

Chapter 7 - Plans

"Only like fifteen hours left."

"I'm trying not to think about it."

"It's gotta be better than last year, at least."

"Maybe. How's Timothy?"

"Hopeless. I keep trying to warn him, but he won't listen. He was organizing his school stuff when I left this morning. Like, he got up early to do it. Like it was Christmas or something. Mom got him color-coded dividers."

"Cute."

"It's sick. They're gonna eat him alive."

"Not with Big Brother around, right?"

"Har har. I've got my hands full keeping *your* ass in one piece."

"Me? When was the last time *you* had to bail *me* out of a fight?"

"A year ago tomorrow."

"Right. Fucking Guyler. But that's *one*, out of—how many times have you been punched in the last year?"

"Not my fault people can't handle a little constructive criticism."

"You told Josh Torrence to brush his teeth so people could tell his farts from his voice."

"And it would've helped."

"Poor Timothy. He's not even going to know *why* so many people hate him on sight."

"Better hated than ignored."

"Depends on who's doing the hating."

"How about you? You ready for tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Does this stuff mess you up the next day?"

"Like after the Halloween party?"

"Yeah."

"I think we'll be okay."

"Hope so. First day back's hard enough as it is."

"You're not excited at all?"

"Are you?"

"A little, maybe. Big year, you know?"

"Seventh grade?"

"Sure. Thirteen, man. We can finally see superhero movies without a chaperone."

"Oh, boy."

"And we got to pick our classes."

"Two of them, anyway."

"And there's...well...."

"What?"

"Y'know. Dating."

"I don't think that's got anything to do with seventh grade. Holt and Ellie went out for like a month last year, didn't they?"

"Yeah, but you didn't. I didn't."

"Why didn't you?"

"Why didn't you?"

"Nobody I wanted to ask."

"Same, I guess. But maybe this year."

"What's different about this year? It's the same bunch of girls we've known since kindergarten. Pretty much, anyway. Like dating your sister or something."

"I guess so. I just—I dunno."

"What?"

"Getting bored with jerking off, is all. Aren't you?"

"Dude. None of the girls in our grade are going to help you out with *that*."

"Phoebe gave Rami a blowjob at the spring dance."

"He's lying."

"She's the one who was talking about it."

"Then they're *both* lying."

"Unless they're not."

"Even if they're not, that's *Phoebe*. Are you really that desperate?"

"Dude, whatever. I could rock it."

"You could rock Phoebe."

"Rocked your mom last night."

"Then why are you thinking about hooking up with *Phoebe*?"

Twenty thousand. Nineteen thousand. Eighteen thousand.

With a scattering of gravel, Conor threw himself over the edge of the roof, catching the lip and dropping into a hang before letting go to slam down onto the breezeway below. Whirling, he ran along the metal surface, wincing at the sound of his footfalls but loath to take the

risk of slowing down. When he reached the end, he ran off the edge without hesitation, this time dropping onto the grass at the corner of the high school math building.

Twelve thousand. Eleven thousand.

The momentum of his roll took him right behind one of the school's giant holly bushes, into the dusty, musty space between its branches and the wall. With a quick scrape of rubber on brick, he launched himself upward, his hand already reaching for the window that he knew was hanging open, eight feet off the ground. Hauling himself through the narrow gap, he grabbed the top of the stall frame and dropped to the tile floor, silently thankful that there were no girls in the bathroom.

Six thousand. Five thousand.

Despite the countdown in his head, he spared a moment to scuff his shoes on the mat before he burst out of the bathroom, anxious to avoid leaving a trail of incriminating footprints. The hallway was empty as he pushed through the door, stretching off to his left, the double doors of the entrance immediately to his right. The voice in his head called out *one thousand* as he hurled himself across, pushing through the doorway opposite and into the boys' bathroom—

The bell rang.

--where he sprinted to the first stall and locked himself in, his heart pounding, his chest heaving. Outside, the hallway began to fill with the sounds of squeaking shoes and locker doors, the babble of conversation swelling until it masked the sound of Conor's coughing. There was a notable rise in volume when the bathroom door swung open, and he hastily pulled off the mask, unzipping his pants as he turned toward the bowl. Still shaking, he spilled several drops onto the seat as he peed, electing to use the last few squares of toilet paper to wipe his face and neck instead of cleaning up the mess.

He counted another thirty seconds as his breathing slowed fractionally, trying to judge the best moment to leave his refuge. He wanted the bathroom to be full, but not so full that people would be waiting for a stall, with nothing to distract them from his flushed face and slight frame. Making the decision based on feel, he pulled open the stall door and wormed his way out, skipping the sink and heading straight for the hallway.

It was packed with high schoolers, twin streams pushing through the double doors in

opposite directions, mixing into chaotic eddies in the center. Conor joined the crush, trailing slightly behind a group of freshmen as they stepped out into the sunlight and headed for the cafeteria. He stuck with them until the last possible second, breaking off as they went inside, pretending to read the student council fliers posted in the vestibule as he waited for another source of cover.

There were plenty of stragglers still throwing their food away from the previous lunch group, and soon enough Conor was drifting along with a clump of his fellow seventh graders, walking back toward the middle school building. A pair of angry-looking teachers brushed past them, striding purposefully toward the high school, and Conor allowed himself a tight little smile. It wasn't until he was back at his locker that he felt the last cord of tension loosen in his shoulders, the hairs on the back of his neck shifting from attention to parade rest. Surreptitiously transferring the mask from his pocket to his bookbag, he shut the locker door and turned to head for the gym.

He hadn't even gone three steps before a hand fell on his shoulder, prompting an explosion of adrenaline in his chest that sent shrapnel tingles into every muscle of his body. Jerking instinctively away, he whirled, barely suppressing a gasp of relief as he registered the face of Nolan Brinkley, looking feverish.

"Did you hear?" Nolan asked, his voice quivering with excitement. "Ashleigh. He came back *again*."

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There were rules to this game, and each time Conor put on the mask, he added another, or two, or three.

It was almost a rule in and of itself, a way to stay sharp and focused, to keep himself from growing cocky or complacent. Some of them were obvious, inevitable, included only as a general reminder—like the cardinal rule, his First Commandment:

Don't get caught.

Others were abstruse, recondite, distilled from chance observations and careless mistakes. These were the ones that Conor disciplined himself to remember, repeating them over and

over. Each was a tool in his toolkit, a tiny trade secret that might one day mean the difference between success and failure:

Never lose track of your shadow.

Roll your feet – don't tiptoe.

Mulch sticks to clothes worse than grass does.

Always carry a watch.

He used them like a scalpel each time he planned a new mission, cutting away the bad ideas until what remained was at least potentially sane.

Stay away from the AC units – anyone can climb them.

Never drop where they can see you.

Always have a backup crowd to hide in.

The sense of safety they created was false, an illusion of control that would shatter under the first stroke of bad luck. All it would take was one grownup in the wrong place at the wrong time, one loose brick or shaky pipe, one teacher who spotted the sweat against the dark blue of his uniform and put two and two together.

