

Prologue - Binder's Gap

In the last hour of summer, as the classroom fluorescents flickered to life and the first of the buses coughed its way into the parking lot, Conor Moreton wriggled out from the dark space beneath the equipment shed and began to climb.

He was alone, and that was not part of the plan. Alone, getting onto the shed meant squeezing into the tiny gap where it pressed up against the gym, using the pressure between the two walls and his body to inch his way upward. It was slow going, and he always slipped at the top, scraping his palms and forearms against the rough shingle as he pulled himself past the gutter. Much easier with two—one to boost, and the other to reach back and help the first up.

But Ashleigh was not coming, could not possibly be coming, was at the very least grounded and most likely suspended. Conor knew this, and yet still he'd waited, shivering in the mud beneath the shed, waited as the black turned grey and the teachers trickled in, as hope gave way to outright denial, and even denial wore thin.

Then he'd waited longer.

It was fear, he knew. Not of the climb itself—he'd done it alone before, and if this time felt dicey, with the dew slicking every surface and the school coming alive around him, the

difference was only superficial. Safety before simplicity, simplicity before speed, and silence wherever possible—that was how it worked, and the risk of falling or being caught changed nothing.

No, what held him fast beneath the shed was another kind of fear, one less immediate but more primal, based more on what he *couldn't* predict than on what he could. It was Guyler's blood staining the sidewalk, and the way his pupils had been different sizes as they loaded him onto the stretcher. It was the empty cheerfulness of Ashleigh's voicemail, and his cold silence as Conor texted him, emailed him, threw acorns at his bedroom window. It was the sudden realization that the rules had changed, had maybe never really been there in the first place, and that nothing stood between him and the rest of the world.

Two minutes before I dialed 911, Guyler was completely fine.

And as thoughts like that came and kept coming, it became more and more important that Conor wait for Ashleigh—Ashleigh, who was brave, who was invincible, who would laugh and say, lighten up, man, you act like we've never been in a little trouble before. He was on his way, had to be, just a few more minutes and he'd show up like he always did, unashamedly late, a spring in his step and an easy excuse on his lips. And they'd do the climb together, and everything would be fine, everything would be fine, all Conor had to do was give him a little more time and it would all go back to normal.

In the end, it was the sound of car doors slamming in the front circle that got him moving, a sound that said if he didn't start climbing *right now*, it wouldn't matter whether Ashleigh showed up or not.

With one final heave, he dragged himself past the gutter and out onto the shed roof, being careful to stay hidden behind the low peak in the shingle. Rolling over onto his back, he waited for his breathing to slow, picking dirt and grit out of his scabs as he considered his next move.

Step two involved hopping from the shed roof onto the high, aluminum awning that stretched between the gym and the office, covering the sidewalk below. Following that would take him to the electives building, where he would be able to climb onto the roof of the school itself. Unfortunately, it would also expose him to view not only from the office, but also from the middle school classrooms on the opposite end of the commons. With at

least half an hour left before first bell, Conor didn't expect anyone to be around, but he still listened carefully for the sound of footsteps before rolling back over onto fingers and toes. Hearing nothing, he rose slowly to his feet, eyes alert for any sign of movement in the windows ringing the grassy square.

All clear.

Quickly, he jumped the small gap, wincing as the metal popped and groaned under his feet. Stepping swiftly from brace to brace, he reached the electives building and pulled himself up onto the first story.

Like most of the other rooftops at East Binder Secondary School, this one was covered in a thin layer of gravel, dotted here and there with air conditioning units and surrounded by a raised metal edge exactly four inches wide. Choosing silence over speed, Conor stuck to that edge, arms out for balance as he moved carefully around the corner of the building and over to the magnolia.

It was a gnarled and magnificent tree, far older than the structures around it, growing proudly from the center of the grass that stretched between the electives building and the auditorium beyond. Its branches poured down from the trunk like a jungle waterfall, too high to be reached from the ground but spreading carelessly over the roof where Conor now stood. Stepping in among them, he leaned out over empty space, grabbing hold of an arm-thick limb at the limit of his reach and swinging into the foliage.

Slowly, never moving more than one hand or foot at a time, he picked his way across the tree, rising as he went. Soon, he arrived at a junction—almost a fork in the trunk itself—where one massive branch split away from the rest and reached out to brush, fingerlike, against the auditorium wall.

The first time—months ago, at the beginning of summer—it had taken all of his courage to crawl out to the very edge, where the sagging, overloaded limb let him rest his hands against the bricks, a full twenty feet above the ground. But that was where the prize lay, the key to the puzzle: a sturdy, three-inch metal pipe emerging mysteriously from the otherwise empty patch of wall and stretching all the way to the roof.

