

SOME KIND OF WAY OUT

by

BARBARA GORMAN

A thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Program in

Creative Writing

written under the direction of

Prof. Lauren Grodstein

and approved by

Prof. Lauren Grodstein

Camden, New Jersey October 2013

THESIS ABSTRACT

SOME KIND OF WAY OUT

By BARBARA GORMAN

Thesis Director:
Prof. Lauren Grodstein

Sixteen-year-old classic rock and blues guitar aficionado Drew Gilmore and his fourteen-year-old sister Cori have been helping their divorced mother Michelle cope with her advanced multiple sclerosis for the past two years to the best of their ability, but the severe sensory pain and uncontrollable muscle spasms have left Michelle, a former grocery store cashier, confined to a wheelchair most days and unable to sleep most nights. A concerned social worker and a few school staff members have begun to question whether Drew and Cori's needs are being met at home. Drew is resistant and at times hostile toward any suggestions that Michelle may be unable to take care of them, insisting that he and Cori have plenty of help from family and friends in their working class neighborhood of Gloucester City, New Jersey, and that their father Frank, a prison guard who lives in Trenton, New Jersey, with his new wife and toddler son, does the grocery shopping and takes care of the bills. But Drew knows that things at home are far from okay, forcing things at school to a breaking point. By March he has more than doubled his allowable absences for the school year and has resorted to cutting classes frequently in order to take care of his ailing mother, whose condition continues to decline alarmingly. To top it off, Cori's recent questionable behavior adds to Drew's list of adult responsibilities and threatens to undermine the one bright spot in his life: his serious

crush on tenth-grade sweetheart Tiffany Cortland. When all of the forces beyond his control collide and force him into a heart-breaking situation, Drew's music ultimately gives him the strength to face his difficulties and the means to deepen his relationship with Tiffany.

Some Kind of Way Out

Chapter 1

No one would believe it if I told them, but I actually didn't mind school, Tiffany Cortland being a huge part of the reason, and if I didn't have to cut—which, by the way, is a major felony at my school—I wouldn't. But other than a few drug dealers and gang bangers who were just waiting to turn 17 so their moms could sign them out, I'm pretty sure I held the record for cuts and attempted cuts, and I knew that day that I would be adding one more to the list. Before we left for school, my sister Cori stood at the door to our mom's darkened room, gazing in at her fidgeting form in the bed. When she turned to me for an explanation, I told her that Mom was fine, just really tired and not ready to get out of bed yet. For only being 14, Cori worried like an old woman, and I didn't want to give her one more thing to stew about.

Our mom had multiple sclerosis, or MS. Bad.

And ever since that time in November, when I found her slumped against the hot radiator in the bathroom, the filmy material of her shirt melted into her arm and back, I never felt comfortable leaving her alone in the house for too long on her really bad days.

And it was clear from the start that the day was going to be bad.

"Two hours," Mom said when I got her out of bed, her legs spasming beneath a tangle of sheets and blankets. "Only two freaking hours! I can't do this anymore."

Throwing an arm over her face, she sobbed like baby, and all I could do was lean across her legs to hold them steady, to give her some peace from the constant jerking

until she cried herself out. It scared me to see her so low, but I never wanted her to know that, so after she settled down a little, I told her that maybe she should just take her morning pills and go back to bed after she went to the bathroom. Now, I'm pretty sure most guys my age would rather not have to wait on the other side of the bathroom door while their mothers took a piss or did whatever, but I didn't have a choice. MS made my mom prone to falling.

She didn't say a word as she got back in bed. I smoothed out the blankets and told her that she would feel better after a few hours' sleep.

"We have a half-day today," I lied. "For night conferences. I'll be home in a few hours."

She just looked at me like I had said the wrong thing and turned her face away. We never discussed my absences and cuts. I made up the time in four-hour Saturday detentions, when Cori was home. Most Saturdays they were both still asleep when I got home at 12:15 anyway, so it was no big deal.

I was so worked up that I left the house without breakfast. My rumbling stomach an hour later during an English test made everyone within a three-desk radius crack up. Tiffany, my lab partner in Biology and pretty much the sweetest girl in the 10th grade, smiled and whispered, "That was epic, Drew." I smiled back, feeling my face get hot. And for one or two super stoked seconds, I forgot about Mom, MS, my absences, and all the other shit that weighed me down and just looked at her face. Her dimples killed me. She smelled good, too—clean, like oranges and grapefruits.

So I stayed in school as long as I could bear it, watching the clock and biting the calluses on my fret hand, knowing I would be sorry later in the day when I pressed the

new pink skin of my fingertips against the steel strings of my guitar. It was the only thing that kept me in my seat for the three hours and twenty minutes I was forced to be there. Slipping out the cafeteria doors between fourth and fifth period, I wondered if—even hoped—Tiffany would be disappointed when I wasn't in Bio. I got the vibe that she was into me, at least the part of me that played guitar, but I was pretty sure that she could have any guy she wanted, so what would she want with me?