Cross buildings – never run along them.

If you're not wearing the mask, don't carry the mask.

Yet so far, it was working. In the two weeks of Ashleigh's second suspension, Conor had run four separate missions, each one in full view of the East Binder students and staff. They had gone off without a hitch, three of them so smoothly that he hadn't even *seen* a teacher during the escape phase. With every new success, he felt his confidence rise, bolstered by the whoops and cheers of his classmates below. It was a game, with each side trying to outthink the other, and he was winning.

Wash your hands as soon as you can.

There was a subtle irony to the way it had all come together. Ashleigh's defiant leap, leaving Conor feeling unaccountably adequate. Conor's encore, which had been aimed at puncturing Ashleigh's reputation, but had ended up reinforcing it instead. The school's response, predicated on the assumption of a pattern that wasn't there, bringing one into being through an act of prophetic self-fulfillment. Even Ms. Palmano, with her infuriating skepticism, her endless stream of taunts and dares. There was no logic to it—every piece of the

puzzle had been disjoint, a series of collisions that had left him pointed in a direction that seemed to be independent of any of them.

There hadn't even been a goal in the beginning. Only Conor, alone on the roof of the library, watching the buses roll in as he lay flat on his belly behind a two foot high ventilation shaft, wrestling with himself.

It was a simple route—down onto the breezeway, up onto the office, down onto another breezeway, and back up onto the cafeteria, where he would disappear from view as he climbed down the pierced brick wall surrounding the dumpsters. Thirty seconds, and that was being pessimistic.

Thirty seconds that would take him along the entire length of the courtyard where the East Binder student body was gathering.

You can't seriously be afraid that they'll catch you.

His own voice, Ashleigh's voice—it was hard to tell which was which, anymore. They blended together, switched sides, each arguing caution and action in turn.

You'll be gone before they even move. Most of them probably won't even see. There would have to be somebody standing right by the dumpsters to even have a chance, and in that case you'll just climb down somewhere else.

But the sheer immensity of what he was intending gave him pause, brought forth every doubt and second-guess his brain could muster up. It was a liminal action, transformative and irrevocable, the casting off of one identity and the assumption of another. Much as he'd always admired the Anna in Ashleigh, he had always played the part of Sid, and this was a stunt no Sid could ever justify. It was like *walking* off the edge of Binder's Gap—though the possibility fascinated him, he couldn't really muster up a *why*.

Except for the fact that he wanted to.

Sort of.

In the end, it was the mask itself that convinced him to give it a shot. Not the promise of anonymity, but the presence of a standard—fictional or not—to which he wanted to hold himself. Batman would do it in a heartbeat, so Conor—the Tracer—would at least try.

That's what he told himself, anyway. Repeatedly and forcefully, as the sun cleared the treetops and the last few buses unloaded their passengers, through half a dozen countdowns

and a fistful of false starts. It was like the days before he'd broken the Gap—he fully intended to do it, was *going* to do it, was already ready and just needed a few more seconds. He even congratulated himself—briefly—on having made the right choice, refusing to back down. His spirits were high all the way up until first bell, and even for a few minutes after, because there was still time, half of the kids were still outside, there were still at least a hundred stragglers, this was his last chance, this was *it*.

The problem, he decided, climbing back down the electrical conduits at the rear of the library, was that absolutely no one cared. Oh, sure, they *would* have cared, if he'd done it, but since no one was expecting it, there was no one to hold him accountable for his failure. No one to recognize it, even, with Ashleigh gone. Who else would criticize him for *not* running across the rooftops in front of a thousand people?

That's why he wrote it on the board.

It was a sobering realization—that he'd misjudged Ashleigh's motives entirely, failed to see the purpose behind the other boy's revelation of their shared secret. Ashleigh hadn't been bragging or showing off—he'd been forcing himself into it, creating an expectation that he'd feel pressure to fulfill.

It might even be my fault.

All of those times they'd trained together, and he had never once insisted, never once told the other boy *this one isn't a choice*. He had tried to be reassuring, supportive—gentle with the one thing they both knew he did better. Right from the start, he'd made it clear that he had no expectations, and he was only just beginning to understand that there were two sides to that coin.

Logically speaking, that's the same thing as saying "we don't care," isn't it?

For the rest of the day, he'd endured the chatter and gossip as the tale of Ashleigh's jump was told and re-told, taking it as penance for his vacillation. That afternoon, he'd followed Timothy right up the stairs and let himself into his friend's room. It hadn't been locked.

"I'm going to cut across the rooftops before first bell. Tomorrow."

He'd tossed Ashleigh the pair of masks, and the grin that had spread across the other boy's face was like manna. They'd sat together for almost two hours, hashing out the details, thinking of potential problems. Conor had returned the next afternoon, awash with success,

to share the hilarious news—that nearly everyone in the school thought the mysterious figure had been *Ashleigh*.

“So that’s why Mr. Sykes called this morning, looking for me,” the other boy said. He nudged his crutches with his one good foot. “I guess they thought I was faking it yesterday.”

“I’m going to run with it,” Conor declared. “It won’t fool the grownups, but it’ll keep the rest of them from wondering if it’s me.”

And it had. The only person who seemed to harbor any suspicions was Holt, his voice unusually quiet in the loud debates that followed Conor’s second mission, his eyes lingering until Conor met them, then shifting uneasily away.

That second mission had been the roughest of the four. In a reckless gamble, they’d decided that he should go for an exact repeat, crossing the rooftops at the same time on the very next day. It was such a terrible idea, they reasoned, that the grownups wouldn’t even have considered the possibility.

They were right, but they’d underestimated how quickly the teachers would make it around to the far side of the cafeteria. Conor had ended up taking a torturous detour across half the buildings in the school, doing his best to throw walls in the paths of his fastest pursuers and circling back on himself until he found a quiet corner he could drop into. Fortunately, more than half of the courtyard had come pouring into the campus along with the grownups, and his was just one flushed, breathless face among many.

It might have stopped there, except that the following Monday he’d disembarked from the bus to find that the entire student body was being funneled straight inside, as if in preparation for a hurricane. It was a week before they let the students gather in the courtyard again, and there were fewer teachers supervising them than usual, the rest of the faculty having been deployed around the edges of the buildings.

“They think *that’s* going to stop you?” Ashleigh had asked, indignant.

And it would have, before. Conor had always been the voice of reason, the pessimistic counterbalance to Ashleigh’s unfounded and limitless confidence. He’d drawn a hard line at half mad, and on more than one occasion had saved both their necks with his cold feet.

But his newfound disregard for the rules was addictive, and he quickly found that his gift for spotting problems was just as useful for troubleshooting crazy plans as it was for torpedo-

ing them. He began to develop the rules, and in the meantime he dove headfirst into planning his next trespass.

