

Chapter 8 - Secrets

"I've been thinking about the trapdoor."

"What about it?"

"I don't think it's actually locked. At least, not from both sides. I mean, think about it— whoever left the bag got up here somehow, right? And there's no way they climbed up that fucking pipe."

"They could have."

"Yeah, they *could* have, but come on. Which is more likely—potheads climbing to the roof, or potheads breaking into the school?"

"Point."

"Anyway, that's what makes me think it isn't locked. Breaking in, sure. And climbing around on the catwalks—whatever, I guess once you're inside you're going to fuck around a bit. But potheads breaking a Masterlock, or whatever? No way. I think they got inside, tried the door, and it just opened."

"So if we could figure out a way into the auditorium—"

"—we wouldn't have to go up and down the goddamn pipe all the time."

"I *like* the pipe. I got a lot stronger climbing it. And just climbing up a ladder seems—I dunno—kind of lame, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but remember when it rained while we were up here? We almost died, man. It wouldn't hurt to have a second way down."

"We've already got a second way down."

"A *third* way, then, asshole. Which reminds me—assuming we ever *do* make it across to the gym, have you given any thought to how we actually get back down to the ground?"

"A little. There's the trees, and the ledges on the far side, and the walls around that generator thing."

"So in other words, we're making it up as we go along?"

"Look, I can't exactly test it out, okay? There's more than one way down, but they all involve dropping like ten feet. The only way to get up there is to do the jump."

"Didn't you have some philosophy bullshit about being able to do everything backwards?"

"A, don't be a dick, and B, that was just an example."

"Of what?"

"The rule isn't about doing things backwards, it's about not getting stuck. There's all kinds of situations where you might be able to jump to something, but you wouldn't be able to jump back. You don't want to be so focused on getting to point B that you cut yourself off from point A."

"But in this case, we are cutting ourselves off from point A. There's no way you're jumping back across the Gap."

"Yeah, but—okay, look. There's two things going on here. The first one is *getting* to the gym, and the second one is getting away from the gym. Maybe to get all the way back to point A we have to climb down, walk around, and do the whole tree and pipe thing all over again, but we can do it."

"If you're right about there being a good way down."

"I got us this far, didn't I? I know we can do it. It's just going to take a little bit of trial and error, that's all."

"Trial and error. Jesus. We're going to end up haunting a fucking gym for all eternity."

"Hey, look on the bright side. There's always the girls' locker room."

In the end, Conor spent more time looking for an open bathroom stall than he did actually reading. Guyler had written back, and his response was brutal and short:

Dear faggot,

I've got to admit, the LAST thing I was expecting was for you to give this shit BACK. Are you really that desperate for a pen pal? I mean, I know you're not getting any from your boyfriend these days, but seriously, this is a new low.

As for your question: from you, nothing. Unless this is you hinting that you've finally pulled your head out of Ashleigh's ass, in which case I'll take a complete list of his secrets, habits, and weaknesses.

Yours truly,

~Guyler

Letting out a long, slow breath, Conor closed the journal and tucked it in with the rest of

his books, holding his fury tightly in check. He used his foot to flush the empty toilet—camouflage, a habit—then nudged the stall door open with his shoulder and stalked back out into the bathroom.

It was the last minute of class change, and the space outside the stalls was nearly empty. A pair of eighth grade boys looked up as he walked past, but their glances were idle; they had nothing to hide, and therefore Conor had nothing to fear. Worming quickly through the thinning crowd, he left most of his stuff in his locker, keeping only the journal and a pen as he turned toward the cafeteria. He moved as if half-held by invisible leashes, his fist and jaw clenched as energy thrummed through his body, seeking an exit and finding none.

So far, the plan was working—Guyler hadn't thrown the little book away, or kept it, or any of the other possibilities that had occupied Conor during his first four periods. He'd walked into math to find it lying on the table, with Holt eyeing it as though afraid it would sprout fangs and lunge. Unsure of what it would contain, Conor had slid it under the desk with the rest of his books, waiting for the end of the period.

Yet Guyler's response had been so brief, so contemptuously dismissive, that Conor could not help feeling cheated, the bubble of anger in his chest swelling until it seemed his ribs would burst. He'd spent all of math class staring at the back of the other boy's head, imagining what Guyler might have written, assembling an armada of devastating responses, only to find that once again it was Ashleigh who was at the center of things, Ashleigh who was Guyler's sole target. The destruction of Conor's journal wasn't even part of some grand plan—it was a mere sideshow, an offhand act of cruelty.

Wait a sec – are you actually jealous?

Even in his own *head* Ashleigh tried to steal the show!

Overcome, he turned to a nearby pillar and kicked it—then backed up and kicked it again, harder—then pounded against it with both fists, a feral growl clawing its way past bared teeth. Around him, several students froze in mid-step, their eyes widening in surprise, but he ignored them, continuing to hammer at the indifferent concrete until his rage collapsed under its own weight and he found himself sagging, a cut-string puppet left leaning in the breezeway.

It's not his fault, he thought wearily, retrieving the journal from the dust as the rubber-

neckers chuckled and began to drift away. His friend had not asked for any of this, was probably not even aware that his peculiar brand of fame was casting Conor in shadow. It wasn't even entirely a bad thing—hadn't Conor used Ashleigh's notoriety deliberately, as a cover for the missions?

But this—this! It was a straw too many. Conor had always done his best to stay neutral in the war between Guyler and Ashleigh, stepping in only as often and as far as was absolutely demanded by the laws of loyalty. He'd been sympathetic to Guyler's bitterness, uncomfortably aware that Ashleigh's animosity burned hotter than it had any real right to. A part of him had even argued that he should overlook the destruction of the journal, treat it as a kind of reparation—an eye in exchange for the one Ashleigh had blackened.

But Guyler had mistaken Conor's clemency for weakness, his inaction for inability. He'd made it *personal*, relieving Conor of the moral distance that had so far held him back.

Entering the cafeteria, Conor filled his tray and headed for the tables, once again foregoing Nolan, Eddie, and Holt in favor of the silent lunch section. Setting his food aside, he opened the journal and picked up his pen, shaping each word with careful concentration.

You know, for somebody who throws around the word faggot the way you do you sure do think about dicks an awful lot. Something you wont to get off your chest? I mean, its okay, its perfectly normal to spend every waking minute obsessing over a boy oh wait no its not. You'll have to get your stocker list the old fashioned way, perv.

Seriosly, you keep calling me and Ashleigh pathedic, but niether one of us is sneaking around stealing peoples journals and trashing them or talking big in front of a crowd but where were you when Ashleigh came back to school? Didn't hear you talking big then. Your mad cause Ashleigh beat your sorry little ass but you forgot that YOUR the one who started that fight and Ashleigh just finished it.

Thing is, you wont to mess with one of us your gonna have to deal with both of us, cause that is how it works when you have friends. Except you don't know that, do you, cause oh wait you don't have any. So fuck off with your bully bullshit, you can make fun of my spelling all you wont and I don't care, thats cause I have a life and your just sitting there being obsessed.

Signed "Faggot" see it don't bother me cause I know its not true.

Conor dotted the last sentence savagely, the tip of his pen poking through to the page below. Somehow, the act of writing had made him *more* angry, not less, a kind of anti-catharsis occurring as he refined and clarified his grievances. He found himself bristling at incidents that had long since ceased to matter, recalling every slight and scuffle of a year or more of conflict.

Ashleigh overdid it this time, but Guyler started it at the skate park, and in Mr. Marowitz's class, and on the bus on the way to the science museum. It had been Guyler when Ashleigh had brought a fragile mural to school for his book report, and when Holt's mother had done a ludicrous job with Holt's haircut, and when Conor had spilled a cup of apple juice onto his pants just before the pep rally. It was ridiculous for the other boy to act so aggrieved, to demand redress as if he had been uniquely and unfairly wronged.

Aren't you doing the same thing, though? a quiet voice asked.

No!

But his fury faltered as his brain began supplying a different set of images. Guyler's shoulders slumping as he stuttered to a halt while Ashleigh raced away with the bag that held his Halloween candy. Guyler's hair shining like a beacon in the movie theater, an easy target for their popcorn, their pennies, their chewed-up gum. Guyler on the verge of tears in the locker room, unable to find his brand-new sneakers because Conor had snuck them into Ashleigh's bag while Ashleigh provided a distraction.

Fine, Conor snapped. So none of them were innocent. But it was Guyler who was in the wrong *today*, Guyler who'd chosen to give up his transient claim on the moral high ground when he'd turned his anger at Ashleigh into an unprovoked attack on Conor. Two wrongs did not make a right.

And three?

No. It was Guyler who'd started all of this in the first place. That still mattered, even now. Perhaps *especially* now.

Calmer, his anger still hot but somewhat tempered, Conor closed the journal. The message was wrong for his original goal of stalling, of drawing the other boy out, but it fit just fine with the way he was feeling now. He had no idea how Guyler would react, and he didn't

care, and he sort of *liked* that he didn't care.

Do your worst, asshole.

Standing, he walked briskly across the floor to the table where Guyler was sitting, alone as usual. Setting the book down, he slid it firmly across the speckled surface, knocking a splash of juice out of Guyler's cup as he pushed it against the other boy's tray.

Guyler looked up, his eyes narrowing. Reaching forward, he picked up the journal, tossing it lightly back in Conor's direction. "Already read that one," he said. "It's boring."

It took a full three seconds for this to sink in, after which Conor experienced a moment of horrible, clawing desperation in which the only words his brain was able to supply were *you touched it last*. "W—there's more," he said, suppressing a wince at the catch in his voice. "Page and a half, brand-new."

"Not interested." Guyler feigned a yawn, which morphed into a predatory grin as he watched Conor flounder. "Whatcha gonna do now, pen pal?"

"Fuck you, Guyler, read it," Conor said brusquely, trying to ignore the tendrils of panic that were curling around his chest. Over at the staff table, several heads had turned in their direction. He had been out of his seat for over twenty seconds.

"Why should I? Last I heard, your own *boyfriend* didn't even want to."

Conor's breath caught in his throat, his lips moving soundlessly as a dozen angry retorts fell into gridlock. "You couldn't get enough of it, before," he said lamely.

One of the teachers had stood and was heading their way. They had about fifteen more seconds.

Guyler's smile deepened. "Yeah, but this is *way* more entertaining."

Frantic, Conor felt his thoughts go slippery, and he scrambled to turn one into words, not bothering to filter for quality or relevance. "You—you owe me," he blurted, registering the words at the same time Guyler did. "For your forehead."

Guyler's eyes widened, his jaded façade slipping half an inch. He stared at Conor for all but their last two seconds, finally breaking off to shrug. "Deal," he said, reaching out for the little leatherbound book.

"You need to be in your seat, young man," said the teacher, an older woman Conor didn't know. She had come to a halt and drawn herself up imperiously, looking down at

them over the ramparts of her crossed arms.

"He was bringing me my diary," Guyler piped up, a sudden and appalling choirboy cheerfulness in his tone. "I dropped it in the hall!" Already turning, Conor looked back to see the other boy holding up the book, a shit-eating grin plastered across his open, guileless face.