"No way," Ashleigh had said, when Conor first suggested it. "Not in a million years." But there was no *other* way, as Ashleigh himself quickly admitted, and so, after a few days, *no*

way became fine – you first.

Taking a deep breath, Conor readied himself, his right hand curled around the pipe, his left still braced against the wall, his body bobbing slowly up and down as the breeze whispered past the shaky branch. For the briefest of moments, his panic returned, and a thousand objections swelled into his mind—that he was too tired, that the roof was too far, the pipe too wet, that there was no one to help him if he fell and he would be late and he would be caught and he should go back because Ashleigh might still come, might be down there waiting right now—but he banished the words with a shake of his head, locked the voices away with a single, simple thought:

The first thing Guyler will tell them is that Ashleigh came down from the roof.

With one sure, swift motion, Conor sprang forward, planting both feet solidly against the wall and pulling himself in to hug the pipe as the branch tore upward past him. A smattering of dead leaves and twigs rustled their way toward the ground, dusting his hair. He waited until all was still, shifting back and forth, testing the grip of his sneakers against the rough red surface as he leaned back, rappel fashion.

And then he climbed.

Hand over hand, step by step, up past the leafy canopy and out into the open field of bricks, using the pipe like a rope, each breath moving in primal rhythm with the scrape of his shoes and the beat of his heart. Once he paused, shaking out the tightness in each arm and wiping the sweat from his brow, but otherwise he moved like a machine, like a clock, every action efficient and precise. Scarcely thirty seconds passed before his fingers found the sudden emptiness that marked the end of the pipe, and then he was there, chest heaving and face flushed, standing at the summit of the school.

Okay, he thought, unclenching his fingers.

Okay.

There was a time—not far past—when he would have been exultant, would have shouted in triumph or laughed out loud. But the rooftop was no longer a goal in and of itself, was simply a means to an end, and so he stepped from the edge without celebration.

He had maybe ten more minutes before he had to start his descent. Already there were whispers of conversation below, a soft, tumbling chorus that came and went as the wind

changed direction, floating up from the front courtyard where the students were gathering. He could hear voices but not words, a constant flow of tone and emotion that recycled itself endlessly just beneath the threshold of understanding. There was happiness there, and excitement; a touch of nervousness and an air of expectation.

Conor ignored them. They belonged to that other world—the one where getting a locker was the best thing since losing training wheels, where his biggest concern had been whether there would be a quiz on the summer reading he'd skipped. They had nothing to do with sirens, or suspensions, or the desperate slap of running feet. They had nothing to do with him.

And yet, as he moved out onto the roof, a small part of him wondered quietly if they knew—if somewhere, buried in that murmuring mass of gossip and chatter, was Guyler's name, and Ashleigh's, and his own.

Ahead of him, the world was a patchwork of grey, the sharp horizon of the rooftop shouldering a sky of grim inchoate stormclouds. There was a scattering of squat, steel structures all around him—air conditioning units, ventilation shafts, and trapdoors set in weatherworn concrete. A pair of long furrows slashed through the gravel like tire tracks in a forest road, twin paths where the stones had been swept aside to reveal the black shingle beneath. He took the left one, avoiding the crunch of stones, his footfalls nearly silent in the gentle breeze. Ten steps in and the whispers behind him disappeared; twenty, and he stood in the exact center of the roof, in a place where the two paths widened, crossed, and blended, forming a clear space large enough for two to sit in.

There he paused, his eyes roving over the speckled surface, searching. At first, he saw nothing, but as the wind picked up, whipping dust and grit around his feet, he spotted movement in the shingle, a slight tumbling of white on black.

It was a twist of thin paper, half an inch long and narrower than a pencil, with a few loose, blackened flakes still poking out of one burnt end. They fell as he lifted it, vanishing without a trace.

A joint, Ashleigh had called it. He'd rolled it right there in front of Conor, pulling the musty flakes from the bag they'd been haunting since June. He'd found instructions on the internet, said he'd stolen the paper and lighter from the gas station by the highway. It wasn't dangerous, he'd said. Not if you did it just once.

Conor had objected, of course. Ashleigh was talking about doing *drugs*, about doing drugs on a *rooftop*, a *school* rooftop—about *stealing* drugs from God knows who and getting high where *anyone* might catch them. What about that time the janitor had come up through the trapdoor? What about climbing back down the pipe? Wasn't this the exact opposite of why they were there, why they'd spent nearly half the summer baking in the sun, just watching and waiting?

He'd stood up to leave, steeling himself for Ashleigh's retort, waiting with each step for his friend to laugh and call out, to say something brilliant and disarming and oh-so-reasonable to talk him into it. All the way back to the pipe he'd felt the other boy's eyes on his back.

But when he reached the edge and turned around, it was to see Ashleigh just sitting there, his mouth slightly open, his hand still extended.