He'd given it one extra day, just to lull the staff into a false sense of security, and then he'd gone for his next target—a small, level gap between two outstretched wings of the music building, facing a commons where the upperclassmen went for break. He'd turned in his Social Studies quiz a few minutes early and asked to be dismissed to the bathroom, whereupon he'd grabbed his books from his locker, darted over to the high school side, scaled the patterned brick façade on the back of the building, broken the jump, and run, slinging his bookbag down to the ground and dropping meteorically after it.

With no teachers present, he'd had only students to dodge, most of whom were more interested in heckling than in actual pursuit. He'd made it back to the middle school building just as the dismissal bell rang, taking almost the full five minutes to compose himself in the bathroom—conveniently establishing his alibi at the same time—before continuing on to math. By the time third lunch rolled around, the story had already spread through the school like wildfire, another feather in Ashleigh's apocryphal hat.

Ashleigh, for his part, was doing everything he could to draw attention to himself. Twice he'd limped theatrically away from his driveway as Timothy got on the bus, and he invited Holt, Eddie, Nolan, and Sam over to his house nearly every afternoon, offering ludicrous alibis and non-denial denials whenever the topic turned to Conor's latest exploit. His ankle injury—just a sprain, as it turned out—was healing rapidly, and he frequently “forgot” his crutches when he stood, only to stutter and collapse dramatically as soon as someone noticed. Except for Holt, they seemed to be buying it, awe and admiration clearly visible on their faces. Eddie was particularly enthusiastic about playing along, his usual stream of nonsense littered with retractions and corrections as he repeatedly pretended to *almost* give the game away.

Still, there was only so much they could do to muddy the trail, and the threat of discovery out of costume—as opposed to while he was actively wearing the mask—was rapidly becoming a major risk. Conor's complicity in the first two missions had been covered by the fact that no one kept track before homeroom, and they had judged the between-class excursion acceptable in light of the Social Studies teacher's notorious absentmindedness. But there

simply weren't that many moments during the day when Conor could disappear unnoticed, and they were hesitant to reuse them for fear of creating a detectable pattern.

"You should start skipping classes when nothing happens," Ashleigh suggested. It had been his idea to detour through the girls' bathroom for the fourth mission, and to time the run so that it ended during a high school class exchange. "Maybe get caught making out in the bathroom or something."

"I'd feel bad cheating on your mom, though."

"Eh, don't worry about it. She was just humoring you because we're friends, anyway. She really prefers guys who've hit puberty, you know."

"Dick," Conor shot back, tossing a pillow at his friend's face.

He wasn't quite sure what to make of Ashleigh's overt camaraderie, of the abrupt and total reversal of their previous estrangement. On the surface, their friendship had returned to normal, full of bluster and brag, with the occasional moment of quiet sincerity or sheepish affection. They were chatting online every night, and Conor continued to bring the other boy his homework assignments, collecting them from Timothy on the bus each morning. Already they were making plans for sleepovers once Ashleigh's punishment ended, and playtime was no longer limited to the hours when his mother was working.

Yet in light of the tangle that still lay between them, the lack of awkwardness was itself suspect, the flow of their banter smoothly artificial. Each easy encounter left Conor feeling slightly disheartened, his own laughter just a little more forced. Surely they hadn't recovered *that* quickly, with so much left unsaid?

Still, it was better than the alternative, and so Conor kept his misgivings quiet, basking in the glow of fraternity, occasionally managing to bury his doubts for as long as an afternoon before they edged back to the surface.

This is what you wanted – what you hoped for. What's the matter?

Nothing—and that was the problem. It was the same self-evident exuberance that Ashleigh showed to *everyone*. Gone were the rough edges, the savage honesties that had marked their something special.

To distract himself, Conor poured his effort and attention into his training, filling his spare hours with the search for new challenges and new opportunities. He was stronger

than ever, with even his longer training sessions leaving him only moderately sore the next day. He'd begun taking an indirect route on his morning runs, cutting across fences and creeks as he had on the night of the window. He'd climbed Mr. Baker's little brick wall so often that he'd rubbed a hole in the sole of one shoe, and his target jumps were just a hair away from a fifty percent success rate.

His strength and endurance were serving him well in soccer, where he now spent a quarter of his afternoons crisscrossing the centerline as a midfielder. Though his dribbling and passing were still atrocious, he was holding his own, and Coach Pool had tentatively confirmed him as a second- and third-quarter player for their first game. He'd only had one really embarrassing moment, and that one not completely his fault – when he'd chased a wild ball past the bench where Guyler was sitting during passing practice, he'd felt something catch his ankle and gone face first into a puddle.

His schoolwork, however, was suffering. Ms. Palmano's class was now officially his only B, and math was threatening to tank him entirely. It wasn't just that he split his evenings between jumping and scheming instead of doing homework; he was losing focus during the day as well, his attention increasingly taken up by nebulous ideas for his next mission.

He'd been caught on a new problem, a gap unlike any of the ones he'd broken since the start of his training. Just as with Binder's Gap, the solution had been obvious almost immediately, with the one small drawback being that it was completely and irrefutably insane.

He had first noticed it on his mad escape from the cafeteria after the second mission, when he'd been searching frantically for a way down that didn't lead straight into the arms of a teacher. He had come back to it later that day, studying it from below in spare minutes between classes. It was about twelve feet across, stretching from the squat, garage-like shop classroom to the wall of the high school English building. With a running start, and a boost from the raised lip at the edge of the roof, Conor could cover the distance easily. The catch was that the English building's roof wasn't at the same elevation, but was instead a good three feet *higher*.

He'd thought about trying to make up the difference by just running faster, jumping harder, but a few test runs in his neighborhood playground had put that idea to rest. The distance was simply too great. Instead, he was forced back to his original plan, the one that

had first popped into his head.

Whenever he climbed a wall—whether it was the tiny one in Mr. Baker’s yard or a real one like the one by the bank—there was a moment when he hung just below the edge, with his fingers gripping the top and his feet against the vertical surface, his knees pulled up tight to his chest. Like a rock climber considering his next move, or a monkey with its feet against the trunk of a tree as it dangled from a branch. It was a surprisingly solid position—after working on it for a few sessions, he’d found that he could hang like that for almost a minute before his forearms started to protest.

But that was just hanging. If what he was imagining was correct....

He could jump the twelve feet between the two buildings; he just couldn’t make it *up* the additional yard. If he went for it anyway, got his shoes to a spot three feet below the edge, that would put his hands at exactly the right height to catch the top. Instead of landing *downward*, on the roof of the building, he could land *forward*, on its vertical face, trading his own height for the last bit of wall.

There were a dozen reasons why it was a terrible idea. He could come in too low and bounce off, or slice his hands open slipping off the raised metal edge. He could smash his face, his chest, his knees, break his ankles or his wrists. He could even *make* it, only to have his arms rip out of their sockets, his shoulders overwhelmed by the pull of gravity.

The more he thought about it, though, the more he became convinced that these were merely technical objections, a set of logical hurdles in front of a solution that was fundamentally sound. It *could* work—the question was, could it work for *him*?