The woman's expression softened. "Next time, wait until lunch is over," she chided, underlining the sentiment with a frown. She watched as Conor beat a hasty retreat, not daring to look back again until he'd arrived at his table. By then, she was gone, and Guyler was once more staring inscrutably in his direction, his stolid countenance broken only by the shadow of a sarcastic wink.

We probably should have seen that one coming, whispered Ashleigh.

Fuck you, and fuck him too, Conor countered, groaning inwardly. In a quieter voice, he added: *new rule – no more plans that Guyler can fuck up just by deciding not to play along.*

He spent the next few minutes gathering together the remnants of his composure, picking at his cold, congealed pasta and trying not to look in Guyler's direction. There was plenty to distract him—Holt, juggling empty milk cartons while Nolan and Nicholas laughed with delight, or William and Jennifer, Jennifer looking particularly beautiful in an East Binder sweatshirt that was perhaps half a size too small. There was the normal mix of miscreants at the silent lunch tables—some sullen, some resigned, most indifferent—punctuated by the high schooler Oliver in his usual place at the end of the row. He was missing his book, his head upright, his eyes—for once—actively taking in the scene around him. And there were the rest of the high schoolers, out past the staff table, the roar of their conversation dwarfing the modest cacophony of the middle school side.

Eventually, though, his eyes returned to Guyler, drawn as if by some fundamental force that could be resisted but not overcome. The other boy was positioned as Oliver should have been, hunched over the journal, his eyes sliding back and forth. As Conor watched, he picked up a pen off the table, making a few quick marks before setting it back down.

Spellchecking me again, Conor thought darkly. But there was nothing to be done. He had rolled the dice, and things were now quite literally resting in Guyler's hands.

I told you we should have just punched him.

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The next day and a half passed in staccato savagery as the journal switched hands with ever-increasing frequency. It was on the floor of the hallway when Conor returned from Activity, some twenty feet away from his locker as if it had been carried downstream by the flow of students. He'd thrown it at the back of Guyler's head in the courtyard after final bell, picking it up from the tree again that night. By the time they arrived in Math on Wednesday, they had each written in it three more times, and it passed between them again whenever Mrs. Atkins turned her back.

Guyler had apparently decided that his agreement to read it was generally binding, because after his initial capitulation in the cafeteria, he offered no further resistance. Either that, or he was simply enjoying the chance to take the gloves off, even if only on paper. His first response had been ruthless:

*I'm glad it doesn't bother you when I call you faggot, faggot. By the way, faggot, *want, *it's (3x combo!), *obsessing, *stalker (I think, anyway), *seriously, *pathetic, *neither, *people's, *you're, *because, *YOU'RE. There's more, but there's no fucking way I'm doing all the work for you. Quit screwing around and put some fucking effort into it.*

As long as we're making lists of stuff you don't get, we might as well add irony, because I'm pretty sure YOU just called ME obsessed. You know, by writing it down in this book. The one that you carry around with you everywhere because it reminds you of your butt buddy. I can't decide if it's funnier if he never even read it, or if he just didn't bother taking the time to write back.

*Not your friend (since I don't have any),
~Guyler*

P.S. — I didn't steal your stupid journal, shithead. You dropped it on the ground in Math and never bothered to pick it up. News flash: no one's out to get you, because no one cares.

Conor had accomplished very little in Art that afternoon, spending most of his time poring over the newspaper scraps they were using for papier-mâché, looking for the proper spellings of various words. He'd felt a grim pleasure at the lack of annotations the next time he'd opened the journal, but the feeling had lasted only seconds:

Hey, look, progress! Maybe we can work on your math skills next. I could teach you about negative numbers so you can finally understand your report card.

Livid, Conor had filled his next entry with deliberate errors, which Guyler had thoroughly ignored. It was infuriating—the other boy seemed to know each and every one of Conor's buttons, while at the same time having none of his own. He didn't react to name-calling or insults, and when Conor recounted several of his more public humiliations at Ashleigh's hands, Guyler replied with details that Conor had forgotten, each word oozing a cool, dispassionate contempt.

Conor had considered breaking the chain—just keeping the journal the next time it came back, refusing to write another message. But they both knew that Guyler was winning, that to end their exchange prematurely would be an admission of defeat.

Of course, if Guyler felt the same way once *Conor* pulled ahead....

If Conor pulled ahead.

God dammit.

In any event, most of the low-hanging fruit was gone, and both boys were beginning to probe deeper, their battle shifting from a general bombardment to a slower insurgency as each sought to find the chinks in the other's armor. A real conversation began to emerge, its content buried at first beneath the sheer volume of their casual abuse, but rising gradually to the surface as they dispensed with petty libel. It was as if, having rigorously established their mutual disdain, they were by unspoken agreement giving each other room to maneuver, risking a devastating coup de grâce in hopes of achieving the same.

Guyler's advantage in this more intimate arena was indisputable, given his unlimited access to two weeks of Conor's most private and vulnerable ramblings. Conor nearly choked the first time Guyler referred to Ashleigh as his *imaginary friend*, mocking his internal dia-

logue with unsettling accuracy.

Slowly, though, the gap began to narrow, glimmers of Guyler's true personality poking through the bluff and bluster as their strange correspondence drew on. Often, there was more to be learned from what the other boy *didn't* say than from what he did, and Conor began quietly keeping track of which threads Guyler continually refused to pick up. Most of his deflections were subtle, as when Conor had asked once again why he hadn't ratted Ashleigh out after the fight.

And here I thought you were grateful, Guyler had written, leaving the book on Conor's desk at the start of fifth period. What's the point of telling, when it doesn't get anything done? I notice YOU haven't told on ME for ruining your pretty little diary.

Which had in fact successfully distracted Conor from his question, though he privately resolved to come back to it later. *I haven't told anybody cause I don't want to have to hold your stupid face together again,* he'd written back.

Guyler's response had been shrewd:

You wouldn't have to WORRY about holding people's faces together if your friend wasn't a fucking psycopath with a short fuse. Seriously, how does this not bother you? I mean, it must bother you on SOME level, or you would have just told him I fucked with your journal, right? Why else would you keep it a secret?

It had taken Conor an extra read to be certain that there were, in fact, no subtle insults or hidden sarcasm—just an open, honest question. Without stopping to think, he'd picked up his pen and composed an answer:

Yeah, it bothers me. It's fucked up, think I don't know that? He crossed the line. But you're an asshole if you think you're any better. You stoll my journal and spent like five hours wreking it, WHY? Just cause I'm Ashleigh's friend. You ask me, BOTH of you need to get some fucking counciling, difference is NONE of this would of happened except for you and your bullshit. If you would of just left us alone (hell if you just left us alone in the FIRST place, back in 6th grade) everything would be all normal right now. Ashleigh might have a short fuse,

but your the one ligthing fucking matches and then crying cause you got burnt.

No sooner had he placed the final period than a note of worry rang softly in the back of his mind. Looking back over the message, he frowned.

Caught up in the act of writing, he hadn't made any effort to filter his words, and his candor had brought him dangerously close to the edge of disloyalty. There was nothing in there that he wouldn't share with, say, Holt, or Timothy, or even Nolan or Sam. He'd said as much to Ashleigh directly, on the one day they'd both been at school.

But this was *Guyler* he was writing to. Solidarity was called for – wasn't it?

Conor closed the book on his finger, holding the page. He glanced toward the front of the room, where Guyler was talking quietly with Rami as the pair of them worked together on the day's assignment.

Ash? Little help, here?

Silence. It didn't work like that, apparently.

Okay, fine. Conor opened the book again, rereading the message once more. It wasn't *bad*, exactly. Just – too honest. Even for Holt or Timothy, now that he really thought about it. The nature of what Ashleigh had done, and the way Conor felt about it – these things were personal, private. They were, quite literally, just between the two of them. No one else had any right to eavesdrop, or comment, or judge.

Yeah, but it's not like you give a shit what Guyler has to say about it.

Okay, maybe not. But there was power in confession, in confirmation. Guyler was already uncomfortably familiar with the details of Conor and Ashleigh's recent – what, disagreement? Separation? Rough patch? This would be fuel for his fire, ammunition for his attacks.

Who the fuck cares?

Conor frowned. That was a question that cut two ways.

Come on. What are you going to do, rip out the whole goddamn page like some girl who can't decide what to write to her crush?

That was the deciding factor, in the end. There was no way that Guyler would fail to notice, and no doubt that he'd milk it for all it was worth. Better simply to leave it, and let the

other boy think what he would.

Besides, Conor thought, closing the journal as he waited for Mrs. Atkins to turn her back. It's the truth.

There were things worth lying for, but Guyler's opinion wasn't one of them.

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It began to rain in the middle of last period, a heavy, monotonous downpour that sounded like it planned to last for forty days. After final bell, the students huddled awkwardly beneath the breezeways, packed in like sardines, breaking away in impromptu footraces whenever one of the buses pulled into the circle.

Conor was one of the last ones onto bus 134, having lingered at his locker, waiting for Guyler to give back the journal. He had waited at lunch, too—both before and after—and between sixth and seventh periods, but neither book nor boy had been anywhere to be seen. He'd been thirty seconds from giving up when Guyler had appeared around the corner in the empty, echoing hallway, tossed the little book like a Frisbee, and disappeared without a word.

Swinging into an open seat near the front, Conor pulled the journal out of his bag and opened it. Guyler had written his longest entry yet:

I didn't fuck up your stupid diary because you're Ashleigh's friend, faggot. I fucked it up because you're Ashleigh's tool. I mean, Jesus, look at this crap. You spent two fucking weeks begging him to just please come back and make you his bitch again, and he wouldn't even ANSWER you. After he got you in trouble, ditched you, ignored you, wrote your stupid little secret up on the board. All that and you're STILL on his side. Go figure.

The problem is, he's an asshole, and you're his fucking mirror, and I can't decide which pisses me off more. At least he's got a REASON to try and ruin my life. He actually HATES me. But you? You don't even give a shit! You're just along for the ride! So don't go bitching about how I came after you just because you're Ashleigh's friend, when that's the only reason YOU came after ME. It's a two-way fucking street...you want to be left alone? Then quit tak-

ing orders from a thug and start thinking for yourself. Get off his dick, grow a pair, and tell him to fuck off once in a while. Or better yet, forever. I'll sign the fucking truce in a heartbeat.

Holding my breath,

~Guyler

P.S. – "Crossed the line," my ass. Ain't no line if nothing HAPPENS when he crosses it.

The engine came to life with a sputtering roar just as Conor finished, and the bus lurched forward, tossing the students back against their seats. Closing the journal, Conor slipped it back into his bookbag, looking over his seatmate's shoulder at the washed-out grey of the October sky, half-visible through the droplets tracing their way across the window. He felt a sort of tangle in his brain, a snarl of thought and emotion that acted like a dam, preventing actual words from forming. For a time, he simply stared, swaying with the rhythm of the overworn tires and the cracked, uneven road.

Guyler was right.

He was biased, hypocritical, savage and uncouth, and his loathing for Ashleigh colored every word he wrote and every move he made. And he was *right*.

What did that mean?

Conor didn't know. Or he didn't *want* to know. In a flash of lucid self-awareness, he realized that this was the real reason he'd hidden the journal's destruction from Ashleigh, the source of his strange, unnamed reluctance. Somehow, reading those first few furious passages, a part of him had intuited where Guyler was coming from, registered the truth behind his barbs and sought to hide from it.