I just thought, the other boy had begun.

And in that moment, he'd looked so fragile, so breakable in a way that Conor had never seen before, and Conor had almost kept going anyway, had almost run from that look that was so startling and alien on his best friend's face. But in the end, he couldn't.

If I hadn't looked back....

Then it would have been me, Conor thought. Would've been me coming down the pipe alone, would've been me and Guyler instead of Ashleigh and Guyler. Or maybe it would have been *nobody* and Guyler. If we'd come down an hour early...maybe he wasn't even there yet.

And if I'd left Ashleigh on the roof, looking like that?

He shredded the tiny roll with both hands, scattering the bits of paper and kicking the gravel around to cover what the wind wouldn't take. Turning, he strode over to the nearest air conditioning unit and tugged at a loose panel until it came away in his hands. Reaching inside, he groped around until his fingers touched plastic, and pulled out the bag.

It was still full, the one pinch Ashleigh had removed the day before having made no noticeable dent in its contents. It looked like coral to Conor, or some strange mix of broccoli and spinach. It was drier than it had been back in June, the clumps flakier and the musty smell much weaker, but otherwise it was unchanged.

Replacing the panel, he slipped the bag into his pocket. It seemed to weigh almost nothing, which was good – the climb down would be hard enough as it was.

His original plan had been simply to destroy it, to upend the bag at the edge of the roof and watch it all disappear. But as he'd huddled in the mud and the darkness under the shed, it had occurred to him that the owner of the bag – whoever he was – was bound to come up and check on it when he heard that teachers had been searching the roof. And if the teachers found nothing, but the bag was still gone....

Yesterday, the thought of potheads blaming Ashleigh for their lost weed might have seemed comical, might even have been something that Conor tried to set up on purpose, as a prank. Yesterday, when he still didn't know what the inside of an ambulance looked like.

No, much as he wanted to destroy it, the bag would have to be kept safe. He would stash it beneath the shed and return it that afternoon, before anyone else had a chance to visit the roof.

And after that, screw this place. I've had enough of it. I don't ever want to see it again.

He took a deep breath, his eyes drawn to the far side of the roof, where the two paths ended abruptly at the edge, like twin rivers pouring over a cliff. Beyond them, there was nothing, only a swirl of slate and gunmetal, slowly turning silver as the sun backlit the clouds. There was only one reason left to linger now, one last loose end to tie up.

The gap.

I could leave it for later. For this afternoon, when I come back with the bag, when I'm not pushing up against a first-day tardy.

But even as he thought it, his feet were moving forward, unconsciously falling back into the left of the two paths – his path – as he walked toward the edge. He had to see, had to know – that it had been real, and not some drug-induced dream. That he really had seen the other side of it, been *on* the other side.

I need to understand –

What?

What, exactly?

But the thought stopped there, too huge, too complex to arrange itself into words. Why he had been so far away, leaving Ashleigh all alone. Why it wasn't his fault. Why Guyler was

in the hospital and why Ashleigh wouldn't pick up his phone and why the world was suddenly different, suddenly terrifying, it all came back to *this* and for some reason he just needed to stand there, needed to look at it one more time.

As he approached the edge, he found himself counting backwards, working his way down from twenty, his pulse quickening with each step. At ten, the horizon broke, the cloudscape shrinking skyward as the other buildings came into view. At five to go he faltered, and at one, he stopped completely, his heart pounding, just inches shy of the edge.

Binder's Gap.

It was a name for nothingness, a label strung spiderlike in the space between two somewheres. Directly in front of him stood the gym, its roof twenty-one feet away and twelve feet further down. In between there was nothing but air—air, and a forty-eight foot drop to the sidewalk below. Conor knew the numbers by heart, had traced them, paced them, measured them over and over again until they presented themselves unbidden in the form of an inescapable conclusion:

It takes just under two seconds for an object to fall forty-eight feet.

And there—faint enough that he might have overlooked it, but clearer and clearer the longer he stared—there it was. A pair of shallow scars, a hint of black shingle, a scattered interruption in the otherwise smooth gravel of the gym roof, a few feet in from the edge and perfectly in line with the path that stretched back from where Conor now stood.

That's where I landed.

For a moment, he couldn't quite process it, the impossible hugeness of it. He took a shuffling step toward the edge, felt pressure against his toes, looked down to find them pressed against the raised metal border. Half-step forward, half-step back.

Consequences.

He took a half step back.

I really did it, he thought.

In a way, it was silly. He had known it was true, had a clear memory of it taking place, of the way his stomach had dropped as he cut through the sky, of the bone-rattling shock when his feet struck the gravel. There were bruises on his palms that had swelled afterwards, and he squeezed his hands to feel them.

Yes, he'd remembered. Much of the previous day was a blur, but not that.

