thrumming just beneath the surface. “I care. I worked all summer for that fucking jump. You can’t just—just give it away like that. It’s—”

“It’s what? It’s *yours*? In case you forgot, I’m the one who found it, remember? You wouldn’t even have noticed it if it wasn’t for me.”

“And you never would’ve gotten up there if it wasn’t for *me*.”

“So what the fuck are we fighting about, then? It’s not like it’s going away just because I told a couple of people about it.”

“They could take away the pipe.”

Ashleigh’s look of withering contempt was more eloquent than any response could have been, stifling Conor’s anger and putting him briefly on the defensive. “Or put up a fence,” he continued. “Or a camera. Whatever. The point is, it was *our* thing. A secret.”

“You never said you wanted it to be a secret.”

“The whole plan was a secret!”

“The *plan*, not the jump. What were you going to do, just jump it and then never mention it to anybody?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. The point is, we’re supposed to decide together.”

“Fuck that. You’re my friend, not my mom. Don’t be trying to set up rules and shit.”

“Am I your friend?” Ashleigh’s eyes narrowed, but Conor stood his ground. “*Am I*? Because last time I checked, friends don’t leave each other in the fucking dark for two weeks straight.”

“I was on lockdown, in case you didn’t notice.”

“Don’t fucking even. I swear to God, if you try to act like I’m making this up, or I’m overreacting—”

Conor's words caught in his throat, and he squeezed his eyes shut, every muscle in his body tensing. He took a deep, steady breath, and continued. "*Answers*. You owe them to me—you owe them to me two goddamn *weeks* ago. I wasn't going to push it, today, but then you pull *this* bullshit, and—I'm done. I'm so fucking done. You've got, like, ten seconds."

He opened his eyes to see the other boy standing perfectly still, his expression tight, his own eyes dark and hooded as they bored into Conor's. Around them, the hallway was emptying, with only a few stragglers still rummaging frantically through their lockers. Conor felt the passage of seconds as if each one were a band of metal tightening around his chest. When he could stand the pressure no longer, he opened his mouth, only to stop when Ashleigh opened his.

"I was *mad*, okay?" the other boy said. "All that time up there, and I thought I *had* it, but then I start running and I just fucking choke, and there you go, like it's nothing, you come up *laughing* and I'm stuck standing there holding my dick. I was mad, and I was high, and I went to try again but I *couldn't*, I was shaking, so I climbed back down and there was fucking Guyler, and he—I—I just snapped. And no, I *didn't* want to talk to you about it, because you were the fucking *problem*, you and your Batman and your stupid training schedule—"

He broke off, jaw clenched, and looked away. "Whatever. It's fine. I just needed some time to cool off, okay? It was—it's *embarrassing*, the way I—"

He faltered again, and Conor frowned, feeling his own anger draining away. The way he what? The way he'd gone ballistic on Guyler? The way he'd chickened out on the jump?

"Look," Ashleigh said, starting for a third time. "I just—I wanted to sort this one out on my own, okay? I wanted you *not* to help."

"But why? We're friends, aren't we?"

"Because you were *better* than me, that's why!" Ashleigh shouted, suddenly irate. The single head still lingering in their vicinity turned their way, and Ashleigh burned it with a glare. "You were better, and it *pissed* me off, and I didn't *want* it to piss me off but it *did*, and the last thing I wanted was to see your—"

The tardy bell rang, and both of them winced, but neither made a move to leave. Conor was awash with emotions—anger, confusion, concern, shameful pride—each fighting for primacy as he studied his friend's face. Ashleigh, on the other hand, was suddenly, glacially

calm, the redness draining from his cheeks. "Your face," he finished quietly. "I didn't want you floating around while my head was messed up and I was *this* far away from saying some stupid friendship-ending thing. Maybe it was shitty to shut you out, but I'm *here*, right? We're both here. It's over. So—ball's in your court, I guess, because if you're looking for me to say sorry, it's not going to happen." He crossed his arms, looking guardedly at Conor, waiting for a response.

Conor didn't have one. Out of all the answers he'd imagined his friend giving, nothing had come close to this. Jealousy? Insecurity? Shame?

From *Ashleigh*?

He was suddenly reminded of that morning—of *the* morning, when he'd turned down the joint and stalked to the edge of the rooftop, only to look back and see the other boy's face, open and vulnerable like it had never been before. He'd turned around, and that had been the first domino, everything else emerging from that one moment when Ashleigh had been human and Conor had been allowed to see.

Now the mask was slipping again, and Conor realized that this was what Ashleigh was truly asking—that Conor play along, cover up, keep the secret of his mortality from everyone he'd fooled. For the second time in their four years of friendship, Ashleigh was showing Conor the weakness he hid from everyone else.

And he needs me to ignore it.

"How did you and Guyler end up fighting?" he asked finally, just to fill the silence.

