

Chapter 2 - Methods

"I never realized you could see our houses from up here."

"Yeah, this is where I go to watch your mom in the shower."

"Funny. Your mom just invites me in."

"No wonder you smell like a girl."

"You think we could get on top of the chapel?"

"What—the steeple?"

"No. I mean, yeah, that would be sweet, but I meant the castley part. Those cracks between the stones—they're big enough to get your fingers into them."

"Maybe. It's still a long climb, though, if we're going straight up the wall. Why?"

"Well, if we were up there, we could probably see every roof at the community college. Maybe there's some cool stuff up top that we never spotted from the ground."

"Like more roof jumps?"

"Maybe. I want to practice someplace smaller, first, and we still haven't found anything good around here. We need a place that's a little less—"

"Insane?"

"It's *not* insane. We both did it at the beach, didn't we?"

"Into sand. And it took, like, six tries before we made it far enough."

"Yeah, but we also didn't have as much height."

"You think reminding me about how big a drop it is will make me feel *better*?"

"That's why I want to *practice*. The sand thing was good, but we've got to get better at rolling on hard stuff."

"I still don't think that rolling thing is going to work."

"Come on. It worked when we jumped off your garage. And it works for paratroopers. They hit the ground a lot harder than we do."

"Not if we're dropping four stories."

"It's *one* story! Not even, really. Twelve feet."

"Onto gravel. At a full sprint. And that's assuming we make it."

"This was *your* idea! You saw it first! What gives?"

"I was *joking*. I didn't think you'd actually drag us *up* here. And it's scary. You've been obsessing over it for months, and it's *still* scary. I don't think more practice is going to make a difference. I think it's time to admit that you're never going to feel more ready than you do right now."

"I *don't* feel ready right now."

"Yeah, that's my point."

The problems began on the second day.

Perhaps it was better to say that they *continued*—but while Tuesday's troubles were certainly no less than Monday's, they were of a far different sort. Few of them had anything to do with Conor, and for the most part he watched, unaffected, as the people around him took their turn at helpless scurrying.

It started with the morning's bus ride, when Eichardt, making his way slowly down the aisle, timed things so that the bus jerked into motion just as he was passing Timothy's seat. He fell deliberately to the side, planting an elbow squarely in the sixth grader's gut. Conor and several other boys leapt immediately to their feet, but the damage was already done—smirking, Eichardt sauntered on toward the back while Timothy doubled up, wheezing, silent tears streaming openly down his face.

It wasn't until they pulled into the parking lot that he was able to uncurl and take a full breath. Conor made sure to stay between the two of them as the bus emptied, but neither boy made a move toward the other. As they passed through the cars of the front circle, each went his separate way—Timothy to the passageway, Eichardt to the flagpole, and Conor to the open courtyard in between.

Of course, they first had to pass through the police cordon, which was in full effect once more. Only this time, in addition to a quick check for drugs and weapons, each student's hands and fingertips were given a thorough examination. A blood-red eagle had been sprayed across the front doors of the school during the night, and the cops were searching for traces of red paint. The janitor was hard at work, scrubbing away at the glass with chemicals, but much of the eagle was still visible. Conor thought it looked like a red Bat symbol; he

found out later that the eagle was the mascot of Central High.

This act of vandalism led to a wave of retaliation against the new Central students. Those who had been particularly unpleasant or aloof the day before found themselves especially favored targets; every time Conor stepped out into the hallways for a class change, he heard a new story of someone being cornered in a bathroom or hurled into a locker door. It didn't help that the newcomers were the only kids in the whole school without uniforms. Each time one of them tried to disappear into a crowd, that crowd solidified, bouncing the unfortunate student back into the arms of his pursuers. By the middle of the day, they were moving around the campus in packs, bristling at anyone who looked their way.

Throughout all of this, classes continued, so that the morning felt oddly fragmented, the long hours of quiet boredom interrupted by intense bursts of gossip and speculation. Conor's homeroom turned out to be the same as his math classroom; Mrs. Atkins introduced him to the rest of the group, most of whom he'd known since kindergarten, and assigned him a seat at a table with Holt. Then they left for English, and on their way were told that a locker in the science wing of the high school had been set on fire.

Conor had been looking forward to Ms. Palmano's class, but it turned out to be far less interesting than the previous day's discussion. When they entered the room, the words KEEP GOING were written in foot-high letters on the board, and those students already seated were bent over their papers, working fervently. Apart from saying bless you when Holt sneezed and lending an eraser to the girl in front of him, Conor said nothing all period.

Then it was off to Spanish, his first elective, and after that Science, Social Studies, and Math, all in a row. They were beginning to get into actual work now, and Conor went up to the teacher at the end of each class with a folder to collect Ashleigh's homework and makeup work. Back out in the halls, he overheard a rumor that Mr. Sykes had already suspended fifteen of the new Central students for their own protection. No, it was fifteen *Bulldogs*—as the East Binder students were suddenly referring to themselves—and the Central kids were all in the nurse's office. No, it wasn't fifteen, it was only three, two Bulldogs and an Eagle, but the police had taken all three of them away in handcuffs.

"*Ándale*," said Holt. "That's right—one of them had a grenade, and the other two were fighting with knives dipped in the poisonous juice of the bullshit berry." He winked, and

Conor laughed. They listened to fewer rumors after that, but there was no denying that at least a few of the stories had a kernel of truth in them. Conor had spotted Mr. Sykes when he passed the office on his way back from the electives building, and the grey-haired AP was talking in low, serious tones with Officer Grimsley, the man who'd taken Conor's statement about Guyler two days before. The grownups didn't see him, and he ducked quickly around a corner, taking a longer route to his next class.

Now it was lunchtime, and in a bid for some privacy, Conor split off from Holt and sat at a table with a group of kids he didn't know. Instantly, it was as though he had built a wall around himself. The other boys at the table ignored him completely, and when one of them spilled his drink next to Conor's tray, he wiped it up without speaking, as if Conor and his food were simply part of the cafeteria furniture.

The privacy was necessary because he'd brought the little leatherbound journal with him. Without access to his phone or his computer, and with only a few minutes to drop off Ashleigh's homework in the afternoons, he had decided to use it to keep in touch. He figured he could write in it during the day and leave it with the other boy's notes, collecting it from Timothy on the morning bus ride, along with Ashleigh's completed assignments.

It had seemed like an excellent plan at breakfast that morning. But now, as he cracked the spine on the book for the second time and again saw the blank page staring up at him, he hesitated, unsure of where to begin. There was at once too much and too little to say—he could fill up pages discussing the gossip of the morning without ever touching on anything that mattered. And he wasn't at all sure he knew *how* to write down the things that did.

Maybe you should start with "Dear Ashleigh."

Even that was not so simple—as he had the night before, he wrote *Dear*, then *Hey*, then *Hi* and finally *What's up?* before settling down to just *Ash*. Then he moved his pencil to the next line, where it hovered, waiting.

Next to him, the boys at his table were arguing about video games, shouting to be heard over the general uproar of the cafeteria. Around them, four hundred other voices contributed to the cacophony, accompanied by the scrape of chairs and the bang of trays, the dull vibration of footsteps and the shrill edicts of the watchful teachers.