Yet after two months, *two whole months* of thinking about it—practicing, planning, waiting, dreaming—the reality had been too large to sink in. It had refused to be grasped until just this moment, when he could see the evidence from above, where his mind's eye had always hovered as he imagined himself doing it. He had readied a place for the memory in his thoughts, carved a niche for it through endless anticipation, but the actual experience had been of a different shape entirely, and had not fit the way he'd thought it would.

Maybe because I always imagined it being both of us.

And just like that, he was back in it, the sunset warming the back of his neck, the breeze tugging at his jacket, the musty taste in his mouth and the electric tingle of possibility in his legs, his fingertips. They'd both been grinning as they counted down, had laughed as they broke forward, their feet pounding on the rooftop, so loud, and Conor had raced ahead, exhilarated, pushing as hard as he could, he was beating Ashleigh, he was *winning*—

Then the leap, the flight, the landing, and the realization as he rolled to his feet that something was horribly, horribly wrong. He'd turned, and every crunch in the gravel had come from his own motion, there were no other sounds on the rooftop, he was alone, where was Ashleigh, *where was Ashleigh*—the almost heart-stopping terror as everything else fell away and there was nothing but the thought, that Ashleigh hadn't made it, that Ashleigh was down below on the grass.

He'd raced back to the lip, almost thrown himself over it in his panic, and when he seen that the space below was empty he'd almost fainted in relief. Looking back up, he'd called out the other boy's name, thinking that Ashleigh had chickened out and was hiding, but could be bullied into trying again, especially now that Conor knew it was *easy*, as easy as standing on two feet, why had they been so afraid, waited so long?

But there had been no answer, and soon the seconds stretched out and became minutes, and Conor felt the fear rising in his chest again. It took nearly ten minutes to figure out a way down from the gym—why hadn't they thought of that earlier, and planned out a route?—and by the time he finally touched ground and ran around to the magnolia, it was too late. Guyler was falling, Ashleigh was running, and for the next hour it was all a whirlwind of blood and sirens and shouted questions until he'd broken down in tears and his parents took

him home and put him in bed. He'd fallen asleep, must have slept, because he snapped fully awake at five in the morning with one thought crystal clear in his head—that he had to move the bag before the teachers checked the roof.

And now he was here—he had it, mission accomplished. Except that Guyler was still in the hospital, Ashleigh was still in limbo, and Conor was probably facing suspension himself if he couldn't come up with a good explanation for how he was close enough to bandage Guyler's forehead, but not close enough to stop Ashleigh from splitting it open in the first place. Mission accomplished, except that in addition to having no idea what to do *next*, he wasn't even close to understanding the things that had already happened.

He looked out over the gap again, at the fractured footprints that marked his landing spot. Reaching down, he picked up a stone, tossed it gently, underhanded, out into space. It moved in a perfect arc, slicing easily through the wind, vanishing into the gravel on the other side with only the smallest of sounds.

It had all seemed so *important* yesterday. So necessary and monumental, an achievement to top anything else he'd ever done. But what did it matter, really? A few stones *there* when they would have been *here*, a few bruises on his hands, and one bittersweet memory rendered insignificant by what had come after. He spread his fingers in the wind, trying to recapture the thrill he'd felt the day before, the rush of power and potential. I could do it again right now, he thought. I could turn around, take half a dozen steps, and there I'd be.

But it was gone—the feeling—overwhelmed by confusion and anxiety and doubt. Without being able to put it into words, he had the profound impression that these were his last moments of control—that by retrieving the bag, he was closing the door on the safe and sensible world he'd always known, and stepping out onto the edge of a knife.

He picked up another stone, let this one slip from his fingertips and drop straight down. He counted silently in his head—*one, two*—and watched as it bounced off the sidewalk below. There was so little difference between them, those two pieces of gravel—just a little bit of momentum, nothing more.

Turning away, he checked that the bag was still safely tucked away in his pocket and began to kick the gravel around, erasing the paths they'd dug in a summer of pacing. When he reached the pipe, he turned to take one last look around the rooftop. As far as he could tell,

there was no sign that anyone had ever been there.

Best I can do, Ash. You'll have to figure out how to deal with the rest.

He swung his legs over the edge, his thoughts churning. They'd be waiting down below, would want to talk to him. He'd have to be ready. That meant lies—careful ones, since he hadn't been able to coordinate with Ashleigh, and likely wouldn't have a chance to before they caught him. He began spinning them in his head, practicing lines, looking for the explanations that suggested the most while revealing the least.

They would want to know everything. They would dig and dig and dig. His last thought as he dropped over the side was that he hoped they'd be interrogated together, because the questions they would ask were the same ones Conor wanted answered—like what, exactly, had happened during those ten minutes when Guyler and Ashleigh had been alone behind the gym.