

## ***Chapter 3 - Consequences***

"I've been thinking—"

"Did it hurt?"

"Wow. Been saving that one, huh?"

"Yeah, I got it from your m—"

"Oh, shut up."

"Don't sulk. You've been thinking about what, exactly?"

"What's the point of all this?"

"We're going to catch—"

"—a bad guy, yeah. But what happens after that?"

"How should I know? It's not like I've thought that far ahead."

"Bull. You came up with this whole scheme in, like, five minutes. You expect me to believe that in an entire summer of sitting up here, you haven't given any thought to your—what do you call it—encore? You, Mr. All-I-want-to-be-is-Batman?"

"I've been focusing on the g—"

"—the gap, I know. And?"

"And what? What's your next big idea, Mr. I've-been-thinking?"

"Don't have one."

"Me, neither."

"Then what's the point of all those stupid jumps you're doing? I thought you were practicing for something."

"When was the last time you saw any crimes around here?"

"My mom ran a red light last week."

"Exactly. It just—doesn't work that way. I mean, jeez, we've been up here all summer and whoever left the bag hasn't even come by to check on it. Even when we know something shady's going down, it doesn't mean we can actually do anything about it."

"We could call the cops."

"Right—'Officer, me and my friend were hanging out on the roof of the school in the middle of the summer, and we just *happened* to notice—'"

"But if we're not really doing jack squat, then what's your deal?"

"I dunno. It's fun, I guess."

"Is not. Not the way you do it. It's creepy."

"I just want to get better."

"At what? Climbing walls? What *for*?"

"Dunno. In case."

"In case what?"

"Nothing. It's stupid."

"Don't give me that."

"Well, I keep thinking what if, you know? Like, what if something does happen."

"Yeah, you've said that before. But—aren't you ready *now*? I mean, you can already outclimb every kid we know. Probably every grownup, too. Isn't it—I dunno—enough?"

"You're looking at it backwards. I figured out a while back—it's not about what you can do, it's about what you *can't*. Like, the reason Batman kicks ass is he's never like, oh, whoops, guess that wall's too high for me, you know? But me, there are still all these paths I can see, I can imagine, but I'm not good enough to trace them out. Every time I start to feel like I'm getting ahead, I spot some new thing that's, like, *just* this side of impossible. And I think about all the stuff I know how to do, and it's all nothing, because if that one thing happens to be in front of me, then I'm done, it's over, because I quit practicing once I was good enough."

"But that's insane. There's always going to be stuff you can't do."

"Which means there's always going to be stuff for me to work on."

"But it's *stupid*. You're never going to get good enough for it to matter. Batman can climb everything because he's a *comic book character*. You spent all of Thursday morning trying to boost your wall climbing record from eight and a half feet to nine. What difference does that make? It's not like you can work your way up to climbing a skyscraper."

"We climbed the Raymond tower."

"And it took us two hours. Would've been faster to crawl up the stairs. Backwards. What good is that? All this training you're doing, it just doesn't *matter*."

"It matters a little."

"Nine feet instead of eight and a half? Is that really worth half a day out of your life?"

"Yes."

"Why? How?"

"What else am I going to do, sit around and play video games? Chase after a stupid ball? Look, I get what you're saying, all right? I'm not an idiot, I've thought about this stuff a lot. I know it's probably pointless. But I hear those stories, you know? Like, a fireman pulls three people out of a building, but there were four inside. And I think, what if he'd been a little faster, a little stronger? I wonder, what was between him and that last guy? I know it probably won't ever matter, but if it does, that extra six inches might turn out to be the thing that saves somebody's life."

"But what if something happens, and it turns out what you *really* needed to learn was—what, I don't know—jujitsu? Or CPR? Or how to hold your breath for a really long time?"

"You can't be good at everything. At some point, you've got to just pick something and run with it."

"So you picked *Batman*."

"I picked something I couldn't do. And now I sort of can. That's better than nothing, right?"

"Depends on whether I'm the one who has to haul your busted ass out of the crater when you crash and burn."

"I'm not going to crash and burn. That's what all the practice is *about*, remember?"

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that."

The journal came back empty.

Timothy handed it to him on the bus, along with Ashleigh's completed homework and a not-so-subtle hint that Conor might want to start handing things over on the afternoon bus ride rather than bringing them over in person. For the rest of the week, though, Conor continued to run the half-mile between their houses, depositing the little book and his friend's assignments in a neat pile outside of the locked bedroom door.

Each day, he wrote on the left-hand pages of the journal, leaving the right-hand ones blank, and each morning he picked it up from Timothy and flipped through them, looking for an answer. None came. It was disheartening, but Conor refused to quit, and soon he was bringing the little book with him to every class, jotting down a constant stream of thoughts and notes as he dragged himself through the day.

Much of it was trivial—classes were turning out to be every bit as tedious as he'd feared, and he passed the time by writing jokes, transcribing gossip, and subtitling the words and actions of his teachers. With a little effort, he found that he could imagine Ashleigh's responses in detail, see the other boy's expressions in his mind's eye. He earned a silent lunch from his science teacher for laughing out loud in the middle of their first quiz, at a witticism that only he could hear. It was a poor substitute for real company, but it gave him a sense of connection with the other boy. At times, he felt even closer to Ashleigh than he would have normally—his real friend would have been in only three of his seven classes, but the imaginary one followed him everywhere.

That was small comfort outside the classroom, though, where things were settling into their usual unpleasant routine. It didn't take a vendetta like Eichardt's to make you a target

when there was only a single pair of bathrooms in the building and all three grades changed at the same time. The teachers poked their heads in often enough to prevent serious trouble, but he still had to endure the typical taunts and shoves of the bigger kids, and he only narrowly missed getting drawn into a real fight when he encountered a trio of bullies during an ill-advised, mid-class visit. The three of them had a sixth grader cornered in one of the stalls, and once again the litany of *not your problem* ran through Conor's head as he spun on his heel and headed back to class. There was no point in going for a teacher—by the time one got there, it would already be over.

Another time, he lingered too long during a class change, and as he came out of the stall he saw two eighth graders making a surreptitious swap by the sinks, each quickly tucking away whatever the other had handed him. Conor kept his eyes down and said nothing, but he could feel them watching, considering, as he washed his hands and walked away. The back of his neck tingled the whole way down the hall; it took a deliberate effort to stop himself from looking over his shoulder.

There were bright spots to the chaos—Josh Miller, another seventh grader, stole a pack of crayons from the art room and took to holding one casually in his hand each time he walked down the main hallway, so that over the course of a day a crooked rainbow slowly appeared at waist height on the whitewashed cinderblock wall. Mr. Sykes was furious—Conor overheard him berating the teacher on hall duty, demanding that she explain how another two lines had materialized during the hour he'd been away patrolling the high school.

But overall, things were not pleasant. The hazing was harsher than Conor remembered from the year before—worsened, perhaps, by a spillover of tension from the high school, where the covert war against the Central students had splintered into a murky free-for-all as Bulldog solidarity waned. Conor went back to eating lunch with Ashleigh's fan club after he had his chocolate milk poured into his mashed potatoes, and he had to lend his Spanish homework to Sam Marlin when the other boy's locker was broken into and trashed.