Maybe trying to write during lunch was a mistake. The sheer volume of noise made it

almost impossible to think—even from twenty feet away, the sound of Holt singing ostentatiously into an imaginary microphone was completely swallowed up. Putting the pencil down, Conor took a sip of his chocolate milk. There weren't any other good times left in the day for writing—all he had left were Activity, Art, and the bus ride home. He could try during Social Studies tomorrow, instead—

No. It has to be today.

He paused, surprised at the sudden forcefulness of the thought. It didn't *have* to be today. It didn't *have* to be any time at all. He would see Ashleigh later that afternoon, in person—the book was just in case.

In case? In case what?

Slowly, reluctantly, Conor let himself put together the pieces of the pattern that had been bothering him since Sunday. Ashleigh's refusal to talk outside the bus the day before, and his brief but undeniable cold shoulder in Mr. Sykes' office; the way he'd ignored every call and message Conor had sent, and above all, the way he'd run when he saw Conor coming around the corner of the gymnasium—

It's in case he's decided he's just not going to talk to me at all.

A part of him scoffed that he was being paranoid and dramatic, but he could not deny his growing unease. The very idea that Ashleigh might cut him off was alien, almost incomprehensible—and therefore unnerving. Since third grade, they had been partners in everything. There had never been a subject that was taboo between them; each knew the other's ambitions, his convictions, his secret fears and his frightening secrets. For the past three days, Conor had assumed that Ashleigh was just as much in need of a shoulder and an ear as he was himself.

But maybe not. And if not—what then? What would he do—what would it *mean*—if his friend truly didn't want to talk to him?

A sudden hush made him look up again, and a flash of movement caught his eye. Over on the high school side, three boys in the blue-and-gold sweatshirts of the East Binder uniform were standing, looming menacingly over a fourth wearing jeans and a t-shirt. The fourth boy was seated, but he tried now to rise, leaning back dangerously as he did so. Almost dismissively, one of the Bulldogs put a hand on his chest and shoved, sending him

crashing to the floor, his tray and food flying.

The teachers were already on their feet, and in seconds they descended on the scene, hustling the three antagonists away as they helped the fallen boy back up. Conor was surprised to see that none of the other Central students were nearby, or had risen to his defense, but a moment later he understood: the high schooler had the scrawny, underfed look of the marginalized, and had likely been eating lunch alone, without protectors or allies.

Like me, Conor realized, and he threw a sidelong glance at his tablemates, who were watching the aftermath of the confrontation with satisfaction on their faces. While the persecution of the Central students was notable for how systematic and pervasive it was becoming, none of it was far out of the range of everyday East Binder trouble. Things like this happened every week, if not usually all in the same day, and Conor had been unwise to forget the first rule of survival: never be alone. It wasn't something he normally had to think about, since Ashleigh was always, always there.

But he's not here now.

With that, Conor returned to the little leatherbound journal, still lying open on the table. Maybe his friend wanted to be left alone, and maybe he didn't. But either way, Conor wasn't about to give up, not until it was a whole hell of a lot clearer than *maybe*. At the very least, a letter would be a reminder to Ashleigh that they were in this together. A space had opened up between them when they found themselves on opposite sides of the gap, and Conor was determined to throw a line across before either of them became accustomed to it.

Picking up the pencil, he began to write, thinking as little as possible and putting down the words as soon as they came to mind. When he reached the bottom of the first page he stopped, scribbled his name, and read back over it.

Ash,

I hope your doing ok at home. I cant call or message you bcuz I'm grounded bcuz I didn't leave a note when I went to try to meet you yesterday before school. I did try to meet you just like I tryed to call you. We got to talk about Gyler and stuff. I dont know what your mom knows my parents know most of it, there not too mad tho. I'm not mad ether so if you thot I was dont worry. I'm just worreid about you (not to be gay) and I dont know what happend.

School is ok. I found out were your locker is and its pretty close to mine. We have English together and I'm pretty sure your in pe with me to. Tim got hurt on the bus but I guess you already know that by now but it wasnt a big fight. Sorry. Ill try to watch out for him better. PS I cleaned up the mess we left and put it all in a BAG. Let me know if you wont any of it back or Ill just throw it away. Write me back if you wont. Ill come get this in the morning b4 school

Conor

He sighed. It was not at all what he wanted. He had hoped to convey concern, respect, understanding, forgiveness—all of the things his father had given him in their conversation the night before. Most of all, he had wanted to show that things were the *same*—that there was no reason for this to be different than any of the other misadventures they'd survived together. But the right words hadn't come, and in their place was this stumbling, disjointed mishmash of fact and feeling. It made him uneasy, because he couldn't work out why all of this was suddenly so hard.

The bell rang.

Might as well take it to him anyway. It wasn't like doing it over would produce anything better. At the very least, it was an attempt—a gesture, that hopefully Ashleigh would recognize and respond to.

Closing the book, he stood, joining the crush as he threw away his trash and replaced his tray. Two more hours, he thought—just two more hours, and he would be on his way home. Of course, he'd have to share a bus with Eichardt to get there, and once he did, he had little to look forward to except yardwork and homework until he fell asleep and it all started over again. With any luck, he'd see Ashleigh, but with a half-mile walk each way, he'd be lucky to have a scant three minutes to talk to his friend. Not so much two hours as two weeks—then, hopefully, things could begin to become bearable again.

But two hours first.

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There was no circle of onlookers outside of bus 134, and Conor permitted himself a small

sigh of relief. He spotted Timothy and Eichardt in the crowd; they were far apart and seemed to be ignoring each other, but he maneuvered quietly between them anyway.

The students waiting to get on the bus ranged from dwarflike sixth graders—still uncertain and lost-looking after only two days of school—all the way up to the hulking, disinterested seniors. Apart from hallways like those in the electives building, which every grade shared, the bus was the only place at East Binder where middle schoolers regularly rubbed shoulders with high schoolers. It had the feel of a lawless frontier, one fraught with danger for the younger students, but at the same time more consistent and predictable than the hallways, where the teachers might—or might not—be watching. There were no rules on the bus, no protections, only the social structures that the students themselves had developed. Yet those structures were immutable, a kind of jungle order that held without the need for maintenance by a higher authority.

Nowhere was this order more clearly visible than in the way the students sorted themselves out as they passed through the doors and into their seats. Outside, the crowd was fluid and egalitarian, the different cliques and age groups mixing and mingling in the momentary thrill of freedom. Once inside, though, it crystallized, falling into a pattern as rigid and logical as a military formation.

Since many of the high schoolers at East Binder had cars, the only older students were those who were too poor, too reckless, or too antisocial to get to school any other way. They were massively outnumbered by the middle schoolers and the underclassmen, but they were the ones who set the grid—everyone else just fell into place.

This year there were only three seniors, and they claimed the back bench as their own. Immediately in front of them sat the handful of juniors, with the druggies and the dealers on the left side, where they couldn't be seen as well by the driver. Conor supposed that outside of East Binder, those would be the most dangerous—two of them at least were actual gang members, and one of the seniors had quietly dropped a knife out of the window last year when the old assistant principal boarded the bus. But in practical terms, they were nothing to worry about—after years of terrorizing little kids, the novelty had worn off, and they kept almost exclusively to themselves.

