

Chapter 1 – Confessions

“Look, I can see why you *like* him more. Better movies, cooler costume, *much* nicer car, not to mention the fact that you’d look hot as Robin—”

“Oh, screw you.”

“—all that yellow, and the mask would totally bring out your eyes—”

“Screw. You.”

“—but what I don’t get is how you think Batman is *actually better* than Spiderman.”

“Brains. Gear. Ninja training.”

“Whatever. Super strength, super speed, sticks to walls and ceilings. Plus, Spidey invented the web slingers himself, so don’t try to play like Batman’s the only one who knows how to put together good tech.”

“I thought the web slingers were part of the whole spider powers thing.”

“Have you ever actually read a comic book?”

“Super isn’t everything. Batman’s hardcore.”

“Puh-lease. Super beats non-super every time. Spider sense alone tops all of Batman’s combat training. You can’t punch what isn’t there.”

“They’re not fighting *each other!*”

“Only ‘cause Batsy wouldn’t be dumb enough to try it.”

“You’re missing the point. Power level isn’t what makes Batman cool. It’s not about him being the best in some make-believe pissing contest.”

“What is it, then?”

“Look, Spiderman, Superman, Wolverine—whatever. But Batman—you could really *do* that. Anybody could.”

“You mean, anybody with a few billion dollars and a mental disorder?”

“No. I mean *anybody*.”

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There were police cars waiting in the front circle — four of them.

Conor cursed as he ducked back behind the corner of the cafeteria, then cursed again as he realized his mistake. *Oh, nothing suspicious here, officer, just playing hide and seek.*

Slowly, carefully, he eased back around the corner, slipping quietly behind one of the squat holly bushes planted along the front of the building. No one had noticed his sudden movement — at least, no one was looking or walking his way — and so he relaxed, settling his back against the wall behind the screen of leaves and branches.

Like the library opposite, the cafeteria extended out well beyond the rest of the school, the two buildings like arms sheltering the parking lot between them. Conor had come around the back side of the squat structure, where it butted up against the school's outer wall, avoiding the crowded interior. The roundabout path had brought him to the farthest end of the lot, so that he now stood looking in, peering past the parked cars to the front circle.

His original plan had been fairly straightforward. This far out, there was nobody watching; he could simply join in with the trickle of high schoolers coming from the cars, or with the streams of younger students pouring from the buses parked along the side.

But in the circle, where there should have been a double row of parents dropping off the car riders, a single line of traffic crawled past four patrol cars parked in the curbside lane. The cars were widely spaced, forming a long, broken wall between the lot and the courtyard beyond, and three pairs of uniformed officers stood like guards in the gaps. Conor watched as they funneled the arriving students between them, directing kids and cars alike with clipped, military gestures. They spoke with each student individually, sometimes pulling one aside for a few moments before letting him — it was always a boy — move forward.

Conor sucked in his breath. Adrenaline flooded his veins as his mind leapt immediately to the obvious and paranoid conclusion — *they're looking for me*. He sank deeper behind the bush, pulled his pale arms into his dark sleeves to make himself less visible.

But no — they couldn't be. No one knew about the bag or the gap, and he hadn't done anything else even remotely deserving of police attention. Trespassing on school grounds

the day before, maybe, but *four* patrol cars? Several long seconds passed as Conor struggled to get a grip, to force his brain back to reality.

If they're after anyone, it's got to be Ashleigh.

This was not particularly reassuring. The only reason for them to be after Ashleigh was Guyler, and Conor tried not to imagine what about Guyler's condition might call for four cars to be sent to East Binder Secondary School. Once again, he felt the dread that had seized him before the climb, the helplessness that had filled him on the rooftop. The presence of the police meant the end of his hopes that all of this would blow over, would turn out to be no big deal. The world was spinning out of control; things that had always seemed remote and impossible were suddenly real and immediate, and Conor was unprepared. It occurred to him that this was the first time in his life that he'd felt fear from looking at a cop.

Where are you, Ash?

For the hundredth time that morning, the thousandth time since the afternoon before, Conor wished his friend were there, wished they weren't each facing this situation alone.

So go find him, retard. If they're looking for him, it means they don't have him. If they're looking for him here, it means he's not at home.

Which also meant he wasn't grounded, as Conor had assumed, and that it wasn't his mom who was keeping him from answering his phone or email. Was it possible that he'd gone completely off the grid, was skipping school entirely and might not be findable at all?

No. No, he'd be here. Conor would bet on it. For one thing, strange silence or no, Conor felt certain that Ashleigh would be looking for him, too, would want to talk just as badly as Conor did. For another, this was exactly the sort of game that Ashleigh loved to play. Conor straightened, looking back through the leaves at the cordon, where the cops were still filtering kids through, one by one.

He'll see them a mile away, Conor thought. He'll see them, and he'll take it as a challenge. He knows they'll catch up to him eventually, but he'll get as far as he can before they do. Homeroom, maybe, or maybe just our spot in the courtyard, but he won't back down when he sees them all lined up like this.

Slipping back out from behind the bush, Conor turned the corner and began retracing his steps behind the cafeteria. He was fairly sure they would have let him through, but he'd get

to the courtyard some other way. Confidence wasn't certainty, and he wouldn't know until too late which of his assumptions might turn out to be wrong. Safety before simplicity—whatever else might have changed, that was still how it worked.

At least, he hoped so.

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There were over a thousand students waiting in the courtyard between the front circle and the office. They sprawled across the open space in knots and clumps, drifting from one reunion to the next, laughing and shouting as they revived half-remembered rituals with half-forgotten friends. Those nearest to Conor were all frighteningly large—juniors and seniors, some of them twice his height and three times his weight. He pushed in among them, dodging high-fives and hacky-sacks, ignoring cries of “Go, Diego, go!” and “Watch it, fun size,” as he threaded his way toward the library. The voices followed him, but not many, and none for very long. There were rules for moving through a crowd like this one, and Conor followed all of them—head up, eyes down, bookbag tight on both shoulders, and above all, keep moving, even if it meant turning sideways or doubling back.

It would have been easier, he knew, to walk around the edges of the courtyard, hugging the buildings or even ducking deeper into campus as he crossed over from the high school side to the area where his own classmates were waiting. But the press of bodies made for good cover, especially if any of the teachers had noticed a small shape slipping out from behind the cafeteria.

It was a strange feeling, the need to avoid notice, the tight prickle of heat on the back of his neck whenever he caught sight of an adult between the shoulders of the other students. Conor had broken plenty of rules in his life, had run from neighbors and teachers and construction site managers, had hidden from security guards while playing soldier at night near the old folks' home. But always before his wariness had been tied to what he was doing, and had vanished as soon as he stopped doing it. This was different—a sort of lingering paranoia, as though he still carried the bag in his pocket and Guyler's blood on his shirt. It made him feel vulnerable, unclean. He was glad when he passed under the central flagpole and

over to the middle school side — at least then he was no longer out-of-bounds.

The crowds on the middle school side were thinner, and other students began to call and wave as he passed, casual acquaintances from hallways and classes. He nodded back to them, not slowing as he headed for his and Ashleigh's usual spot. There were maybe five minutes left before first bell; if the other boy really was there, they wouldn't have much time to talk.

Approaching the library, Conor angled for the entrance, a long, wide passageway sandwiched between two extended wings of the building. Not many students chose to wait there — it was comfortable enough, lined with benches and columns and covered by another aluminum awning, but the double doors it led to remained locked after the bell, which meant the students would have to walk back out across the courtyard behind everybody else. Their usual spot was in a corner all the way at the very end, invisible until you were almost on top of it —

Conor blinked.

The corner was occupied, but not by Ashleigh, nor by any of their other friends. Instead, there were three small boys he'd never seen before, sitting on their bookbags, playing cards. They took absolutely no notice of him, and he opened his mouth — whether to challenge them or interrogate them he couldn't have said — and just as quickly closed it again.

The two adjacent nooks were also occupied by total strangers. After a year at East Binder, Conor knew the faces of every other middle schooler, from lunch and PE and recess. Obviously, these were all new students, but that didn't explain why they were all gathered together *here*, in *his* spot —

Oh. Stupid.

Sixth graders.

What with the climb, the bag, and the police cordon, Conor had completely forgotten that two hundred new kids would be entering the school for the very first time that day — lining up for class schedules, nervously practicing the combinations on their locks, and getting lost on their way to the bathrooms. Looking around, he confirmed it — the few other kids he'd brushed past on his way in were all undersized, and one of them he recognized from elementary school. An echo of a voice rose up in his memory, the drone of a teacher directing

traffic a year earlier: *"Sixth graders by the library, eighth graders by the flagpole, seventh graders in between. Sixth graders by the library...."*

He sighed. That meant that his spot was no longer his spot, that Ashleigh could be anywhere—if he was anywhere at all—and that even if they did somehow find each other in the next four minutes, any conversation they had would take place practically in front of the principal's window. Frustrated, he turned to head back out into the courtyard—

And stopped again.

It was a sign of their naïveté that none of the kids in the passageway had reacted to Conor's presence. That would change, and quickly—one of the first things a new East Binder student picked up was an almost radarlike ability to detect people who didn't belong. It was a necessary talent in a school where half the bullies had at least two years on you, second in usefulness only to the skill of disappearing instantly into a crowd.

But with less than an hour under their belts, and having been at the top of the food chain a summer ago, none of the newly minted sixth graders were on the lookout for trouble. They had paid no attention to Conor, just as they paid no attention to the three older boys who were just now swaggering into the passageway from the courtyard.

The middle one was familiar, a seventh grader—*no, an eighth grader, now*—named Craig Eichardt. He rode Conor's bus, alternating between tormenting the smaller kids at the front and sucking up to the thugs at the back. He'd had a few run-ins with Conor and Ashleigh the year before, and they'd faced him down easily enough, but it hadn't stopped him from trying to make their lives miserable, along with anyone else who happened to be short or look nervous. Conor didn't know the names of the other two boys, but they were no less familiar. The looks on their faces were identical to Eichardt's, a harmony of casual cruelty.

Not your problem, Conor.

He began walking slowly back toward the exit, head down, watching from the corner of his eye as he drifted to the far side of the passageway. They had zeroed in on a group of sixth grade boys and were looming over them, laughing, pressing them back against the brick wall of the library. One of them reached out and snatched the hat off a kid's head; in response another kid dropped his bookbag and pushed to the front, his hands clenched into fists. The kid yelled something back at the older boys, who only laughed harder.