That was the question that had brought Conor back to East Binder, four hours after sunset on Sunday evening, his fingers numb as he climbed in the chill night air. He would have preferred to study the problem in daylight, but between soccer, homework, and the increasingly vigilant army of teachers, nights were the safest option. He also found himself strangely reluctant to share his new idea with Ashleigh—a feeling which he deliberately did not examine—and there were fewer questions when he disappeared after bedtime.

He yawned, scrubbing blearily at his eyes as he caught his breath, his legs trembling slightly from the climb and the long jog over. A harsh, yellow light illuminated the gap, its quiet buzz the only sound now that the crickets were going to ground. He stepped forward

to the edge of the shop roof, looking out at the English building, its wall deceptively, tantalizingly close.

He tried to imagine the jump—what it would take, how it would feel. It was difficult. This movement was like nothing he'd ever attempted—even after a whole summer of adventuring, nothing in his toolkit came close. The only relevant thing he could think of was the time he'd overjumped coming down from the roof of the supermarket. He'd been aiming for one of the large, green electrical boxes, and he'd almost missed it entirely, his palms slamming down right at the edge to stop him from tumbling headfirst onto the grass below. The pain in his wrists had kept him out for over a week, and he didn't relish the idea of repeating the experience.

Except this time, he wouldn't be falling, so the impact wouldn't be so extreme—right?

Or rather, he *would* be falling, but it would be more or less incidental to the landing, which would be mostly forward.

Unless he ended up higher or lower than expected.

He grimaced. There were just too many variables, too many questions he had no way of answering. Should he be more concerned about the strength of his fingers, or the placement of his feet? Was he going to have more trouble with gravity, or with the fact that he was basically hurling himself into a wall at top speed? Should he try to lead with his hands, or his feet, or both? Did it matter?

It probably matters.

Turning, he hopped across to the breezeway, walking softly around to the English building. Pulling himself up, he walked out to the landing zone and lowered himself down into a hang, testing the grip.

If I come in too steep, my feet are going to slip out—skid down the wall. But was that better or worse than trying to absorb all of the shock with bent knees?

Conor didn't know.

Okay, then. The hard way, just like Binder's Gap.

He could get part of the way there by approximation—finding smaller, similar gaps and attempting the same sort of technique. But there were only so ways to mock up a given obstacle. At some point, he would have to commit to the real thing, and when he did, it would

become binary—he would succeed, or he would fail, and he *could not* fail.

My arms. They're the weak point.

With Binder's Gap, there had been only one real factor to take into account: impact. He would make the lateral distance or he wouldn't—the question had been whether or not he would drive his knees through his ribcage when he landed. In the months leading up to it, he'd been able to get a sense of just how much shock he'd be dealing with by dropping into mulch beds and sand pits, gradually pushing his way up to twelve feet, strengthening his legs as he went. The actual jump had still been terrifying, but there hadn't been any surprises when he'd finally broken through.

This problem was a whole new level of complex. He would have to cover all of the bases, preparing equally well for any number of possible mistakes. And he was naturally further behind—however extraordinary Binder's Gap might be in scale, he'd spent his whole life using his legs to take impact. Up until a few months ago, it had been *years* since he'd put all of his weight on his arms. Even counting his recent success with climbing Mr. Baker's wall, he had next to no faith in the ability of his fingers and shoulders to survive something like this.

He'd poked around on the internet a little, back when he was first trying to figure out the mechanics of the shock-absorbing roll. He'd read that even a drop of just a foot could potentially double your weight on impact. If he came in at the wrong angle and his feet slipped out, he might end up supporting as much as two or three hundred pounds with nothing but his fingertips.

This was going to take some preparation.

He turned to climb back down, his body switching to autopilot as his thoughts wandered. A part of him was already brainstorming ways to strengthen his arms—weighted topovers and one-armed hangs, maybe?—while another part was reluctantly crossing *monkey jump* off the list of possible targets for his next mission. Everything else on the list was crossed off, too—if he didn't think of something soon, he'd be back to the idea of retracing his previous paths.

Risky. And lame, too.

He drifted through the deserted campus, his eyes on the rooftops, looking for inspiration. After two full circuits, he gave up, defeated. Checking his watch, he saw that it was only

eleven fifteen. Still early.

The Gap?

He hadn't been there since Ashleigh had broken it. It might be worth a visit, just to be sure that the teachers hadn't made any changes to the rooftop in response. Rounding the corner of the gym, he squeezed into the tiny gap behind the equipment shed and began to climb.

He was halfway through the magnolia, picking his way across by feel in the darkness, when his foot dislodged something, knocking it down through the branches and out of the tree.

Conor paused. The whatever-it-was had made an oddly familiar sound as it fell, something both commonplace and out of place, not like a stick or a pinecone at all.

He lowered himself down a couple of branches and peered at the ground. There were no lights near this particular patch of grass, and he couldn't see anything in the shadows below.

He checked his watch again. Still only eleven nineteen. He could drop down and take a look and still have time to climb back up if he wanted to. This being East Binder, there was a good chance he'd just stumbled across somebody's stash, or a contraband weapon or something.

Climbing down through the last few branches, Conor dangled as low to the ground as he could and let go, wincing at the jolt as he hit the mulch a split second earlier than expected.

He *hated* dropping in the dark.

He circled the tree, peering through the darkness, shuffling his feet as he walked. On his fourth pass, his toe brushed against something small and hard, and he bent down to pick it up.

It was a book. Holding it by the cover, he shook it gently, letting the mulch and bark it had collected during its fall drift away. He couldn't make out any of the pages in the gloom, so he stepped out from under the magnolia, back into the cold September starshine.

He frowned.

It was a *small* book, bound in black leather, and he recognized it immediately.

His journal.

For a long moment, Conor just stood there, trying to make sense of it. The little book had

gone missing—two weeks ago? Sometime around Ashleigh's jump, anyway, because he remembered searching for it that night and being unable to find it. After a while, he'd simply stopped looking, and it had dropped to the back of his mind.

I must have never got it back from Ashleigh, he thought. He'd been leaving it in with the other boy's homework, after all. Maybe Ashleigh had found it, hung onto it, and then —

And then what?

And then brought it to school and left it in the *tree*?

He studied the cover. It was hard to tell for sure, but it looked pristine, not weathered at all, and they'd had a thunderstorm only a couple of days earlier. However it had gotten there, it hadn't been waiting long.

A note, maybe?

Flipping it open, Conor squinted down at the first page. Still too dark. He began walking toward the auditorium. There was a light on the far side, and if he could just take a closer look —

He stalled.

The page was covered in red marks, looking almost black in the harsh yellow light. They draped across his own writing like twisted shadows, a mass of corrections and annotations. There were strikethroughs and carets, whole sentences rewritten with punctuation where Conor had left none. In the margins, a narrow, angular script spelled out a series of smug little taunts:

Don't you have to know "your" and "you're" to pass third grade?

Oh, man. "They're" and "we're," too. Maybe the problem is "re"?