Not so with the next tier, the posers and wannabes who clustered on the borders of the

older kids' territory. They were the ones most likely to cause trouble, to pick fights or float from seat to seat in search of easy prey. They tended to work a year down, trying to impress those above by intimidating those below—tenth graders picking on ninth graders, who in turn picked on eighth—the braggarts and the showoffs, stealing money and talking trash, flaunting their disregard for authority as long as that authority took no notice of them. They were the ones Conor worried about, because they lived almost exclusively for attention, feeding off their peers' respect and their victims' terror.

Eichardt was among them, and Conor watched as he carefully chose a seat in the middle of a near-empty section in the back third of the bus. He did it deliberately—all the bullies did. They spread themselves out, leaving open spaces to draw their victims in, waiting for the overflow from the front to provide them with their entertainment. The sixth graders were in particular peril—usually the last to board the bus and the least aware of the danger, and almost never able to force someone else to scoot over and give them room.

Some of them found shelter at the very front of the bus, in the seats closest to the driver where no bully dared operate. That was the loser's haven, the province of those who valued safety and comfort over social status, and they sat three to a seat in awkward silence. The ones more sensitive to the stigma joined the remaining middle schoolers and underclassmen in the center of the bus—the normal kids, who had no beef with anyone and were just looking forward to getting home.

Conor had settled himself in the sixth row, his usual spot—close enough to the front for peace, but not so close as to invite mockery. Ashleigh's spot beside him, against the window, was still empty. He could hear Eichardt behind him, telling filthy jokes, and he listened with half an ear as he peered out the window, looking for Timothy. The younger boy still hadn't boarded, and as Conor counted the remaining seats, he felt a growing sense of urgency. Yesterday's ride had been quiet, the lingering memory of Ashleigh's bizarre behavior serving as a kind of shield for his brother, keeping Eichardt at bay. But the bully's stunt that morning was proof that the effect had worn off. Given the chance, he would make trouble for the younger boy.

And he was likely to have that chance. As the line outside the bus dwindled, more and more of the seats in the safe zone disappeared. Conor held the spot beside him as long as he

could, but eventually had to yield it to another seventh grader, who grumbled about not getting the aisle before sliding sullenly in. By the time Timothy came through the doors and started down the row, there were only a few obvious places left, all of them near the back.

Come on, Timothy, make somebody scoot over.

But the younger boy showed no sign of slowing. Looking back, Conor saw a feral grin on Eichardt's face as he watched his victim's approach. Making a swift decision, Conor stood up, blocking Timothy's progress down the aisle. "Here," he said, gesturing. "Take my seat."

Timothy stopped short, frowning. His eyes flickered down, then back to where Eichardt was waiting, then back up to meet Conor's. "Why?" he asked suspiciously.

Conor dropped his voice to a murmur. "Are you kidding? Just take it, thank me later. I'll sit back there with the sharks."

Timothy's frown deepened. "No," he said flatly.

"What? Why?"

"Move."

"But —"

"Move."

Timothy glared, and now the pair of students waiting in the aisle behind him began to join in, complaining. In a moment, Conor was shouted down, and he sank back into his seat, turning his head to watch as the sixth grader carried on down the aisle.

"I'll sit there, if you want to move so bad," the boy next to him said.

Conor ignored him.

A prickle of foreboding worked its way up his spine as Timothy headed straight for Eichardt. The eighth grader was sitting longways by himself, leaning against the window, his arms draped casually over the seat back. Timothy stopped directly in front of his outstretched feet and turned toward him, unshouldering his bookbag. Conor had to crane his neck to see, since the two other people behind him had kept going, too, and were now blocking the view.

Timothy said nothing, only stared, until Eichardt opened his mouth. Then he spoke too, quickly, so that his words cut across the older boy's.

"What do you —"

“So, you going to move your legs, or not?”

Eichardt’s mouth snapped shut, but he recovered quickly. “Sorry, kid. Afraid this seat’s taken.” He smiled broadly, crocodilian, and crossed his legs, his shoes brushing against Timothy’s knees.

“Bull,” Timothy said, and around him, conversations fell quiet. The two kids in the aisle each took a step backward, distancing themselves from the situation.

“What’d you say, shithead?”

“You heard me. I said bull.” Timothy’s voice was clear and unafraid, and he glanced at the rapt faces around him. “I got an older brother—you think I don’t know how this works? Find out what I want, hold it over my head, make me beg and cry. That how you make yourself look big and bad? Playing keep-away?”

Eichardt’s face darkened with fury. That *was* how it worked, Conor knew, but Timothy was breaking the rules. It was a game of dignity and status, and he had just declared that he didn’t care. It put him outside the hierarchy, which put him *above* the hierarchy, able to look down on it and sneer, just as those within sneered at one another. It was a cheat, but a good one, and Eichardt had already lost; Conor could see it in the faces of the other bullies around him, who were amused by the nerve of the diminutive sixth grader.

Timothy wasn’t done, though. “Anyway,” he continued, disdainful, “I was just asking. There’s a seat here, and there’s three of us waiting to sit down. But if your ass is so fat that you need the whole thing all to yourself—”

Too far. Eichardt surged to his feet, lunging at the younger boy with hands frozen into claws, snarling with rage.

Timothy was ready. At exactly the right moment, when Eichardt’s body left the seat, he swung his bookbag, slamming it into the bully’s face. With so little room to work with, he couldn’t muster enough force to do any real damage, but it completely broke the older boy’s momentum, throwing him off balance and knocking him back the way he’d come—against the window, leaving a space by the aisle.

Quick as an adder, Timothy slid into the seat, dropping his bookbag onto the floor. “Thanks,” he managed to get out, just before the bully lunged again, grabbing him by the throat and sending both of them tumbling out into the aisle.

Conor was helpless, cut off by the two students still standing in the way. But *they* weren't helpless, and neither was the tall black boy who had been sitting in the next row back. In a second, they had the two combatants separated, and suddenly the tables were turned as the black boy pressed Eichardt up against the window by his throat, leaning across the seat back between them.

The whole bus froze. The black boy wasn't wearing a uniform—he was from Central, and an unknown quantity. A couple of the older East Binder boys began to rise, but he stopped them with a glare and a raised finger. "Hold on, now, folks," he said, and his voice was heavy with implied threat. "Let's just all calm the fuck down, shall we?"

He looked to be sixteen at least, thin but tightly muscled, with hair in a short afro and fingers that spread easily across Eichardt's neck and touched the glass behind on either side. Conor's eyes flickered up toward the driver, but the whole fight had taken place under the radar, and even now the standoff wasn't clearly visible in the grownup's mirrors.

The boy released his hold on Eichardt's throat, putting a hand on the eighth grader's chest instead, pressing him back against the window. "It seems to me our little man here just demonstrated that there's plenty of room in your seat, don't you think?" He glanced down at Timothy, who was frozen along with the rest of the bus, still sitting on the floor of the aisle. "Now, I'm kind of new around here—"

He broke off, looking over his shoulder. Turning with him, Conor saw that he had locked eyes with the largest senior in the back, the one who had ditched the knife. A look of understanding passed between them, and the senior lifted a finger dismissively, as if to say *go ahead*. Raising his chin respectfully in acknowledgement, the boy turned back to Eichardt.

"—but where I come from, it's considered *rude* to jump a guy who's just trying to make *friends*, know what I'm saying?"