So, Ashleigh said quietly, his imaginary voice unusually somber. What happens next?

Conor didn't know that, either.

A snatch of conversation behind him caught his ear and he turned toward it, wordlessly grateful for a distraction, for anything that could derail his current train of thought before it arrived at its destination.

"—to do, little man. But you feel free to do whatever. We red, white, and blue up in here—ain't nobody making green unless they want to."

It was Devon, sitting four rows back and making no effort to keep his voice down. He was speaking across the aisle to Timothy, who looked back through narrowed eyes.

Conor watched as Timothy spoke, too quietly to make out over the background chatter. Devon laughed. “*Love* that word, ‘literally,’” he said. “Straight out of a book, shit all lined up according to plan. Sure, ain’t no reason why I *can’t*, but I got five or six reasons why I *won’t*.”

The older boy held up a hand, ticking them off as he continued. “Numero uno: today is by definition better than tomorrow morning, that’s why FedEx charges double for it. Numero dos: little personal rule of mine. I try not to bother a man before eight AM unless I got news that’s better than coffee or I don’t give a fuck, neither of which happens to apply in this particular situation. Numero três: once a dude’s told you to fuck off, gets kind of hard to get him to break the habit, so I’d rather make shit smooth as possible before it gets to that point, your expertise being just what I need to make that happen. And last and most definitely not least, if I do it myself, then how to I justify handing over thirty whole dollars to *your* skinny white ass?” Lowering his hand, he frowned. “Shit. That was only four, wasn’t it? Guess I *literally* lied.”

Timothy opened his mouth to respond, still too softly for Conor to hear. Just then, the bus came to a halt, and the two kids in the seat in front of Devon stood up to get off.

There was no time to be subtle. Seizing the opportunity, Conor darted down the aisle as soon as the two kids had passed, throwing himself into the empty seat as the bus jerked into motion again. “Hey, guys,” he said, shucking his bag and pulling himself upright. Both Devon and Timothy were staring at him, the former with mild surprise, the latter with cold disapproval. “What’s up?”

A muscle in Timothy’s jaw tightened, but Devon merely chuckled. “Long time no see, Rocky,” the older boy drawled. Turning back to Timothy, he jerked his head in Conor’s direction. “Now that I think about it, maybe catapult here could help me out, since you seem so...*unenthusiastic*.”

Timothy crossed his arms. “Didn’t say no, did I?”

“Didn’t say yes, did you?” Devon spread his hands, waiting, his face an open challenge.

Timothy frowned, his gaze shifting back and forth between Conor and the older boy. “It’s so *stupid*, though,” he grumbled. “Isn’t there something else I can do?”

Devon shook his head. "I got plenty of people can do me plenty of favors. *This* the favor I need right now. You either the man I want, or you're not. Take it or leave it."

Conor cleared his throat. "What's—um. What's going on?"

They ignored him. "Fine," said Timothy. "Give me the stupid money."

Devon chuckled again, pulling out a pair of tightly folded bills. Opening them up, he skinned away a twenty, tucking it back into his pocket. The other, a ten, he passed across the aisle. "Pleasure doing business with you, Tim," he said cheerfully. Lifting his chin in Conor's direction, he added, "How about you, David? Want to make it a race? I got me another ten right here."

David?

"Oh, come on, ain't you been to Sunday school? David throws rocks." Devon looked expectantly between the two of them, then shook his head. "Shit. Y'all bitches just don't understand the basic concept of nicknames."

"What's going on?" Conor repeated. Across the aisle, Timothy was folding the bill into a tiny rectangle.

Devon shrugged. "Simple exchange of favors. Tiny Tim here needs a few extra bucks, and I'm looking for a chance to get to know his brother. Heard he's something of a local badass."

Oh, here we fucking go.

"More like the village idiot," Timothy muttered. Stashing the folded ten in his sock, he looked up at Devon. "How am I supposed to get two fives?" he asked. "Don't you usually have to buy something to get change?"

Devon snorted. "The fuck you asking me for? Figure it out—that's why I'm paying you." He turned to Conor. "Goes like this. I give ol' Timothy here a ten, he comes back tomorrow with his brother and they're both holding fives, I give each of 'em ten more. You want in? Bet five bucks on the other guy and either way you come out happy."

Conor blinked. "That's *thirty dollars*," he said, taken aback. "For *nothing*?"

Devon shrugged again. "You call it nothing, maybe. Me, I like to play the long game, know what I'm saying? Li'l Tim here pulls it off, I got two guys know they'll get taken care of, they ever in the mood to do me a favor. He doesn't, well—I lose ten now, but I learn a les-

son that might've hurt a lot worse later if I was thinking I could rely on Timothy, here." He grinned. "R-O-I, amigos, return on investment. Nothing like a little goodwill in the bank, gathering interest, ain't that right, Tim?"

Timothy's eyebrows drew together, and he turned, looking stonily at Conor as he answered. "That's right," he said softly.

Conor squirmed under the younger boy's scrutiny, once again reminded of his broken half-promise. He was silent as the bus shuddered over the railroad tracks, crossing out of the city proper and into the suburbs. "Uh, Timothy?" he said finally, unable to stop himself from glancing nervously over at Devon. "This—ah—this sounds an awful lot like you're getting recruited into a gang or something."

Conor expected another laugh from Devon, but the older boy said nothing as he turned to meet Timothy's gaze, his face expressionless and still. There was another long pause as the two of them weighed each other, Conor looking back and forth between both. "So?" challenged Timothy, still staring in Devon's direction.

So – gangs are bad? Conor opened his mouth to form the words, but Devon was faster.

"Ain't no gang, Alcatraz," he said, breaking the stalemate to look at Conor once more. "Just friends and favors—freely asked, freely given. You get people start thinking of they selves as part of a gang, shit gets all kind of fucked up." He snorted again. "Remember the first couple weeks of school? Stupid, man. Whole bunch of people could've just got along, except they had this *idea* between them. Eagles and bulldogs and shit. Set us back fucking weeks, man."

Conor frowned. "Set *who* back?"

"Me and every other Joe out there just trying to make a quiet buck," Devon said. "Live and let live, know what I'm saying? I must've dropped two, three hundred dollars trying to calm things down. But hey, you got to spend some to make some. Shit is looking real entrepreneurial, now."

"Wait," Timothy cut in. "You're saying *you're* the reason everything got better in the last couple of weeks?"

Conor bit his lip. *Had* things gotten better? He hadn't really been paying attention, given the state of his own private little corner of the universe. He tried to recall the last time he'd

seen a fight, or heard that someone had been suspended. There was Ashleigh, of course, but since then?

“What, you thought your buddy Craig just up and decided to turn over a new leaf?” Devon asked. Timothy’s eyes widened. “Wasn’t just *me*, of course. Had to find me some similarly enlightened individuals to help put pressure in the right places, and that took a while. And good ol’ Mr. Sykes did his fair share, thanks to a couple of extremely accurate anonymous tips.” He winked. “But all in all, time and money well spent. Brother needed a little peace and quiet so he could get to *work*, you know?”

“And you’re telling us all this why?” Timothy demanded. “Want to make sure you’ve got *street cred* with the sixth and seventh graders?”

“I’m telling you so you’ll be fuckin’ *grateful*, man. Ain’t no point building a bridge if you don’t put your name on it. And it don’t hurt to have people think of you when they’re asking they selves who runs shit. Even if those people *are* middle schoolers.”

Timothy fell silent as this sank in. Conor studied the older boy’s face. It was almost beyond belief—would have *been* beyond belief, if someone had tried to make the same claim a month earlier. But four weeks of Ms. Palmano’s lectures had left their mark on Conor’s view of the world, and after a moment’s thought, he was almost surprised that he hadn’t seen it coming. He could hear his teacher’s words in his mind as clearly as if she were on the bus beside him—*agency is what we call it when an individual has power, control, the ability to make choices and have those choices affect the world around you.*

“Aaaaanyway,” said Devon, leaning back and stretching languorously, “all that’s a roundabout way of saying I ain’t after no lifetime commitment. I’m just looking to get up with anybody thinks they might could turn a little value into a little *more* value, that’s all. And until we get that ball rolling, I’m more than happy to spread a little cash among good friends who know how to get shit done.”

The bus squealed to a halt, and Devon stood. They were stopped in front of a small, one-story brick house with a neat, well-tended garden and an old but pristine Honda in the driveway. “You ever short a couple presidents,” he said, his glance including Conor as well as Timothy, “you come on and look me up.” He shouldered his bag, threw them a mock salute, and stepped out into the aisle.

And just like that, he was gone. Conor and Timothy rode in silence for the next few minutes, each lost in his own thoughts, until suddenly Conor realized that they were only a few blocks away from Timothy's stop. "Hey," he began, reaching out to touch the other boy's shoulder.

Timothy twitched irritably, shaking him off. "What?" he growled, continuing to gaze out the window.

Conor swallowed, forcing himself to continue. "I'm sorry I didn't catch up with you again. After Ashleigh came back."

"Whatever," Timothy said, his voice brittle with bitterness. "I get it. World revolves around Ashleigh, everyone loves Ashleigh, Ashleigh is love, Ashleigh is life."

Conor winced, remembering the fury he'd felt at Guyler's dismissal, at Ashleigh's usurping of the jump. "Yeah," he agreed. "I know that feeling." He looked down at Timothy's ankle. "You don't have to do this, you know. Run errands for Devon."

"Mom's got enough money for half a birthday present," Timothy said levelly, turning so that his eyes bored directly into Conor's. "The other half went to Ashleigh's new window and Ashleigh's therapy session."

Conor's mouth hung uselessly open as he struggled to think of a response. A ghastly shriek filled the air as the bus driver downshifted, and Timothy stood, slinging his bag over his shoulder. He still hadn't gotten a new lunchbox. "Besides," he continued. "I need *somebody* I can count on to look after me."

Then the bus stopped, and he, too, was gone, leaving Conor alone with his thoughts.

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A double life, a triple life—quadruple, quintuple, high enough that Conor no longer knew the word for it. A dozen lives, a hundred, each in its own little box, distinct from all the rest; a shifting sea of priorities as he stole time and energy from himself to satisfy the needs of the present.

He was awake at five in the morning, dangling by one arm from the old oak tree in the backyard, fighting for even an inch of lift, humbled by the pull of gravity. The monkey jump

loomed on the horizon in the same way that Binder's Gap once had—it was all he ever thought of, the sole consuming passion in his heart.

He was on the edge of his seat in Ms. Palmano's class, razor-sharp and laser focused. He rarely spoke, holding out for serendipity, for the rare and ideal coincidence of a brilliant insight and a silent room. He had come to need his teacher's winks like water—a day between them parched, and two was almost unbearable. He had even made conscious efforts to improve his grammar, beating plowshares out of Guyler's cutting mockery.

He was weathering that mockery in math, where the first test had rung a death knell for his hopes of earning a D. There would be a parent-teacher conference soon, and Conor had had two separate nightmares in which they made Guyler his tutor. Over a week had passed since the other boy's last entry in the journal, and Conor still hadn't handed it back; Guyler had responded by resuming his usual steady stream of snide asides and vague aspersions, taking particular pleasure in being provocatively right whenever Conor was forced to be publicly wrong.