Never mind, I figured it out. You can't read, so you can't spell check.

Plus I bet it's hard to write when your hand is permanently wrapped around someone else's dick.

Conor felt his body go cold and still. There was panic, and humiliation, and outrage, but they had arrived too suddenly, had not yet begun to sink in. They swirled on the fringes of his attention, a hurricane of emotion that left the core of him untouched. He thumbed to the next page and skimmed it, then flipped past the following four in quick succession. Every one of them had been defaced, scarcely a line left unscathed. Even his math notes, jotted down when he hadn't been able to find another sheet of paper—half of the problems had

been crossed out and completely reworked, while the other half had been overwritten, mistakes corrected with heavy, dark strokes.

And in the margins, a constant refrain of cruelty, variations on a theme as the same two or three insults clothed themselves in a hundred different words.

Come on, you KNOW how to use an apostrophe. You're just being fucking lazy.

Oh, are we making fun of retards now? Is this like black people saying the N-word?

Man, if THIS boring shit is what you pick to write down, your OWN life must be PATHETIC.

I was going to make fun of you for not knowing what to do with periods, but I guess you're a late bloomer.

Would HAVE, not would of. Moron.

Loser.

Faggot.

Tool.

A kind of aristocratic indignation began to swell inside of him, born of a thousand scoldings—if it's not yours, don't touch it. He felt violated on a fundamental level, a law he'd thought immutable exposed as mere convention, no more binding than a forced apology. It was the same sort of feeling he'd had on the day after the fight—the sense that suddenly no one was playing fair. People stole journals, sure. People read them, spread their secrets, maybe even trashed them. But *this*? This was barbaric. Uncivilized. It crossed the line.

Who?

He knew, of course, though he turned back to the first page for confirmation. There it was, amid the run-ons and the botched contractions, a single misspelled name, crossed out and recopied, the letters formed with obvious care. Who else would have noticed? Who else had reason to come after him in particular, and knew just where to leave the book?

He flipped to the final entry, scribbled down in haste and anger on the day of Ashleigh's jump. Beneath it, the page was filled with red ink, the letters looking like knives next to Conor's sloppy scrawl.

Wowsers. Trouble in paradise, huh? Didn't realize you two had a catfight. Or is this where you scribble down all the stuff you're not brave enough to say out loud?

I've got to say, I'm disappointed. Half this shit isn't even worth writing down. It's just class notes and gossip. Where are all the dirty little secrets? You didn't even give me anything to blackmail you with. I mean, other than the part where you'd suck Ashleigh's dick if he'd just be nice to you again. And the part where you're hiding a bag of pot somewhere (high five, didn't think you had it in you!). And the part where you're the dumbass who's been running around on the roof all week (that one's just a guess, but it fits, don't you think?).

Bit of advice for you, since you don't know how to put two and two together. Your boyfriend's not interested anymore. Get over it, move on, maybe try pussy next time. Also, quit writing in a fucking journal. It's the 21st century...haven't you heard of Google docs?

Your biggest fan,

~Guyler

Still cold, Conor closed the book, sliding it gently into his pocket. He waited for the explosion, for the rage to rise up and take him over, as it had on the night of the window. But instead it seemed to retreat, coiling up inside him like a viper, watchful and wary. If anything, he felt calmer as the seconds ticked by, a frozen clarity emerging from his initial shock.

Everything about the situation was heavy with implied threat. That Guyler had somehow managed to steal the journal without Conor noticing, that he had figured out about the bag and the missions—even the way the message had been delivered was carefully calculated to throw Conor off stride, to impress upon him just how much Guyler had pieced together, and how easily he could fuck everything up.

But he *hadn't* fucked everything up. Just like he hadn't told on Ashleigh, after the fight.

Why?

It wasn't out of a sense of mercy or fair play—that much was certain. And despite his reference to blackmail, it didn't seem like a shakedown. He hadn't made any demands, and he'd only lost leverage by giving Conor the heads-up.

Could it be that there *was* no grand design? That he'd destroyed the journal simply because he could, and left it in the tree for no reason other than to make Conor twitch?

Somewhere in the distance, an owl hooted softly, jerking Conor out of his thoughts and back into reality. Glancing around at the deserted buildings, he moved away from the light

and back into the shadows. Checking his watch, he sighed. Only eleven thirty.

There was no point in trying to guess at Guyler's motives. The other boy was an enigma, a black box. Conor simply didn't know him well enough to come to any reasonable conclusions.

Okay, then. Worst-case scenarios.

He would have to stay off the rooftops for a while, at the very least. That was probably a good idea anyway, given his lack of a solid plan for the next mission. He could spend a few weeks practicing off campus, building up strength for the monkey jump.

And the bag?

He turned to look back at the equipment shed, a squat shadow in the quad on the other side of the breezeway. It had been safe there this long. Guyler had been in the hospital when he'd buried it; there was *zero* chance that the other boy had somehow divined its location from the oblique references Conor had made in the journal. And it wasn't like he had a better hiding place lined up—at least this way, if the grownups found it, they had about a thousand other suspects besides Conor.

Still, he'd sleep easier if he checked on it, maybe dug it down another foot or so. As long as he was on his way home by midnight, he should be fine. Walking over to the shed, he dropped onto his belly and wriggled into the tight space.

Ten minutes later, he crawled back out, his fingers raw and bleeding, his face stricken. It was gone.

• • •

Click.

The pebble bounced off the glass pane, dropping straight down to the driveway and tumbling away into the grass. Shaking the handful still in his palm, Conor chose the smallest and took careful aim.

Click.

It was well past midnight, and Ashleigh's window was a pool of darkness, the navy blue curtains tightly closed. Conor had tried calling, but the other boy's phone was off. Not for

the first time, he wished that Ashleigh's room and Timothy's were switched; one side of their house was only one story, and Timothy's window overlooked the lower part of the roof, making it much easier to knock at night.

Click.

The curtains parted, revealing the vague outline of a face made of shadows, then fell back into place, swaying gently. Ditching the remaining pebbles, Conor turned and walked up the driveway. He reached the front door just as Ashleigh opened it, scrubbing at his eyes with one hand.

"Get inside, quick," the other boy said. He was shivering, standing in the entrance in nothing but a pair of boxers.

Conor complied, squeezing past his friend and into the dark and cluttered living room. Behind him, Ashleigh shut the door, leaning into it as he turned the deadbolt. "It's like one in the morning," he said softly, his voice sounding tired but alert. "This good, or bad?"

"The bag is gone."

Ashleigh stiffened, a black shape barely visible against the dark wood of the furniture, oddly monstrous. "What do you mean, gone?" he asked, after a long and pregnant pause.

"Gone," Conor repeated. "I buried it under the shed after —"

He broke off. This was dangerous ground. "After," he finished firmly. "I was scared they might search the roof once Guyler —"

He stopped again. Ashleigh said nothing, still unmoving in the gloom. "Anyway," he continued, "I put it there first day of school and just kind of — forgot about it. Tonight, I was out there training, and I decided to check on it, and it — well — it wasn't there."