Eichardt had no response. He sat as though cast from iron, only his eyes moving as they darted wildly from side to side. Conor was struck by how small he looked, stripped of his normal bluster—no different from any other scared little kid.

Timothy, on the other hand, spoke up in a ringing voice. "Hey, *little man*, did I ask for your help?"

The bus grew suddenly airless as the spectators sucked in a collective breath. Slowly, the

black boy's head turned toward the sixth grader on the floor, his face blank and unreadable. As the silence stretched out, Conor found himself marveling at Timothy's uncanny ability to say exactly the wrong thing, to take the least prudent course of action. It must run in the family, he thought vaguely, waiting for the explosion.

It never came. Instead, the black boy burst into a laugh of rich, deep amusement. "Well, well," he said, looking around as though inviting the rest of the passengers to join in on the joke. "It seems our little man don't want a hand. All right, all right—no hand it is." He pulled his own away from Eichardt's chest, raising it in mock surrender, and settled back into his seat. "You two can work this shit out on your own, then. My bad."

All eyes turned to Eichardt, who searched among them, looking for sympathy and support. Finding neither, he cut his losses.

"Fucking psychos," he spat. "You and your retard brother both. It's just a seat—who gives a shit?" But the words came out sounding every bit like the retreat they were, and his face burned red as he turned to stare out the window, muttering balefully under his breath.

Timothy stood and sat down, carefully keeping his distance. The two other students in the aisle quickly found places—nobody making any pretense at refusing to make room—and as the bus shuddered into motion, the tension in the air faded slowly away.

Conor continued to watch, sitting backwards in his seat, trying to decipher Timothy's intentions. If the younger boy had been attempting to get the bully off his back, he had failed spectacularly—by the look on Eichardt's face, if there had been fewer witnesses, Timothy would have soon found himself following Guyler into the hospital. The eighth grader hadn't been beaten, merely outmaneuvered, and if anything, his anger was becoming more personal with each postponement of revenge.

Was that the whole point? To provoke him, enrage him, goad him into some rash and indefensible attack? Conor remembered the words that Timothy had thrown at Eichardt, how they had been perfectly chosen to work their way under his skin, stoking his fury. It was a younger brother's tactic—he had seen Ashleigh and Timothy fight at home, and he knew there was some value to it, as long as you were willing to take the hit. More than once, Timothy's best defense against his brother had been to push him over the edge just before their mother walked into the room.

But a strategy that worked with family was risky when applied to outsiders. Ashleigh loved Timothy, and so even in his blindest furies he always held back to some extent—he had never, for instance, sent Timothy to the emergency room. Eichardt had no such built-in safety, and now Timothy had been the instrument of his humiliation three times running. If his goal was to irritate the older boy, it was time to back off—another confrontation was already inevitable, and there was no sense in adding fuel to the fire.

“Hey—little man. My name’s Devon. What’s yours?”

Conor’s ears perked up. The black boy had swung his knees out into the aisle and was leaning around the seat, talking to Timothy. Timothy ignored him, staring straight ahead, his lips pressed together into a thin line.

“Listen, little man, you want me to stop calling you little man, I’m down, but you’re going to have to give me something else to work with, here.”

There was no arguing with this, and after a moment’s consideration, Timothy relented and gave his name.

“And your brother, the dude with the chip on his shoulder—where’s he?”

“Suspended.”

“Ain’t that the shit. How long?”

Timothy said nothing.

“Come on, now, don’t be all puffed up and grouchy. I’m trying to have a conversation. Was it two weeks?”

No answer.

“I’ll bet it was two weeks. Old man Sykes, he loves that two-week suspension. ‘Discretion, young man! Now get out of my office!’” Devon peered at Timothy, who continued to stare straight ahead. “Oh, I get it. You don’t know Mr. Sykes yet. That’s why you’re not laughing.” Shrugging, he retreated. “Sorry. Just thought I’d share some sympathy with another victim of the system. Me, I only spent twenty-eight weeks in school last year.”

“My brother’s not a victim,” Timothy snapped. “He deserved it.”

“Hey, look—it talks!” Devon grinned. “Big brother pissed you off, huh? Well, just because he deserved it don’t mean he ain’t a victim. Ten other motherfuckers on this bus *deserve* it, but they’re all sitting here, ain’t they? Hell, you probably deserve it yourself, boy

scout." He reached out and flicked at a fold in Timothy's hand-me-down school sweatshirt.

The younger boy bristled. "What do you want?"

"Like I said. Trying to have a conversation."

"Well, get to the point."

"Ain't no point, friend. Small talk. I say shit you don't care about, then you say shit I don't care about. Talk about the weather. Passes the time, know what I'm saying?"

"I don't like small talk."

"All right, all right, fair enough. How about big talk, then? Like, for instance, how this motherfucker here is sitting there planning on how he's going to whoop your ass first chance he gets?"

Eichardt, who had been staring out the window the whole time, stiffened noticeably.

"Yeah, that's right, you — what's your name, kid?"

Reluctantly, Eichardt turned so that Devon could see his face. "Craig," he said sullenly.

"Craig, you gonna tell me I'm lying?"

Eichardt said nothing.

"Hey, Craig, let me ask you something. If I told you not to lay a finger on little man's head, would you do it anyway?" Devon leaned forward as he spoke, his eyes glittering.

Eichardt said nothing.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. But I haven't told you that—have I, Craig? Funny, huh?" He turned back to Timothy. "Want me to tell him that, Tim?"

Timothy glowered.

"Boy, you two don't ever shut up, do you?" There was no answer, and Devon laughed. "Well, shit. Looks like I got nobody to talk to today. Let me know if either of you change your mind. I saw the weather report for the whole week this morning—I could go on for fucking *hours*." Still laughing, he sat back again, his eyes drifting out the window.

The three of them rode in silence as Conor watched, surrounded by the chatter of the other students. Bit by bit, the bus emptied out, and soon it came to a stop at the corner by Timothy's house. Without so much as a glance at Eichardt, the younger boy stood, shouldering his bag and pushing his way down the aisle. Conor watched him go, wrestling with indecision, and then grabbed his own bag and followed him.

They had gone a dozen steps before the sound of the bus faded enough for Timothy to realize he wasn't alone. He whirled, the look on his face equal parts surprise, anger, and determination. Then he recognized Conor, and the determination faded.

"Seriously? *Seriously?* You're following me to my *house*? What the hell is the *matter* with all of you?"

Conor stopped dead, nonplussed. "What?"

"You think I don't see what you're doing? You, and my stupid brother, and even that jerk on the bus—let's all look after the *baby*, he can't take care of himself, we'd better hold his hand or he'll get lost and start crying." The words poured out of him in a furious rush, boiling past clenched teeth. "Did any of you stop to think that if I wanted your goddamn help I'd *ask* for it?"

Suddenly, Timothy's anger made sense—too much sense, actually, because swift on the heels of his accusation came the realization that the younger boy very much had a point. Conor had opened his mouth to object, but he closed it now as Timothy continued.