Not. Your. Problem.

He drifted even further to the side, hoping—and hating himself for it—that he would be able to slip past unnoticed. It wasn't entirely cold self-interest—there was still a chance he could find Ashleigh outside, and that took priority over random acts of kindness. Besides, Conor recognized the pattern of what was happening, and helping wouldn't help. Eichardt had no particular interest in these sixth graders, felt no specific malice toward them. He and his cronies were just trolling the area, looking for easy targets, establishing the pecking order. They'd call some names, maybe push the kid with the fists around a bit, and then slither off before the teachers showed up, no real harm done. They weren't looking for trouble—just the opposite. They were trying to prevent trouble down the line. It would all be over in two minutes as long as nobody did anything stupid.

All that would change if Conor stepped in. Suddenly it would no longer be a forgettable first-day shakedown, but a question of reputation, of honor—a challenge to Eichardt's authority. And then they really *would* get hammered, Conor and fist-kid and maybe the rest of them, too, as a lesson to every sixth grader in sight. Better for all of them if that particular lesson didn't get taught.

He was almost past them, only five steps away, when three things happened in quick succession:

Eichardt reached out and shoved the kid with the fists, who staggered back into the wall behind him.

The kid rebounded, shouting in fury, and as Conor heard his voice and looked directly at him for the first time, his jaw dropped in recognition.

And as Eichardt turned to laugh with his cronies, Timothy Falhanner dealt him a savage kick that landed squarely in the center of his left shin.

Timothy — Ashleigh's little brother.

Eichardt went down, hard, and before the other two eighth graders could react, Timothy had snatched his friend's hat back and darted away, the rest of his group scattering. One of the bullies followed, chasing three of the younger kids out into the courtyard; the other leaned over to help a fuming, cursing Eichardt back to his feet.

Conor stood frozen in shock. So quickly had it happened that he had not even had time

to form a coherent thought. What had started out as *not his problem* had very definitely become *his problem*—he couldn't have left Ashleigh's brother in the hands of a bully on the first day of school. Only, what was he supposed to do *now*?

"The *fuck* you looking at, bitch?" Eichardt was standing, his face red as he tried gingerly to put weight on his leg. Conor took a step back, raising his hands in silent answer. Satisfied, the eighth grader snorted and turned away, taking short, shuffling steps with his left foot as he and his friend walked back out into the courtyard.

And just like that, it was over. The younger kids around Conor were just as stunned as he was; more than one mouth was hanging open. Slowly, chatter resumed as it became clear the bullies weren't coming back.

There was a bookbag lying on the ground where the confrontation had taken place. Walking over, Conor picked it up. It was patched and battered, with the initials AMF on it, and he recognized it immediately. Ashleigh's old bookbag, the one Timothy had shucked just before stepping up to defend his buddy.

He looked around, feeling helpless. None of Timothy's friends remained anywhere in sight, and he doubted he would be able to find the younger boy in the courtyard with only a minute or two left until first bell. He couldn't just leave it there; he'd have to wait for Timothy to double back for it. Sighing heavily, he sat down.

"Conor?"

The voice was that of an adult. Turning, Conor saw a man entering the passageway from the courtyard. It was his math teacher from the previous year, one he'd gotten along well with. Quickly, he stood back up. "Hi, Mr. Marowitz."

"What are you doing here? Seventh graders should be out in front of the office."

"Yeah, I...." He hesitated. "I forgot. I was looking for Ashleigh. This is where we used to hang out."

Mr. Marowitz gave him a sharp look, and Conor wondered if he knew about Guyler. "Ashleigh's in the office right now. You're supposed to be, too, actually. They've been calling for you out in the courtyard."

Conor's heart sank. "Sorry, I didn't hear. I only got here a minute ago."

"Well, you'd better head on down, then." He started to move, but stopped as the teacher

held up a hand. "I don't suppose that bag belongs to one of the sixth graders that tore out of here about ten seconds ago, does it?"

"What—oh." Conor glanced down at the second bookbag in his hands. "Yeah, it does." Catching the look on Mr. Marowitz's face, he hastened to explain. "I didn't take it from him. It was—it belongs to Timothy. Timothy Falhanner. He's Ashleigh's little brother, he's starting sixth grade this year."

The teacher nodded slowly. "I see," he said, clearly waiting for more. For a moment, Conor considered filling him in. Mr. Marowitz had always been pretty fair—he was not, for instance, the kind of teacher who would run a kid in for kicking a bully in self-defense—and there was bound to be trouble between Timothy and Eichardt down the road. It might help to have a grownup keeping an eye out.

But just then the bell rang, and before he could open his mouth, the other students began flowing around them, heading for the main doors at the front of the school. Changing his mind, he held the bag out. "Can you get it to him? I don't know which homeroom he's in."

Mr. Marowitz must have picked up something in Conor's expression, because he didn't press the issue. Reaching out, he took the bag. "He's in mine, actually. I'll give it to him."

"Thanks."

They turned and began walking together, following the last of the new sixth graders out into the courtyard, where a scrum had formed around the doors. As they waited, Mr. Marowitz spoke again. "So, ready for seventh grade?"

Ha. "Sure, I guess."

"Sad that summer's over?"

Not after yesterday. "I kind of like fall."

Mr. Marowitz nodded. They fell silent again, pushing through the doors and into the front hallway, where a large blue-and-gold banner proclaimed WELCOME BACK, BULLDOGS! When they reached the office, Mr. Marowitz said "Well, good luck," and continued on down the hallway. Conor turned right and went inside.

He looked immediately for Ashleigh, but the other boy wasn't sitting in the office lobby. Instead, there were six or seven other students in the chairs around the room, and a handful of teachers and parents vying for the lone secretary's attention. It was several minutes before

she noticed him, at which point she ushered him down a short hallway and into a small, deserted lounge. Depositing him on a couch, she knocked sharply on a door marked *Asst. Principal*, told him to wait until called for, and disappeared just as the tardy bell rang, leaving him alone in limbo.

Conor put his head in his hands.

Ready for seventh grade?

Not really, no.

The lounge was warm, stuffy, and quiet as a Saturday sunrise. A clock ticked softly on the wall across from him, and he closed his eyes, feeling the heartbeats in his forehead as they took turns marking time. For the first time since the afternoon before, he felt like the rollercoaster had stopped.

It seemed to Conor that he'd spent days off balance, just trying to hang on. First the weed, then the jump—the fight, the ambulance, and Ashleigh's disappearance—the bag, the cops, and now Timothy and *Eichardt*, of all things—always reacting, never prepared, unable to do anything except pick up the pieces. Finding Ashleigh before the grownups did had been his final gambit, his last pretense at retaining control, but he'd missed it, they had him, and Conor was finally ready to let somebody else take over the job of making it all up as they went along.

Go ahead, ask me anything. I can say "I don't know" in English and Spanish.

There was a sharp click, and an unfamiliar voice came on over the intercom.

"Good morning, students and staff, and welcome back to another year at East Binder Secondary School. My name is Everett Sykes, and I will be joining you this year as your new assistant principal. I have just a few brief announcements for you before we all get down to business."

The words were dry, clipped, and precise, wasting no time or energy. Conor was mildly surprised—he hadn't heard that they were getting a new AP. He wasn't sure whether that would be good or bad. He'd known the old one, Mr. Benson, since the first day of sixth grade, when he and Ashleigh had been caught impersonating absent students to steal their locker combinations. They had been sent to him a handful of times after that—never for anything serious, just minor pranks and hallway scuffles.

Almost all of which, now that Conor thought about it, had involved Guyler Stevens in one way or another. Would that make a difference? Yesterday hadn't happened in isolation—there was a long history of bad blood between Guyler and Ashleigh, with fault and provocation on both sides. Would this new Mr. Sykes take that into account? Or would the unprecedented brutality of this particular fight overshadow all that, so that it stood out as the only incident in its category? Conor knew which would be better for his friend, but as he thought once more of Guyler's ruined face, he found himself wondering—not for the first time—whether Ashleigh *should* be given the benefit of the doubt.

If I just knew what had actually happened down there....

But there was no point wishing for *that* anymore. At least, not until he'd had a chance to talk to Ashleigh alone, which wouldn't be until all of this had already been decided.

"...and for those new students who still have not purchased the school uniform, this is a reminder that you have until Friday to do so. After that, uniforms will be required for all classes and at all school functions. Thank you for your attention, and go Bulldogs."

The voice clicked off. Almost immediately, the door to the assistant principal's office swung open, revealing a tall, grey-haired man wearing a blue-and-gold tie. "Hello, Mr. Moreton," he said, in the same taut, formal voice that had come out of the intercom. "My name is Mr. Sykes. Please come in."

Conor stood and followed him into the small office. It looked very different from the last time he had been there, though the cheap plywood furniture remained the same. Mr. Benson had filled the nooks and crannies with picture frames, knick-knacks, and piles of paper, memorabilia from his years as a classroom teacher. Now, those spaces were empty, every surface swept clean, with only a single photo on the corner of the desk, a landscape with a rocky mountain and a lake.

"I'm sorry that our first meeting has to be across a desk, but I wanted to check in with you as soon as possible about the events of yesterday," Mr. Sykes said as they both sat down. His chair was identical to Conor's, the same molded plastic that could be found at every desk and table in the school. "You'll be happy to know that Guyler Stevens woke up soon after arriving at the hospital last night, and neither his concussion nor the shock are going to cause him any lasting harm. The doctor particularly mentioned that whoever put the compress on

Mr. Stevens' forehead probably saved him from needing a transfusion, and that if that person hadn't been so quick to act, things might have been much worse."

A tension that Conor had not even been aware of left his shoulders at this news, and he felt himself relax into his seat a little. "Will he be—what about his face?"

"His nose was broken, and it isn't clear how well that will heal. But the scar on his forehead should be quite thin once the stitches come out. At the moment, I'm told he's having more pain from the fractured rib, which won't be healed until mid November." Throughout this recitation, Mr. Sykes had been studying Conor's face intently, and now he leaned forward, clasping his hands together, his eyes sharp. "Were you in the tree with Mr. Stevens when he fell?"