Things were going especially badly for Timothy, who had not backed off from the aggressive stance he'd taken with Eichardt. The older boy hadn't tried anything on the bus since the second day, but he seemed to have memorized Timothy's schedule, popping up outside of the sixth grader's classes each time the bell rang. At first, Conor did the same, but

Timothy gave him such looks of withering fury that he soon stopped. Instead, he watched from a distance with growing concern as Timothy's clothes and possessions began to show signs of abuse, and his face hardened into a permanent scowl. The younger boy continued to stand up to Eichardt in public—Conor overheard him spitting contemptuous poison at the bully in the courtyard and the cafeteria—but each of Timothy's overt victories was followed by a savage round of furtive and efficient retribution in the bathroom and the crowded halls. By the start of the second week, he had had to buy a new uniform sweatshirt, and had quit carrying a lunchbox altogether.

Given the stress and turmoil of the downtime, the stifled order of a quiet classroom was almost a welcome relief. Conor could see it in the bearing of some of his peers—he wasn't the only one whose shoulders relaxed each time he passed through a doorway and out of the jungle. For the first few minutes of each period, he found it blessedly easy to focus, the clean simplicity of classwork like a salve for his shell-shocked mind. Once he recovered, though, the clarity inevitably faded, chased out by boredom, anxiety or—in his least favorite lessons—both at once.

Math was the worst. Mrs. Atkins was by no means cruel, but she could only circle the room so many times before she was forced to call on Conor, and it seemed unpromising that his answers confused her every bit as much as her questions confused him. Their first test was coming up at the end of the month, and Conor couldn't decide whether to bury himself in the textbook or write it off as a lost cause. The other classes were not quite as bad—in Science, Social Studies, and electives, he was meeting with his usual mixture of modest success and acceptable failure. But he still found it hard to look forward to any of them with anything like enthusiasm.

Except for first period English. Ms. Palmano's class was turning out to be the oddest he'd ever been in. After their first discussion, she hadn't spoken a word for three straight days, except to crack down on a pair of girls who'd come in chattering and been too slow to settle down. She had sent both of them straight to the office without so much as a warning, paying no heed to their indignant protests, and the rest of the room had gone deadly silent.

On Friday, she had taken up their papers, removed their names, and passed them back out, so that each student held someone else's anonymous work. They spent that day and all

of Monday reading them aloud, one at a time, ignoring by tacit agreement the sudden, involuntary twitch of a classmate who heard his or her own words in the air. The papers had varied wildly in topic, length, and style; throughout the recitation, Ms. Palmano had sat unmoving at her desk, a look of polite attentiveness fixed on her face.

Once the last piece had been shared, she had taken the papers back, gathered them into a neat stack, and dropped them into the trash. “Terrible,” she had said into the shocked silence, wiping her hands theatrically. “Unpublishable, across the board.”

As on the first day, reactions had been mixed, ranging from indifference to outrage—but the outraged students had been *truly* outraged, some of them actually leaping up out of their seats as they shouted their objections. It had taken Ms. Palmano a full thirty seconds to make herself heard over the clamor.

When she finally did, though, her response was devious. “Any student who disagrees with my evaluation is welcome to have me take a second look,” she’d said. “Simply identify which paper belonged to you, and we’ll go over it publicly, for everyone’s benefit.” At that, the shouters had abruptly recanted, their complaints trailing off into seditious grumbles.

That had been the end of Monday’s class, and on Tuesday they had come in to find laminated speeches and essays spread throughout the room, taped to the desks. The words **READING REQUIRES SILENCE** had been written on the board, and they had spent the period rotating from one seat to the next, poring over the words of Confucius and Alexander, Mandela and Churchill, Jesus and Socrates and Sun Tzu. Most of it was incomprehensible to Conor, and his classmates didn’t seem to be doing any better—the indifferent ones were clearly daydreaming, and many of the nerdier ones were on strike. But he copied a handful of good quotes into the journal, and he managed to make it all the way through Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, which was the shortest piece. The entire time, Ms. Palmano sat behind her desk, ignoring them completely as she thumbed through a tattered paperback novel.

Strangely, Conor felt encouraged rather than frustrated by her offhand discourtesy. Partly it was because he felt none of the fear and outrage his more scholarly classmates were feeling—he was, after all, making an 85 in the class. Partly it was because he enjoyed watching those same classmates get cut down to size. Ms. Palmano had affirmed what he’d always secretly believed—that while his own writing was admittedly terrible, theirs wasn’t really any

better.

But mostly, he liked it because it had the ring of pure truth. There were no euphemisms, no careful tiptoeing around people's feelings. She talked like a kid, unafraid to judge and even less afraid to pronounce those judgments. For as long as Conor could remember, grownups had bent over backwards to hide their real opinions, blurring the boundary between good and bad. *No, no, it's great, I love it*, they'd rush to say, as if they automatically assumed that their disapproval had the power to destroy you. They claimed that quality was a matter of opinion, that nobody was really better than anybody else, and that effort was more important than results. Conor had learned not to rely on them, because they offered the same bland praise for his worst work that they did for his best.

Ms. Palmano, though, had reintroduced the sharp, dividing line, driving good and bad apart. That she'd placed them all on the wrong side was trivial; to Conor, it was far more important that she believed there was a difference, and wouldn't shrink from telling them so. She didn't seem to care whether they could handle the criticism—or rather, she seemed to take it for granted that they could. It was a backhanded kind of respect, a refusal to treat them with kid gloves. For once, Conor felt a spark of interest—here was a teacher that might actually have something to *teach*, something that wouldn't boil down to natural talent or prior experience or how often you raised your hand.

*And she winked at me.*

That hadn't meant anything, of course, but it gave him hope. Out of everyone in the room, he had been the first to *get it*, to figure out the game she was playing. He might not have any special aptitude for reading or writing, but he knew how to recover after being thrown off balance, and if the first few days were anything to go by, that would be a valuable skill in this class.

So it was that on Wednesday of the second week, he entered first period feeling almost eager, ready to participate. There were no instructions on the board, though, and no papers on the desks. The usual pre-class quiet had a nervous feel to it; as he sat down in his usual seat, he saw that Ms. Palmano had a dark, ominous expression on her face as she watched them filter in from the hall.

She must have been counting, because with half the class still on its feet she strode over to

the door and closed it. “I thought,” she said, making her way back to the front, “that we might start today with a moment of honesty. You see, some of you tried to get me fired last night, and we should probably talk about that before we go any further.”

Her tone was light and casual, so it took a heartbeat for the sentence to sink in, after which the air in the room turned to ice.

“Oh. I guess I’m not supposed to say that, am I? I’m supposed to act like nothing happened, and just carry on teaching. And if I know which students were behind it, I’m *definitely* not supposed to call them out on it, or let it influence the way I treat them for the next – what is it – hundred and seventy-three class days. Right?”

There was a heavy, uncomfortable silence as the students tried to look anywhere but straight ahead. Conor exchanged glances with Holt, who jerked his head subtly toward the boy who had complained during the very first lecture. The boy was sinking slowly in his seat, his face red, unable to tear his eyes away from the front.

“Maybe I should back up and explain, since only four of you actually know what I’m talking about.” She leaned back against the dry erase board, her arms crossed. “On Monday, I did something that took a lot of you by surprise: I took your papers – which you had worked on for *four whole days* – told you that they weren’t good enough, and put them in the trash.