"Seven classes yesterday, and all I hear is 'Oh, you're Ashleigh's little brother, aren't you? Tell him I said hello.' And then today, everybody's like, 'Dude, did your brother really take down an eighth grader?' Like I'm not even *there*, like I don't count for anything, and it's your fault, you and Ashleigh both. You think I didn't know Eichardt was going to try something yesterday? I *wanted* him to try something. So what if I lost? Even getting the shit kicked out of you is better than getting *rescued*. *Princesses* get rescued. And now you're actually trying to *walk me to my house*?"

"No," Conor interrupted, and Timothy broke off, his chest heaving. "I didn't—I mean, I wasn't." He fumbled at his bag, pulling out the folder with Ashleigh's assignments. "That's not why—I've got Ashleigh's homework. His makeup work. Both."

Timothy glared at him suspiciously. "Why didn't you give it to me on the bus, then?"

"I was going to give it to *him*."

"He's not allowed visitors."

Conor blinked, and then mentally kicked himself. He had been so concerned with getting permission from his own parents that he had never considered the possibility that Ashleigh's mother would have assigned consequences of her own.

"For how long?" he asked, and Timothy shrugged, his expression still dark.

"She didn't say. He's lucky she only knows about the suspension—I didn't tell her he was gone Sunday night. Wish I had, now, but she'd only ground me too if I say anything." Conor gave him a look, and he shrugged again. "She was at work. I told her I was asleep when the cops came by."

"Did he tell you what happened?"

"No. You think he tells me jack squat? I'm the baby, remember?"

Conor winced. "Sorry."

"Yeah, well. Whatever." Timothy shifted, crossing his arms. "What *did* happen?"

"I don't know. I was—we were together, and then we got separated, and it all happened while I was around the corner."

"They were saying the other guy ended up in the emergency room."

"Yeah. He's out now. Should be fine. Ashleigh broke his nose."

"Wonder why."

"Me, too."

They stood there for an awkward moment. Then Timothy gestured to the folder and the book. "Want me to take those?" he asked.

Conor hesitated. "Is your mom home?"

Timothy scoffed. "You think I'm going to let you in?"

"I'll owe you one."

"How about you *don't* owe me one, since every time you try to help you just screw everything up worse." He turned, and began walking. "Come on," he called over his shoulder.

Conor followed him into the house. It was a tired, messy place, with stacks of paper and magazines covering every surface and toys lying here and there where they had been abandoned, some of them years before. "He's upstairs," Timothy said, heading for the kitchen. "Or at least, that's where he stayed all last night. Mom gets home at five, so watch it."

Conor turned, climbing the creaking, warped staircase to the second story. Ashleigh's room was to the right, at the end of the hall, overlooking the driveway where Conor had stood the morning before, throwing acorns. The door was shut, a stripe of light shining at the bottom. Walking softly toward it, he knocked. "Ashleigh?" he called out.

There was no answer.

"Ashleigh, it's me—Conor," he said, and he waited for a slow ten-count before reaching out to try the knob. It was locked.

He knocked again, more firmly this time, and jumped when he heard Timothy's voice behind him.

"Use the paperclip."

The younger boy was standing in the doorway of his own bedroom, holding a glass of water and a plate with two s'mores Pop Tarts. He gestured. "On top of the doorframe. You can use it to pick the lock."

"Are you sure he's in there?"

"Find out." With that, Timothy disappeared into his room and shut the door.

Conor knocked for a third time. "Ashleigh," he said again. "Open up, I brought your homework." He pressed his ear against the wood, listening for movement. There was nothing.

He looked up at the doorframe. If there was a paperclip up there, it was seven feet off the ground; he'd have to climb or get a chair from downstairs to reach it.

He sighed. Either Ashleigh was in the room, in which case he didn't want the door opened, or he wasn't, in which case there was no point. Once again Conor felt a sort of low-key panic, a sense that everything around him was too fast to catch, too slippery to grasp, or just outside his reach. Whatever this was, anger or frustration or embarrassment or guilt, he didn't get it—never, in all the arguments and disagreements of four years of friendship, had he come up against such a solid, blank wall, as though Ashleigh, who always said *exactly* what was on his mind, had completely shut down. It was a good thing that Conor had brought the journal, however flawed and pathetic the letter inside might seem, because there was no question about it now—his friend was shutting him out.

All right, then, he's shutting you out. What are you going to do about it?

But that was the problem—he didn't *know* what to do, and without a clue from Ashleigh, any attempt at fixing things was just as likely to make them worse. The cold shoulder might be genuine, or it might be a cry for help. It might be an act, or a test; it might have no meaning at all beyond Ashleigh just being stubborn and dramatic. There was no way to tell, and

Conor had no experience to fall back on. His friend had never put him in this position before; in the past, he simply would have asked, and Ashleigh would have answered.

Great time to start playing games.

He toyed briefly with the idea of shouting through the door, but with nothing to say, no time to say it, and Timothy able to hear everything in the next room, there wasn't any sense in trying. Setting the folder and the journal down on the rough wood of the hall floor, he turned to leave, feeling small and defeated. At least he's got the letter, Conor told himself.

Assuming he bothered to read it.

• • •

One last drag of the rake, one final fluttering of ochre and amber, and the backyard was clean. Conor leaned on the slim shaft of the rake handle, feeling it flex as he looked out over the ragged, abused lawn. It was six thirty, and the sun had already slipped below the horizon; he had worked for over two and a half hours to get the whole thing done.

He heaved a sigh, and his breath caught in his throat, turning into a cough. After leaving Ashleigh's house, he had run the half-mile back, hoping to make it home within the time limit of twenty minutes. His parents were at work, and would never have known either way, but with so much else off-balance in his life, he wanted to avoid the lie if he could.

The run had taken him barely five minutes, but it had left him completely winded; upon tagging his mailbox, he had needed to walk around the yard three times before his breathing slowed enough for him to drink a glass of water. Another half hour had passed before his heart rate fell all the way back to normal, and even now his chest felt dry and tight.

It bothered him, to discover this weakness in himself. He had never been athletic, not even a little—on the soccer team, they'd dropped him at fullback in second grade and left him there ever since. His dad had tried to interest him in running and swimming and even a little light weightlifting, but none of it had stuck. His body worked just fine, and he couldn't see the point in fitness for its own sake.

Until the warehouse. Until his first climb, and his first fall, and Ashleigh's laughter, good-natured but still rankling as he limped slowly home. He'd come back alone the next

day, and again the day after that, pushing the limits of his meager strength, working each impossible step until it *became* possible. It took three weeks, but the look on Ashleigh's face the next time they happened to pass by made it all worth it.

And then Ashleigh insisted that Conor show him how it was done, and the course of their summer was set. Their next climb was a night mission at a monstrous, Victorian mansion that had been converted into a retirement home; Ashleigh almost got them caught when he slipped and came crashing down on a balcony just a few feet away from an old man sleeping with his window open. After that had come the Raymond tower downtown, and then the school—which had led to the Gap—and in the intervening months, Conor had come to think of himself as tough, capable, ready for anything.

Yet now, a simple flat-ground run had brought him almost to his knees, leaving him weak and shaking so that hours later the chill autumn air still burned in the back of his throat. It was embarrassing, shameful, like being back at the beginning, confronted by the inadequacy of his own body and will. The half-mile had beaten him just as thoroughly as any too-high wall or too-wide jump, and he felt an almost primal need to do something about it.