"You were at school? Just now?"

Conor winced. There was the barest hint of betrayal in Ashleigh's tone, so faint that he might have imagined it. *No, no, it's fine, I see how it is.*

Shut up, Ash.

Make me.

"Yeah," he answered. "I was thinking about the next mission, seeing if I could scope something out. I, um. Figured you wouldn't want to risk it, since you're coming back Wednesday."

He waited for Ashleigh to fill the silence, but the other boy said nothing. “Anyways, I got sidetracked before I found anything —”

You mean after, right?

“—came straight here. Figured you’d want to know.”

Ashleigh shrugged, a shifting of shadows. “Guess so. I mean, if it’s gone, it’s not like we can really do anything about it, right?” He tilted his head. “No idea who took it?”

“No. I mean, I didn’t exactly stop to look for clues, but it could’ve been as much as three weeks ago, right? In that amount of time —”

“Conor?”

Conor turned. There in the doorway to the kitchen, backlit by the light from the stove, stood another silhouette, this one smaller and slimmer than Ashleigh.

“What do you want, dwarf?” Ashleigh growled, falling immediately into a sort of habitual hostility.

The shape seemed to bristle, crossing its arms. Timothy’s voice emerged from its head. “I heard you guys talking.”

“None of your business,” Ashleigh said coldly. “Vanish.”

The outline turned toward Conor. “Are you guys sneaking out? Can I come?”

“I said *go away*,” Ashleigh hissed.

Conor shifted uncomfortably, suddenly aware that he’d half-promised Timothy another training session and then ignored him for over a week. “We’re just talking,” he said quickly. “I’ve got to get home soon anyway.”

The younger boy turned back to Ashleigh. “Mom’s supposed to be back at one,” he said. “You guys should —”

“Do I look like I give a shit?” Ashleigh interrupted. “*Beat* it, house elf, or you’re gonna *get* beat.”

Timothy sniffed, uncrossing his arms with deliberate slowness. “Whatever,” he said acridly. He nodded in Conor’s direction. “See you on the bus, I guess.”

With that, he turned and disappeared, his footsteps deftly quiet on the creaking staircase. A long silence followed as Conor thought of half a dozen things to say, discarding each of them in turn.

Eventually, Ashleigh spoke. "There's no rush," he said.

"What?"

"Mom's not coming home. She's been spending nights with her manager. As long as she's back by six, Timothy doesn't know the difference."

There seemed to be no response to that. "Oh," Conor said. "You – um. You want to talk about it?"

"None of my business whose face she wants to suck," Ashleigh said.

That's a no, then. There was another silence, during which Conor was suddenly grateful for the darkness hiding both of them from view. If he had been able to see the other boy's face, he would have been forced to say *something*, and since he had absolutely no idea what, it would have inevitably been inadequate.

After what felt like several hours, Ashleigh saved him again. "So, next mission, then," he said, his voice forcibly bright. "Any ideas?"

"Actually, I kind of decided to hold off for a while," Conor said slowly. "Everybody's pretty on edge after that last one. Thought maybe I'd wait until you'd been back for a bit."

"Oh."

There was another horrible lull, and Conor felt his face beginning to burn. *Remind me again – why did we decide to keep the whole journal thing secret?*

I don't know, okay? Shut up and leave me alone.

There were several perfectly good reasons, which he had brainstormed during the long walk over. Keeping Ashleigh from going into another ballistic rage was one, as was denying Guyler the satisfaction of knowing he'd touched a nerve. Conor also had a vague sense that this was something he should deal with on his own, that to rely on Ashleigh would be a concession of sorts, giving Guyler the upper hand.

But none of those were the *real* reason, which had remained infuriatingly opaque, exerting its pressure on Conor's thoughts from some inaccessible corner of his psyche. In the end, he simply did not want to tell, and that was that – an end to four years of holding absolutely nothing back.

Let's kill Guyler together, okay?

Ashleigh cleared his throat, breaking the silence for a third time. "So, hey – Halloween,"

he said, changing the subject. "Only like five weeks away."

"Yeah," Conor replied, an edge of relief creeping into his tone.

"We still going as heroes?"

"You still want to?"

"Yeah, but I was thinking," Ashleigh said, leaning back against the door. "We don't have a lot of time left to make full costumes."

"My dad might be able to help a little," Conor offered. "He's been working from home, so he's got extra time on his hands."

"I was thinking maybe instead of costumes, we just wear the masks over our uniforms."

Conor blinked. "But that's—"

"—what you've already been doing? Yeah. Exactly."

Even in the darkness of the living room, Conor felt like he could see Ashleigh's grin.

Every year, East Binder held an all-school dance on the Friday closest to Halloween. It was actually two dances, with the middle schoolers in the cafeteria and the high schoolers in the gym, but nobody bothered to try enforcing the boundaries with everyone in costume. They'd crossed over the year before and made off with a bottle of rum that an upperclassman had unwisely hidden under the bleachers.

"Didn't you want to try to win the costume contest?" Conor asked.

"This is better."

He bit his lip, considering. It was a bold move—almost stupid, really. Asking for it. But at the same time....

"I *am* Iron Man," Ashleigh whispered.

Conor laughed. "Okay. Maybe. But it can't just be the two of us. That would *actually* get us caught."

"Way ahead of you. The guys are already all on board, and I think William and Jennifer might do it, too."

"When did you talk to William and Jennifer?"

"Ran into them at the grocery store. I think they're going out—it was just Jennifer's dad with them. Anyway, best part is, Jennifer's older sister heard me asking them, and she was stoked, too. She's a junior. Said she knows a bunch of people who would probably join in."

"A junior?"

"Yeah. She was right there when you did number four, said it was the best thing she'd ever seen."

Conor fell silent again. If it actually worked—if they actually got ten or fifteen people to show up in uniform....

He crossed his arms. "What are you planning?"

It was Ashleigh's turn to laugh. "Dunno, amigo. Isn't that your department?"

So Ashleigh wanted some kind of stunt. Conor frowned. It was an interesting challenge—it would be dark, and there weren't that many places that were visible from both the gym doors *and* the cafeteria entrance. And most of the students would be inside for most of the evening. They'd either have to choose a time when a lot of kids were coming or going, or create some kind of distraction, to lure everyone outside....

Ashleigh laughed again. "Gotcha, don't I?"

In spite of himself, Conor grinned. "Yeah, I guess you do. I'm in."

"Knew it." Straightening, Ashleigh stretched and yawned mightily. "Okay, bedtime. You sleeping over here?"

"No, I've got to get my school stuff together."

"Right. School. That stupid thing you go to all the time."

"Hey, shut up. You're coming back in like two days."

"How long you think I'll last this time?"

"Not as long as I lasted with your mom last night."

Ashleigh punched him on the arm, then turned the deadbolt and pulled the door open, the skin of his shoulders faintly spectral in the moonlight. Conor turned to step through, then paused, an old thought rising out of the depths of his memory.