Outside in the clearing that separated the high school from the elementary school, I stood watching a couple of birds pecking around on the bald ground, like I was stuck in a glitching video game. I shivered deeper into my hoodie. Spring was only a few weeks away, but it was definitely still winter in New Jersey. I knew I should get moving, but dread filled my sneakers with hot cement. That was what my life had become in the last year—a cycle of sprinting and paralysis, running away when I should stay put and then slamming on the brakes when I should get moving.

The eerie buzzing from the high tension wires seemed to grow louder. I swore I felt a charge—a tingling that danced along the surface of my skin beneath my clothes—whenever I got too close to those towers. They creeped me out. Skeleton scarecrows in a single file, one outstretched arm hooking down, locked and loaded, ready to spike 500,000 volts at kids who cut school.

But it was the late bell for fifth period that electrocuted me instead, jolting my feet into a sprint that carried me through the clearing and across Market Street, where the digital sign in front of the chiropractor's office alternately flashed 11:26 and 39°F.

Though I was tempted to keep running, I set a fast walking pace down Greenwood, our usual route home. I would look guilty as hell running through that

neighborhood, with its neat, lookalike houses, edged lawns and above ground pools. That section of town was known as Highland Park. I'm not sure where the name came from, but there was a bar called The Highland a few blocks away on Orlando, making its home among houses a bit bigger and nicer than those on Greenwood. Tiffany lived a few streets over on Sylvan. She had been wearing that yellow shirt, the one where the neckline scoops down just to the point where her boobs swelled upwards. That picture of her on Facebook in a white bikini flashed into my mind. I felt myself getting —

“And just where the hell do you think you're going?” Hollering through the opened passenger window of the old driver's ed car, Mrs. Sheehan, the school's attendance officer, scared the shit out of me. I squashed the impulse to run. Though she was short and fat and pretty old, it was accepted as fact that Mrs. Sheehan could, on the trail of a kid who was cutting, hurdle three-foot fences without breaking stride. And you were totally screwed if she caught you. Kind of like resisting arrest in her book.

“Get your ass in this car and do *not* make me put it in park!” She looked like a dragon, cigarette smoke pluming from her pink lipsticked mouth as she leaned across to open the passenger door. For whatever reason, no one had ever told Mrs. Sheehan that she shouldn't smoke around students or curse in front of us. Maybe it didn't matter because she wasn't a teacher or a principal or anything like that, or maybe it was because most people, even the adults, were probably a little afraid of getting bitched at by her. Most likely, though, she *had* been told, but like everything else, Mrs. Sheehan just laughed and continued to do what she had always done. It didn't bother me. Her cursing and yelling, that is. But smoking was just plain nasty, and I would rather not have to sit in a car that smelled like an ashtray.

“Can’t I just walk back?” I said.

“GET IN! NOW!” she said.

With my shoe, I pushed aside the empty coffee cups and crumbled tissues that littered the floor of the car while she tossed her gigantic purse into the back. Taking one more drag off her half-smoked cigarette, she flicked it out the window and then swung the car into a U-turn. The drive back to school was, literally, four blocks. I leaned my head out the window and breathed in the cold air while a country song droned on the radio, doing my best to stay out of the line of fire of those skeleton scarecrows.

“Don’t you have anything to say for yourself, genius?” This was the worst part of her recovery missions, as she liked to call them: the lame questions that had no answers.

“Do you think you can outsmart me? I’m telling you one thing right now, you may be able to outrun me, but you’ll never outsmart me,” she said.

“I just want to go home,” I said. “I want something to eat.”

“Yeah? And I want to be tall and blond, but it’s not happening anytime soon, is it? You know what this means, don’t you, Zeppelin?” She started calling me Zeppelin a few months before that, when she found out that I played guitar. She said my long hair made me look like “that guy from Led Zeppelin.” I asked her once which “guy” she meant, but she said it didn’t matter because they all looked like they smelled and she knew for a fact they didn’t wear underwear. I think she might have been right about Robert Plant not wearing underwear, but I totally didn’t mind the nickname, so I let it ride.

“I doubt there are enough Saturdays in the school year left for you to work your time off now. You might be looking at SCC, buddy,” Mrs. Sheehan harped on.

Summer Credit Completion. Summer school for kids who passed all their classes but missed too many days. I would be totally screwed on every level if I got SCC.

“I’m talking to you!” she said. “You’re frittering away a year of your free education. Why? With a mind like you got?”

Dad wanted me to get a job that summer to help out with car insurance when I got my license in August. I couldn’t have SCC and then go to work. That would leave Cori by herself with Mom all day.