He looked around the yard. No running—that was done for the day. He had learned something of weakness during the long and arduous summer, and he knew there was nothing to be gained from punishing his heart and lungs when they'd already been pushed to the breaking point. Plenty of time for that later, when he could test himself slowly and deliberately, mapping out the boundaries of this newfound frailty.

In the meantime, though, the rest of his body was wound like a clock, his limbs thrumming with nervous tension. The last two days had left him feeling caged and useless, unable to do anything but pace, with his unspent energy manifesting itself in a kind of restless pulse that coursed from his head to his toes and back. Exhaustion, that was what he needed—the weariness of overworked muscles, arms that felt like lead and legs that felt like butter, the ache that worked its way deep into his body and drowned out his thoughts, moving him on to a lower plane of consciousness.

It was time to be Batman.

Leaning the rake against the deck, he walked to the edge of the backyard, where the roots

of the old oak tree spread out like the tentacles of a sea monster, rising up from the hard, packed earth. Squinting at them critically in the fading light, he chose one that was roughly two inches thick and twice that off the ground. He stepped lithely onto it, bringing his legs together so that he perched like a bird, balanced on the balls of his feet with the root stretching out to either side.

Balanced, but not steady—for several tense seconds he swayed back and forth, bowing and straightening, his knees bending and unbending as he fought to find a stable equilibrium. Eventually, he managed to coax his body into the ideal position—hips slightly back, knees slightly bent, chest and arms forward as if he were scratching behind the ears of an invisible dog. Only then did his movements slow, all but the tiniest adjustments shrinking away as he focused on his target, another thin root emerging from the soil three paces away.

For a single heartbeat, he stood completely still, everything in perfect balance as he took a deep breath, an archer on the draw.

Then he jumped.

It happened in the blink of an eye, but to Conor it was like a dance, each piece of it distinct and necessary, contributing to a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. It began with his arms, which swung backward like the hammer of a gun being cocked as he sunk deeper into his half-crouch, tipping forward until it seemed he would fall on his face. Then, as he passed the point of no return, everything uncoiled, his arms reversing direction as his legs fired explosively, driving him up into the air, his whole body stringing out along a line drawn at forty-five degrees. He rose as he flew forward, and at the peak of his jump he pulled his knees up and in, flashing into a cannonball before again reversing his movement, this time extending his feet down and out toward the root. His legs were fully extended when he made contact, touching down just behind his toes, and he immediately began to compress, absorbing the impact with the muscles of his legs, his ankles, knees, and hip all hinging as he shrank back into a ball, ending in a deep crouch atop the second root.

And that was the end, and it would have been perfect, except that he came in slightly too low, had just a hair too much forward momentum and didn't adequately compensate. Windmilling his arms, he lost his balance and had to step down onto the ground in front of the root.

Turning, he got back up, facing the way he'd come, and in a moment he found his balance, jumped, and fell again, this time because he'd come in too short and ended up staggering backward.

Again he stood, again he jumped, and again he fell.

And again.

And again.

And again.

He was seven jumps in before he made his first good landing, but he didn't pause to celebrate—only spun around without stepping down from the root, wobbled, and jumped again, this time arriving with one leg too far forward, so that a jolt of pain stabbed through his heel.

Four jumps later, he stuck his second landing, and this time he found the rhythm, making two more before he lost concentration and fell again.

And again.

And again.

Slowly, Conor felt his mind recede from the task at hand, his body's reflexes gradually assuming control as he sank into the repetition—jump, turn, balance, jump, turn, balance. A slow burn kindled in his thighs and in the arches of his feet as he passed his fifth success in twenty attempts.

I'll go until I've stuck thirty, he decided. Either that, or until it was too dark to see, which wouldn't be too much longer. Already the crickets were chirping, and the cars driving past on the street had their headlights on. He landed another, but heavily, wobbling dangerously on the root, his arms swinging wildly. Grimacing, he added it to the count of failures and turned around again.

Jump.

After this, I'll do toppers on Mr. Baker's wall. Then tomorrow I'll cut the grass and practice vaulting over the deck railing.

Jump.

Thursday I'll work on rolls, after I finish stacking the firewood.

Jump.

Friday I can do switchovers and slipthroughs.

Jump.

And I'll work on running every day. I'll get off at home, run to Ashleigh's, and run back.

Jump.

It had quickly become apparent—once they started climbing together every day—that Conor and Ashleigh approached their excursions from very different directions. For Ashleigh, it was all about going places, especially places that no one else could reach. He climbed for the thrill of the challenge and the joy of exploration; once a particular route had been broken, he saw no point in going back.

But Conor had never quite gotten past the sting of that very first failure. He remembered all too well the bitter frustration of seeing the way up, understanding how it could be done, and coming up short. He'd reached a certain point where his fingers just couldn't...hang...on, no matter how hard he'd willed them to. It was something Ashleigh, who *was* a natural athlete, would never really understand. In those three long weeks when Conor had revisited the warehouse over and over again, he hadn't simply made it to the top—he had *become* the kind of person who *could*, consistently and reliably. The climb had changed him, physically and mentally, and the process of transformation had awakened in him a hunger for more.

A hunger to be more like *him*, he realized, guiding his friend up that first familiar route. To shake the fear and the doubt, to have confidence in himself and to have that confidence be justified. It had taken him three weeks to reach the warehouse roof; Ashleigh did it in ten minutes flat.

And so he began to push himself. On their second climb, he started taking deliberate detours whenever the route became too easy, using his fear as a gauge to make sure he stayed close to the limit of his ability. As that ability grew, he sought out ever-trickier challenges, following daunting paths to inaccessible places, trying to recapture the strain and uncertainty of his first climb. If the natural obstacles weren't difficult enough, he would handicap himself by skipping handholds or using only three limbs. Ironically, his desire to be more like his friend drove them apart during the actual ascents—Ashleigh always took the most obvious route, content to explore those heights and hideouts that lay in easy reach.

It was some time after their third climb — while they were planning for the fourth — that a light had gone on in Conor's brain, and he had made an obvious connection. Kicking off of walls, shinnying up pipes, dangling by his fingertips, and hauling himself up and over ledges — each of these skills was cropping up over and over again, as the most basic and straightforward solution to a certain category of problem. And each of these skills could be strengthened independently of any particular route or climb — could be practiced separately, at ground level, where he would have the freedom to experiment, working out the kinks without the threat of falling.

It was a revolutionary shift in his thinking, no less powerful for being — in retrospect — entirely self-evident. Like rock climbing, or skateboarding, or even soccer and basketball, there were basic ingredients, building-block movements that made up the bulk of each challenge. If he could master them, it would drastically reduce the time and energy he was now spending solving the same problems over and over again, allowing him to focus his attention on the unique and interesting aspects of each new climb. It would mean stepping back from the edge, where he'd done all of his growing so far, but it would allow him to return to that edge with a much more versatile toolkit, ready to jump ahead to significantly harder problems than the ones he'd been tackling so far.

It was then that he'd first imagined being Batman.

Oh, he'd been *thinking* about Batman all along. That's how the whole thing had gotten started — they were walking down the street, each arguing his hero's merits, and Ashleigh had pointed to the warehouse roof. "Look," he'd said. "Spiderman could climb that thing in ten seconds flat."

"So could Batman!"