"He dissed my mom and called you a faggot," Ashleigh answered quietly. "Got exactly what he asked for."

"You went too far."

Ashleigh shrugged. "Screw him." They were over a minute late, now. It was time to get moving—time to make a call.

Conor sighed. "Want to walk home this afternoon?"

Did Ashleigh hesitate, just a little bit?

"Sure."

• • •

Conor made it into Spanish with nothing more than a warning, but for the rest of the day, those missed minutes continued to plague him, as if it were impossible to catch up. He had to stay late to finish a quiz in Science, got caught in a line in the bathroom after Social Studies, and ended up being dead last in the lunch line when he knocked all of his books onto the floor just before the bell at the end of math.

He was in no mood to talk by the time he'd gotten his food, so he walked past Eddie, Nolan, and Nicholas and joined Holt over at the silent lunch tables. The high school boy—Oliver?—was there, too, head down as usual, turning the pages of his book with one hand while he ate with the other.

There was just enough time for Conor to finish his burger and fries, and then it was off to Activity. For once, he was actually looking forward to it—not only would it be his first P.E. class with Ashleigh since fifth grade, but they were also slated to start soccer.

He and Ashleigh had met on the soccer field, in the spring season of third grade. They had been on opposing teams—Conor as a left fullback, Ashleigh as a right forward. They'd locked shins half a dozen times in every game they'd played, culminating in a double trip that ended with each of them slinging grass and mud at the other while the ball spun uselessly into the parking lot.

That was the same year that Ashleigh's father had passed away, leading Ashleigh's mother to sell their house and move into Conor's neighborhood, switching to Conor's team in the process. It wasn't long before the two of them were carpooling together, which quickly led to playdates, sleepovers, and a dramatic improvement in their ability to spot Volkswagen beetles.

Conor had quietly interpreted the start of the soccer unit as a positive omen, but no sooner had he gotten to the locker room than there was a rumble of thunder overhead, and they were told that they would be playing dodgeball in the gym, instead. There was the usual mix of cheers and groans, and Conor headed over to the pullout bleachers to wait.

Dodgeball could be fun, he reasoned. He hadn't exactly improved his reflexes over the summer, but he imagined his newfound agility would come in handy when it came to retrieving balls from the danger zone near the middle of the court. And if he and Ashleigh

ended up on the same team, they'd be able to cooperate a whole lot more than they would have in soccer, with half a field between them.

A minute later, though, as the tardy bell rang and the rest of the class drifted out of the locker room, Ashleigh was nowhere to be seen. Conor craned his neck, searching through the clusters of students—maybe the other boy was avoiding him, after their earlier argument.

No. The coaches arranged them into rows and called the roll, and Ashleigh definitely wasn't there. For a brief moment, Conor considered slipping out to go look for him, but there wasn't much point to it. If he was skipping, he could be almost anywhere, and if he *wasn't* skipping—

Well. If he wasn't skipping, he was with Mr. Sykes.

They began their usual warm-up—jumping jacks, crunches, hamstring stretches. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense that Ashleigh *was* with Mr. Sykes. It would go a long way toward explaining the assistant principal's presence in first period that morning. And what better class to miss for a check-in than Activity?

With a mental shrug, Conor turned his full attention to the class. Sam Marlin, the last member of Ashleigh's fan club, was one of the captains, and so Conor was picked fairly early in the draft. He managed four kills in the first game before one of his opponents caught his throw, and was one of the last survivors in the second. He died at the center line, taking hits from three directions as he rolled balls back to his teammates.

They were just beginning the third round when a sharp, echoing crash brought them all to a standstill, drawing everyone's eyes upward. It was followed almost immediately by a long peal of thunder, and a few kids shrugged and began moving again, trying to restart the game. But the rest continued to look up, their attention focused on a thin trickle of dust that was descending from a corner of the ceiling.

There was a moment of cognitive dissonance in which Conor both knew and refused to know, as the coaches blew their whistles and gathered the students together on the far side of the gym, opposite the column of dust.

No.

After a brief, huddled conversation, one of the coaches headed for the supply closet, thumbing through a set of keys attached to his belt. Stepping in, he dragged aside several

pieces of equipment, clearing a path to the steel ladder bolted to the back wall. Meanwhile, the other coach directed them all into the bleachers before disappearing into his office. Between the rumbles of thunder, they could hear the muffled sound of him speaking quietly into the phone on his desk.

No, no, no.

The dust had stopped falling, and the students around Conor were abuzz with speculation.

“Did an air conditioner explode, or something?”

“— gas pipe —”

“— like a frigging airplane part —”

“— just thunder, you guys —”

“— that ladder go all the way to the roof?”

Conor’s eyes were glued to the supply closet, where the first coach had disappeared upward. With each passing second, he felt himself slipping deeper into a kind of feral panic, as if he could see the next few moments drawing closer while he waited, exposed and defenseless. It had taken him nearly ten minutes to figure out a way down from the gymnasium roof....