“Of course, I didn’t *actually* throw them away. That was a bit of dramatic acting on my part.” Following her nod, they saw a neat stack of papers sitting on the corner of her desk. “But since I never intended for you to have them back, and was just keeping them for my own records, let’s say I don’t hold it against you if you believed me. That was the idea, after all.” She smiled tightly. “Now, I expected a certain amount of blowback, which is why I cleared my plan with the principal weeks ago. He’s fairly old school – still complains that we should bring back paddling at staff meetings – and so he got it right away and gave me the green light to go ahead.

“But being old school, he was surprised at the vehemence of the responses he got. If you don’t know the word ‘vehemence,’ you should look it up. It’s got an ‘h’ in it. You see, back in the day, if a kid came home and complained that his teacher said his paper was no good, that kid soon found out that Mommy and Daddy and Missus So-and-So were all on the same



team. There was none of this how-dare-you-hurt-my-child's-self-esteem that we get today."

She shook her head ruefully. "Four sets of parents called, demanding that I be fired on the spot. In fact, it was seven—I did the same thing with my other classes—but this was the only group with quite so much...solidarity. Our principal asked me, what did I do differently with *these* kids, that their parents were so *personally* offended? And I said gee, I don't know, which kids were they?

"That's where it got interesting. Because I looked back over my gradebook, at the little list we made on the first day of school, and lo and behold—every one of those parents had a kid who'd put him or herself into the 'A' column."

There was a slight rustling as heads twisted back and forth, seeking out the known bookworms and overachievers. The boy Conor didn't know was sinking even lower, and the girl in front of him, Jennifer, had her hands cupped around her eyes like blinders, blocking out her classmates.

"Then it all made sense. You see, you guys are what we call the 'higher level' group. There are more academically gifted students in here than in any of my other classes. Which means that this class in particular is made up of students who aren't used to hearing that their work just isn't going to cut it. I could tell that to a group of D students all day long, and they'd laugh and say, what else is new? But you tell Little Miss Shining Star that her paper is unpublishable, and boy, now you've done it."

Ms. Palmano stepped away from the board and began walking slowly up and down the rows of desks, passing by each student as she traced her way around the room. "The parents, of course, insisted that I had misjudged their children, that I was a terrible teacher, and that maybe the reason I couldn't recognize quality work was that I wasn't able to produce it myself. Oh, yes," she said, catching Holt's incredulous look. "That one especially made me smile. Because, as it happened, I'd already done something that afternoon, in preparation for this week's lessons: I'd taken every paper that you guys had written and typed them all out in the same font and format, fixing all the little grammatical errors along the way, so that everyone's words were presented with the same level of polish. And guess what? Once you got past the surface detail, the handwriting and the spelling, it wasn't just *me* who couldn't tell an 'A' paper apart from a 'D' one. Those very same parents were completely lost when I asked

them to pick out their children's work. Only one father managed to do it, and he, at least, was honest enough to admit that he had already asked his daughter about her topic."

She stopped at the back of the room, next to Conor's desk, turning away from him as she faced the rest of the class. "So that put an end to *that* little episode. Needless to say, I'm still here—it's going to take more than a couple of sulky seventh graders to get rid of me when the school system's already scraped the county dry looking for qualified teachers. Unfortunately, though, the real problem isn't the *parents'* attitudes. It's yours."

Again, the class squirmed. Ms. Palmano stepped around Conor's desk and reopened the door to the hallway, leaving it ajar as she strode back up the aisle to the front. Picking up the top paper from the stack, she began to read aloud.

"I am writing this paper, which is a dumb paper because you haven't told us what we're supposed to do, so I'm going to fail like you said because I can't think of anything to write. This whole assignment is stupid. I don't get how you can be a teacher if you don't even have anything to teach. I thought you are supposed to help us instead of just sitting there but here I am not learning nothing. I wish I was fishing instead of wasting time writing down words until you say enough. If this is what this class is like then I'm going to get an F because it's a waste of time and it don't make no sense.'" She lowered the paper. "You remember hearing this one, I'm sure. It goes on like that for about a page and a half."

Setting it back on the stack, she leaned against the dry erase board, fiddling idly with one of the markers as she swept her gaze across the room. "In case you couldn't tell, that was *not* one of the students who put themselves in the 'A' category. So we've got one group that thinks they already know everything, and another that thinks they're not learning anything. Add to that the kids who feel one way or the other but are too polite to say anything, and we've got maybe half the class ready to walk out the door. Lucky for you, it's open." Raising her hand, she pointed with the marker. "Anybody wants out, now's your chance."

If the previous silences had been heavy, this one was oppressive. She looked at them. They looked at her, at the door, at each other. No one spoke.

She continued, her voice flat. "You see, I'm not even remotely interested in trying to teach kids against their will. It's boring and it's frustrating and it's not what I signed up for. You guys have spent your entire lives having information shoved down your throats wheth-

er you wanted it or not, like it was lima beans or something—eat it or you won't get dessert. Not only does this make you hate learning, it also teaches you that knowledge is cheap and worthless. But it isn't—it's incredibly valuable, and I'm not going to waste one scrap of it on some ungrateful brat who's just going to toss it in the garbage on his way out the door. You aren't babies anymore—it's time to make up your own minds. You can eat your mental vegetables and build a brain that's capable and strong, or you can pig out on intellectual fast food and watch your potential disappear. Either way is fine with me, but only one of them is acceptable in my classroom—if you want to cling to your ignorance, get out and let the rest of us get to work."

She crossed her arms, waiting. There was another long pause as Conor's classmates stared intently at their desks. He tried to imagine Ashleigh saying something clever, but for once, his imaginary friend had fallen silent along with everyone else.

Predictably, it was Holt who summoned the courage to speak first.

"What happens if we leave?"

"Not my department," said Ms. Palmano, sounding unconcerned. "Whatever usually happens to kids who walk out in the middle of class, I guess. Detention."

"That's not fair!"

"What's not fair about it?"

"You aren't even giving us a choice!"

"I'm sorry—was I supposed to? Did any of your *other* teachers offer you a choice?"

"None of them told us we should leave and then said we'd get in trouble if we did."

"I never said you *should* leave. I told you that you *could*, if you wanted to. And that was already true—telling you didn't make it possible. You can do whatever you want. But all else being equal, your best bet is to stay right where you are."

"Then what was that whole lecture about?" Holt demanded.

"I thought it was pretty clear—I was clarifying your options."

"*What* options? You still didn't give us a choice!"

"Aren't you listening? You already *have* a choice—stay, or go."

"But that *isn't* a choice. We have to stay. Those are the rules."

Ms. Palmano opened her mouth to reply, then hesitated, a frown working its way down

from her eyebrows. "Maybe we need to back up," she said. "There's a fairly basic point that you're not getting, here." She shifted her stance, turning away from Holt and addressing the class as a whole. "How many of you are here at school because you want to be?"

Several glances were exchanged before a scattering of hands rose hesitantly into the air. Conor's and Holt's were not among them.

"And how many of you would say that you'd rather be somewhere else?"

The hands fell, replaced by a dozen more.

"Okay, those of you with your hands up—where would you be, if you didn't have to be in this class right now?"