"Not if he couldn't use his grappling hook."

"If Batman can't use his grappling hook, then Spiderman can't use his web slingers."

"And Spiderman wins. Climbing powers. No way Batman could climb that with nothing but his hands."

Conor had disagreed, and they'd gone back and forth for five minutes until he found himself standing on a dumpster on his tiptoes, straining to reach a rusted metal windowsill. He'd made it to the sill, but not to the ledge above that, and Ashleigh had claimed victory un-

til Conor brought him back three weeks later.

He'd pretended to be the caped crusader ever since, romping across the rooftops as Ashleigh fired imaginary webs after him. But it wasn't until his epiphany that he really *felt* it, could imagine himself standing in the Batcave, plotting out a training regimen, trying to anticipate every physical skill that he would need to win the fight against the Gotham underground.

Combat training, sure—Batman needed that, just like any other superhero. But what fascinated Conor most—what had drawn him to Batman *particularly*—was the way he used the city as his ally, flitting from rooftop to rooftop, lurking in the shadows, laying traps and snares in blind corners and making the environment work *for* him, so that every brick and pipe became a tool, a natural extension of his utility belt. Batman was everywhere at once, through a combination of gadgets, brains, and—most importantly—the strength and agility of his body.

And he got there by *practicing*. Not by being an alien, or getting bitten by a spider, or being granted three wishes. In most of the stories Conor knew, Batman's training was centered on punching bags and sparring drills, on endless sets of pushups—but with a thrill of excitement, he realized that there had to be another side to it, a hidden one that the movies and comics never mentioned. Conor imagined Bruce Wayne standing before a ten foot wall, running at it, throwing himself at the top, and scrambling over—and then doing it again, nine hundred and ninety-nine more times.

Sure, it was all make-believe—the stunts Batman pulled weren't realistic to begin with, which was probably why they didn't bother to show him training for them in the first place. But hadn't Conor done something similar, without even meaning to? Haphazardly, unmethodically, without any larger plan beyond reaching the top of a particular building—and yet still, he'd grown. Improved. It had made a difference.

And if that was all it took to get better at climbing, what about the rest of the things Batman did—popping over fences, jumping off rooftops, leaping over cars and diving through windows? In that moment, Conor's eyes had been opened, and the world around him had transformed. Where before there had been a static and empty environment, there was now a mosaic of possibilities, a never-ending cascade of *what-ifs* that reached far beyond the streets

and sidewalks he had always used.

What if he needed to hide on top of that sculpture?

What if he had to break into that fifth-story window?

What if the bad guy he was chasing was on the other side of that fence, that ledge, that truck, that gap? What if it was a chase, a race, and every split second mattered?

It was his Bat vision, and once he turned it on, he couldn't turn it off. From then on, he found himself constantly evaluating the world around him, his eyes drawn to odd quirks in architecture and landscaping, always asking himself: what would Batman do?

And could I do it, too?

He began practicing methodically, isolating specific skills and drilling them over and over, building a repertoire of techniques that he could call upon at any time. He sought out unusual obstacles and lingered with them for days, crisscrossing them back and forth, boiling down the various possible approaches until he found the most efficient methods—the ones that maximized speed, or minimized effort, or were the most adaptable. He spent hours studying the movements of the squirrels in his backyard, stealing tricks from the Discovery Channel and ESPN, mimicking the tumbling roll of a paratrooper and the graceful vault of a gymnast. Slowly, through trial and error, he developed his mantra—safety before simplicity, simplicity before speed, and silence wherever possible.

And all the while, he kept it secret, embarrassed. Because it was silly—wasn't it? What would he say, if anyone stumbled upon him—dangling by one arm from a low-hanging branch, trying desperately to reach thirty Mississippi before his screaming muscles refused to hold any longer—oh, I'm training to be a crime fighter? It was ridiculous. Exhilarating, intoxicating, the most alive he'd ever felt—but ridiculous. Only Ashleigh would understand, but he kept it secret even from him, waiting for the perfect moment to blow his friend away.

It came on a hot day in late June, when they'd gone to the park to play on the playground, he and Ashleigh and all of their other friends. Someone had started a game of freeze tag, and after three rounds in which Conor hadn't been caught, they made him *it*, and he'd started running, and forty-five seconds later the entire playground was still, every kid frozen.

He hadn't been particularly fast—he had won the game by inches, in the closed jumble of the playground architecture, catching each victim on the scrambles as he floated over obsta-

cles that made everyone else falter. For a moment they'd all stared at him, unnerved, until Holt broke the silence, shouting "Es un monito— who are you, monkey boy, and what have you done with Conor?"

Then everyone had laughed, and as the last boy tagged started up the next round, Conor had walked quietly over to the benches and sat down, waiting for Ashleigh. Ten minutes later, they were gone, on their way to the bank where Conor's favorite practice wall stood. They climbed it fifty times that afternoon before the manager came out and ran them off.

In the weeks that followed, it soon became clear that being Batman wasn't Ashleigh's style—the other boy easily grew restless, reluctant to drill, itching to move on to the next thing. But that was okay, because Conor didn't have to do his serious work while they were together. It wasn't long before he settled into a routine—skill sessions in the morning, in his backyard or downtown, then afternoon edgework with Ashleigh, conquering the unknown. Despite his friend's athleticism, he quickly became the stronger of the two, his new discipline adding whipcord muscles to his slender frame, but that was okay, too—Ashleigh had no fear, and so they remained matched, his natural daring a perfect counterpart to Conor's developed competence.

It was how they'd made it to the auditorium roof, their fourth climb—Conor's careful preparation, dangling off pipes for weeks as he built up his endurance, and Ashleigh's refusal to quit, bombing up after him with every scrap of energy he had. It frustrated Conor sometimes—the way that Ashleigh, without putting in any work at all, was able to follow every trail that Conor blazed. But that was just Ashleigh. It wasn't malicious—he never went anywhere Conor couldn't follow, or mocked him for taking things slowly.

Well, except for all that bullshit about how Spiderman doesn't need to practice.

Conor paused in his jumping, teetering on the root as he wiped his brow. It was almost time to quit—the stars were coming out, and the shadows beneath the oak tree were deep and dark. Turning, he jumped again. Another miss.

Apparently Spiderman doesn't need to do Binder's Gap, either.

Conor shook his head, trying to clear the intrusive, churlish thought. That's not right, he told himself firmly. This was *not* a contest—seeing it as one was a good way to get himself hurt, to push himself into trying something he wasn't ready for, just because Ashleigh could

do it. They weren't opponents, they were partners.

Besides, the gap wasn't about practice. It was about fear. So what if Ashleigh had finally found something he was afraid of? Conor was afraid of *plenty*. There was no shame in that, not when you were forty-eight feet above the ground. He turned and stuck another jump—his seventeenth.

And if Ashleigh had made it, then he wouldn't have been alone on the ground when Guyler showed up. Maybe then I wouldn't be stuck in my backyard, practicing target jumps and writing letters in blank books. Conor would give up any amount of bragging rights to be a part of *that* alternate timeline.

He made one last attempt, barely able to see his landing in the gloom, and smiled as his feet connected cleanly, his balance holding without a wobble. Eighteen, out of seventy-six. Not bad.

But not great, either. Fifty...four? No. Fifty-eight.