So random, so unexpected was this question that Conor, who had come into the office fully prepared to lie on Ashleigh's behalf, was nevertheless caught completely off guard. "I—wait. *What?*"

The assistant principal grimaced, a thin tightening of his lips. "I thought so. Let's try a different one: did you by any chance move Mr. Stevens before the EMTs arrived?"

"*Move him?*"

"Drag him, roll him, help him walk. No? Could he have moved himself? You told Officer Grimsley that you heard a shout, came over the outer wall, and found him by the sidewalk—is there any chance that he crawled there from someplace else?"

"*What?*" Conor was growing more confused by the second, and somewhere in the back of his mind, a small voice warned him to be careful, for he sensed that Mr. Sykes *wanted* him to be confused, to keep him off-balance.

"It's very important, Mr. Moreton. Are you sure that the place where you found him is the same place where he first collapsed?"

"Yes. But what—"

"How can you be sure?"

"I..." He hesitated. *Because I watched him fall, saw my best friend standing over him.* "The blood. There was blood on the sidewalk. Nothing on the grass. Why? What does this have to do with anything?"

Mr. Sykes ignored the question. "*It was* Mr. Stevens who started the fight, wasn't it?"

Conor froze. That was exactly the story he had planned to run with, the best he could think of without being able to confer with his friend. It made sense, since half of the fights between them had been started by Guyler anyway, and it was the only way to draw sympathy for a kid who'd put his classmate in the hospital—that he'd done it in self-defense. It might even be true—Conor had been with Ashleigh just five minutes before it all went down, and the other boy certainly hadn't been in a fighting mood at the time.

But the way Mr. Sykes had said it and the questions that had led up to it were too strange, too pointed. Conor didn't understand what was going on, and so he instinctively changed tactics.

"I don't know."

"You don't know who started it?"

"No."

"But there *was* a fight."

Conor's eyes narrowed. Something was very wrong here. "Guyler's the one with the broken nose," he said slowly. "Why don't you ask him?"

Mr. Sykes leaned back in his chair, studying Conor's face again. "That's an interesting answer."

Conor said nothing.

"Last night, you stated that you didn't know what had happened to Mr. Stevens, that you found him that way, and that, I quote, 'Ashleigh is gone.' Apparently you repeated that last part quite a few times."

Conor kept his face carefully neutral, though he winced inwardly. He had no memory of saying any such thing, but he didn't doubt it; he'd been something of a babbling wreck at the time, and had probably said a lot of things he shouldn't have. Yet there wasn't anything particularly revealing in that, given that Guyler had surely filled them in on his side of the story by now.

Was it possible that he hadn't?

"Ashleigh was supposed to meet me in the park across the street." *No, wait – too specific. Keep it vague.* "I mean, he wasn't *supposed* to. But I was looking for him there. We meet there sometimes."

"But he wasn't there yesterday?"

"I don't know. He might have been. I left when I heard Guyler shout."

"So you didn't see him at all?"

Mr. Sykes was fishing, that was certain. But for what? None of the questions Conor had anticipated were being asked—the man had not mentioned the roof, or challenged Conor's explanation for how he'd been on the scene so quickly. He couldn't tell if it was better to say that he *had* seen Ashleigh, and risk contradicting the other boy's story, or to say that he hadn't, leaving his friend with no alibi. "I don't remember."

"You don't *remember*?"

Again, Conor said nothing. They sat there for a long moment, just looking at each other. Slowly, Mr. Sykes' expression softened. "He's your friend, isn't he, Mr. Moreton? Ashleigh Falhanner, I mean."

Conor nodded.

"And you want to help him out of this, don't you?"

Help him out of what, exactly?

"And you're trying very hard not to tell me anything that will get him into trouble, aren't you?" Conor still didn't answer. Mr. Sykes sighed. "Listen, Mr. Moreton, I'm not here to interrogate you, or to trick you into betraying your friend. As it happens, you've already cleared up the major issue for me, and there's no need to drag this out if you plan on being stubborn. If you want, I can write you a pass to homeroom right now."

He paused, as if to give Conor a chance to take him up on the invitation, then continued. "But there are still a few things that aren't making sense to me yet, and I'd appreciate it if you were a little more...open...than you seem to be right now." Conor's suspicion must have been apparent on his face, because Mr. Sykes quickly held up a hand. "Please remember: you are the only other person who might qualify as a witness. Right now, it's Mr. Stevens' word against Mr. Falhanner's—and Mr. Stevens is the one speaking from a hospital bed."

"What is it that Guyler's been saying?"

"That doesn't matter right now. I'm interested in what *you* have to say."

He really doesn't know. Guyler didn't tell him.

Conor felt his heart begin to race. It made no sense at all—Guyler and Ashleigh had been

enemies for a year, and neither had ever hesitated to spill the beans on the other. Why would Guyler cover for him *now*? Ashleigh was out in the open—with a broken nose and a fractured rib, Guyler could get him suspended, or even arrested. It was the perfect chance for revenge. Ashleigh had put him in the *hospital*, for crying out loud —

Holy shit.

Maybe he can't remember.

Mr. Sykes cleared his throat, causing Conor to jump in his seat. The man was watching him closely, a skeptical slant to his eyebrows. Conor searched frantically for something innocuous to say.

Say nothing.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sykes. Like I said last night, I don't know what happened. I heard a shout, came over the wall, and called 911. That's all I know."

Mr. Sykes' face darkened. There was another long pause, and when he finally spoke, there was an edge of sharpness in the dry formality of his voice. "Let me tell you a story, Mr. Moreton." He leaned forward again, fixing Conor with a cold stare. "I came here from Central High. Do you know where that is?"

Conor knew.

"We have our fair share of problems at Central. Gangs and so forth. I wouldn't be surprised to see five fights in a single week, and those would be just the ones we managed to find out about. Most of them never make it to the office. You know how it goes—*snitches get stitches*." He smiled, but there was no mirth in it. "So there I am, last night, getting ready for my first day at this *new* school, this *good* school, where there's only one fight a week and they only bring the drug dogs around once a quarter, and I get a call from Mike Grimsley, in the Binder PD. He says, Everett, I know this isn't really your problem, it still being summer and everything, but I thought you'd want to know that we just responded to a 911 call from a kid about another kid who got his face pasted on a sidewalk at East Binder.

"And so I ask, did the caller see anything? And Mike tells me no, the kid's got his mouth shut, but he's going to stop by the hospital once things have calmed down, and interview the victim. And I say thank you, Mike, I appreciate it."

Conor felt himself beginning to sweat. Nothing good could come from whatever Mr.

Sykes was trying to do—intimidate him? Trick him? Catch him in a lie? At the same time, though, a trickle of curiosity began to work its way through his tension. This was a side of the story that he had not expected to hear.

“After an hour, Mike calls me back and says, you’ll never believe it, the kid claims he fell out of a tree. And I ask him what’s wrong with that, and he says that, for one thing, this kid, Guyler Stevens, doesn’t have any mud or bark in any of his cuts. None. Plenty on his hands and clothes, but none in his cuts. For another thing, Mr. Stevens was found on a covered sidewalk, and the closest tree was thirty feet away.”

Conor could see it clearly in his mind’s eye—the wet splatter on the speckled concrete, the distant trunk of the old magnolia. He hadn’t registered the bark on Guyler’s hands and clothes, but suddenly the point of Mr. Sykes’ opening questions became clear.

Wait, though – does that mean Guyler was in the tree at some point? It seemed impossible, but before he could give it further thought, Mr. Sykes continued.

“Now, Mike and I have both been in this game for a long time, so before I can even ask, he tells me that he already checked the caller for busted up knuckles and came up empty. At this point, all he has to go on is another kid that the caller mentioned, a girl named Ashleigh. I offer to look into it, and soon enough I find that it isn’t a girl, it’s a boy, and furthermore that this boy has a history of getting into fights with our very own Mr. Stevens. I give Mike the phone number and address, and I hang up.

“So now things are fairly clear. Mr. Falhanner is our suspect, Mr. Stevens is our victim, and you, Mr. Moreton, are our witness, but nobody’s going to talk, because snitches get stitches, yes? Most cases like this, the police don’t really need witnesses anyway, because if it turns out that this Ashleigh has split knuckles and no alibi, that’s usually enough for a judge who knows how these things go.

“But then Mike calls a third time, with two pieces of bad news. First, he’s had no luck tracking down our suspect. He went by the house, but no one would answer the door, and apparently the house phone doesn’t have voicemail. Second, he’s been back to the hospital to talk to Mr. Stevens again, but the kid is *really* sticking to his story, so much so that Mike tells me he’ll have to drop the case entirely—Mr. Stevens says he’ll testify in court that the only thing that took a swing at him was the root of a magnolia tree.”

Conor struggled to process this. Guyler hadn't forgotten, he'd *lied* – and to the police, no less. But why?

"Mike is concerned, naturally. We've seen this kind of thing before, and there are only two reasons. Either the victim is scared out of his mind – and Mr. Stevens doesn't strike him as the type to come unhinged that easily – or he has his own ideas about how to pay his attacker back, and they don't involve juvenile hall. Mike's hands are tied, so I agree to follow up here at school. I assume this means that Mr. Falhanner will get away with it, since Mr. Stevens isn't talking, but that we'll talk to the parents and keep a close eye out for the first month or two. I draft a letter to both families, and I go to sleep.

"Imagine my surprise, then, when Wendy knocks on my door at seven forty-five this morning to tell me that there is a boy outside my office with ice on his knuckles and dirt all over his clothes."

Wait. *What?*

"And the icing on the cake: this boy isn't saying a word. Not one word. He won't even give his name, although one of the teachers confirms my guess pretty quickly."

Conor's head was spinning. Ashleigh had given himself up? Ashleigh, who once dug a hole eight feet deep to hide the broken pieces of his mother's favorite flowerpot? He took his punishments cheerfully enough when they had him pinned down, but he always made them work for it. In Conor's memory, Ashleigh had *never* confessed.

But he hasn't confessed, has he – he hasn't said a word.

Mr. Sykes observed Conor's confusion with a look of savage satisfaction. "You understand my frustration, then. I have a victim who refuses to admit he's been attacked. A bully who surrenders himself, but then withholds his confession. And you, a witness who clearly wants to do the right thing, who dialed 911 and tore up his own shirt to stop the victim's bleeding, but who says he saw nothing and offers no help at all."

"Ash's no bully," Conor said, unable to stop himself.