Nobody ventured a response. *Fishing*, thought Conor, hearing the word in Ashleigh's voice. On impulse, he raised his hand. "Fishing," he called out.

There was a little laughter, and as Ms. Palmano smiled, the temperature in the room came up a degree or two from freezing. "All right, Conor, since you volunteered. What, exactly, is keeping you from going fishing right now?"

"Aren't...you?" he answered, immediately regretting his decision to speak up. He could feel the pressure of his classmates' attention like a weight across his shoulders.

"From all the way over here? You're right next to the door—what am I going to do, use the Force?"

More laughter. Conor shifted self-consciously in his seat. "You could call the front office," he said.

"True. But by the time anybody got here, you'd be long gone, wouldn't you? I mean, how long does it take to get off campus from here? Two minutes? Half that, if you run."

*Tell her you could do it in thirty seconds if you went over the wall instead of heading for the gate,* Ashleigh whispered. Conor said nothing.

"The point is," Ms. Palmano continued, "there's nothing actually stopping you. No guards, no chains, no barbed wire fences. If you wanted to leave, you could. But you haven't. *Modus tollens*—logically, you must not want to leave."

"Otis what?" Holt interjected, triggering another round of giggles.

Conor didn't laugh. He was beginning to grow frustrated; Ms. Palmano was toying with him, twisting things around so that his answers kept coming out wrong. "What are you try-

ing to get me to say?" he asked, an edge of anger creeping into his voice. "That I'm in school because I *want* to be?"

Ms. Palmano shrugged. "Aren't you?"

"No!"

"Would you rather be fishing? Because I can think of two good creeks in walking distance. Three if you're willing to skip second period, too. Or do you *prefer* to stay in class?"

"I prefer not to get grounded!"

"Exactly!" Throwing him a mock salute, Ms. Palmano turned back to the rest of the class. "I hate to sound like a self-help book, but the first step in taking control of your life is realizing that you already have it. Conor wants to go fishing, but he wants to stay out of trouble more, so he stays in his seat even though there aren't any chains. He could get up and leave, but he knows I'd call the office; he could outrun the AP, but he knows we'd call his parents; he could run away from home, but *it just isn't worth it*. So he chooses to follow the rules. *He* chooses—not his parents, not me, not the police or the president. Just him. Unless you've been kidnapped, hypnotized, and put under direct control by the government or aliens or the Wicked Witch of the West, no one has ever *made* you do anything. The most they've done, the most anybody *can* do, is limit your options—make certain choices so attractive or unattractive that you're overwhelmingly likely to pick the one they want. But even then, there's nothing to stop you from going the other way. Somebody could put a gun to your head, and if you had a good enough reason, you'd still tell them no."

She turned and began writing on the board. When she finished, she capped the marker and moved aside so they could read:

*"There has never been a slave who did not choose to be a slave.*

*Their choice may be between bondage and death, but the choice is always there."*

"Free will, kids. Whether you admit it to yourself or not, you're here at school because you want to be. It might not be fun, you might not actually enjoy it, you might spend the whole time *wishing* you were somewhere else, but you've decided to come because you think it's better than the alternative. That's how human beings work—we always pick whichever

option looks best. It's not about good or bad, right or wrong. It's economics. Coming to class everyday nets you the lowest possible amount of pain and suffering—although given how hard some of you tried to get me fired, maybe you're reconsidering." She smiled humorlessly, and the sinking boy twitched.

"Holt was only halfway right—the rules do say you have to stay, but they can't *make* you do it. Rules and laws don't make people behave, they just set the price for misbehavior. Want to go ninety on the highway? Fine—but it's going to cost you three hundred bucks every time you get caught. For some people, that's a fair trade, and they take the risk. Other people have to get by on a public school teacher's salary, and so they drive three miles under the limit. It's all a question of what you want, and how much you're willing to pay for it."

She stepped back up to the board and added a third line beneath the quote: THERE IS ALWAYS A PRICE.

"That's what this lecture is really all about. Because, see, you don't just pay for the bad stuff. You have to pay for the good stuff, too. Robbing a bank might cost you twenty years of your life, but so does becoming a neurosurgeon. And some of you have been trying to get a free ride—you're not willing accept the price of skipping class, but you haven't accepted the price of *taking* class, either. You're here, but not really—you're dozing off in the back, or you're writing passive-aggressive essays, or you're going home and complaining to Mommy and Daddy that your mean teacher hurt your feelings."

Leaning back against the board, she crossed her arms. "It's not going to fly. The petulant little kid act has to stop. You need to decide right now whether you're in or out—no more dragging your heels, no more getting your parents to fight your battles for you. For goodness' sake, you're twelve years old, or close enough—there've been *monarchs* younger than you. Those of us who are here to work don't need you whining in the background. I want your total cooperation, or I want you out of the way."

Silence reigned as she pointed to the door once more. For several long seconds, the class held its breath. Then—

"What about what *we* want?"

It was Jennifer, the girl in front of Conor, and her voice was laced with indignation. Conor couldn't see her face, but the rest of the class could; she had stopped hiding behind her

hands and now sat rigidly in her seat, arms crossed, a mirror image of their teacher.

"Pardon?" Ms. Palmano replied, arching an eyebrow.

"You keep going on about prices and payment and stuff, but you haven't said what we're paying *for*. You're telling us we have to cooperate, but you haven't given us any good reasons why, except that you'll throw us out if we don't. You sound like some kind of crummy stepmom trying to bully us into doing extra chores. Why should we say yes? What do *we* get out of it?"

"An education."

"But you're not teaching us anything! All you've done so far is throw out our papers and insult us!"

"And what did you learn from that?"

"That you're a total jerk and you *should* be fired!"

Jennifer's tone had risen with each exchange and was now not far from being a shriek. A shiver moved outward from her desk like the shockwave from an explosion, leaving behind expressions of horror, trepidation, admiration, and glee. Conor glanced across the aisle at Holt, whose eyes were wide over a disbelieving grin. In the back of his head, the part of his brain that spoke in Ashleigh's voice was speechless.

Ms. Palmano shook her head ruefully. "You say 'total jerk' like it's a bad thing."

"It is a bad thing! You're supposed to help us, not treat us like dirt!"

"I *am* helping you. This is lesson number one, and it has to be severe because I'm up against six years of teachers who've tried to ruin you. They've got you so programmed that you're not even prepared to admit the *possibility* that your work got exactly what it deserved. I'm trying to give you an honest opinion, and you're treating it like a personal attack."

"It is an attack. You threw my paper in the *garbage*."

"Your paper, not *you*. Don't you see the difference? If you're not willing to separate yourself from your failures, you'll never move past them. Putting your paper in the trash was a compliment—it means I think you can do better. If I'd really wanted to insult you, I'd have told you to be proud of it."

"You can tell people their writing needs work without making them *feel* bad."

"Not if their self-esteem is all wrapped up in being one of the smartest kids in seventh

grade, you can't."

Jennifer blushed, looking down at her desk. Ms. Palmano's face softened a little, and when she continued, it was in a gentler tone. "Look, I appreciate your point, Jennifer, but sooner or later, this is where we were going to end up. It's inevitable, given the way your generation's been taught. I could have done it more gently, brought you to it more slowly. But when we finally got there, the result would have been just as unpleasant, except instead of chucking out four days' worth of work, it might have been four weeks. Better to set the bar high right from the start than to keep twitching it out of reach every time you get close."