He was gasping for breath on the soccer field, where the modest improvement brought about by his nighttime runs had been horribly misconstrued as the tip of an iceberg of talent. Coach Pool had kept him at midfield for two of their three games so far; perhaps out of respect for his former loyalties, he had benched Conor for most of their match against the Vikings. Guyler was showing a peculiar consistency of character on the field, resisting all appeals to decency, strategy, and esprit du corps—he had received yellow cards for tripping Conor on two separate occasions, and there was now a boy assigned to stay between them at all times.

He was at a loss for words in Freedom Plaza, struggling to translate his patchwork, piecemeal philosophy into some kind of coherent and teachable framework. Where Ashleigh had questioned his reasons, Timothy challenged his methods, demanding that Conor justify the placement of every hand, the purpose of every drill. By the tenth time the younger boy interrupted his explanation with *but why can't you just*, Conor was ready to scream. But Timothy was there at his request, had in fact only come because Conor had insisted, and so he swallowed his frustration, doing his best to think things through from a fresh perspective.

He was playing the good son at home, laughing at his mother's lame jokes, forcing him-

self to accept his father's affections, unable to put his finger on the moment when his responses had ceased to be genuine. He did his chores, suppressing the layer of resentment that had overlaid his usual reluctance. He left his door open as an act of defiant self-discipline, closing it only when he needed to relieve some pressure, or when he was sneaking out, or when he was working on homework or listening to music. He realized he was closing his door all the time, and he gritted his teeth and opened it again.

And between and behind each of these, in the unscheduled hours that filled the cracks of his week, he was Ashleigh's friend. They sat together on the bus, rendezvoused in the hall, defected to one another's team in dodgeball. They shared afternoon bike rides and weekend sleepovers, shrinking the lengthening autumn nights with hours of online conversation. They told tales, dared dares, discussed dreams—solemn and serious one moment, dissolving into giggles the next.

It was by far the largest share of Conor's attention, an archipelago that dominated the map of his life. But it was not one hundred percent, and in the quiet lull between laughs, each could see that the other had noticed. There was a sense that they might have talked about it, faced the tension head-on and in so doing eradicate it, but the confidence to take that critical step was itself a casualty of change. These days, there was simply too much that each did not know about the other, and all of it too trivial to bear the weight of their full scrutiny.

Ashleigh no longer came out to train, though his ankle had fully healed. After his fourth refusal, Conor had stopped asking. They still went up to the roof together from time to time, but by silent and mutual agreement, neither of them approached the Gap. It hung unacknowledged in the background, casting its shadow into the present, a physical manifestation of the gulf that lay between them.

There were times when Ashleigh disappeared entirely, leaving no note, his phone off or simply ignored. He offered no explanation, and Conor didn't press the issue. He did, however, let die his long-established habit of dropping by the other boy's house unannounced, demoralized by the sinking sense of abandonment he felt whenever his friend failed to come to the window.

Things were especially awkward during family dinners, where Conor's mother and father expressed their hospitality through endless, cheerful interrogation, always with the pair

of them lumped together by default—*what were you boys up to this afternoon? What have you boys got planned for the weekend? You boys working on anything interesting in school?* They seemed painfully unaware of the cost of their presumption, oblivious to the way that each unanswered question gave substance to the tension that both boys were trying so hard to ignore. They soon defaulted to spending nights over at Ashleigh's, where Ms. Falhanner's questions were cursory and tended to be pizza topping-related.

By the second week of October, Conor had become aware of another new wrinkle in their relationship, one which seemed portentous or petty by turns, depending on his mood: since the day of the fight, Ashleigh had not called or texted him once.

Oh, he'd called *back*, of course. And he answered Conor most of the time, those occasional odd absences notwithstanding. And it wasn't like he was going invisible online or avoiding him in the hallways or anything like that. But if Conor didn't make the first move, nothing. Once, a full four days went by with zero contact outside of school before Conor finally caved. It was emblematic of the uncertainty between them—too small for comment and too large to be ignored.

I'm not imagining it. I just don't know what it means.

As if all of that were not enough, the seeds of doubt that Guyler and Timothy had planted in the back of Conor's mind had been quietly growing, adding an entirely new axis to his dilemma. In the four years that they had known each other, it had never really occurred to Conor to question Ashleigh's character. They were friends, and that was that—the scale of good and bad simply wasn't relevant.

But now, with his central premise in doubt, Conor found himself vulnerable to a wider perspective. Guyler's enmity and Timothy's cold contempt marked the corners of a triangle closed by his own reflexive loyalty; for the first time, Conor began to move within its borders, taking an objective view of his friend's behavior. He started to notice patterns, obvious ones—a set of common triggers, common responses, a primitive algorithm with an unsettling degree of predictive power. Around other people, Ashleigh was constantly on edge, his composure stretched taut around a kind of vindictive petulance only partly restrained. He launched caustic attacks during classroom debates, elbowed his way through the halls as if looking for a fight, lost his temper with his fan club in the courtyard. He was imperious,

dismissive, blunt to the point of cruelty—his every word bespoke an absolute and unshakable confidence in the correctness of his opinions and the superiority of his ideas. He was like an island rising from a turbulent sea, defining its center by his presence, forcing everything else to bend and flow around him.

He was, in short, every inch the self-centered, arrogant asshole that Guyler and Timothy had accused him of being.

But that doesn't make any sense.

Uncertain of his footing, wary of his own biases, Conor did his best to think in short, simple steps, to confine himself to the realm of verifiable fact.

People like Ashleigh. That's not just my imagination.

Evidence: they talked to him in the halls. Picked him early in Activity. Joined his group for projects. Followed his lead with substitutes. Invited him to parties. Didn't rat him out.

People don't like assholes.

Evidence: much weaker. There were plenty of stuck-up, bratty popular kids. But still. There was a difference between popular and "popular," and Ashleigh really *was* well-liked—wasn't he?

Unable to answer, Conor returned to his observations, this time focusing his attention on his classmates, on the way they were reacting to Ashleigh's abrasiveness. It didn't take long to reach a conclusion:

Ashleigh was popular, but he was losing ground, and fast.

So it wasn't just me being dense, Conor thought. This is new.

Now that he knew what to look for, the signs were everywhere. There were furrowed brows and pursed lips when Ashleigh stormed through the hallways, dark mutters that spread behind him like a wake. There was a kind of ad-hoc militia forming in English, a bloc of students who would immediately leap to a collective defense whenever he started gearing up for one of his rants. On the bus, he'd developed the same sort of anti-kid bubble that existed around Eichardt—none of the sixth graders sat within three seats of him unless they had absolutely no other choice.

The change was most apparent in Ashleigh's fan club, no longer quite so fanatical. Nolan and Sam seemed to be halfway through the process of splintering away, spending more and

more time with each other, apart from the rest of the group. When they were gone, Eddie became even more frenetic than usual, filling every second with puerile word vomit as if terrified of silence. This had the effect of wearing away Ashleigh's already thin veneer of patience, turning every get-together into a potential powder keg. Holt was doing his best to play diplomat, smoothing over misunderstandings and keeping everybody happy, but it was clearly just a matter of time before things came to a head.

It was agonizing to watch, this slow descent into self-destruction—not least because Conor couldn't *quite* convince himself that it wasn't exactly what the other boy deserved. He swung back and forth like a pendulum, one hour indulging in grim satisfaction, the next squirming in penitent guilt. And all the while helpless, held back by the pretense that nothing was wrong.

And you're playing along with that why, exactly?

He doesn't want my help.

Fuck what he wants! He's falling apart over there!

Not my problem.

He's your best friend!

He was my best friend.

He's still your best friend. He's your only fucking friend.

Not if he won't even tell me what's going on.

You mean like how you told him all about your journal? And the monkey jump? And having a big fat crush on —

Shut up.

It was spite, and he knew it. But dammit, Ashleigh had *hurt* him. Had gone right to the heart of everything they shared and made a mockery of it. Whatever trust, whatever loyalty, whatever *friendship* was left between them, it wasn't worth saving on faith and hope alone. There would be no more forgiveness without apology, no more help without thanks. If they were going to come back from this, it was going to be because *Ashleigh* wanted them to.

And in the meantime, he could dig himself out of his own damn hole.

Slowly, experimentally, Conor began to disengage, reclaiming the hours and minutes that he'd left in Ashleigh's possession. He started by dropping their late night chat sessions, us-

ing the extra time to play catchup in math. When Ashleigh offered no comment, he stopped calling and texting as well, with predictable results. An Indian summer rolled in, the clouds disappearing for days at a time, and Conor began to bike to and from school, cutting out wait time in the courtyard along with the bus ride.

They still saw each other all the time, of course – in English and Activity, in the breaks between classes. But the flow of weekend and afternoon get-togethers slowed to a trickle as old plans got crossed off the list and no new ones replaced them. Before long, their friendship had shrunk to the level of mere acquaintance, no more time-consuming than Conor's relationship with Timothy or Holt.

Conor waited for Ashleigh to say something, anything – to give any sign at all that he'd noticed, that he too felt the band-aid sting of their estrangement. But if anything, the other boy only grew more relaxed, his smile like quicksilver, the unnatural smoothness of his banter in sharp contrast to his increasingly savage treatment of the rest of the world. The less they spoke, the easier the words flowed between them, and though he knew it was an act, Conor couldn't stop himself from hurting at just how effortlessly Ashleigh donned his mask of nonchalance.

Then stop fucking dwelling on it – isn't that the point?

It was, and he did, filling his evenings with yardwork, with homework, with games and cartoons, with endless practice sessions that left him battered and drained. Bit by bit, the edges of his other lives expanded, pushing into the empty space until it almost seemed it wasn't there. Whole hours would pass in which he didn't even think about it, and when he did, the pain was dull and distant, like the bruise beneath a cut that had long since scabbed over.

There were times, though, when it seemed as if nothing had changed, when a glimpse of Ashleigh's haggard face across a crowded hallway would rob him of his breath mid-laugh, or a stray thought half a moment before sleep leave him tossing and turning for hours. He felt inexplicably guilty, as if it were not Ashleigh who had caused all of this, Ashleigh who had chosen to push them apart. He had no god to speak of, so he cursed the other boy instead, pouring his frustration into clenched fists and muttered rants, digging pens into his journal until the pages seemed to bleed. Above all, he was maddened by ellipsis, by the utter

lack of reason or explanation, the completely avoidable nature of every scrap of misery. It became his refrain, his mantra, a single word upon which he pinned all of his unhappiness.

Why?

• • •

"So, anyway, I tried to explain it to her mom like you told me, about learning how to fall and stuff, take it slow, protect yourself, but she was still, like, pretty against it, and she said the only way she'd let Isabella try is if she can talk to your mom first, and you come with us."

Conor squinted. The words had spilled out of Timothy's mouth in a rush as he stood there, hands in his pockets, not quite meeting Conor's eyes. Beside him, the other sixth grader was blushing faintly, an embarrassed look on her face as she rocked back and forth onto her heels.

"What?" Conor asked, perplexed. "I mean, wait—what?"

Timothy rolled his eyes, taking a deep breath and starting again, more slowly. "I was going to show Isabella some of the stuff you taught me—you know, target jumps and slipthroughs and the roll and stuff. And I was going to take her to Freedom Plaza. But her mom won't let her go unless she talks to *your* mom, first."