Mr. Sykes dropped his fist against the desk, causing the picture frame to bounce. "I'm not interested in a biased opinion of your friend, Mr. Moreton! This is a *mess*. I am interested in facts. I want you to tell me what happened here, so that I can *deal* with it. I have thirteen hundred students to look after, and I have neither the time nor the patience for *games*."

And now Conor saw that he was indeed trapped, though the trap wasn't of Mr. Sykes' making. For even though he'd been present for all but ten minutes, those were the ten minutes that had really mattered, and he truly didn't have the answers Mr. Sykes wanted. There was a bitter irony to Conor's next words, because he knew they would be received as a lie – and would have gladly suffered his assistant principal's anger to protect Ashleigh if they had *been* a lie – yet they were nothing but simple truth.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sykes. I didn't see it, and I really don't know."

The silence that followed was the longest and most uncomfortable of the whole conversation, but when Mr. Sykes spoke again it was with flippant unconcern. "Fine. Two weeks' suspension for your friend."

"What? But –"

"Discretion, Mr. Moreton. As assistant principal, I may suspend any student for up to 10 days for any reason, without appeal. A fact which you would do well to keep in mind, since you have decided that our relationship will not be one marked by an excess of trust." He reached over to a phone on the corner of his desk and pressed a button. "Wendy, please notify Mr. Falhanner's parents that he will be taking a two-week suspension, beginning tomorrow. I'll still want to talk to him, but I have enough information to make a decision. If the parents complain, schedule a conference." She acknowledged, and he released the button, turning back to meet Conor's eyes one last time.

"I don't like things that are messy, Mr. Moreton. There are rules for how these things should go, rules that are higher than the regulations of the school handbook. If your friend is caught, he should be punished, and if he gets away with it, *I should not have to deal with it anyway*. The three of you have given me the headache of a problem and robbed me of the relief of a solution, and if I were you I would try very hard not to find myself in this office again any time soon."

He nodded curtly to the exit, and Conor hastily stood, leaving a slight smear of sweat on the chair behind him. Opening the door, he glanced back over his shoulder. Mr. Sykes was not looking, was gazing past him to the lounge beyond, and as Conor stepped out the grey-haired man said, "Mr. Falhanner, you may come in."

Conor's head twisted back to the front so quickly that his neck cracked. There, on the

same couch where he had sat listening to the announcements, sat Ashleigh.

He was still wearing the clothes he'd been in the day before, his tattered t-shirt and jeans making Conor suddenly conscious of the dirt staining the khakis of his own school uniform. The shirt was filthy — smeared with black dust, adorned with twigs, and spattered with what looked sickeningly like several cups of dried blood. Glancing down, Conor saw that he had a bag of ice balanced on each hand, drops of condensation trickling past knuckles that were split, swollen, and scabbed.

Their eyes met for an instant. "Ashleigh," Conor said, the beginnings of a question forming on his tongue, but before he could say anything more the other boy looked away, stood and walked past him with eyes downcast, taking Conor's seat in the assistant principal's office.

Conor hovered in the doorway for another heartbeat, irresolute, until Mr. Sykes called out "Close the door, please."

There was nothing to do but obey. With one last look at the back of his friend's head, Conor pulled the door shut, leaving himself alone in the lounge. The clock on the wall read 8:25; the entire conversation had taken barely more than ten minutes, and homeroom wasn't even over yet.

Numbly, he walked back to the secretary's desk. She gave him a printout of his class schedule and handed him a combination lock. "Locker number four-four-nine, combination eight, five, seventeen," she told him. Then she turned back to her computer, erasing him from her universe.

Conor walked out of the office on autopilot, his thoughts churning. They came and went of their own accord, interrupting one another, so that it seemed he was eavesdropping on a pack of gossiping ghosts — *his hands look worse than Guyler's face — I don't think he's even been home yet — they think Guyler's out for revenge — why would he give himself up — why wouldn't he look at me?* He pressed his hands against his temples, trying not to think.

All of the middle grades — sixth, seventh, and eighth — were contained within the same building, a one-story, T-shaped structure with a wing for each year. He entered the building through the eighth grade doors, which were closest to the office, and made his way down the long, empty hallway, feeling exposed. When he reached the bathroom at the intersection, he

ducked inside.

Two of the mirrors had tape around their edges, as though they'd been recently replaced and hadn't fully set yet. The other two were useless, covered almost entirely in scratch-graffiti comprised of badly-spelled obscenities and poorly rendered pictures of girls, cars, and nuclear explosions. Even though he was alone, Conor used the stall. It was mercifully clean, the result of the school year being only thirty minutes old.

Locker 449 was a top locker, and as he unloaded his bookbag into the half-sized space, he sent up a silent thank-you; at least this year he wouldn't have to choose between crawling around his classmates' knees or waiting for the halls to clear and being late to class. He closed the door and opened it again three times, making sure he had the combination memorized, and checked his schedule.

There was no point in heading to his homeroom; it would be dismissed in five more minutes anyway. His first class—English—was in a room just thirty feet away. Sinking to the floor, he pressed his back against the locker nearest the door and settled in to wait.

First period English.

It was too much, Conor thought, on top of everything else. He wasn't ready for school to begin again, wasn't ready for the onerous task of figuring out seven new teachers, of forcing himself to stay awake through seven periods of lectures and busywork, watching the hours of his life tick by. He could barely hold the events of the last twenty-four hours together in his mind; if he had to calculate the distance between Train A and Train B, or write five paragraphs on the legacy of slavery in America, he was pretty sure he'd lose it altogether.

Hey, remember when Conor went nuts in Science and started eating his textbook?

But that was the thing about being twelve—you were stuck. Nobody asked your opinion, nobody cared. They just built up this whole structure around you, called it childhood, and acted like nothing outside of it mattered, like nothing outside of it even *existed*. As if eight hours of school followed by two hours of sports, two hours of homework, and video games until bed was the only possible combination, and anything else was wrong. And when it got to be too much, and you just couldn't pretend to care anymore about the difference between an A and a C, or whether your sweatshirt was tucked into your pants, they blamed *you*—as if it was your fault that their game of let's-pretend wasn't real enough to

hold your attention.

And there was nothing you could do about it, because they had everyone else locked in with you, and one day you'd all grow up, and the ones who'd bought it, who'd thrived on it, they'd be the bosses and have all the money, even though they were just the ones who couldn't think of anything better to do. And if you hadn't kept up, you'd be screwed – that was the threat they always pulled, you'd better do good now so you can get to high school so you can get into a good college and get a good job. Conor always wanted to ask them, those grownups who smirked and lectured and talked down to him – do you like what *you* do all day? Was it worth spending sixteen years in a hamster wheel?

He never said it, though – because what if they said yes?

Conor didn't want to be a teacher. He didn't want to be a doctor or a lawyer, couldn't see himself as a scientist or a politician or a businessman. He couldn't even work up excitement about being an astronaut or an Olympic athlete or a rock star. There wasn't a single thing he'd ever seen a grownup doing that he wanted to be a part of.

But it wasn't like he had any better ideas, so he just went with the flow, putting in enough to get by, living for the weekends. That's how he'd made it this far, from kindergarten to seventh grade – by keeping his head down and playing along. He wasn't bad at it. He'd made B's all the way through elementary school, with the occasional A thrown in and only a couple of really memorable failures.

Only now it was too much, the game was too trivial and he couldn't do it, wouldn't be able to do it, couldn't muster up the energy to fake it for even one class. He'd just made enemies with his AP, had watched them roll Guyler's limp body onto a gurney and drive it away with lights flashing, had gotten high with his best friend and jumped – *God, I jumped from one building to another. I really did it.*

How was he supposed to focus on school, after all that?

He paused, looking down at his hands, at the last lingering traces of mud and grime from the morning's ascent. He thought about Ashleigh's fingers, Guyler's face, the look of angry defiance in Timothy's eyes as he faced down three bullies twice his size. *Feel sorry for yourself, Conor. I'm sure there isn't anyone who'd rather be in your shoes.*

He laughed a little, shaking his head. Okay, fine. So he wasn't the only kid with prob-

lems. Didn't even really *have* problems, compared to some of the kids at East Binder, the ones who slept in homeless shelters or shopped with food stamps or had to hide from Daddy at night. And maybe he wasn't the first seventh grader in the world who'd rather do something besides sit at a desk all day.

But that didn't change the fact that he felt stuck. However insignificant his worries might be in the grand scheme of things, they still weighed on him, and there was next to nothing he could do about any of them. The fight, the roof, the drugs, the gap—and behind them, behind it all, his best friend in the whole world, who in this most critical of moments had suddenly stopped answering his phone.

What's going on, Ash?

Over and above everything else, that was the question that burned in Conor's mind as the bell rang and the hallway flooded with students. It tumbled through his thoughts, a puzzle piece seeing its match in the scattered fragments of yesterday's memories. More than anything, he realized, he was bothered by the silence, which had taken on an ominous tone in that split second outside of Mr. Sykes' office. He was unaccustomed to having doubts about what was going on in Ashleigh's head, and was even more unused to having no way to resolve them.

Steeling himself for the tedium ahead, he stood, slipping past the last of the stragglers and into the empty classroom. It was a cold, bare place, with individual desks in long rows and whiteboards covering every wall. The teacher, a younger woman in a plain outfit, was busy up at the front, erasing the leavings of her homeroom activities. Conor took two steps into the room and slid into the nearest desk, up against the wall and just behind the door, where he could see the whole classroom without having to twist around.

He watched as the seats filled up, exchanging nods with classmates he hadn't seen since June, dividing his attention evenly between them and the teacher at the front of the room. She'd written her name on the board—Ms. Palmano—and was now standing in the corner opposite Conor's. Her gaze was a mirror of his own, though she paid him no special attention; she seemed to be weighing each student as he or she came in from the hallway, and what she saw was hidden behind a small, knowing smile.

"Hey, Monito!"

Conor turned as a skinny boy with dark, close-cropped hair dropped his bag and plopped breathlessly into the nearest seat in the next row over. “Hola, Holt,” Conor answered.

Conor had known Holt Avery since the fifth grade, when he’d cheerfully ramped up a food fight Ashleigh was trying to start by dumping an entire plate of creamed spinach on his own head and running around hugging every girl he could sneak up on. They had spent a week together in detention, along with the three other boys who made up Ashleigh’s circle of friends at East Binder. Conor had never gotten along very well with the larger group—his own relationship with Ashleigh was more individual and personal—but Holt was the sort of boy it was difficult to dislike. He lived a few streets over with his mother, who was Hispanic. They invited him over for dinner from time to time, and Conor had spent the night once or twice in the first half of the summer before Holt went to visit his father.