It’s fine. They’re not going to find anything. If it was him, he was gone before they even blew the whistle.

But soon the seconds became minutes, and when the coach reappeared, it was only to call for his partner, the pair of them holding another muttered conference before he vanished upward once more. The second coach ducked back into the office to make another call, then hurried after, threatening the students with dismemberment before leaving them completely unsupervised. A few kids darted down from the bleachers and began to goof around on the floor, only to scurry back when the double doors swung open, admitting Mr. Sykes. Behind him came the school nurse, her overlarge first aid kit slung over one shoulder.

Conor’s heart leapt into his throat. There was another interminable wait, this one punctuated by the occasional thrill of terror whenever Mr. Sykes’ gaze happened to pass over him. Finally, the clunk of shoes on steel came echoing out of the closet, and Conor watched with bated breath as the first coach descended into view, swinging softly down to the ground

and then lifting his arms up to spot another, smaller figure.

Ashleigh.

The other boy was moving gingerly, picking his way down the ladder with two hands and just one leg, his right bent up behind him, the ankle wrapped tightly with what looked like the blue and gold of his uniform sweatshirt. As he reached the ground, the nurse rushed forward, producing an icepack and a roll of medical tape from the interior of her kit.

The second coach descended a moment later, and for a long minute, Ashleigh was hidden from view, the three adults clustering around him in a whirlwind of medical efficiency. When they pulled back, it was to reveal him standing defiant and proud, a pair of crutches drawn from the closet tucked under his arms, a pale bandage holding the icepack tightly to his leg. They escorted him out onto the floor, and he tapped his way straight to Mr. Sykes, sparing only a single, triumphant glance into the bleachers where Conor sat.

Then he was gone, and the gym erupted into chaos, the image of Ashleigh allowing himself to be led quietly away crystallizing into legend—an avatar of civil disobedience, self-assurance incarnate. Those who hadn't already heard the story of his entry on Ms. Palmano's board were being told in awed whispers, while the others tore through the gym, their ebullience irrepressible. The coaches had only just begun to regain control when the bell rang, and the students spilled out of the gym like conquerors, the seeds of a hundred rumors scattering in their wake.

Conor followed, detached as always, an island of quiet in the middle of the storm. There had been a whole conversation in that single look, a flood of information incomprehensible to anyone but Conor. Ashleigh's voice bubbled over in his thoughts, giddy in a way it had never been before.

I did it! See? Told you so. It wasn't even that hard, really. And oh, man – flying. That counts as flying, it has to, I was in the air for like two whole seconds. My ankle's fucked and I'm probably suspended, but seriously – worth it. And right in front of everybody, too – they're going to be talking about this one for years!

He tried to silence the voice, turning inward, searching for a name to fit the feeling that had settled over him like a fog. He drifted idly through the halls, heading for seventh period, not angry, not jealous, not bitter or sad. There had been no apology in the glance, but he

hadn't expected one, and it wasn't a problem anyway — there was no sense that Ashleigh had done him a disservice, no feeling of betrayal. He just felt empty, hollow, a bystander in every possible sense of the word.

It wasn't until halfway through art that he realized that was the key. The bag, the gap, the bullies on the bus — even that morning, in Ms. Palmano's class. It was as if everything he did was a shadow of something Ashleigh had already done, or was going to do, or could easily do better if he just felt like it. Conor was a sidekick, a second rater, a supporting character in his own story. Even when he'd outdone the other boy, beaten him by two weeks and a hurt ankle, nobody noticed, nobody knew. Only Ashleigh, and Ashleigh wanted to *win*.

What do you want, Batman? Ashleigh asked.

Conor wasn't sure, but this wasn't it.

That night, when he couldn't find the little leatherbound journal, he went digging through his desk, then his drawers, and then even his closet. Everywhere he looked, he found mementos of his friendship with Ashleigh, always with himself just half a step behind. The trophy from their fifth grade soccer championship, where Conor blocked the crucial shot, and Ashleigh scored the winning goal. The photo from the fourth grade play the pair of them had starred in — Ashleigh as Sherlock, Conor as Watson. The game the other boy had given him for Christmas last year, with the final boss that only Ashleigh had been able to kill.

I don't want to beat him. I just don't want him to always beat me.

Equals. That's all. He wanted to be — to *feel like* — an equal. Not someone you could just dismiss for two weeks whenever you felt like it.

He pulled another box off the shelf in his closet, and two small, soft objects came tumbling down — the masks they'd made for Halloween, Siphon and the Tracer. He studied them for a moment — the curve of the lines, the arrangement of the colors. His was better, for all that that mattered when they were both sitting on a shelf in the dark.

Okay, Ash. You want to show off by jumping around on rooftops?

Fine. I'll play.