"And unless I go with you?"

"Right."

Conor turned to the girl. "And you're—"

"Isabella. Hi." She stuck out her hand and Conor shook it.

"Hi," he answered. Turning back to Timothy, he squinted again. "So, you want me to, like, teach her, too?"

"No. I mean, yeah, that would be great, if you feel like it, but no, I can just show her the same stuff you showed me. It's just that she's gotta have, like, a chaperone or whatever." Isabella snorted, and Timothy glared at her. "Like in case somebody gets hurt," he amended.

Conor scratched his head. "Okay? I guess?" He glanced over at Isabella and hastened to clarify. "I mean, sure, the more the merrier. I just—I wasn't—yeah, that sounds fine."

"Awesome." Timothy shot Isabella a smile, then turned back to Conor, waiting expect-

antly.

"What?"

"Um—your mom's number?"

"Wait—you meant *today*?" Conor felt a slight flutter of panic as he looked back and forth between the pair of sixth graders.

What's the matter, Batman, can't handle a couple of young wards?

"Um, yeah. If that's okay."

It wasn't, not really, but Conor's afternoon was wide open, and he didn't really have a reason other than *I don't feel like it*, so he dug into his bookbag and handed Timothy his phone. The other boy copied the number into a text, and the three of them stood there awkwardly as they waited for a response.

Around them, the courtyard was gradually emptying as the lines of cars and buses siphoned off the students. Conor had retrieved his bike from the rack in front of the office and had been on the verge of setting off when Timothy had come up at a run, Isabella trailing close behind. He could see bus 134 up near the top of the hill, at the front of the line, its doors just closing behind the last of its passengers. "Do you guys have a backup plan?" he asked.

"Isabella's house is only a few blocks away. We'll chill there if her mom says no."

"Okay." The silence stretched out again, and Conor cleared his throat. "So, um," he said, knocking out his kickstand and leaning against the bike. "Do you do anything? I mean—what do you do? Exercisewise."

Isabella smiled, and he winced. "I take gymnastics," she said. "Since fourth grade."

"Oh, cool." Another silence. "Um. Can you do a backflip?"

"Yeah, but not from standing. I have to round off into it."

Conor nodded uncertainly. *So, how do you and Timothy know each other?*

He winced again. Reaching down into his backpack, he rummaged noisily for nothing in particular, until Timothy and Isabella struck up their own conversation. Apparently all of the time he was spending inside his own head lately was rusting away his social skills.

"Skills," you say?

Oh, shut up.

Another minute passed, and then Timothy's pocket began to hum. Pulling out his phone,

he checked the screen and grinned. "Sweet! We're on."

It was a long walk to Freedom Plaza, during which Conor learned that Isabella and Timothy had been in the same fifth grade classroom, that they were not, repeat, *not* dating, and that Timothy had been using the patterned brick façade to climb onto the roof of the music building at recess.

"They *let* you do that?" Conor asked, dumbfounded.

"Not really," said Timothy, shrugging. "They yell at me whenever they notice. But most of the time, they're looking the other way."

Isabella had apparently asked Timothy what he was doing, to which he'd answered *tracing*, the term that Conor had settled on after discarding *being Batman* and *superhero training*. Intrigued, she'd pressed him for more detail, and here they were.

"Timothy says you've got, like, a whole Zen thing going," Isabella said, smiling at Conor over her shoulder.

"I guess," Conor mumbled, looking down at the handlebars of his bike. He suddenly felt very exposed, as if the girl were reading his journal over his shoulder. He was grateful when Timothy picked up the thread, doing a better job than Conor would have expected at introducing the basic concepts.

"...so, if the cone is narrowing—like, all possible paths are headed toward the same spot—then that's gonna be called *reaching*. But if it's widening, we call it *escaping*. Not like you're escaping a *thing*, or anything, just that you're more focused on getting away instead of getting *to*."

"And anything goes?"

"Pretty much. I mean, there are these guidelines, right? Like, being safe is more important than being simple, and being simple is more important than being fast, because it's a lot easier to fuck up than you'd think. Oh, and if you make more noise than you have to, Conor'll gripe at you for, like, days. It's supposed to be about keeping your knees from wearing down, or whatever...."

Conor let the pair of them pull ahead a little, listening as Isabella probed at the boundaries of Timothy's description, asking many of the same questions that he had asked of Conor. Soon enough, they arrived at the plaza, and Timothy immediately set about teaching Isabella

how to land and roll. It was both easier and harder than it had been when Conor taught Timothy—easier because Isabella was much more confident and controlled, and harder because she'd clearly practiced a different kind of rolling until it was almost automatic.

Conor watched for a few minutes, but Timothy didn't seem to need any help, so he drifted away, giving the two sixth graders some privacy. He'd intended to go straight home and get started on a new essay for Ms. Palmano, but now that he was here....

Even after what felt like a hundred visits, the plaza continued to surprise him, his Bat vision picking up on new possibilities every time he came there to train. It was like making the jump from letters to words, or from words to phrases, or from phrases to poetry, each incremental increase in his ability setting the stage for a whole new round of discovery. Though he'd clambered over every single brick and block at least a dozen times, felt he he had yet to exhaust the potential of any of them, surprised as he often was by the obviousness of opportunities he'd completely missed for months.

This time, his attention snagged on the pair of low walls that flanked the handicap ramp leading up to the doors of the police station. They were spaced about seven feet apart, each of them a little under three feet high at their lowest point, made of rough concrete about as thick as the length of Conor's shoe. He had played around with them before, usually either jumping between them or vaulting over each in sequence, but he had a sneaking suspicion that there might be a faster way.

His go-to technique for obstacles like this was a movement he called a cat vault. It was like a leapfrog, but with hands and feet reversed—instead of planting his hands close together and letting his legs swing out to the sides, he spaced his hands shoulder-width apart and kept his feet together, pulling his knees up tight to his chest as he launched himself over. He'd smashed his shins a few times before he'd gotten the hang of it, and once he'd clipped his toes on the wall and flipped straight over onto his back, leaving him breathless. But it had rapidly become one of his favorite movements for the way it kept his body facing straight ahead, with no movement wasted through leaning or turning.

Often, he'd do what he called a half cat, where instead of vaulting *over* an obstacle, he'd simply pop up and onto it, landing on his feet in a crouch on top. The last time he'd been to the plaza, he'd practiced using a half cat to get up onto the first low wall and then immedi-

ately jumping across to the second with both feet.

Now, though, he found himself wondering—instead of vaulting up and then gathering himself for a second, separate jump, what if he blurred the lines between the two movements? Whenever he vaulted over an object, there was a split second in which his feet were directly under him, perfectly positioned for a kind of midflight boost. It would be a high-commitment movement, with not a lot of margin for error—if he didn't add enough power, he'd just end up launching himself headfirst at the second wall. But it was possible that, if he timed things just right, the momentum from his runup combined with a push off the first wall would let him clear the ramp in between at full speed, without ever touching down. If so, it was a skill that would come in handy elsewhere, in places where there *was* no ground in between....

Lost in thought, he began to test his theory, first with gentle steps at a walking pace, then with more and more powerful jumps, until he was coming so close to the second wall that he had to brake with his hands to prevent himself from slamming into it. He spent a good twenty minutes exploring the difference between pushing off with one foot and pushing off with both, and was just about to begin testing leading leg against trailing when Isabella wandered over, out of breath and flushed with exhilaration.

"So, what do you think?" Conor asked absentmindedly, measuring his runup in shoe-lengths as he planned out his steps. Isabella hopped up onto the wall a few feet uphill, out of his way, and sat, kicking her heels against the rough concrete.

"Pretty cool," she said. "Harder than I thought—I'm almost as tired as I would be after gymnastics, and we're getting ready for competition next month."

Squaring off a dozen yards away, Conor sprinted at the wall, breaking off at the last second to catch himself against it. "Uh huh," he said. *Wrong foot in front. Start further back, or in the same place with switched feet?*

"Yeah. I really like the—what do you call it, when you push off the wall with your foot? Like Mario?"

"Rebound." He decided to switch his feet—no point in getting dependent on unnecessarily long runups.

"Yeah. That's cool. We don't really do anything with just one foot like that. It's neat."

"Mmm."

"Timothy said that's also the first step in climbing walls? With a rebound?"

"Yes." He ran at the wall again, once more stopping just before the vault. *Perfect.*

"Cool. I think he said we'd work on that, next." Isabella trailed off as Conor walked backwards to his starting point, his shoulders set, his eyes locked onto his target. She watched as he shook out his wrists, took three or four deep breaths, ground the soles of his shoes against the concrete, looking for grip.

Up and FIRE. Up and FIRE. Up and FIRE.

Here goes nothing.

He launched himself forward, and the world disappeared, everything but the stretch of concrete in front of him and the pair of walls at its end. With his last two steps, he drove himself into the air, his hands coming down to slap against the concrete, his front foot cycling underneath him where it made a quick but solid connection with the top of the wall, sending him even further into the air. In less than a heartbeat, he was across the gap, stretching down with his other foot to tap the second wall before passing over it completely, landing heavily on the far side and rolling to absorb the impact.

Overkill.

He came to his feet as Isabella let out a whoop, turned back to see her applauding. "Nice one!" she called out.

Smiling mechanically, Conor waved. *Not really, though. Pushing off with the front foot slowed everything down –*

"I think you want to try using your back leg, though."

He blinked.

"It looked like you didn't have enough time to get it under you, so you had to slow down. I think if you shove off with the back foot instead, it'll be smoother."

He smiled again—a real one this time—and began to circle back around to his starting point. "Yeah," he called back. "That one was just an experiment. I think you're right." He shook out his wrists again, pausing to receive a high five from Isabella as she hopped down off the wall. "Thanks for the tip," he said. "You jumping back in?"

"Yeah," she answered. "We're gonna—ooh, look at *that*."

Conor followed her gaze to the other side of the plaza, where Timothy was just pulling himself up and over the wall by the bank. "Oh, yeah—that's the best place to practice topovers," he said.

"Do you always start them with a jump like that?" Isabella asked.

Conor frowned. "Jump?"

"Yeah." Cupping her hands around her mouth, she shouted across the open space. "Hey, Timothy! Do that again!"

Timothy waved, dropping down from the wall into a roll and stepping over to one of the decorative concrete pillars that flanked the bankside entrance to the plaza. Scrambling up on top of it, he turned to face the way he'd come, rubbing his hands together and stomping his feet in a way that seemed oddly familiar.

"Wait," Conor said. "What's he doing?"

"He's going to jump across—watch."

Conor's frown deepened, but before he could say anything else, Timothy sprang into motion, his arms leading the way, the rest of his body stringing out into a line as he leapt toward the wall, an impossible ten feet away.

Conor's heart leapt with him, clawing its way toward his throat as he let out a strangled croak. As if in slow motion, he saw Timothy's legs tuck up and then extend forward, saw his head and shoulders sink beneath the line that marked the wall's top, saw the other boy's fingers reaching for the edge as his shoes made contact, five feet off the ground. For a split second, it looked as if he'd succeeded, but then his hands ripped from the top and he fell, barely getting his feet under him before tumbling backwards onto his butt.