“Been looking for you—long time no see. You missed homeroom.”

“Office.”

“Yeah, I heard. Was it about Guyler?”

Conor shot him a sharp look, and he shrugged. “Ellie Maye’s mom checked him into the ER last night, told my mom about it. Figured it might’ve been you and Ashleigh—usually is.” There was no hint of judgment in his voice, for which Conor was grateful. “I notice El Capitan isn’t back yet.”

“Still talking to the AP,” Conor said. “Does everybody know?”

Holt shrugged again. “Dunno. Don’t think so—nobody was talking about it outside.”

Conor nodded. They would have, if they’d known. “What did Ellie’s mom say?”

“Concussion, broken nose, black eyes, fractured rib. Seven stitches on the cut in his forehead. They kept him there overnight to keep an eye on him, but he’s probably home now.” Holt gave Conor a measured look. “Pretty serious stuff. She said there was a cop there, talking to him.”

It was the closest he would come to digging for more detail. When he saw that Conor wasn’t talking, he switched gears.

“Hey, did you see any of the new high schoolers?”

“What, the ninth graders?” Conor had passed a few of them on his way through the

courtyard that morning, full of the thrill of their new status.

"No, I mean the *new* guys. The ones from Central —"

He would have said more, but at that moment, Ms. Palmano stepped forward and closed the door. Silence began to settle over the class, working its way back from the front of the room. Holt shrugged for a third time, grinned, and spun around to face forward. Conor followed suit.

When the entire room had fallen quiet, Ms. Palmano turned to the dry erase board behind her and drew four large columns, labeled A, B, C, and D. She capped the marker, and then, as an afterthought, added the word (grades) after the letter D. Stepping back into the corner of the room, she spoke.

"I'd like you all to come add your names to the board, please."

No one moved. Everyone looked at one another, then back at the teacher, who stood expectant, her arms crossed. Cautiously, a girl named Katie raised her hand. Ms. Palmano nodded to her, and she asked, "Should we put our name under the grade we want? Or the grade we think we're going to get?"

"Is there a difference?"

Again, they all looked at one another. Holt caught Conor's eye, and jerked his head toward the front of the room, raising his eyebrows. Conor shook his head, firmly.

Rolling his eyes, Holt stood and strolled casually to the board. Picking up a red marker, he wrote HOLT in large capitals right across the center of the board, with the HO in the B column and the LT under C. Then he walked back with his hands in his pockets, whistling a jaunty tune.

There was a smattering of nervous laughter as the class waited for Ms. Palmano's reaction, but she gave none. Eventually, two other students stood up, and then the floodgates opened. Soon there was a scrum at the board as the seventh graders fought for colors and pride of place.

"Why are we doing this?" asked one boy as he waited outside the pack for a blue marker.

"I thought we might start with a moment of honesty," Ms. Palmano answered. Only a few students were close enough to overhear, Conor among them. Quietly, he picked up a black marker and added his name in small letters right underneath Holt's; there were ten or

eleven other kids who had also chosen to straddle one of the lines.

When they had all retaken their seats, the teacher reached into her desk drawer and pulled out a phone. Holding it up, she photographed the board. “Well,” she said, “half of you cheated.”

Another nervous chuckle.

“I think I can fix it, though. If a solid A is a 95, and a solid B is—what, an 89?—then I suppose I can give Arianna a 92.” Arianna shifted uncomfortably as everyone’s eyes fell on her; her name was written across the boundary between A and B. A moment later, though, they all turned back to the front as Ms. Palmano picked up her gradebook and began writing, looking back and forth from the board to the page.

“Wait—what are you doing? Are those really our grades?” This from another boy, one whose name Conor didn’t know. He sounded slightly panicked, and from the looks on the faces of the students around him, he wasn’t alone.

“Yes,” Ms. Palmano replied, still looking from the board to the gradebook.

“For what?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who gave it to yourself.”

“No, I mean—what’s the grade *for*? Is that, like, a quiz grade, or a homework grade?”

“Oh. I don’t know. I was just going to put it onto your report card.”

There was a wave of incredulous protests as the teacher finished writing and put her gradebook down. Turning to face them, she hoisted an expression of exaggerated innocence onto her face and asked, “Is there a problem?”

A dozen voices spoke all at once, and she lifted her arms in a calming gesture. Slowly, the voices quieted, and were replaced by a dozen raised hands. She pointed to one.

“But we haven’t done anything yet!”

“So? You’re *going* to— isn’t this easier? Now we both know what to expect.”

Another outburst, this time involving at least half of the class. Again, Ms. Palmano waited, and again the students slowly settled and raised their hands.

“If those are our grades for the quarter, what’s to stop us from just doing nothing?”

“I hope you’re not suggesting that it would be a good idea to cheat in my class, Miss—”

“Gibson. Susanne Gibson.”

"Are you saying you plan to cheat, Susanne?"

Susanne fell silent, her face burning. Someone else spoke in a stage whisper. "Wish I'd put myself under A instead of C."

"Cheating, Mr. —"

"My name's Ben."

"And twice a cheater—you didn't wait your turn." She called on another boy in the front row. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Rami, ma'am—and can we change our grades?"

"CHEATING!" she roared, and the class was evenly split between those who laughed and those who cowered. "One does not simply *change* a grade!"

"But we didn't know what the grade was *for*!" protested the boy who'd spoken first. There was a general mutter of agreement, smothered by the stern gaze of Ms. Palmano as she swept it around the room. Not everyone joined in—half of the class was just sitting there, indifferent—but those whose hands were raised looked mutinous. Holt was shaking with suppressed laughter. Conor didn't find the situation particularly amusing.

"The grade is for your work in this class, which I thought was perfectly obvious from the fact that I wrote it down in *my* gradebook," Ms. Palmano said. She called on the girl sitting directly in front of Conor.

"What work, though?—and my name's Jennifer."

"You tell me, Jennifer. You've promised me"—here she paused, scanning the board—"an A's worth of English work. What will it be?"

"Aren't *you* supposed to tell *us*? You're the teacher!"

"And you're the student. Would you rather learn how to follow directions, or how to write them?"

There was a lull as the protesters digested this. Holt was still laughing silently; Conor reached over and punched him in the arm. "What's so funny?" he hissed.

"This whole thing," Holt whispered back. "Está jodiéndolos—they're all taking it so serious, and she's just trolling them. I bet she didn't even write those grades down in her gradebook. Bet she was just taking attendance. Oh, man, this class is gonna be fun. I hope she doesn't get fired." He started laughing again.

Hands were going up into the air once more. The teacher called on another boy, who identified himself as Jeremy. "Are you saying we're supposed to make up our own assignments?"

"I'm saying there *are* no assignments. But you owe me for that B you've asked me to sign off on."

"What if we can't think of anything?"

"Then you'll fail."

"There aren't any failing grades up there," Ben pointed out. "You only went down to D."

"Oh, I'm not saying you'll fail the *class*. Then you'd just be right back here next year—how would *that* help?"

"Wait—are you saying we *can't* fail?"

"Of course you can fail—weren't you listening? I'm just saying that your grade has nothing to do with it." She threw her hands up in frustration. "Look, this is a very simple concept. I don't know why you're having so much trouble with it."

"You're not explaining it!"

"Exactly!"

The discussion dissolved into chaos. Conor watched with clinical interest as half of his classmates came unhinged. Some were like Holt, who now had tears shining in the corners of his eyes as he goaded those around him. Others—like Susanne—looked stricken, their voices pleading as they struggled to be heard over the angry shouts of Jennifer and the boy whose name Conor still hadn't caught. There were plenty who sat in silence, and their reactions were no less varied—some looked pensive, others anxious, others merely bored. A few, like Conor, gave nothing away as their eyes moved back and forth across the room.

And there in the center of it all, making no effort to temper the bedlam she had unleashed, stood Ms. Palmano, that small, knowing smile returned to her lips as she waited for her students to wear themselves out. *She did this on purpose*, Conor thought. Holt is right—she's jerking us around.

Strangely, the thought produced no feeling of resentment, perhaps because he himself had not been swept up in it. *She's playing us for fools, but we don't have to play along*. He wondered what Ashleigh would do in this situation. Probably go up and erase the board. Or de-

clare the class dismissed and walk out. Or....

Conor hesitated. A beautiful idea had just struck him—but it couldn't be that simple, could it? He looked around the room, at the pandemonium still raging unabated. Slowly, he reached into his binder, took out a sheet of paper and a pencil, and laid them on his desk.

Ms. Palmano winked at him.

Oh, Ash would just love this....

He picked up the pencil and wrote his name and subject at the top of the page. Then, looking up at the board, he also wrote the number 85, and circled it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Holt following his lead; a moment later, the girl in front of him, Jennifer, withdrew her voice from the tumult and did the same. Slowly the idea spread, in fits and starts, like ripples radiating out from Conor's corner, until a tipping point was reached and the whole room fell silent. Then there was only the zip of bookbags and the click of binders, the rustle of paper and the scratching of graphite and ball points.

• • •

At the end of the period, no one had finished, but that was okay—Ms. Palmano assured them that anything worth turning in would take at least until Wednesday. When the bell rang, they packed up and left, and although he was closest to the door, Conor was the last to go. She didn't wink at him again, but she *did* smile, and as he smiled back, he felt a tiny flicker of optimism—maybe one class, at least, would turn out to be enjoyable this year.

It didn't take long for that flicker to disappear. The rest of the morning crawled by in an endless haze of icebreakers and course outlines. By the time he left his fifth class and headed for the cafeteria, he felt as if summer had been a lifetime ago.

"Do you think they ever stop to consider that by seventh grade, we already *know* everybody's names?" he grumbled to Holt as they passed through the double doors and joined the long line of kids waiting for food. After parting ways outside English, they hadn't seen each other again until Math, which had just let out.

"You don't know everybody's names. Who's that, over there by the drink machine?"

Conor squinted.

"Shorty McShorticus."

Holt laughed. "It's so *they* can learn our names, brohombre."

"I know, it's just—man, think how much time we're burning up, doing this in every single class."