She shook her head, addressing the whole class again. "What you guys have to understand," she said, "what apparently no one has ever told you before, is that no matter how good you get, you are *always* capable of failure. Of producing work that is completely and utterly worthless. Some of you really are decent writers, but that doesn't mean that *what you actually wrote* was quality material. You have to break out of the trap of thinking that every word you put down is worth preserving. Nine times out of ten, it isn't."

She began to pace back and forth, gesturing with the marker still held in her hand. "The first thing you have to learn is that good writing isn't about the production of ideas. It's about the distillation of them. It's an experimental process. Put down ten sentences, and you're just trusting to luck. Put down a hundred, and cross out ninety, and things get a little more certain. Try out a thousand, and kill all but the ten best, and you've got yourself a winning paragraph. But if you're too proud to throw *away* the nine hundred and ninety, it won't even matter that the ten best are solid gold, because nobody's ever going to notice them under all the chaff."

Turning back to Jennifer, she spread her arms. "Your first try was bad. So what? *Everyone's* first try is bad. That's what second drafts are for. And third, and fourth, and fifth. It's my job to draw the line, to teach you the difference between what's worth saving and what isn't, so that every draft is actually better than the one before it. If nothing in your first run is worth saving, then you start from scratch. You may think I'm a jerk, but when it comes to getting useful feedback, a jerk is a far better resource than someone who's main concern is making sure you don't *feel* bad. I'd rather be too harsh than too gentle—at least that way, if you fail, it'll be because you *failed*, and not just because you were too lazy to get it right."



Lowering her arms, she held the younger girl's gaze, waiting. Conor looked around the room at his classmates, weighing their reactions. Here and there a defiant attitude still showed in a pair of crossed arms or furrowed eyebrows, but for the most part, people were nodding. The boy who'd been sinking in his seat was sitting up straight again, and for once not a single kid was dozing off or spacing out. Even Holt was taking it seriously, a thoughtful look wrinkling his forehead.

Conor lowered his eyes to the desk, trying to untangle his own thoughts. Once again, he was struck by just how much Ms. Palmano sounded like a kid—not in her tone or turn of phrase, which were trademark grownup, but in her almost hostile approach, the way she seemed to be daring them to disagree. For all that she'd just spent ten minutes lecturing, Conor didn't feel that she'd been talking *down* to them. It had been more like an argument than a lesson—and one she'd won fair and square, not just by being the one in charge.

Because she was right—there *were* no rules. At least, not the kind you believed in when you were little, the kind that were solid and real, that would stop you before you lit up a joint on a rooftop and put your classmate in the hospital. There were only suggestions, guidelines, threats, as intangible as the yellow lines on a road and crossed over just as easily. It was unnerving to think that what Ashleigh had done was not, at its core, a violation of the way the world worked. He'd simply quit playing along, and found nothing to contain him.

In front of him, Jennifer finally nodded, snapping the last thread of tension and kicking Ms. Palmano back into gear. "Paper and pencils, please," the teacher barked, clapping her hands.

There was a moment of wild hesitation, and then the room filled with noise as they scrambled for their bookbags and binders. "Your assignment," she called out over the sudden tumult, "is to respond to the quote on the board with at least three hundred words. That's about one sheet of notebook paper, front and back, or one page typed, size twelve. Say anything you like, as long as it's interesting and relevant—a successful paper is one that you're not embarrassed to read aloud and that your classmates aren't bored to listen to. For the rest of the period, you'll work in silence. If things go well, I'll allow you to whisper tomorrow, and we'll share on Friday. Bring your first three sentences up to me; I want to make sure you're on the right track before you waste too much time on a false start."

By the time she finished giving the directions, the room was still again, with no sound except the scratching of pencils. Taking one last look around the room, she nodded, then spun on her heel and strode back to her desk. All around Conor, students were squinting up at the board as they jotted down the pair of sentences.

Conor didn't need to look with them. He had already copied the quote into the little leatherbound journal. He stared at the page for a moment, and at the blank sheet of notebook paper beside it. Then he picked them both up and walked to the front of the room.

"Finished already, Conor?" Ms. Palmano asked quietly, her eyebrows raised again.

"No," Conor said. He showed her the previous page in the journal, where he had written down excerpts from Tuesday's speeches. "That quote. I was wondering—who said it?"

She studied him for a long moment, and he shifted nervously. Now that she was sitting and he standing, their eyes were nearly level, with her looking up at him slightly. She had a faint constellation of freckles across the smooth skin of her nose and cheeks that he hadn't noticed before.

"I imagine it's been said by a lot of people," she answered carefully. "It's a pretty common sentiment. This particular quote came from a book, a fantasy series. Forgive me, but if I recommended it to a seventh grader, I'd probably get fired." She shrugged. "Anyway, it wasn't said, exactly—it was a thought. The person thinking it had been a lord, but his family fell from power, and he ended up being sold as a slave a thousand miles away."

Conor glanced at the board. "Is he still—I mean, did he—"

"No. He chose to live."

"As a slave."

"Yes."

Conor looked back over his shoulder, at his classmates bent over their papers. "You didn't write that up there because of what me and Holt said, did you?" he asked. "You had this assignment planned out already. You wanted somebody to argue with you."

She laughed. "That character said something else you might like—'Why is it that when one man builds a wall, the next man immediately needs to know what's on the other side?'" Still smiling, she winked at him, and gestured back toward his seat.

He turned, walking slowly back down the aisle between the desks. Another wink—and

this one coupled with a special quote just for him. He felt a small swelling of pride as he slipped back into his seat. For once, he wasn't struggling to keep up or get ahead. Ms. Palmano liked him. This would be a good class.

He wondered what Ashleigh would make of it.

• • •

Wednesday was pizza day, and as they left fifth period, Conor broke away from Holt, threading his way through the crush at a near jog. His locker was in the wrong direction, so he skipped it, tucking his math book and the journal under his arm. He arrived at the cafeteria ahead of all but a dozen students; in two minutes, he was setting his tray down beside Nolan and Nicholas, who brought lunch from home. Turning his sweatshirt around backwards, he immediately went back for seconds, falling in beside Holt and snagging two more slices of pepperoni as the crowd rolled in behind them.

They were halfway back to their seats when Conor stopped abruptly, his elbow knocking over Holt's cup as the other boy swerved to avoid a collision. "Qué demonios, man?" Holt protested, apple juice spreading across his tray. He shot Conor an exasperated look, then fell silent as he followed Conor's stare toward the double doors of the entrance.

Guyler Stevens was back.

He was standing near the end of the line, hands in his pockets, his expression hooded as he looked out over the half-filled tables. Even from a distance, Conor could see the shadow of a black eye still lingering above his bandaged nose. A blue-and-gold headband stretched across his forehead, covering what would have been another bandage; if his fractured rib was dressed in any way, it didn't show beneath his uniform.

There was no crowd around him—no circle of friends, no gaggle of gossipmongers. A few of the nearby students were throwing sidelong looks at his face, but for the most part he was simply there, alone and anonymous. Conor watched as he shuffled forward, his movements abbreviated and stiff. There was a rack of clean trays where the line split in two, and he winced as he lifted one off the shelf.