"Fuck!" Conor yelled. Even from a distance, he could hear Timothy's groan. He took off running, vaguely aware of Isabella sprinting along in his wake. But before they had covered half of the distance, Timothy was already on his feet, brushing the dust off of his jeans, his usual scowl darkening his face. He turned toward them as they came pounding to a halt, and Conor saw that he'd left a small streak of blood between his knee and his hip.

"Are you okay?" Isabella demanded, the question barely making itself heard under a thick layer of indignation.

"I'm fine," Timothy grumbled. He looked down at his palm, pressing at a flap of skin at

the base of his index finger. "Just slipped, is all. Stupid slick wall."

"Stupid *wall*? How about stupid *boy*?" Isabella countered. "That was like eight feet up! Over concrete! I thought you said *little* jumps."

Timothy rolled his eyes. "Sorry, Mom," he drawled. "It's no big deal, I've fallen from further than that before. It happens."

Isabella crossed her arms and stuck out her tongue, the anger draining from her face as it became apparent that Timothy was, in fact, unhurt. Meanwhile, Conor's jaw was hanging open, his thoughts churning furiously as he replayed the scene in his head.

That was a monkey jump.

Timothy had just done a monkey jump.

Well, technically he'd just *bailed* a monkey jump. But that hardly mattered—especially since he'd apparently landed his *first* one, when only Isabella was watching. "Timothy," he began, his voice shaky. "You just—I mean, that was—where did you learn that?"

The younger boy shrugged, still holding the little flap of skin closed as he waited for the bleeding to stop. "Dunno. I was kind of messing around with it last week—you know, over by the cafeteria, where there are those short walls around the dumpsters? I was trying to jump up onto them from one of the benches, but they were too high, so I kept falling down into a hang, like right before a topper. Eventually I just aimed for the hang instead of falling into it, and it was way easier."

He peered at his hand, flexed his fingers experimentally, gave a tight nod of satisfaction. "It's kind of a neat move," he continued. "I could get to the wall from, like, seven or eight feet away, in one jump." He frowned, looking up at Conor. "Wait. You haven't done that one before?"

Conor shook his head, unable to stop himself from staring at Timothy's clearly-not-at-all-ripped-out-of-their-sockets arms.

"Cool! Does that mean I get to name it?"

"I—"

"Oh, man, this is awesome!" He turned to Isabella and held up a hand, which she high-fived, rolling her eyes. "Um, crap. Okay, let's see...sticky fingers! No, wait—cliffhanger. Or suction cup."

"Wall catch?" Isabella suggested.

"Lame," Timothy declared.

"It's not *lame*, it's descriptive. Better than some stupid skateboarder name where nobody knows what the hell it is."

The pair of them continued to brainstorm as Conor mentally retreated, shaken. Clearly he had grossly overestimated the risk and difficulty of the technique, and wasted almost a month as a result. The jump Timothy had just done was smaller, but given the difference between his height and Conor's, it wasn't *that* much smaller. Conor clenched and unclenched his fists, thinking of hours spent dangling under the old oak tree, of endless topovers on Mr. Baker's wall—all because he'd chickened out, letting his fear call the shots.

So what, though? It's not like taking a couple of weeks off to get stronger was a bad thing. Just go do it now, no harm done.

Except that Timothy had gotten there first. Had broken the barrier—had not even *noticed* the barrier, but had simply gotten the job done, no hesitation.

So WHAT? Ashleigh was better at this stuff, too, remember?

And Ashleigh—like Timothy—had scoffed at the training, turned his nose up at Conor's insistence on repetition, his careful progression. At a paradigm built around Conor's idea of what a made-up comic book character *might have done*.

Come on, that's not fair—Timothy's not scoffing at anything. He's doing everything you tell him to do—he's teaching other people to do everything you told him to do!

But he'd gone about breaking *this* jump the same way Ashleigh would have. Minimal preparation, minimal thought, giant leaps instead of small steps. And he'd *done* it, with less than a month of experience under his belt.

Conor had barely been able to stick a target jump at the end of *his* first month.

He turned and walked away from Timothy and Isabella, squeezing his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose as if trying to lose a brain freeze. He'd been *so certain* that he was on the right path, that all of his progress was proof of the process, a sign that he really did know what he was doing. He had come so far so quickly that it had never occurred to him that there might exist an even more efficient method, that his careful approach might actually be holding him back.

Hey, it's kept you alive this long.

But at what cost?

He turned to the column, pulled himself up on top of it, looked across at the wall.

Impossible.

Except that it clearly wasn't.

Deliberately giving himself zero time to think, Conor leaned forward, allowing his muscle memory to take over. Without conscious intervention, his arms swung back, his legs compressed, and he jumped, powering his way across the gap. Tucking, he brought his feet forward just as his hands made contact with the top, landing with barely a scrape, the force of the impact reflecting him upward into one of the smoothest topovers he'd ever done.

Easy.

God dammit.

He dropped back down to the ground, turned to see the two sixth graders approaching. Timothy was grinning, the resemblance to his brother stronger than it had ever been.

"I've got it," the younger boy said, a triumphant gleam in his eyes. "I'm gonna call it 'the Spiderman.'"

• • •

It was either a great idea or a terrible one.

Conor stood on the edge of the shoproom roof, looking across at the high school English building. The dull throb of distant music cut through the usual stillness, barely discernable snatches of *Monster Mash* and the theme from *Ghostbusters* echoing through the breezeways. The lights were on and the parking lot was full, mobs of costumed students marauding across the grounds with airhorns and silly string as they searched for couples scrogging in the bushes.

It was Conor's second Halloween dance, the first having ended with him and Ashleigh throwing up behind the library, a mixture of Skittles, Butterfingers, and spiced rum that had burned like lava coming up. He had refrained from drinking, this time, even foregoing the punch after he spotted one of the parent chaperones surreptitiously spiking it with the con-

tents of a silver flask hidden under her witch's cloak. He'd spent the first hour of the evening wandering the parking lot, his mask tight against his skull, his pillowcase dragging behind him on the ground. The PTA had sponsored a trunk-or-treat, and he'd collected almost five pounds of candy, which he'd stashed under the equipment shed before heading inside.

He spent the second hour hugging the walls of the cafeteria, listening to the awful Halloween music, squinting through the strobes and black lights, watching the sixth graders blush, the seventh graders grind, and the eighth graders try to sneak past the teachers to the high school party in the gym.

By the start of the third hour, he'd given up hope that Ashleigh was coming.

It was fine, really – no big deal. It's not like they'd planned on hanging out, or anything. At least, not since they'd last talked about the masks, back in September. A surprising number of people had seized on Ashleigh's idea; everywhere Conor looked, he saw the blue-and-gold of East Binder uniforms, and Mr. Sykes' lips grew thinner every time another student walked in unwittingly dressed as Conor.

But none of them were Ashleigh, as far as he could tell. And so eventually he'd left, climbing out through the bathroom window and making his way across the rooftops until he reached the monkey jump.

He had never been less afraid of getting caught – a kind of holiday indulgence had overtaken the staff, most of whom had been drinking liberally from the punch bowl, and only the most egregious of offenses were being punished. Given his total lack of eggs, spray paint, toilet paper, or confiscatable alcohol, the worst he expected was a lecture. At the same time, though, the risk of being spotted in the first place was almost as high as it was during the day. Already, two adults and four different groups of students had passed by on their way down the breezeway; it was likely only a matter of minutes before someone saw him before he had time to hide.

So good thing this is only going to take like thirty seconds, right?

He gritted his teeth, staring out across the gap – so tantalizingly small, so terrifyingly wide. Since the session at Freeway Park, he had put a total hold on all tracing, even going so far as to boycott the smaller version that Timothy had broken. He was done playing games, done wasting time – either he was ready for this, or he wasn't.

Five steps in the runup – left, right, left, right, left. Jump up, not out; get your feet out in front of you, but not too high or you'll fall backward. Let your shoes slip, and grab with your fingers, not with your palms. Keep your elbows loose so you can sag into the hang.

He had replayed the memory of both jumps – his and Timothy's – a thousand times, cutting them down to their smallest fragments, analyzing the most minute of details. Where the details had been fuzzy, he had resorted to conjecture, relying on his practiced instincts to fill in the gaps. The result was a mental model that was supremely flexible, allowing him to visualize every step of the technique as if watching it in slow motion. It would be easy – *much* easier than Binder's Gap, and not that much harder than a target jump or a big cat vault. Two or three seconds, and it would already be over.

But the fear would not go away, was if anything more intense than it had been before the jump at Freedom Plaza. It resisted all attempts at dismantlement; it could not be shouted down, ignored, or rationalized away.

Conor heard voices in the breezeway, the bass tones of an upperclassman's laugh, and he shrank back into the shadows, waiting for the group to pass. As soon as they were gone, he would get up and do it.

Okay, well – as soon as he'd practiced the runup a couple more times.

And re-checked the grip on the far side.

And warmed up his shoulders just a little more.

Another group appeared, and he squatted down again, making himself small.

No more fucking around. Sixty seconds.

He began to hyperventilate slightly, deliberately, pumping air through his lungs like a bellows, building up the fire in his chest. He shook out his limbs, rolled his head and shoulders, cracked his knuckles. He tested the runup again, did a running jump parallel to the edge to measure his distance.

Thirteen feet.

No problem. Fifteen seconds.

Ten seconds.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

"God *dammit!*" he yelled, heedless of the revelers below. Turning, he kicked at one of the ventilation pipes, stomped on it, the metal giving way beneath his shoe and filling him with a deep and savage satisfaction.

"It's fine," he said, out loud. "It's fine. It's fine, because it only takes like *three seconds*, right, so I can still do it *right now* before anybody shows up to investigate. I just walk over here, see, and I count down from t—from *five*, and then I run, and then it's over, *no problem.*"

He brought his feet together with a click, took a single deep breath, let it out in a huff. Counting down, he reached zero and launched himself forward, managing two strong steps before faltering and coming to a stop several feet shy of the edge.

FUCK.

His fingers curled into fists, but there was nothing to punch this time, no target for his frustration. There was literally nothing holding him back except himself.

"It's *right there*," he moaned. If it were even six inches closer, he would have done it already, ten times over.

But it wasn't.

Okay, fine. So Timothy's way doesn't work for you. You can just go back to your way, then. Slow and steady, bit by bit. What's wrong with that?

Nothing—except that Timothy's way was better.

A hundred heartbeats later, he was halfway up the magnolia, churning through the branches faster than he'd ever gone before. When he reached the pipe, he gripped it so hard that for a moment he was surprised it did not flex beneath his hand. He swarmed his way up to the roof with reckless abandon, paying no mind to the sweat in his palms or the mulch that slid through the tread of his shoe, weakening his contact with the wall.

Once on the rooftop, he stalked straight toward the center, where the twin furrows began their short and precipitous run toward the edge. Still out of breath from the climb, he assumed his starting stance in the left of the two paths, a runner waiting for the gun.

Twenty – no, ten seconds.

Nine.

Eight.

“Conor?”

It was like waking from a dream, like flipping a switch—as if everything that was Conor had existed on the surface of a bubble, and the bubble had popped. There was no monkey jump, no Binder’s Gap, no Halloween party and no terrible crisis of confidence. There was only a moment—timeless, eternal, with Conor and Ashleigh as its only witnesses. They existed on the rooftop, had *always* existed on the rooftop, and were by implication each other’s entire reason for being there.