"You're looking at it all wrong," Holt said. "Think of it like an experiment. In second and third, I got to hear every possible way to mispronounce Siobhan. Plus, no homework."

"Except English."

"Well, that's not exactly *homework*, is it? Not when we're working on it in class for the next two days."

Conor grunted and grabbed a chocolate milk off the counter.

The cafeteria at East Binder was enormous, yet even so it took three separate lunch rotations to cycle everyone through. It was divided down the center by a long staff table, with the right side reserved for middle schoolers and the left for high schoolers. Conor and Holt were on third lunch, which meant the food was at its worst, but it also meant that Conor had nothing left for the afternoon except for an hour of Activity and seventh period Art.

It took five of their twenty minutes to get through the line, and they wandered for another two looking for a table before Holt pointed to one tucked away in the corner of the room. Conor followed his finger, took stock of the people already sitting there, and hesitated.

"Oh, come on, don't be that guy. Nobody likes that guy." Holt began threading his way through the minefield of chairs. After a moment's indecision, Conor sighed and followed him. *Might as well get this over with.*

The table held five chairs, three of which were already occupied. As Conor approached, Holt plopped himself down in a fourth, shouldering aside Nolan Brinkley and Eddie Hooper, and began savagely tearing at his cheeseburger. Conor took the last chair across from him, next to a smaller boy who was introduced as Nicholas, Nolan's little brother.

Holt, Nolan, and Eddie—along with Sam Marlin, who had second lunch and was already back in class—made up the circle of boys that Conor privately thought of as Ashleigh's fan club. They were a miscellaneous bunch—among them, only Nolan and Sam were particularly close outside of school, although Holt did his best to be friends with everyone. In the hallways and classrooms, though, they stuck together. One reason for this was that East

Binder was the kind of place where a guy could use a few people watching his back.

The other reason was Ashleigh. They followed him religiously, which had the effect of ensuring that they were usually all in the same place at the same time. They were his minions, his guinea pigs; each, in his own way, was under the other boy's charismatic spell. When he wasn't around, they gathered together like lost ducklings, clinging to one another as a substitute for Ashleigh's gravitational pull.

At least, that was how Conor saw them. No doubt they had their own interpretation, and when he was honest with himself, he knew that similar things could probably be said about his own friendship with the other boy. But for some reason, the mutual respect that they all shared for Ashleigh had never brought them together, had instead left them in opposition, so that he was always with Conor *or* the group, and that pursuits involving all of them became a subtle tug-of-war between two sides jealously competing for the greater share of his attention and approval.

Conor had tried to put this into words, once—with Holt, the only member of the group for whom he felt any affinity. It had been an awkward, unproductive conversation, and by silent mutual agreement neither of them had ever brought it up again. Had they not been standing in line together, Conor would have found a quiet spot of his own, sparing them all the tension of unspoken disapprobation. Most especially, on this of all days he did not want to discuss Ashleigh with his own rivals for Ashleigh's companionship.

But they would track him down eventually—he couldn't possibly avoid them for two whole weeks—and in the fairer portions of his heart, he knew they had at least some right to know.

Sure enough, he had not even set down his tray before Eddie was leaning toward him, speaking in a low, conspiratorial tone. "So—is it true?"

Conor mustered a glare and directed it at Holt, who spoke thickly through a mouthful of burger. "Don't look at me, you. I said nada."

Nolan raised his hand, looking sheepish. "I saw him this morning, when I took the attendance down to the office. Just for a second. He was in that little room behind the secretary's desk, icing his knuckles."

"And Guyler wasn't in homeroom, either," Eddie added. "So, what happened?"

Conor took an immediate dislike to the tone of eager anticipation in Eddie's voice. "They got in a fight," he said, shrugging. "Ashleigh won." His irritation deepened as Eddie let out an elated whoop.

"Oh, man, I wish I'd been there," the other boy said, wistfully.

"You wouldn't say that if you had been," Conor countered.

"You kidding me? A chance to watch Ashleigh kick the shit out of that fuckstick? Dude, I'd've bought *tickets*." Eddie grinned, and even Nolan smiled shyly. Only Holt remained aloof, his attention on the last bite of his cheeseburger.

"It wasn't like that," Conor shot back, struggling to keep a rein on his rising frustration. He reminded himself that Eddie was an idiot, that he didn't know any better, and that he, Conor, would probably have thought the same only a day ago. If only he would quit looking so smug. "You don't get it," he continued. "Guyler's in the hospital. There were cops out looking for Ashleigh. It wasn't funny or awesome, it was—stop *laughing*!" He slapped his palm down on the table, and everyone jumped. "You weren't there. It was scary, all right? Quit acting like this is some *game* that Ashleigh won. Things are fucked up now. It's—it's *real*." He faltered at the end, unable or unwilling—he wasn't sure which—to paint more clearly the picture of how frighteningly everything had spiraled out of control.

Whether because of Conor's words or the way in which he'd said them, Eddie quieted, the smile slowly sliding from his face. "What happened?" he asked again, this time in a very different voice.

Conor heaved a sigh, searching for a starting place. They had a right to know. Some of it, anyway. Not the drugs, or the gap, or Conor's growing suspicion that Ashleigh had spent the night outdoors. Nor would he tell them about Guyler's strange and unexpected lie. Only what they would find out in the end anyway—that much, Conor could give them.

In as few words as possible. "Look, we were messing around on campus, and we got separated. I guess Guyler was there, too, or maybe he followed us, because I was gone for a minute, and when I came back, he'd been decked. Ashleigh split, I called 911, and this morning they picked up me and Ashleigh both and asked us questions. I got yelled at, he got a two-week suspension, and that's pretty much it."

"Two weeks, damn," Eddie breathed.

Nolan nodded. "How long until Guyler gets out of the hospital?"

"He's out already." This from Holt, who had finished his burger and was halfway done demolishing a huge plate of fries. "He probably won't be back for a couple weeks, either, though. Broken nose, fractured rib."

Eddie's eyes widened in wounded surprise. "You *knew*?"

"Not my story to tell." He made a point of catching Conor's eye for a long moment, and Conor nodded. *Thanks, amigo.*

And that was that. For a minute or two, Eddie blustered on about how Guyler had gotten what he deserved, but that was just Eddie. Conor let it wash over him, focusing on his food, and soon enough the conversation left him behind. He listened idly as the three of them offered tips to Nolan's brother Nicholas on the pros and cons of the various sixth grade teachers, and as Nolan told stories from his summer rafting trip. They were almost to the end of lunch before Holt made an attempt to draw him back in.

"So, Conor, did you see any of the guys from Central in the office this morning?"

Conor had no idea what he was talking about.

"You didn't hear?" Eddie asked. "Didn't you wonder what the deal was with all the cops this morning?"

Conor blinked. "I thought it was—" he began, and then stopped himself. *Apparently not.* "Tell me."

"They found some kind of toxic waste in the ceilings at Central two weeks ago, had to shut the whole thing down. They couldn't find a building for a temporary school in time, so they spread the kids out to all the other high schools in the area."

Conor remembered what Mr. Sykes had told him in the office that morning—*we have our fair share of problems at Central.* "So the cops...."

"They were here in case anybody decided to bring knives or drugs or whatever."

Nicholas piped up, the first Conor had heard him speak. "I heard they caught one kid with a gun. Cuffed him up right out in front of everybody."

"Well, no shit. How stupid can you be? You'd think he'd've ditched the thing in the bushes or something."

"Did you see any of them, Conor?" Holt repeated.

"No," Conor said. "I wasn't down there for very long." He paused, wondering. "How many of them came here?"

They all looked at each other blankly. "Well, there's what, like, two hundred kids per grade, right?" Nolan asked.

"Different in the city, though," Holt pointed out.

"Yeah, but not *too* different. Figure two fifty per grade, that's a thousand. How many high schools did they spread them out to?"

"My dad said the whole county," offered Eddie.

"So that's us, Northern—"

"—East Chatham—"

"—Lincoln—"

"—South Bedford, Lakeside, and Voyager," Nolan finished. "What's a thousand divided by seven?"

They all scratched their heads. "More than a hundred," said Eddie.

"It's 143," said Nicholas.

They all stared at him. He shrugged. "So, divide that by four, and you figure we've got about thirty five new kids in each grade? Nine through twelve?"

"One classroom, give or take," Holt mused.

"They'll spread them out for sure, especially if they're worried about gang violence and drug stuff," Eddie said confidently.

"Unless they keep them all together, like quarantine."

Again, Conor sank into his own thoughts, letting the conversation drift past him. He pictured the bag of weed currently lying buried in the mulch beneath the equipment shed. If Guyler didn't mention the roof—and it didn't look like he ever would—there was no real need to take it back up to its old hiding spot in the air conditioning unit. He wondered idly how much it was worth, and whether it would keep as well in the cool, dark damp as it had in the summer heat of the rooftop. Probably better, he imagined—more like a refrigerator.

What, going to become a drug dealer now? Not enough excitement in your life?

The bell rang, and the cafeteria trembled with the sound of four hundred chairs sliding backwards all at once. As they joined the flow of students jostling their way toward the

doors, Conor realized that he'd just gone a full five minutes before coming around to the events of the day before. And while Eddie had been annoying as always, once they'd quit talking about Ashleigh, the lunch conversation had been harmless, casual, even interesting at times. He looked at the faces of the other four boys, now walking in a square around him, still caught up in speculation over the plan for the Central students, and found that he had no real desire to escape, to pull ahead or to let the crowd swallow him.

It was something.

• • •

Three quick spins of the dial, one solid shove to shut the overstuffed locker, and Conor was free. He slipped through the crowd with empty hands, moving half a step slower than a jog. The gusting wind was cold against his face as he passed out into the courtyard, but he left his jacket open, letting it ripple, capelike, behind him.

It had been a long day. Activity had begun with the presidential fitness test, which meant long minutes of waiting followed by bursts of sheer exhaustion. Conor was one of the few who actually enjoyed it—after the summer of climbing around with Ashleigh, he was able to do twelve pull-ups in a row, more than anyone else in the class. However, the test had been followed by flag football, and he had nursed an injured wrist all the way through Art.

Stepping out of the flow of traffic, he turned on his phone. He was disappointed—though not surprised—to see that there were no messages, and he argued with himself for a full minute before pocketing the phone without sending any. Better at this point to talk in person—since he didn't have to come back to move the bag, he could pick up his bike at home and ride over to Ashleigh's before the sky grew dark.