It wasn't until Holt's hand fell on his shoulder that Conor realized he had started forward

again. He looked back to see his friend shaking his head. "Not now, dude," Holt warned.

"I wasn't—"

"Good. Don't." Holt held his gaze for a moment, then jerked his head toward their corner of the cafeteria. "Come on, let's eat." Letting go of Conor's shoulder, he turned and continued on, weaving his way between the chairs.

Conor hesitated a moment longer, his eyes flickering back toward the line as Guyler stepped up to the counter with his tray. Holt's suspicion was understandable, but misplaced. Conor had no intention of starting anything, not with fifteen teachers sitting half a breath away. Besides, there was nothing to fight about—Ashleigh had won, and Conor had no reason to take another pound out of Guyler's flesh.

What he *did* have was a sudden desire to kick himself. For a week and a half, he had been struggling to get through to Ashleigh, hoping to find answers, to sort out all of the confusion and uncertainty that had come from his friend's inexplicable viciousness. And in all that time, it had never occurred to him that Ashleigh was not his only source of information. Guyler had been there. Guyler knew everything.

*Right. And I'm sure he's real eager to sit down and talk it over with you.*

Then again, Conor *had* rescued him.

Sort of.

He sighed. Holt was right—now wasn't the time. He walked back to his table, where he discovered that he had lost not only his original seat, but also his first two slices of pizza.

"Seriously?" he grumbled, settling into one of the two remaining places.

"I traded you," Holt said, gesturing to his own sodden tray. "Mine's been marinated in apple juice. People pay extra for that."

Conor rolled his eyes. Reaching across the table, he grabbed his books, sliding them into his lap as Eddie sat down beside him.

As usual, the other boy wasted no time. "Did Jennifer really bitch out your teacher in first period?" he asked, looking eagerly back and forth between Conor and Holt.

Conor closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"I wouldn't say she bitched her out," Holt answered. "They were kind of bitching at each other. But Jennifer did say she was a jerk, and that she should've been fired." Someone gave

a low whistle, and Eddie laughed. "It wasn't a big deal, though," Holt continued. "She didn't even care, just said 'You act like that's a bad thing' and kept right on lecturing. I don't think Jennifer even got in trouble."

Nolan's voice floated across the table as Conor fumbled for a slice of pizza, his eyes still closed. "She must have been *pissed*, though. I mean, Jennifer? She doesn't exactly yell. Remember when Mr. Marowitz made her retake the proportions test because he thought she'd cheated to get a hundred?"

"Yeah. She got a 98 on the second try, right?"

"And that's what he put in the gradebook. She didn't say a word."

"Did her parents really call the principal about the paper thing?" Eddie broke in. "The ones she threw away?"

"No," said Holt. "Some people *did* try to get her fired. But Jennifer wasn't one of them."

Conor's eyes snapped open. "How do *you* know?"

Holt looked sheepish. "Ms. Palmano came to get us during break. All four of us."

"Wait. *You* were one of them? I thought she said they were all in the 'A' column."

"Hey, not *me*, man. Mi madre loca. And I guess she rounded up on the grades thing. Shireen, Katie, and William were all definitely in 'A.'"

"William who?"

"I think you called him Shorty McShortpants."

"That kid in front who always looks like he's having a heart attack?"

"What'd she say to you?" Nolan asked. "I've got her after lunch."

"Not much," Holt replied. "Said she wasn't mad, just disappointed. Said she likes students that question authority, but that we didn't really question her, just snuck around behind her back." Shrugging, he took a large bite out of his pizza.

"I guess that makes sense," said Eddie.

"Not really," Holt countered, his mouth full. "We *tried* to talk about it up front. On Monday, right after she threw our stuff away, everybody was arguing and complaining, but she didn't listen. I don't think she deserves to get fired, but she *was* being kind of a jerk."

Conor privately disagreed. Ms. Palmano had been dismissive, sure, but it wasn't like they'd given her an honest chance to explain. They'd just started shouting like a bunch of

angry kindergarteners. And she had offered to go into more detail—it wasn't *her* fault that none of them had taken her up on it.

He said nothing, though, and the conversation quickly moved on. He finished his first slice of pizza as Eddie told a story from his own English class, then started on his second as Holt and Nolan discussed tryouts for the school soccer team. By the time he picked up his brownie, they were on to the latest gossip, and Conor let his attention wander, barely listening to Nicholas' tale of a drug bust in the hall during third period. Looking out across the crowded cafeteria, he searched for Guyler's face.

There. The battered boy had seated himself at an empty table in the corner behind Conor, near the row of desks reserved for students on silent lunch. He seemed to be picking at his food rather than eating it, one hand propping up his chin while the other idly twirled a plastic fork. Every so often, he would raise his head to look around, his face flat and unreadable. Conor glanced away each time, unwilling to risk having his interest misconstrued.

The third time this happened, Conor's eyes caught on one of Guyler's neighbors, a tall boy sitting a few feet away at one of the silent lunch desks. He was thin and pale, with a light dusting of facial hair. He was holding a book open with one hand, his eyes darting back and forth across the pages while the other hand shoveled pizza into his mouth. There was at once something odd and something familiar about him, and Conor frowned, trying to make the connection.

After a moment, it clicked. The boy was wearing a uniform where before he'd been dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, but Conor had seen him before, during lunch in the first week of school, when three other students had sent him sprawling to the floor.

Three other *high* school students. He was on the wrong side of the cafeteria. Impossible—crossing the boundary was such a sure and swift path to suspension that students regularly used it to avoid upcoming tests—but there it was. Looking more closely, Conor guessed that he was at least sixteen years old, probably a junior.

Twisting in his seat, Conor checked the staff table. The boy must have been sitting there with permission—the silent lunch section was under constant scrutiny, and at least three teachers were looking in his general direction at that very moment. Was it possible that he had been sent there as a punishment? Conor had never heard of a high school student earn-

ing silent lunch. They usually just got regular detention.

He turned back to Holt, Guyler temporarily forgotten, keen to discuss this new peculiarity. The previous conversation was still in full swing, though, and before he could open his mouth, Eddie pre-empted him. "Back me up, Conor," the other boy insisted. "You and Ashleigh found a whole bag full on the roof, didn't you?"

Horribly wrong-footed, Conor just stared, his jaw hanging open. Several seconds passed, during which the rest of the table looked on expectantly. "I—what?"

Holt laughed. "You haven't been listening at all, have you? Space cadet—no wonder you're failing math." He nodded toward Nolan's little brother. "They busted into Louis Richardson's locker this morning. Nick saw it—his third period's right by the bathrooms, across from the eighth grade lockers. They found a whole mess of pills in his bookbag."

"I think he got them from one of the Central guys," Nolan declared.

"And I say bull," Eddie shot back. "Louis was smoking pot by the band room all last year. Just because everybody's all worried about the Central guys bringing in drugs doesn't mean they're the only ones who have them."

"Pot's different from pills."

"If you're using it, maybe. Not if you're selling it. Drugs are drugs."

"That's a *lot* of drugs, though. Nobody at Binder has a stash like that. Nicholas said the bag was, like, this big." Nolan held up his hands. "You couldn't even sell half of that."

"Oh, come on. You're being—whatchamacallit—naïve. There's *tons* of deals going on over on the high school side." Eddie turned to Conor again. "How big was the bag you and Ashleigh found?"