“Hey, Ashleigh,” Conor said, and the words were the first he had spoken in months. The other boy was sitting off to the side, leaning against one of the air conditioning units, a dark shadow invisible from the pipe where Conor had emerged. He was wearing his blue-and-gold uniform, his khakis streaked dark with dirt from the climb, his mask lying wrinkled in his lap. The starlight twinkled brightly in his eyes, as if he had been on the verge of tears.

Walking over, Conor lowered himself to the ground, leaning back against the metal at the same time that Ashleigh shifted over, their movements synchronized, harmonized, each a smooth and effortless compliment to the other, so that without even thinking they ended up side by side, their shoulders pressed comfortably together, each looking out at the same horizon.

“Happy Halloween,” Conor said, and he could feel his friend’s faint smile, knew exactly how it would look.

“Thanks,” Ashleigh answered. He raised his hand, accompanied by the sound of sloshing liquid, and Conor took the bottle without comment, letting a mouthful of the liquid sear its way down his throat. He handed it back, and Ashleigh followed suit, setting it down after with a soft clink.

They were quiet for a long moment, the sounds of music and laughter below framing rather than breaking the peaceful stillness of the rooftop. Minutes passed, or perhaps seconds, or hours. They each took another drink.

“Wasn’t sure you’d come,” said Conor, ending the silence at exactly the right moment, not a heartbeat too soon or too late.

"You were *supposed* to be here two hours ago," Ashleigh grumbled.

Conor grinned. "Eh, you know how it is," he said airily. "I mean, I *try* to get out of the house on time, but your mom just never wants to leave the bedroom." He felt the other boy shift and he twisted automatically, taking the punch in the middle of his upper arm with a laugh. They both settled back against the air conditioning unit, and Conor continued. "I was checking out this thing," he said, and he launched into a lengthy description of the monkey jump, explaining the pullups, the preparation, the session with Timothy and his failure down below.

"Sounds pretty sketchy to me," Ashleigh said, when Conor had finished. "Probably worth a couple extra days, just to be safe."

Conor nodded in the darkness. Above them, a bat whispered by, its passage a series of tiny eclipses as it crisscrossed the starlit sky. "Hey, I never asked you—what'd you think of the Gap?"

Ashleigh let out a breath. "*That* thing," he pronounced, "is fucking *nuts*. Why the fuck I ever let you talk me into even *thinking* about it, I'll never know."

Conor laughed again. "Come on, it's not *that* bad. I mean, you made it, didn't you?"

"Bitch, I was on crutches for *weeks*."

"Two weeks."

"That's weeks! There's an 's' on the end and everything!"

"You're just jealous 'cause I did it first."

There was a pause, and for the first time, the air between them seemed to thicken, the easy flow of words meeting resistance. "Yeah," Ashleigh said simply, and he raised the bottle to take another swig.

Long seconds passed in silence. Then Ashleigh's fingers twitched, crumpling the mask in his lap. He inhaled noisily, his shoulder rubbing against Conor's as he filled his lungs, then emptied them with a long, slow sigh. "So, Timothy's got a girlfriend, then?"

Conor hesitated for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah, looks like it." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his own mask, his shoes scraping quietly against the gravel. He laid it out atop his knee, smoothed it flat, felt rather than saw the other boy look down at it. "So," he began, cautiously this time. "We going to talk about all this?"

He held his breath, waiting for the final nail in the coffin—*talk about what?*—acutely aware of the stones digging into his calves, his hamstrings, of the pins and needles creeping into his feet, the chill of the air conditioning unit seeping through his sweatshirt.

But Ashleigh said nothing, only picked up his drink and took another sip, passing it to Conor as he swallowed. It wasn't until Conor pressed the bottle to his own lips that the other boy spoke, almost too softly to hear:

"Maybe."

Conor froze at exactly the wrong moment, the acrid liquid spilling out of the upended bottle, overflowing his lips and drenching his shirt. He felt his cheeks burn as he hacked and spluttered, felt a trickle of relief at Ashleigh's quiet chuckle.

"Give that back before you break it, spaz," the other boy said.

Conor handed it back, wiping his face with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Mom's gonna smell this a mile away," he said sadly.

"Just wash yourself off with the hose," Ashleigh suggested.

"It's like forty five degrees out."

"What would Batman do?"

They fell silent again, once more at ease. Picking up his mask, Conor stuck his fist inside, twirling it like a hat. "Hey, Ashleigh," he said, his tone elaborately casual. "Truth or dare?"

Ashleigh answered without hesitation. "Dare."

Conor grinned. "I dare you to pick truth next turn."

For a moment, it almost seemed the tension was back, but then Ashleigh snorted. "That's cheating, you know."

"I mean, feel free to chicken out, if that's your thing."

"Truth or dare?"

"So you'll do it?"

"Truth. Or. Dare."

"Truth," Conor answered.

Again, Ashleigh spoke without hesitation, as if he'd planned ahead, anticipated exactly this moment. "Are you mad?" he asked quietly.

"What?"

"At me. Are you mad."

So many thoughts and emotions crowded into Conor's head all at once that it took several seconds to regain control of his thoughts. He could feel Ashleigh's apprehension, the way the other boy's shoulder had gone hard, the muscles stiffening until they seemed to tremble. He opened his mouth to speak—closed it—opened and closed it again.

"Yes," he said, finally.

Strangely, his answer seemed to have a calming effect. Ashleigh's shoulder relaxed, and he melted back into the metal box behind them, his fingers loosening where they'd gripped the fabric of his mask. "Okay," he said. "Your turn."

Conor bit his lip. The chorus has begun again, a cavalcade of voices in the back of his mind, each with its own agenda. He tamped them down, locked them away, refusing to be led. There was really only one question, after all.

"Why?"

And just like that, the tension returned, Ashleigh's body going still, the quiet whisper of his breath cutting off mid-hiss. "Because," the other boy said flatly, his voice tightly controlled.

"As if," Conor retorted, doing his best to keep some levity in his tone. "Come on, that's not even *close* to a real answer."

"It wasn't even close to a real question," Ashleigh shot back.

"Yes, it was."

"Conor—"

"It was."

"Don't do this."

"I'm not doing anything. *You're* the one who's breaking the rules."

"I didn't even say truth."

"Then what are we up here for?"

Ashleigh had no answer to that. In the silence that followed, he began to fidget, his foot tapping against the gravel, his mask scrunching and stretching as he mangled it with both hands. Out of the corner of his eye, Conor could see the other boy's head turning, almost twitching, as if he were following the movements of a wasp, ready to dodge if it came too

close. His breathing had started up again, quick and shallow, and Conor almost imagined he could feel the other boy's pulse through the place where their shoulders still pressed together.

"...Ashleigh?" he asked quietly.

His friend continued to squirm, now scrubbing at his eyes as if trying to hide from Conor's gaze, as if it weren't already nearly too dark to see. "I—can't," he said, a slight tremor working its way through the iron of his voice. "I can't tell you."

"Can't? Or won't?"

"Both."

Conor frowned. "Ashleigh, it's me. Remember? I'm your best friend. You can tell me anything."

Ashleigh shook his head, the motion quick and violent. "No, I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because *why*?"

"Because I don't want you to—to—"

He ground to a halt, dropping the mask as he grabbed a fistful of gravel with each hand, his fingers scraping audibly against the shingle beneath. Conor was bewildered, almost frightened, the sudden change in Ashleigh's demeanor like the first tremors of an earthquake. He had never seen his friend like this, not even during the worst of the past couple of months. He felt an overwhelming urge to say something, to put the other boy at ease, but he had absolutely no idea how to begin.

Fuck it — start talking. Now.

"Um. Ashleigh, what? Dude. I mean, like, seriously, what are you even worried about? I'm not going to—to *anything*, man. No—what—no judgment, no hate, no laughing, like—whatever it is, I just want you to *tell* me. I mean, if you can't tell *me*...."

Then who CAN you tell?

He trailed off, unable to stand the sound of his own desperate babbling. Beside him, Ashleigh had let go of the rocks and was motionless once again, his shoulders limp, his

head lolling to one side as he stared at his feet or the gravel or whatever it was that kept him from turning to meet Conor's gaze.

Forget bewildered—Conor was now seriously alarmed. Whatever this was, it was clearly eating his friend alive—had probably been doing so for months—and he'd had no idea until right this minute.

Oh, please – give me a break.

Conor stiffened. He couldn't think of the last time that Ashleigh's voice had spoken in his head while the real Ashleigh was present.

No idea, my ass. You knew something was wrong the minute you saw me outside Mr. Sykes' office. Hell, you knew something was wrong on the roof, before shit ever even started going down. You just didn't care enough to do anything about it.

But Ashleigh hadn't let him—

Yeah, because for some fucking reason I think I can't trust you or whatever. Way to fucking prove me wrong for two goddamn months, huh?

Sucking in a breath, Conor started again. "Ashleigh," he said, his voice as soft as he could make it. "Ashleigh, I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. Talk to me, buddy."

Twisting, he lifted his arm, reaching awkwardly across his chest to lay his hand lightly on the other boy's shoulder. Still staring at nothing, Ashleigh stiffened, pressing his back against the air conditioning unit, his feet digging into the gravel.

"Ashleigh, what is it? What's wrong, man?"

Suddenly, the other boy exploded into motion. "Fine!" he shouted, leaping to his feet, his mask spinning away into the darkness. He began to pace back and forth in front of Conor, wobbling drunkenly, his hands flashing around him as he waved his arms, rubbed his scalp, pounded his fists against his thighs. "Fine! You really want to do this? Great. But then you *can't blame me* when I'm done and you wish I never said anything. This is gonna be *your* fault, not mine."

"Ashleigh, calm down—"

"I'm calm! I'm real fucking calm! You want to see the—the—the *opposite* of calm, just you wait one shitfuck minute."

He stopped abruptly, whirling to face Conor, his eyes flashing in the starlight. "I mean, you *asked* for it, so here we go, get ready to fucking never talk to me again and don't say I didn't warn you—"

He was stalling, rambling, spewing out words as he worked himself into a frenzy. It was like watching a train wreck—Conor was riveted, transfixed, unable to say anything, to do anything but watch as his best friend came unraveled.

"—but whatever, you wanted *answers*, so fine, here's your fucking answer." Ashleigh drew himself up to his full height, his eyes fixed on a point somewhere just above and to the left of Conor's forehead, his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt as if trying to hold his guts together. "The reason I kicked Guyler's fucking face in—the reason I've been trying to avoid you—it's all because I—because *you* fucking—because—gah!"

He broke off, gritting his teeth, grabbed his hair with both hands and pulled his head down toward his chest. "Fuck!" he shouted. "I was *going* to tell you *then*, when we were up here on—on that day, but you—and then I—and *fucking* Guyler—"

Conor gazed up at him, his own heart dropping into his stomach. He could feel the other boy's distress like a physical pain, wanted nothing more than to grab him by the shoulders, pull him into an embrace, and tell him it was fine, that everything would be okay. But first he'd have to believe it himself, and seeing the look on Ashleigh's face, he was anything but sure.