Although he'd been one of the quickest out of his classroom, the detour to his locker had cost him time. The seventh grade wing was the furthest of the three from the parking lot, and by the time he reached the parking lot, there were already hundreds of students waiting, gathered into large clumps on the sidewalk in front of each bus. He made his way down the line, searching for number 134. Spotting it, he quickened his pace to an actual jog—

—until he noticed the shape of the crowd and broke into a run. Students standing in a

circle were never a good sign at East Binder, and as he neared the edge closest to him, he felt a sudden premonition, so powerful that he heard himself shouting "Let him go!" before he could even see clearly past the densely packed shoulders.

"What do *you* want, faggot?" Eichardt growled, as Conor shoved his way into the center of the ring. He had only one of his lackeys with him this time, but that was enough; the eighth grader had no trouble holding both of Timothy's arms behind his back as Eichardt pawed through his bookbag. Conor cursed himself for not making the connection—that all three of them rode the same bus, and that of course Eichardt would remember the morning's humiliation, and seek restitution. If he had been there two minutes earlier, he could have headed the older boy off, rallied the crowd against him. But now it had already begun—those who might have helped were too relieved to find themselves mere bystanders, and the rest were eager for a show.

"Who you calling a faggot?" Timothy's voice rang out. "At least *he's* not grabbing all over little boys like your friend here."

Conor winced as Eichardt's eyes narrowed. *Maybe we should just get it over with. Piss him off, take a couple of black eyes, watch him get suspended.* But then he remembered Guyler, lying in the grass, his pupils different sizes as his forehead started to swell.

Sometimes it wasn't just a black eye.

The fear made him hesitate, and the hesitation filled him with self-loathing, and the self-loathing filled him with resolve, so that in the time it took him to think of a calming, diplomatic response, he found he no longer wanted to utter it.

"Let the kid go," Conor repeated, and he felt an undercurrent of pride that his voice came out steady and strong. *If I'm going to play the hero, I might as well get it right.*

"Or what, bitch?" Eichardt dropped Timothy's bag, spilling pencils and books onto the sidewalk. He turned to face Conor head on, stepping forward so that he loomed over the shorter boy. *Here we go,* Conor thought, and his brain formed the sentence that would push the bully over the edge, commanded his lips to open and deliver it—

"Or we'll find out who's the faggot when we put you on your knees, asshole."

Eichardt whirled as Conor felt his breath catch in his throat. To the side, the circle opened as another boy edged his way in between the spectators. His face had been washed, and he

wore a blue-and-gold East Binder t-shirt over his ruined jeans, but the look in his eyes was the same as it had been the day before, when it had held the whole horizon in its scope.

Ashleigh.

He stepped forward, and it was Eichardt's turn to hesitate. Two against three were odds that still favored him, if it came to a fight—Timothy was already neutralized, and neither Conor nor Ashleigh was much bigger. And with open defiance given, his need to reassert control was more pronounced than ever. But as his eyes flickered back toward the school, Conor could see the calculation in his head. This had started out as a simple strong-arm intimidation, and the privacy of the circle wouldn't last forever. Furthermore, his most potent weapon—the fear of his victims, and of the audience around them—had suddenly gone dull.

Before he could recover, Ashleigh bent down, reaching for a chip of wood among the stones of the gravel parking lot. He straightened, balancing the chip on his left shoulder, and looked Eichardt directly in the eye, motioning for Conor to back away.

It was a formal challenge, one that even the sixth graders recognized. Either Eichardt would knock the chip off Ashleigh's shoulder—giving the younger boy an opening to throw the first punch—or Ashleigh would win by default. It was a gauntlet thrown, demanding that Eichardt put up, or shut up.

The decision was inevitable. Eichardt's arm jerked as if by reflex, and the chip went flying. Before it hit the ground, Ashleigh's fist was already swinging, and it struck a glancing blow to the side of the bully's jaw—enough to make him stagger, but not to knock him down. He fell back half a step, his arms spinning—

And then Ashleigh screamed.

It was an animal sound, shockingly loud, and it seemed the entire circle flinched. Eichardt regained his footing, but froze, half-crouched and unable to advance, a trapped and hunted look appearing on his face as his eyes darted from side to side. He watched along with everyone else as Ashleigh crumpled to his knees, clutching his right hand within his left, and suddenly Conor understood—he'd hit the bully with his swollen, ruined knuckles.

It was a situation for which no one had a script. Whole seconds passed as Ashleigh's scream fell to a moan, which stuttered into sobs and finally died. Still no one moved—not Eichardt, not Conor, not even Timothy. *The teachers heard that*, Conor thought. They had to—

they're on their way, they'll come. And he realized that it was almost a prayer, that he wanted them to—not so they could take Eichardt away, but just so that someone would tell them all what to do next.

Ashleigh rose slowly to his feet, tears leaking from furious eyes. He reached up to wipe his face, and when he pulled his arm away, the crowd saw another woodchip—on his right shoulder this time, indicating that he would punch with his left. “Your move,” he said, and though his voice cracked halfway through, no one laughed.

There was a wild moment in which it seemed that Eichardt would do it, would sweep the chip off and repeat the whole performance, but then he took a step back, stumbling over Timothy's bag, and the spell was broken. “What the *fuck*, man,” he shouted, to no one in particular. Still looking hunted, he grabbed his friend by the arm and dragged him out of the circle, almost taking Timothy with them. At the last second, the bully released the younger boy, who bent and began gathering his things.

Ashleigh's shoulders sagged, and he sank back to the ground, cradling his hand once more. Conor rushed over to him as the circle began to dissolve; a smaller space remained around them, as though Ashleigh's presence created an impenetrable bubble that the other students had to slide around.

“What the fuck, man?” Conor breathed, echoing Eichardt's earlier exclamation. He reached out tentatively, put a hand on Ashleigh's shoulder, and was relieved when his friend didn't shrug it off.

“They never mess with the crazy ones,” Ashleigh said wearily. “It was the best I could come up with on short notice.”

“Well, it worked, but—*Jesus*.” Ashleigh had stuck his fist inside his shirt, wrapping the fabric tightly around it, and Conor could see fresh blood leaking through the blue-and-gold threads. “We can ask the driver for some ice when he gets here—”

“Not taking the bus.” With a groan, Ashleigh began rising to his feet again; Conor put a hand under his arm, and he took the help without comment. “I'm walking.” He turned, and Conor followed his gaze to Timothy, who was standing rigidly a few feet away, his bag back on his shoulders, both fists clenched. “Tell Mom,” Ashleigh said.

“Fuck you, Ashleigh,” Timothy snarled, his face twisting angrily. “Tell her yourself.”

Without explanation, he spun on his heel and stalked away. Ashleigh stiffened, a look of surprise replacing the exhaustion on his face as his little brother vanished into the crowd.

"What was *that* about?" Conor asked, bewildered.

"I don't know," Ashleigh answered, sounding more tired than ever. His head remained fixed on Timothy's axis, his eyes distant. Conor watched the rise and fall of his shoulders, saw how each breath leaked in slowly, and left as though crushed out by a great weight.

The sound of a diesel engine starting made both of them jump, and they turned to see that the driver had arrived and the bus doors were standing open. A line had already formed, and shadowy shapes could be seen moving down the aisle within.

"I'll go with you," Conor said. "We need to—"

"No," Ashleigh said flatly. "Look after my brother."

"Ash—"

"No." He looked into Conor's eyes for the first time, and whatever weakness filled his body, there was none of it in his expression. "I'm going alone. Don't call."

And without another word, he turned and began walking up the row, toward the street, his pace slow but steady, his hand still tucked into his shirt. Conor watched him until he disappeared over the hill, feeling lost all over again, and was almost surprised when he looked down and there was no body lying at his feet.

• • •

When his parents came home, they found him slumped at the kitchen table, his head on his arms. It was almost six o'clock, and already getting dark as they came in from the garage, one right after the other. Without a word, his mother set about making a plate of apple slices and peanut butter. She set it down in front of him, and as he lifted his head an inch, it was to see both of them sitting across the table, their arms crossed, waiting.

He picked up an apple slice and licked off the peanut butter, knowing without looking that his mother's nose was wrinkling with disapproval. After a long pause, he sighed and put the slice in his mouth, chewing it into applesauce before swallowing it in one gulp.

"I'm in trouble, aren't I," he said, finally raising his eyes to meet theirs. They sat like

bookends, mirror images of stern concern on each of their faces.

"What tipped you off?" his mother asked dryly.

"You guys never say hello when you're mad." He reached for another apple slice and bit it in half, putting his chin back down on his forearm. He should have expected this, he realized, just like he should have expected Eichardt's attack on Timothy. He wondered what else he wasn't expecting, and how bad it would be when it happened.

"How *else* did you know, Conor?" his father asked quietly.

This was how it went in the Moreton household. No yelling or arguing, no lies or excuses. He couldn't recall the last time his parents had pronounced judgment on him; they always waited until he pronounced it on himself. He tried to gather the memories of the last twenty-four hours and parse out which of his transgressions they knew about.

"You had to come pick me up from a police car."

"Why would we be mad about that? It was an emergency, you called 911, case closed."

"But there was a fight, and I was involved."

"Nonsense. You told us you didn't lay a finger on Guyler, and we believe you. Unless you were lying?"

"I wasn't lying." He finished off the apple slice and reached for a third. "I was trespassing on school property?"

"Come on, Conor. You're stalling."

He chewed thoughtfully, wondering as he did so what answer they were looking for. Almost, he wished he could tell them everything, have them mete out punishment so that he could claim absolution. Then it could all go back to normal, back to the way it was before, sensible and safe, the world where death was digital and saying sorry made it all better, where he didn't have to juggle lies and secrets and try to guess which of his crimes he was about to be held accountable for.

But that wouldn't work, would it? Because it wasn't really the world that had changed. It was Conor, and Ashleigh and Guyler with him. Things never *were* the way they were before—he had only thought they were. He chuckled tonelessly at the pun.

"This isn't funny, young man."

"Sorry, Mom." He popped another apple slice into his mouth. "Um. I wasn't very help-

ful when the AP called me into his office this morning? Did you hear about that?"

"Warmer, but you've gone too far. Back it up a little."