Conor's lips moved soundlessly as he struggled to assimilate Eddie's offhand familiarity with his erstwhile secret. "I don't—I mean, how did you—*what*?" he stammered.

"Oh, knock it off, we're not gonna tell," said Eddie, rolling his eyes. "It was a big one, right? One of those gallon ones." He rounded on Nolan. "Whole thing, full of pot. I'm telling you, there are legit drug dealers around here. My sister went to this party when she was a junior where people were doing ecstasy in the bathroom. Louis could've got that stuff from anybody."

"Looked to me like they were going to get it from *him*," Nicholas put in.

"Either way, point is—" Eddie broke off midsentence as Conor seized his wrist. "What?" he asked, annoyed.

Conor fought to keep his voice steady as he felt his face growing hot. "How do you know about the bag?" he growled, the words striking like flint past clenched teeth. Around the table, the other boys went still, their expressions sobering. Eddie frowned and tried to pull his arm away, but Conor held fast.

"What the hell, man?" Eddie protested. "Ash told me—what do you think?" He twisted, wrenching Conor's elbow, but Conor only tightened his grip, his fingernails biting into Eddie's skin as his knuckles turned white.

"When?"

"I don't know, three days ago?"

"What? How?"

"What do you mean, how? He just told me. We were talking, and it came up."

"Talking *where*?"

"Online. He's grounded, isn't he? We were playing some stupid first person shooter."

"What else did he tell you?"

"*Nothing*, Jesus," Eddie snapped. "You going to let me go? Dickhead?" Conor's fingers twitched, and Eddie snatched his arm back, rubbing at his wrist as the blood began to flow back into his hand. "What the fuck was *that* about?" he demanded.

Conor didn't answer. His pulse throbbed in his ears, drowning out the sound of the other boy's voice. He felt his eyes burning, and he whirled away, hiding his face lest his tears be seen and misunderstood. He wasn't sad, he was *stunned*, a flood of outrage and betrayal seething under a layer of pure disbelief. To have waited for a week and a half with no word, to have run the half-mile and back every afternoon, to have written page after page in the little leatherbound journal only to find that Eddie—*Eddie*—had been in touch with Ashleigh all along—

It was too much to bear. Dropping his head into his hands, he poured every last scrap of self-control into sitting absolutely still, holding back the tide as the conversation slowly picked up again behind him. Not until he heard Holt's laughter did he let go, and even then he held his shoulders level, his breathing shallow, willing himself to be invisible.



Eventually, the bell rang. He remained motionless, head bowed, as the crowd surged around him, as Eddie and Nolan and Nicholas vanished and as Holt—who he sensed lingering—gave up and walked away. Bit by bit the roar diminished, until it collapsed into a mere collection of smaller sounds, the chatter and clatter of the last handful of students. Straightening, he opened his eyes, finding as he did so that he was not the only one who'd waited for everyone else to leave.

For a long moment, he and Guyler Stevens stared at one another across the field of empty tables, each frozen in the spotlight of the other's gaze. There was nothing meaningful about it—no flash of understanding, no sudden sense of kinship, no urgent unspoken messages. They were simply stuck, neither one able or willing to look away.

Then the moment passed, and Conor picked up his tray and headed for the doors. He didn't look back.

• • •

By the time he turned the corner onto Ashleigh's street, Conor had picked up seven pebbles, three shards of gravel, and two actual rocks. They rubbed together in his jacket pocket, rattling as he walked. Every so often, he would reach in and fondle them, letting them spill through his fingers. The largest was always the last to fall, clinging stubbornly to the palm of his hand.

It was almost one o'clock, and the neighborhood was sound asleep, the light from the streetlamps scattering over sleek hybrids and muscular SUVs, the brick mailboxes standing like sentries along the whitewashed curb. Conor padded softly down the sidewalk, his sneakers whispering against the concrete, rehearsing his grievances in his head.

For the first time in days, he had skipped both the run and his afternoon practice session, leaving Ashleigh's books with Timothy on the bus and closing himself in his room as soon as he arrived home. It had been only ten when his parents went to bed, tiptoeing past his door on their way upstairs, but he'd spent the following two and a half hours arguing with himself, weighing the urgency of his anger against the cost of getting caught. In the end, it was the thought of Ms. Palmano that got him up and out the door—her voice had replaced Ash-

leigh's in his head, and he had no answer when she asked what was holding him back.

There was no sign of life as he turned into Ashleigh's driveway. A single light shone over the front door, but otherwise, the house was dark. Ms. Falhanner was out at her second job; it would be just Ashleigh and Timothy in the house.

The driveway lay in deep shadow, shielded by the wall of the garage and the cluster of trees in the front yard. Conor stopped at the halfway mark, beneath the old, rusted basketball hoop that Ashleigh's father had installed the year before he left. Pulling a pebble from his pocket, he looked up at his friend's bedroom window and took careful aim at the reflection of the moon in the center pane.

The first pebble bounced off the glass with a sound like a snapping twig. Instantly, the dog next door sounded the alarm, its barks unsettlingly loud as they split the still night air. Fighting a primal urge to hide, Conor kept his eyes locked on the window, waiting for a tell-tale twitch in the drawn curtains. He counted to thirty, slowly, and then readied his next missile.

Six more times he let fly, and six more times a quiet click was all he got in return. Shortly thereafter the dog lost interest, offering one last growl before going back to sleep. There was an apprehensive quality to the silence that followed, a sense of space waiting to be filled. Conor reached into his pocket to feel the stones that still remained — three little, two big.

Consequences.

The news of Ashleigh's casual betrayal had kindled a fire beneath him, hardening his resolve, burning through his last shreds of patience and compassion. It was no longer a question of respect, of giving his friend the space he needed to recover. Whatever confusion or anger the other boy had been feeling, whatever shame had sent him into hiding, he'd obviously had more than enough time to get over it. An explanation — if not an outright apology — was long overdue, and Conor was done politely waiting. They were going to talk this out whether Ashleigh felt like it or not.

So he told himself, anyway, ignoring for the moment the question of what he would actually do if Ashleigh *didn't* feel like it. He spent the afternoon playing out the scene in his head, readying his arguments, polishing his comebacks. Little of what he imagined was civil, but that was fine — any wrath he might incur by breaking his friend's self-imposed quaran-

tine would be more than worth it if it led to a rally in their friendship. At this point, even bitter words would be better than nothing. They'd had fights before. Fights, they could handle.

Yet as he squeezed the remaining stones, feeling their sharp edges dig into the palm of his hand, he had no choice but to acknowledge the intrinsic inferiority of his position. Ashleigh held the high ground, literally as well as figuratively—Conor could force no confrontation without the other boy's consent. For nearly five minutes, he'd stood waiting in the darkness. He'd knocked at the window seven times with no response.

Maybe silence was all Ashleigh was willing to give him.

He looked back up at the curtains, hanging slack behind the moonlit glass. It seemed to him that they moved, infinitesimally, as if from the breath of an invisible person.

No. No, that wasn't it. Ashleigh was still asleep—Conor just needed to make a louder signal, that was all.

It was denial, and on some level he knew it, just as he'd known it under the shed on the first day of school. But he clung to it, because the list of justifications for Ashleigh's behavior was short and growing shorter. Whatever his reasons for shutting himself away, a rejection at this point—without cause or explanation—would cross the line from self-absorption into outright hostility. It would mean he didn't care what Conor had to say. It would mean he had no interest in seeing things get better.