Fifty-eight misses—*that* was what mattered. Not how he stacked up to his friend, but that he'd fallen three times for every good landing he'd made. That was why he practiced—it wasn't about ego, or adrenaline, or even a sense of accomplishment. It was about perfection. It was for that split second of certainty, before his feet even hit the target, that *this* jump was good, would end exactly as it was supposed to.

It was a small thing, a silly thing to care about. But with so much spiraling ever further beyond his control, there was comfort in the promise of mastery, however long it might take him to achieve. He had no influence over Guyler or Eichardt, no arguments to sway Timothy, and no idea how to get through to Ashleigh. All he had was himself—one small, half-trained body that only sometimes did what he told it to. It was his only tool, and so he sharpened it, hoping it would be enough.

Crossing into the next yard, he stepped up to the low brick wall Mr. Baker had built around his air conditioning unit. Grabbing the top with his hands, he squatted down and then lifted his feet one at a time, pressing them against the vertical surface so that he dangled in a tucked position, his butt a few inches above the ground. With a titanic heave, he pulled himself upward, hauling his head and chest over the top, his sneakers scraping as he scrambled to his feet and stood atop the narrow row of bricks. Then he reversed the movement,

squatting to press his hands down on either side of his feet, kicking his legs out behind him, and lowering himself back into the tuck, careful not to dig his chest into the edge or let his feet touch the ground.

One.

Heave. Scramble. Squat. Drop.

Two.

• • •

Conor's father was working in the shop when he came in with the rake, poring over a set of plans on the workbench. "Oh, hey," he said, without looking up. "Finished with the leaves already?"

"All done," Conor replied, setting the rake on its hook against the wall. He walked back to his father, peering over his shoulder. "New props?"

"Miniatures." The plans were for a scale model of a city, with buildings, streets, and cars all carefully marked out. Next to them was a large plywood board, covered in pencil marks. Conor squinted. It looked a little like a map.

His father was a corporate artist, part of a small production company. He worked in the physical design department, making sets and props for filming. Two years earlier, he had turned their garage into a workshop, filling it with wood and plaster, fabric and paint, so that he could spend more time at home. There was even a machine for injection-molding rubber and plastic, which Conor and Ashleigh had used over the summer to make the masks they were planning to wear for Halloween.

Thinking of the masks, Conor turned to the shelf where he'd left them. It was cluttered with boxes and junk, the leftovers from half a dozen old contracts.

"I've got the foundations laid out there," his father continued, pointing at the plywood board. "We're going to do it with balsa and hot glue. Should only take a couple of days."

"Cool," said Conor, shifting various props aside as he dug through the mess. A realistic plate of plastic food made his stomach growl. "Can I smash it when you're done?"

"Har har," his father replied. "No, this one's actually going to get demolished during

filming. We're only painting one side of it. Some kind of Godzilla thing—apparently it's still cheaper to blow up a model and add the monster than to CG the whole shot." He looked up to see Conor transferring boxes to the shelf above, making space to search the back. "What do you need?"

"Those masks we made."

"You and Ashleigh? I had to move them. I think I put them in the box with the Christmas ornaments."

"They're for Halloween."

"The holiday ornaments."

Conor snorted, reaching under the workbench for the box. The masks were right on top. He grabbed them and began putting back the rest of the things he'd moved.

"Your mother called," his father said, yawning and stretching. "She's going to be late, so we're on our own for dinner. You want me to cook you something?"

"No, I'll just microwave some Hot Pockets. You going to be out here long?"

"Until she gets home. Remember, no—"

"No computer, no phone. Got it." Turning, Conor went inside.

It took a few minutes for his dinner to heat up, during which he rifled through his homework folder. There was more than there had been in sixth grade; after only two days, he had something in almost every subject. Sighing, he grabbed the necessary books from his bookbag, adding a glass of chocolate milk to the stack and balancing the plate on his arm as he made his way down the hall toward his room. It was easier for him to focus while he ate, so he set the books aside, toying with the masks as he waited for his food to cool.

They were a matched pair, different in detail but similar in overall design, meant to be pulled down over the head like a balaclava. They completely covered the face—each had been fitted to its owner, although the material was flexible enough to be worn by almost anyone. Conor's was mostly black, with maroon and dark grey trim along the sides, while Ashleigh's was a uniformly bright red, relieved only by the dark plastic lens covering the eyes, scavenged from a pair of ski goggles. Conor's father had helped them every step of the way, and the final product was impressive; all in all, the masks looked *good*, real enough to qualify as professionally made.

The idea had been Ashleigh's. They had gone as their respective favorite superheroes for three years in a row—it was time for a change, he'd said. Where was the self-respect in dressing up as Spiderman when half the five-year-olds on the street were wearing cheap Wal-Mart knockoffs of your costume? And ninjas and zombies and Darth Vader were no better—they should invent their own alter egos, completely new ones that no one had ever seen before. It would be awesome, they would score tons of candy, and it would save him from having to spend all of Halloween pointing out each and every way in which Spiderman was *clearly* better—

Conor had quickly gotten on board. It would be sort of neat, to put real identities to their superhero games. This was only a week or so after they had discovered the bag on the auditorium roof, and they were still filled with the thrill of the possibility that they might catch an actual bad guy. They had sketched out the rough beginnings of a design, arguing back and forth until they settled on something neither Bat nor Spider, but definitely Man. They took the picture to Conor's father the next morning, and a week later, the masks were cooling on a rack out in the workshop. Black for the Tracer, and red for Siphon—Ashleigh pointed out that Tracer was actually the name of a minor villain in one of the Spiderman comics, but Conor kept it anyway.

They had been planning to work on the actual costumes as soon as school started up again. There was a Halloween party at East Binder every year, and Ashleigh figured they had a shot at winning a prize in the competition.

Probably not going to happen now, though.

Conor put the masks down. He was tempted, for a moment, to sink back into despair, into the grey fugue that had gripped him under the equipment shed and never really let go. This was just one more thing that had changed for the worse when Ashleigh pulled a lighter out of his pocket and sent the first domino tumbling.

But the ache in his arms and legs kept him from going under. It was the same ache he'd felt a dozen times during the summer, a familiar, friendly pain that spoke of better days to come. He had made progress today, if only in one insignificant corner of his life, and the next time he went out to do target jumps or topovers, they would come easier. His world had been knocked off its axis, but it hadn't stopped spinning—the sun would be coming up

tomorrow.

Picking up the masks again, he opened his closet and set them on a high shelf. No more, he told himself. Ever since Sunday, he'd been acting like a passenger, moving only in reaction, letting others' choices dictate his own. He'd been on hold, waiting for things to go back to normal. It was time to face the fact that this *was* normal—the new normal, whether he liked it or not. Guyler, Eichardt, the bag, the gap—there was no point in dwelling on the year he wished he was having when the real one was trying to knock his feet out from under him. He closed the closet door, firmly. Ashleigh would come around or he wouldn't; either way, moping about it wasn't helping anybody.

What would Batman do?

Conor turned back to his desk. Probably *not* a lab report, a current events questionnaire, and a pre-algebra worksheet. But given no other options, at least these were things he understood, and knew how to deal with. Settling into his chair, he opened up his folder, took out the first assignment, and began to write.