Conor straightened in his chair, looking from his mother to his father and back again. Backing it up a little would take him to the police cordon, and the bag, and the rooftop. But there was no way they could know about those, was there? He felt his throat constrict. No, they couldn't. For one thing, even *they* wouldn't be *this* calm, not if they were waiting for those particular bombs to drop. For another, he'd left before they even—

Oh.

"This morning," he said.

"Bingo."

"I left early."

"Too early," his father corrected.

"With no note," his mother added. "After everything that happened yesterday. How do you think your father felt, when he came down to wake you up and found an empty bed?"

They all knew she was the one who came downstairs first in the morning.

"Your mother had to call the school to make sure you were all right," his father said, picking up the thread.

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, not yet," his mother said cheerfully. "But you *will* be."

Conor's heart sank. "How long?"

"A couple of weeks," his father answered. "More, if you haven't finished all the yard-work by then."

Conor looked at him dully. "You planned this."

"Not at all. But it *is* convenient, don't you think? Rake the leaves, mow the grass, and stack the firewood. Oh, and blow off the driveway and the roof while you're at it. We can negotiate about any weeding once you're through."

"You want me to use the leaf blower on the roof?"

"What, suddenly monkey boy is afraid of heights?"

They were past the hard part now, and into banter. Conor could never decide if he liked his parents' method or not. It was good that they never yelled, that the three of them could

laugh even in the middle of a lecture. But still, he sometimes wished there could be *sides*. With all of them working together, he had no targets upon which to vent his frustration.

"Two weeks is a long time," he said, hoping to bargain.

"Not nearly as long as the infinity I spent between finding you gone and hearing that you were safe," his mother shot back. "Two weeks is nothing. You'll barely even be started with the quarter by then."

That reminded him. "Ashleigh's suspended for two weeks. They told me this morning."

"Oh?"

"Can I take him his homework?"

His parents exchanged a look.

"Can't Timothy do that, now that he's graduated from Littleton?" his father asked.

"If I'm grounded and Ashleigh's is suspended, it'll be my only chance to see him."

Silence.

"Twenty minutes. Walking time included, just down the street and back. Please?"

"What is there for tonight?"

"Nothing." He knew better than to lie.

"Go to your room while we talk it over. No computer, no phone."

He stood up.

"Yes, ma'am," his father prompted.

"Yes, ma'am, yes, sir," he echoed.

He walked down the hall and into his bedroom, closing the door without turning on the light. Flopping down onto the bed, he stared at the ceiling, where a few glow-in-the-dark stars still held the light they'd gathered during the day. His parents' voices came through the wall, muffled and indistinguishable, but warm and reassuring—he'd heard those voices through that same wall his entire life. Rolling over onto his stomach, he buried his face in the pillow, trying not to think.

About Ashleigh.

About Timothy.

About the bag, and the gap, and the long year ahead.

About Ashleigh.

Sighing, he got up, turned on the light, and moved to the desk, where he fiddled with his supplies as his mind wandered. Pens, pencils, erasers, paperclips—he picked them up and put them down, switched them from one compartment to another, moved his sticky notes from the drawer to the stand and back again, rearranged the bookshelf. On a whim, he got out a sheet of notebook paper and drew an 85 at the top. Thinking for a moment, he wrote the words *Dear Ashleigh* in the upper left corner. Then he erased the *Dear* and wrote *Hey*. Then he threw the paper away.

He pulled out the blank book that Ashleigh's mother had given him for his last birthday—a black, leatherbound journal, the kind with a little cord for marking your place. He opened it to the first page, which was astonishingly, paralyzingly white.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," he called. His father entered, walked around the bed, sat down on it facing him. It was low, so his eyes were exactly on level with Conor's.

"Your mother and I agreed that you can take Ashleigh his homework. Twenty minutes is the deal, walking time included, just like you said—you leave your bike in the garage. Twenty minutes and two seconds, and you're done."

"Thanks." It came out sounding flat, but Conor truly meant it. Whatever it was that had fallen between them, the longer it lay there the harder it would set. Already he was trying to plan what he would say tomorrow, how he could possibly fit into words everything that needed to be said. He glanced at the open book on his desk. Maybe he could write it down.

"There's something else, Conor, and it's awkward to try to get you to say it, so I'm going to give you one chance, and then I'm going to say it myself." His father looked at him seriously, expectantly, his eyes full of concern.

The silence stretched out uncomfortably. Conor could feel the tension in his body, rising in tandem with the growing disappointment on his father's face. *What is it, what is it, what does he want me to say, what did I do?* When he could bear it no longer, he spoke, trying his best not to sound flippant.

"Can I have a hint?"

"Yes, you can have a hint. Smoke."

A kind of chain reaction took place in his head. It began with *they know*, which became

they know about the drugs, and then they know about me and the drugs, that I took drugs. From there, his brain leapt to *I'm the kind of kid who does drugs*, and as the whole thing reached critical mass, it overwhelmed him. He gasped as what felt like fifteen different feelings hit him all at once—guilt mixed with shame laced with dread and smothered in self-loathing, all atop a boiling stew of fear and desperation. All of the emotions he'd managed to juggle—and therefore kept from sinking in—they all came crashing down at once, and he burst into tears.

Instantly, his father was off the bed, was beside him on his knees, arms wrapped around Conor's shoulders. Conor turned and wept into the embrace, shuddering into the dark as his father whispered meaningless words of comfort. They sat like that for a long time—whether seconds or minutes, Conor couldn't have said—and slowly he became aware that his father was no longer whispering, was calling his name, calling him back.

"Conor. Conor—*Conor*."

He lifted his head, saw the smears of tears and snot he'd left on his father's shoulder, and another wave of self-loathing washed over him. He felt his chin trembling, and half a dozen new droplets rolled silently down his cheeks.

"Conor, wait."

He looked up at his father's nose, unable to make himself meet his eyes.

"Conor, it's okay. This is okay. You can cry. But Conor—*Conor*! Wait. Talk first. Tell me, first, and *then* we can deal with it."

And so Conor told him, the words tumbling over one another, fighting to get out. He told him the whole story, from their very first day on the rooftop, how they'd discovered the bag and conceived of The Plan—how they were going to catch a bad guy, and how everything had gone to hell.

"We waited all summer, Dad, every day we were up there waiting for somebody to try and get it, and we had cameras and tripods and everything, we even spent the night up there a couple of times and we didn't mean it, Ashleigh didn't mean it, we just—we just thought of it and we tried it, and it was stupid and it was wrong and oh God, Guyler's in the hospital now, it's all my fault, I could have said no but I *didn't*, I said yes and now it's all gone crazy." It all poured out of him, and it was like poison leaving his veins. When he was done, he collapsed into his father's arms and cried again.

And then he was finished, and in the emptiness that followed he sobered up, and in that instant he was ashamed for an entirely different reason—because he'd broken, broken down and cried like a baby in front of his father, it had been *years* since he'd done that. He felt naked and weak, and he turned away, suddenly unable to bear the weight of his father's embrace, and he scrubbed violently at his face with his sleeve until his eyes and nose stopped running. *A coward and a criminal and now a crybaby, that's what you are, Conor.* "Sorry," he choked out, trying to keep his voice level and deep.

His father burst out laughing.

Conor spun around, humiliated and furious, only to see that there was no mockery in his father's expression, that his eyes held the same love and concern that had been there from the start. "Conor," he said, "didn't I tell you it was okay to cry?"

Conor said nothing.

"There's nothing wrong with being upset, Conor. You've been carrying this—this *mountain*—all day long you've been carrying it, and nobody asked you if you wanted it, and nobody knew to take it off your shoulders, and it's been threatening to crush you the whole time. Hell, I'd be concerned if you *didn't* cry a little. *That's* what would scare me, to think you'd turned into the kind of person who takes all of this in stride."

"I didn't cry just a little."

"Forget it, son, there's no shame in that, none at all. Or rather, there *is* shame, but it's a good shame, a shame that means you feel bad about being bad, that you haven't taken the badness inside you and gotten comfortable with it. What are you worried about, that I'll think less of you?" He looked into Conor's eyes and saw his answer there, and reached out and pulled him into another hug. "Conor, I'm just happy you told me, that you didn't try to lie. We smelled it on you last night, you know—your mother and I both smelled it. Probably the cop smelled it, too, that Grimes or whoever he was, but he had bigger fish to fry and he was nice enough to let it slide. We were going to talk to you about it this morning, but when you woke up, you were already gone."

"That's why I'm grounded, isn't it. It's not about me leaving early."

"Well, that too, but no, you're right—it wouldn't have been such a big deal if it hadn't been for your poor timing."

“So you don’t think—you don’t think I’m—”

Conor tried mightily, but he couldn’t finish the sentence, couldn’t quite make it past the embarrassment that his father had told him he didn’t need to feel. It was too childish, the question he wanted to ask, and he couldn’t bring himself to do it, even though he burned with the need to hear the answer.

Fortunately, his father understood. “No, Conor, you’re not a bad person. You made a mistake, that’s all—and a pretty tiny one, too, when you get right down to it. Not near as bad as the one Ashleigh made. You didn’t hurt anyone but yourself—and to be honest, one joint isn’t going to hurt you, not at all, although don’t tell your mother I said that. How do you think we both recognized the smell?”

Conor nodded, and hiccupped, and his father laughed—they both laughed, and the laughter was twice as good as anything he’d felt in the past day, better even than the feeling he’d had as he soared across the gap. His father hugged him again, and talked to him for a few more minutes, and promised that he wouldn’t have to see his mother until the morning, when the shame of it wouldn’t be quite so fresh. And then he kissed him on the forehead and left, and Conor fell onto the bed, and for the second night in a row he drifted off without undressing, though it wasn’t even six thirty yet.

Two thoughts occurred to him, in the shifting fog that comes right before sleep. The first was that Ashleigh—whose burden was surely twice as heavy as his own—did not have a father to confess to, had only a mother who worked two full-time jobs, and thus would not be there to help him set it down, to give him the relief that Conor now felt, that he had not even really known he needed. This thought was desperately sad, and for a moment it almost woke him up, until he resolved to do everything he could to be there for his friend. Even if—no, *especially* if Ashleigh was guilty, for Conor understood now how far into despair a single mistake could take you, and he believed, as his father believed in him, that Ashleigh was good, and would need to be reminded of that fact.

The second thought was that, in all of that confession, his father had not asked—and he had not volunteered—what had happened to the bag.