Drawing the smallest chunk of gravel from his pocket, Conor moved forward until he stood almost directly beneath the window. He threw underhanded, launching the rock straight up so that it knocked gently against the frame. Reaching out, he caught it as it fell, took aim and threw again.

On his fifth toss, he thought he saw a flicker of movement, a slight change in the folds of the curtains. A surge of emotion ran up his spine as he stepped back, letting the rock fall to the driveway where it tumbled off into the darkness. "Ashleigh?" he called out, his voice a hoarse compromise between a whisper and a shout.

There was no answer. He counted to thirty again.

"Ashleigh?" he called a second time.

Nothing. He grabbed the second chunk of gravel and threw it where he stood. It hit the center pane with a solid thunk and fell to the concrete. Next door, the dog began to bark

again, but in the window — nothing.

Stepping back further, until the moon's reflection appeared once more, he hefted the third piece of gravel. This time he threw overhanded, lobbing it as gently as he could. There was a loud, echoing crack as it connected with one of the upper panes, and a thin spiderweb of lines appeared, crisscrossing the image of the shining crescent.

The curtains moved.

This time, he was sure of it — they had pulled apart, and even now hung slightly open, a sliver of blackness between them. "Ashleigh!" he shouted again, making no effort to keep his voice down.

The curtains closed.

It was as if time had stopped. Or rather, as if it had gone into a loop, with the same empty moment repeating itself over and over again, marked by the steady barking of the dog next door. Conor waited, expecting to feel a flash of rage, a wave of grief — *something* to mark the fact that they had just passed the point of no return. But there was nothing, only a distant chill that settled gently over him, leaving him calm and detached.

He put his hand into his pocket, drawing out the last two rocks. They were the size of chicken eggs, with jagged edges and flecks of mica gleaming in the moonlight. He tried to recall his reasons for having them, what he'd been thinking when he first picked them up, but he couldn't remember. Letting the smaller one fall, he bounced the larger one in his palm and looked to the window.

*It's all a question of what you want, and how much you're willing to pay for it.*

Ms. Palmano's voice in his head was clipped, brusque, and matter-of-fact. Conor couldn't begin to guess what it was that Ashleigh wanted. But whatever it was, he was obviously willing to pay for it with their friendship. It had taken ten days, but Conor had finally gotten the message — all that remained was the sending of an appropriate response.

He threw the rock. It crashed into the wooden frame between the panes, splintering it and sending shards of glass into Ashleigh's bedroom. More glass fell to the driveway, glittering in the moonlight, shattering into dust as it hit the pavement. He watched the curtains as they twitched open, then spun on his heel and walked off into the night.

• • •

It took Conor an hour to get to the school, but only five minutes to reach the roof. He paced back and forth across it as he caught his breath, kicking aside the stones, recreating the path that led up to Binder's Gap. When he finished, he paused at the edge, looking out at the gymnasium below.

The evidence of his previous landing was still there, the rough gouges casting long shadows in the slanting light of the setting moon. It looked somehow closer, as if the buildings had huddled together in the darkness.

Conor was afraid of the dark. He always had been. But during the summer with Ashleigh, he had made an important discovery. It didn't take an act of bravery to overcome fear, only a sense of purpose. Terror crept in when you let your mind wander, when every sound competed for your attention and your imagination had nothing else to do. To keep it at bay, you had to become the hunter, the chaser instead of the chased. You never let the darkness sneak up on you—*you* snuck up on *it*, and let the rumblings of monsters lead you in for the kill.

Tonight, Conor was the predator at his peak. The cold that had filled him outside Ashleigh's house had taken root in his chest as he walked away, leaving no room for anxiety or fatigue. Restless, he had started to run, and when a wall loomed in his path, he discovered that there was something in him that would not be turned aside. Flowing over and past it, he became Batman—only instead of honing his skills, he was testing them, blazing a trail at odd angles to the maze of streets and houses. He climbed fences, pushed through hedges, and jumped creeks until he reached the commercial district, and then he made his way across the rooftops, scrambling up drainpipes and dropping down into dumpsters. He paid no heed to the noise he was making—by the time anyone arrived to investigate, he would be half a block away, shielded by the glare of security lights.

After only a week and a half of running, his stamina was already markedly better. In the hour after he left the driveway, he covered two full miles of up-and-down terrain, and once he reached the school he did the climb in record time, pausing only once, at the bottom of the pipe. Though his forehead dripped with sweat, his breathing was steady as he spun away

from the edge and strode to the center of the roof.

He could barely comprehend the fear and hesitation he'd felt throughout the summer. His limbs tingled with energy, an electric pulse that crackled at his hips and shoulders where it met the ice that filled his center. This must be how it felt to be Ashleigh—try as he might, he could not summon even a shadow of trepidation as he considered the horizon in front of him. There was nothing to it—a quick run, an easy jump, and a short flight with a smooth landing. He couldn't screw it up if he tried.

*Ashleigh managed to, though, didn't he?*

Conor shook his head. That was different. Ashleigh hadn't botched it, he had *quit*—and rightly so. He was a dabbler, a tourist, a weekend warrior. He had no business messing around with something like the Gap. Only Conor truly understood it. Only Conor was prepared. For two months, it had been the very center of his world.

*No matter how good you get, you are always capable of failure.*

He smiled, a quick tightening of his lips, invisible in the gloom. Yes, that was true. No amount of practice could take chance out of the picture. There were a hundred things that could go wrong—a piece of gravel slipping underfoot, a catch of the toe on the raised metal edge, a fatal hesitation or a sudden change of heart. He could trip, he could fall, he could die.

But he wasn't going to.

He allowed himself the luxury of a countdown, savoring the penultimate moment. Adrenaline surged through his body, for once untainted by anger or fear. As he took his final breath, the furrow in the gravel seemed to grow, swelling until it filled his vision, drawing him in. He let go and found himself running, his steps so swift that they seemed to make no noise at all, as if he were running on air. Then came the edge, and for a moment he *did* run on air, until gravity reclaimed him and he plummeted toward the gymnasium roof.

He landed with a meteoric crunch, his hands and feet driving into the gravel like battering rams. Instantly, he tumbled, shedding momentum as he rolled across his back and up onto his feet, still running. He staggered half a dozen more steps before he was able to stop, falling to his knees as the world continued to spin.

It was *life itself*, this feeling that welled up inside him. It lit up the ice in his chest like a sunbeam striking a prism, refracting into a thousand shades of delight. Throwing back his

head, he laughed for what felt like the first time in years, letting loose an unbridled whoop that echoed between the empty buildings. Spreading his arms, he collapsed onto his back, looking up at the stars as he felt his palms beginning to swell.

Nothing was different; nothing had changed. The weight upon his shoulders had not shifted half an inch. But for the briefest, most fleeting of moments, it had ceased to matter. The pressure had vanished in freefall, leaving him bound but unburdened, and the memory was like a talisman. It dwindled as he climbed down from the roof, but it could not be extinguished. *There is a larger world than this one*, it reminded him. One where lawless schools and broken friendships didn't seem to loom so large.

And in that world, Conor Moreton could fly.