"Hey," he said. "We're not worried about whoever put the bag up there in the first place, are we?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, everybody knows you've been up there now, right? Somebody goes and checks, they're going to think of you, first."

Ashleigh frowned. "Dunno. Hadn't really thought about it. Not likely, is it? I mean,

that bag was up there for three months and it never even moved. Maybe the guy who left it there forgot about it?"

"That's like, *hundreds* of dollars of weed."

"Still. Far as anybody knows, I was up there for thirty seconds, right?"

"They've got to figure you went up there more than once."

"We're talking about potheads, here. Something tells me they're not going to be doing much figuring."

Not just potheads, Conor thought. A bag like that had to belong to someone making some serious deals. Someone with brains. Someone like Devon.

He wanted to press the issue, but Ashleigh was yawning again, and it was contagious. Conor's jaw was still cracking open when the other boy put a hand on his shoulder and guided him out the door. "Relax, dude. You worry too much. Anybody goes up there looking for it, they're just going to figure it fell in and got shredded. Or that some repair guy hit the jackpot. Nobody's coming looking for a couple of seventh graders."

And just like that, they were done. Ashleigh held up a fist, Conor bumped it, and the door shut between them. Feeling somewhat deflated, Conor made his way down the driveway and out into the moonlit street, shaking out his limbs in preparation for the jog back home. It was just after one o'clock—if he took it slowly, didn't wake his body up too much, he could be in bed before one thirty. Five hours of sleep, and then he'd be back outside, waiting for the bus at the start of another five days of drudgery.

Hey – no complaints. Nobody's making you do any of this shit.

With a sigh, Conor turned toward home and began to run.

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"Irfan picks up two shirts for twenty-five dollars each, and a pair of jeans at forty dollars marked down by thirty percent. Question one: how much do the jeans cost, after the mark-down?"

Conor dropped his books and sank wearily into his chair. Around him, the room was aflutter with activity, half of his classmates digging for pencils and paper while the other half

shuffled in from the hallway, laughing and chatting.

“Question two: what would his final total be if sales tax is seven percent? You can use your calculators for this one, but remember to show your work.”

At the front of the room, Mrs. Atkins was reading the warm-up problems off of the whiteboard, bulling through the pre-class chaos with her usual forceful monotone. The noise of conversation gradually tapered off as people began to take notes, the last few stragglers hurrying toward their seats.

“Question three: if he has an additional fifty percent off coupon for one item, which item should he apply it to? How much will he save?”

Beside Conor, Holt was already bent over his paper, his hand a blur as he raced through the first question, calculations streaming from the tip of his pencil faster than Conor could read them. The other two boys at their table were staring up at the board, their eyes glassy as they followed along.

“And last, question four: how big of a discount would Irfan get if the store offers an additional ten percent off everything? Does it matter whether the ten percent discount or the fifty percent coupon gets applied first?”

That’s six questions, Conor grumbled inwardly, looking up at the board. It was a rolling sea of numbers, each of which made some amount of sense on its own, but none of which seemed to have anything to do with any of the others. Pulling out his own materials, he tried to concentrate.

It had been a terrible morning. He had barely slept, tossing and turning in an apprehensive fugue, only dragging himself out of bed after his alarm went off for the third time. He’d been a zombie in his first four classes, nodding off repeatedly and getting nothing done. Even Ms. Palmano had lost patience with him, sending him out into the hallway to sit until he felt ready for class. He hadn’t ever gone back in.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Holt had filled half a page and showed no signs of slowing down. Looking down at his own paper, he wrote 25, 25, 40, and then moved his pencil back up to the top to erase the 85 he’d written and circled out of habit.

How much do the jeans cost, after the markdown?

Mrs. Atkins had shown them a multi-step process that she swore would lead them to the

right answer, though it had yet to work for Conor. He started with 100% and subtracted 30%, leaving him with 70%. The next step was to multiply 70% with the original forty dollars, and it was here that Conor fell apart. He knew there was some trick with percentages about moving the decimal point two spaces, but neither \$28800 nor \$2.88 sounded quite right.

Thirty percent is a little less than a third, and a third of forty is...fifteen?

So fourteen, then. The jeans would cost fourteen dollars.

He moved on to part two, his brain rebelling as he tried to force it to buckle down. Seven dollars on top of each item made each shirt cost thirty-two, and the jeans cost twenty-one. So the grand total should be eighty-five dollars.

Beside him, Holt was nearly finished with the fourth problem. Conor glanced up at the earlier boy's answers and was heartened to see \$83.46 as his answer for part two. It was close enough that he didn't bother to change his own – better by far to live with a near miss than to risk being called upon to explain a correct result he didn't understand.

"Two more minutes, everyone. Finish up."

Dammit.

All right, fine. 50% off the jeans. That conflicted with his earlier answer putting their price at fourteen dollars, but it made more sense than picking one shirt when they both cost the same amount. 50% of forty dollars meant twenty bucks saved. Done; last question.

He fully intended to look up at the board, but somehow his eyes never made it. They caught halfway as if snared in a trap, held fast by the sight of Guyler Stevens watching him from the table at the front of the room.

The other boy was finished, his hands empty, his everpresent scowl somewhat softened by boredom. There was a clinical disinterest in his scrutiny, as if Conor were an object, or an insect, something incapable of looking back in any meaningful way. He gave no sign that he'd registered Conor mirroring his gaze, continuing to stare without heat, without malice, without any discernable sense of purpose.

"One minute."

Swearing under his breath, Conor broke away long enough to reread the last question and cobble together an answer. He finished scribbling just as Mrs. Atkins called time, catch-

ing only the back of Guyler's head as the other boy spun around in his seat to face the board.

Asshole.

What little energy Conor had had that morning had mostly been spent on trying to come up with some kind of strategy for dealing with the whole journal situation. He hadn't made much progress. Daylight had brought no new insight into the other boy's means or motives, and without a clear sense of either, Conor had no idea what to do. The thought of simply waiting for Guyler to make another move left a bitter taste in his mouth, but realistically, what options did he have?

You could walk right up to him and punch him in his fucking face.

Yeah, because that worked out so well for you.

A public confrontation—even a nonviolent one—was out. The last time Conor had tried that, Guyler had managed to turn it into a kind of trial-by-diatribes, which he'd handily won. Conor had no intention of giving him another chance to grandstand, especially since everyone seemed to have forgotten the first one in the wake of Ashleigh's jump.

And there really *weren't* any opportunities to corner the other boy privately. The only times Conor saw him were at school and at soccer practice. What was he going to do—follow him into the bathroom?

You could follow him home. Fork his yard, kidnap his dog, TP his house.

Shut up, Ashleigh.

You know I'm not really Ashleigh, right? These are YOUR fucked-up ideas, boy scout.

Leave me alone, Ashleigh.

It would be so much easier if he could just snitch. But Guyler had left all of his incriminating evidence right on top of Conor's; there was no way to separate the two.