"The thing I'm going to tell you is. The *thing*. I am *going*. To *tell* you. *Is*. That I want—that I *am*. Fuck."

It was as if the other boy had come up against some kind of wall, an internal word limit, an impassable barrier that held no matter how hard he pushed against it, how much momentum he built up. All of the awkwardness, all of the uncertainty, all of the anguish that had laid between them, intangible—it was all illuminated in the harsh light of Ashleigh's irresolution, so real that it was physically holding him back.

Conor watched, paralyzed, as Ashleigh stopped, sagged, dropped his face into his hands. "I just—I can't," he said, his voice miserable. "I'm sorry, Conor. I can't do it. I *want* to, but—God, I just, I'm just so *fucking tired* of this—this *bullshit*, I *hate* this, *why*

does this have to, it's so *fucking* stupid, and I *tried*, really I did, you don't even know, but it *didn't work*, and I just—I just can't."

He lowered his hands, lifting his head to look Conor straight in the eyes for the first time, and even in the darkness Conor recognized the expression instantly. It was the same look he'd had after their fight over the drugs, when Conor had threatened to walk away; the same look he'd had when he finally admitted that he was jealous of Conor, insecure about the Gap. It was the look Ashleigh wore when the mask came off, when there was nothing between him and the world and he could no longer hide the fact that he was only a boy, only twelve, that however unshakable he seemed he wasn't any stronger than anybody else.

Conor leapt to his feet, ignoring the numbness in his legs, the slight unsteadiness of the alcohol in his blood. "Ashleigh," he said. Just that—just the other boy's name, but it flew into the space between them like a missile, shattering whatever it was that had been edging them apart, and as he stepped forward, Conor caught a glimpse of tears in his friend's eyes, felt them hot and wet on his neck as he pulled the other boy into a hug.

They stood in silence for what might have been years, Conor's arms wrapped tight around Ashleigh's shoulders, Ashleigh's held rigidly at his sides. Slowly, finally, the dam broke, and Ashleigh lifted his hands, placed them on Conor's back, clung to him as he sobbed wordlessly into Conor's ear.

Eventually, the tears stopped, and they pulled back, each still holding the other, their faces close enough that they could see one another clearly even in the midnight gloom. Ashleigh was a wreck, his eyes bloodshot, his nose and lips wet and gleaming. Conor held the other boy's gaze as if it were an egg, gently determined to keep him *here*, right here, where he could see that Conor cared, that Conor wasn't going anywhere. He pulled his friend close, pressing their foreheads together, trying with all his might to make Ashleigh understand, to make him *believe*. "It's going to be okay," he whispered, desperately hoping it was the truth.

"No," Ashleigh said, his voice cracking. "It isn't."

Then he leaned forward, tilting his head to one side, and Conor felt pressure, tasted salt, saw his best friend's eyes flutter shut as they came closer than they ever had before.

Ashleigh was kissing him.

Softly, gently, hesitantly at first, but as Conor stood frozen with shock, he seemed to take it as encouragement, or at the very least permission, and after a moment his mouth opened slightly and Conor felt the other boy's tongue brush timidly across his lips.

So utterly astonished was Conor that for once the chorus of voices in the back of his mind had absolutely nothing to say, their silence deafening as he scrabbled frantically for words and found none. He could only stand there, helpless, thoughtless, as Ashleigh disengaged, pulling back slowly and opening his eyes. He watched as the other boy's jaw tightened, as he swallowed nervously, bracing himself for Conor's reaction.

But Conor *had* no reaction, was still only halfway through a total systems reboot, all higher-level functions suspended. He could feel the slime of Ashleigh's snot and tears coating his nose, his upper lip, taste the other boy's spit on his tongue, but he was unable to move beyond the simple facts of the matter, to form any kind of opinion about them. He simply stood there, passively watching as Ashleigh's trepidation faded slowly into confusion and then kindled into hope.

Oh, no.

Conor could see it happening, the way the other boy was talking himself into it, setting himself up for the fall that would surely shatter him, that might possibly shatter them both. It wasn't his fault—why *else* would Conor still be standing there, still holding the embrace, instead of shoving—cursing—renouncing—screaming? There was no way for him to know that Conor was simply pending, that any second now he would return to the physical world, that this hope was foolish and tragic and a second kiss was impossible, insane, don't do it, *don't*—

With a herculean effort, Conor seized control of a single hand, lifting it off of the other boy's shoulder and planting it firmly in the center of his chest.

Ashleigh's response was immediate. He sprang backwards, stuttering an apology, almost losing his footing as the gravel rolled under his feet. Words began spilling from his mouth, tumbling over one another in their haste to fill Conor's ears, to obviate his

questions, forestall his outrage. His hands waved wildly, frantically, threads of panic weaving through his voice as he began backing toward the pipe.

Say –

Conor stood, scarecrow stiff, as Ashleigh reached the breaking point. Punctuating his outburst with one last *sorry*, the other boy turned and ran for the edge, becoming little more than a smear of black against the dark backdrop of the night sky. There was one last audible scrape as he swung his legs over the side, and then – almost too quickly to be believed – there was silence.

– something.

Time passed. Seconds, or minutes – Conor couldn't say, and didn't really care. Enough to know that it was too late, that Ashleigh was gone, that there was no point in shouting or trying to catch him. Eventually, Conor wrenched his body free from paralysis, forcing his legs to move, his hands to reach down and pick up the two masks from where they had fallen, unwanted. But his mind remained sluggish, his thoughts constrained to single words and unnamed feelings, a viscous tide of emotion and instinct.

But –

He lowered himself down the pipe, sliding into the magnolia on autopilot, not even registering the darkness that forced him to pick his way by feel. Reaching the electives building, he discovered that some part of him was not yet willing to touch the ground, was convinced that reality and consequence could be postponed along with landfall, and so he wandered across the rooftops like a lost angel, indifferent to the mortal revelry below.

If –

It was after midnight before he truly came to his senses, awakening to find himself atop a breezeway roof, in a dark and quiet corner of the school. He'd been drawn from his fugue by a pair of seniors pawing at one another on the grass, the wet, smacking sounds of their kissing sending shockwaves through the remnants of Conor's composure. He turned to move away, pausing at a quiet note of alarm that rang from the back of his mind.

Listen.

He tilted his head, a discordant note catching in his ear—something subtly off-key, the difference between an eager *mmmm* and a hesitant *nnnn*. Leaning out over the edge, he looked down at the couple. They were locked in a passionate embrace, a pair of bottles lying mostly empty beside them. His hand was under the coat of her nurse's costume, and hers were sliding across his chest—

Pushing.

She was pushing. Not very hard—even as Conor watched, the boy's hand moved, and she moaned around his lips, her arms relaxing. But when he stopped, she resumed, her hands pressing feebly against his shoulders, her head lolling back and forth in a weak approximation of a *no*.

Shit.

As their kiss continued, she began to giggle nervously, a kind of slow-motion crescendo that ended with a squeak as she flopped onto her back and passed out. Her date, a massive boy at least twice Conor's size, chuckled drunkenly, rising to his knees as he shuffled over to one of the bottles and took a drink. Dropping back onto all fours, he crawled over to the girl, reaching out with a finger to poke at her belly, then her cheek, then at the space between her legs. When she didn't move, he began to kiss her again, smoothing back the hair that had fallen across her face.

This isn't happening, Conor thought.

But it was. As he watched, the high schooler reared up onto his knees, fumbling at his belt, swaying with the effort required to stay upright. With a grunt, he managed to undo the buckle and shuck his jeans, falling over onto his back as he kicked them away. He lay there for a moment, hiccupping, and Conor allowed himself a breath of hope.

Pass out. Pass out right now.

After a moment, though, the boy rolled back onto his hands and knees, reaching out to tug at something under the unconscious girl's skirt.

It happened in a flash, the journey from understanding to action, from disbelief to determination. Conor could stop this—*would* stop this, with a word, a shout—

No.

He didn't want to prevent. He wanted to *punish*.

Crouching at the edge of the metal awning, Conor took aim. He hesitated only a moment, waiting for the boy to finish pulling down his date's underwear. As he rose up to toss it aside, Conor stepped out into open space, ninety pounds of flesh and fury dropping five feet directly onto his shoulders.

He had lined it up perfectly, reflexively, the arc of his descent containing just enough sideways momentum to throw them both safely away from the girl. There was a sickening crunch as his shoes made contact, followed by an uncontrolled tumble as the pair of them crashed to the ground. Conor rolled, but badly, a knifelike pain lancing through his wrist as his right hand took the brunt of the fall. Coming immediately to his feet, he spun, turning back to face the would-be rapist.

The high schooler was screaming, a high, tortured sound that echoed through the commons as he writhed on the grass, clutching his shoulder. Cursing, Conor backed into the shadows, digging in his pocket for the masks. Pulling one on, he edged forward, trying to avoid the thrashing limbs, to get close enough to do something, *thing*. "Hold still!" he yelled. "You've got to stop moving!"

But the boy either didn't hear him or wouldn't listen. There was blood leaking from his nose where he'd hit the grass, and it began to streak across his face and neck, forming a spiderweb of black lines. Panicking, Conor reached for his phone, trying to hold his fingers steady enough to dial.

Before he could even unlock the screen, though, he heard shouts and footsteps, saw the frantic bars of flashlight beams in the breezeway. People were coming – grownups or upperclassmen, he couldn't be sure, but they were *big* – and as the light swept across his face, he whirled and ran, melting back into the darkness, the drunk boy's screams fading only to be replaced by the thudding of his own heart, the ragged rasping of his breath.

No one followed. It had all happened so quickly that Conor wasn't even certain they'd seen him. He slowed as he reached the outer wall that surrounded the grounds, popped up and onto it, crouched and turned to look back. He could see flashlights

congregating around the fallen teenagers, watched as the shouting quieted and ceased, as the wail of a siren started up in the distance. He waited until the ambulance arrived, its red light casting blood shadows across the commons, then turned and dropped off onto the sidewalk, still reeling.

All around him, the streets were alive with lights and decorations, bands of late-night trick-or-treaters still roaming the neighborhood, every tenth or twentieth house shuddering with music. After the insanity of the past hour, the sheer banality was surreal—Conor felt unhinged, deranged, unable to integrate the sound of laughter with the fallout from his own private apocalypse. He quickened his pace, trying to shake the sense that something dark was following him and ending up making it worse.

He had done it, exactly as Batman would have—had seen an opportunity and taken it, taken down a bad guy without hesitation or mercy. And it had been sickening, traumatic—the most violent act he'd ever witnessed, let alone committed, easily on par with what Ashleigh had done to Guyler. He could feel the crunch of the high schooler's shoulders every time a leaf crackled underfoot, hear his shrieks in the moan of every store-bought plastic ghoul. His stomach still roiled with the hot nausea of panic, his throat closed tight around a silent scream of horror.

Yet the tears that filled his eyes and blurred his vision, that forced him to tear off the mask and run faster and faster until his legs began to burn—they didn't come from regret, or from terror, from confusion or shock. They came from the knowledge, cold and unshakable, that all it would have taken to pull Ashleigh back from the brink was a word. One word—*any* word—and he could have stopped the other boy, kept him from fleeing the rooftop, drawn him back into the moment and relieved his desperate fear. But he had chosen not to speak.