At the front of the room, Mrs. Atkins had finished reviewing the warmup and was beginning the day's lecture. Doing his best to appear focused, Conor took out a fresh sheet of paper and held his pencil at the ready. Beside him, Holt let loose a quiet snort.

Conor glared, but Holt merely shrugged. "What, you think you're fooling anybody?" he whispered. "Don't bother, take a nap. If you actually give a shit, I'll try explaining it to you at lunch."

Miffed, Conor marshaled his reserves, squaring his shoulders and straightening in his

seat. He spent the next five minutes taking increasingly incoherent notes as he tried to follow their teacher's torturous explanations. Today, there were letters mixed with the numbers, some of which meant numbers, some of which meant other letters, and some of which—Mrs. Atkins claimed—meant anything, which seemed to Conor to be the same as saying they meant nothing at all. Eventually he gave up, trying to ignore Holt's smirk as his gaze drifted back toward Guyler's table at the front of the room.

They were nearly halfway through class when Holt spoke again. "Don't," he murmured, keeping his eyes on the board as he spoke out of the corner of his mouth. Conor threw him a questioning look, and he jerked his head down toward Conor's notes. There, in his own handwriting, scrawled messily across several lines of dubious math, were the words *What do you want?*

"Whatever that means, it's a bad idea," Holt continued, keeping his voice low.

Conor felt his face flush. "It's nothing," he whispered back, fighting the urge to crumple the piece of paper.

"*Con todo respeto, amigo*, that's the same look you get right before you and Ashleigh go off and do something really fucking stupid." Holt glanced away from Mrs. Atkins for the briefest of moments, his eyes flickering toward Conor's, full of concern. "The further you stay away from that guy, the better for everybody—you and him included. Whatever it is, *let it go*."

With that, he fell silent again, staring resolutely up at the front of the room. Conor frowned, looking back down at his paper.

There was no denying the truth in Holt's words. Even the best possible outcomes of a confrontation left Conor worse off than he already was. Given a choice, his best move would be to pretend that Guyler didn't exist.

But would he be given that choice? However Guyler had managed to get his hands on the journal, he'd gone significantly out of his way to place it in Conor's path, not to mention the amount of effort he'd put into defacing it. Conor had a hard time believing that, having gone this far, the other boy had no plans to go further.

He looked up at the front table again. Guyler was motionless, upright and attentive, his shoulders tight around the back of his head. He wasn't taking notes, just watching and lis-

tening as Mrs. Atkins droned on. There was no more hint of pain in his posture, no compensating for sore ribs or scattered bruises.

He's a fucking snake, and he's coming after both of us.

Which made following Holt's advice impossible, really. Conor was through with being passive; he would not sit back and allow Guyler to plan another attack. The best defense was a good offense.

Reaching down below his desk, he felt through his stack of books until he found the little leatherbound journal. Pulling it out, he picked up his pencil and flipped to the last entry. Drawing a line under the other boy's signature, he wrote:

Guyler,

What the fuck do you want?

Conor

He closed the book, feeling more tired than ever. He could feel Holt's attention like a physical force, a mix of curiosity and disapproval pressing down on his shoulder, but he ignored it. For the rest of the period, he floated in a blissful fugue, the world around him muffled, his own thoughts mercifully quiet. When the bell rang, he gathered his belongings and walked straight over to Guyler's table, his steps purposeful but unhurried, his body loose and relaxed. Tapping the other boy on the shoulder, he held up the journal, then set it down on top of Guyler's math book. The pair of them locked eyes briefly, and Conor took a small amount of pleasure in the pinched look of confusion on Guyler's face.

Out in the hallway, Holt looked only slightly better, his expression midway between pity, apprehension, and regret. "Do I even want to know?" he asked, falling into step beside Conor as they both headed for the cafeteria.

Conor merely shrugged. Holt didn't press the point, and soon enough Eddie and Nolan arrived to fill the awkward silence, allowing Conor to drift, unnoticed, to the back of the group. When they exited the lunch line, he curved away, heading for his now-usual seat near the silent lunch tables.

It was simple, really. If Conor took action, Guyler would retaliate; if Conor did nothing,

then Guyler remained firmly in control. By giving back the journal, he at least made it that much more likely that the next few moves of this game would be played out in words, instead of in some other, more dangerous medium.

Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can crush your soul.

Still. It was the best he could do with a bad set of options. And besides, Guyler had already done his worst with the journal. There wasn't much chance he would be able to land a similar blow. At the very least, Conor had bought himself another day to think. If he could do that a couple more times, Ashleigh would be back, at which point the pair of them could deal with the other boy together.

Now you're talking, Ashleigh whispered. *Can we trash his house then?*

Conor looked out across the silent lunch tables to where Guyler was sitting, the journal open in front of him, pen in hand. The memory of flashing red lights danced across his thoughts, and he sucked in a breath.

Something like that, he thought.

Something.

• • •

That night, Conor skipped his regular training, using the extra time to make up lost ground in Science and Social Studies. His mother came home early, and they ate dinner together as a family, watching TV, chatting during the commercials. Afterward, his father sent him out into the yard, where he raked leaves for an hour until it grew too dark to see.

He lingered in the shower, grabbing his mother's hand lotion for the first time in weeks. It didn't take long, vague images of internet girls and Jennifer from English flashing behind his closed eyelids. He paused, unnerved, when Ms. Palmano somehow slipped into the lineup, but after a moment he started again, even faster, and hers was the face he seized on as he finished. Feeling somewhat guilty, he lathered and rinsed an extra time before shutting off the water and patting himself dry.

There was a green dot next to Ashleigh's name when he logged on to his computer, but he stayed invisible, surfing idly, losing himself in a string of related videos. Before long, he

felt his eyelids drooping, and he crawled into bed, looking up at the glow-in-the-dark stars scattered across his ceiling.

For once, there was nothing pressing on his mind, no stream of thought desperate to avoid the death of sleep. He felt relaxed—better still, he felt *justified* in relaxing. He was satisfyingly empty—drained of energy, exhausted of effort, with no stones left to turn. He lived, for a brief moment, in the space between chapters—the quiet, carefree limbo reserved for those who have done all they can.

Nodding off, he dreamed of flying, of fighting, of cities run by monkeys and math tests carved in ice. His mind was like a crossword puzzle, memory and madness juxtaposed through a thousand incidental connections. The contents of his brain were emptied out, divided up, and stitched together in a psychotic slideshow that pulled him headlong through the night, fading back into a quiet calm as the small hours of the morning grew large.

His final dream was a simple one—just a single image, two boys suspended in midair, with rooftops ahead and behind. The air rang with laughter, and it stayed with him as he awoke, an echo of happiness that made music out of his morning routine. Finishing his breakfast, he picked up his bag, gathering his optimism around him like a cocoon. There were walls ahead, and gaps—a hundred unknown obstacles of every shape and size, waiting to trip and trap and bring him down.

And he would pass them all.