“Don’t shake your head at me, Zeppelin. Let’s go.” She lurched the car into a stop in the No Parking Zone by the main entrance and yanked the keys out without bothering to turn off the radio first, cutting off the female vocalist in mid-yodel. Country music, the modern stuff anyway, got way more mainstream attention than it deserved. It seemed to me that people who don’t know much about music tend to be country music fans, and that would make complete sense in Mrs. Sheehan’s case. I followed her squat figure as she marched up to the front doors and buzzed herself in. She nodded once to Mr. Booth, the security guard, who smirked at me with folded arms. The heavy, greasy smell of cafeteria Tater Tots became more concentrated with each clack of Mrs. Sheehan’s chipped heels.

“Mr. Gilmore. We meet again,” Mr. Hartman, the vice-principal, said as he looked up at me from his desk. He motioned for me to shut the door, which barely muffled the sound of Mrs. Sheehan’s wheezy laugh as she bragged to the secretaries about how high I jumped when she caught me. I sat in one of the two comfy chairs in front of his desk, looking around at his diplomas and plaques rather than at him.

“So what’s going on? You were just in here—when was it?—three weeks ago for cutting,” he said, pushing the behavior contract I had signed then at the edge of his desk to refresh my memory.

I shrugged, and rather than answering, my eyes sought out the pictures on the windowsill behind his desk, of his wife and kids, his German shepherds. I had them memorized. He had more pictures of his dogs than his kids. On his computer monitor, my own face in my school picture looked out at me, my now shoulder-length brown hair shorter and lighter on the screen, my face smooth and tan, almost smiling. Wearing my Jack White concert tee shirt, I looked younger, happier.

He waited a minute for me to respond, and when I didn’t, he turned to his keyboard and poked a few keys. My picture disappeared from the screen, replaced by a document which I assumed was my attendance record.

“I’m just about out of patience with you,” he said. “What gives?” He squinted closely at the monitor. “This makes seven times you’ve cut and you’re up to 22 absences. Your mom is going to be hauled into court and forced to pay a fine because you either can’t get to school, or you can’t stay in school. Is that what you want?”

Is that what I want? When did it ever matter what *I* wanted? But since he asked, it would be great if my mom weren’t sick, and my dad hadn’t moved to Hamilton with his new wife, and my little sister had some friends and my grandmother was still alive. *What gives?* Seriously? If I ever told him or anyone at school the truth about “what gives” in our house, they would have Cori and me moving in with Dad in a heartbeat. And that was never going to happen.

“Can we just get this over with?” I said instead. “I’m starving.”

Mr. Hartman eased himself back in his chair and exhaled long through his nose, his eyes turned up to the ceiling, the blue vein at his temple bulging like a fat night crawler. “I’m trying to help you here, Drew, but you leave me no choice if you’re not willing to meet me half way. You are suspended for three days out of school, and I will request that the attendance committee assign you SCC to make up your time.” He stabbed the keyboard one last time for emphasis, like the judge on *Divorce Court*, banging his gavel.

“Thanks a lot,” I said, knowing that there was nothing he or anyone else there could do to help me.

He looked at me then, his eyebrows drawn down as he tore his glasses off and tossed them on the desk. “That attitude of yours is getting real old, real quick,” he said, pointing his finger at me. “I have never treated you with anything but respect, and I expect the same from you.”

I hadn’t meant it sarcastically, but now he was pissing me off. “Got it,” I said. “Can I go now?”

“Go,” he said, shooing me away and then hollering for Mrs. Sheehan before I even had the door opened.

I went straight for his secretary’s desk to get my walking papers to present to Mr. Booth so I could leave the building legally, trying to avoid Mrs. Sheehan’s smug face, but she blocked my path, pointing to the row of chairs that lined the front of the office.

“Sit there and don’t move until I get done with him,” she said.

“I’m suspended,” I said.

“Yeah, no kidding, Einstein. Just wait there a sec.”

I watched as she crammed the rest of a Boston Cream donut into her mouth.

“Are you deaf?” she said, not bothering to wait until she had swallowed the yellow mess in her mouth.

From behind the closed *Edwin R. Hartman, Asst. Principal* door, their voices rose and fell, up and down and back and forth like a jazz number with no apparent melody. It was hard to tell if they were arguing or not because most times Mrs. Sheehan talked over you to make a point, but I caught the secretaries looking at one another like they were glad they weren’t part of that conversation. When she opened the door, Mrs. Sheehan snatched her purse from her desk and my walking papers from the secretary and said, “Let’s go,” without another word. We walked a little down the hall before she stopped and grabbed my arm, looking all around as if we were being tailed by snipers. “Listen. I got Mr. Hartman to agree that if you go to counseling once a week after school until the end of the year, and you do every Saturday—and I mean every single one, too—you won’t have to go to SCC.” She was attempting to whisper, but her gravelly voice made that impossible. “He will count that time towards your make-up hours. And don’t you dare say a word to anyone because I don’t make deals like this.”

Counseling? Where they ask you how you feel about everything? No way. What did it matter how I felt about things anyway? Nothing would get done if all I did was sit around and talk about how I felt. That’s what music was for.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Can’t what?”

“Go to counseling.”

“Are you—” Pretty sure she stopped short of calling me an asshole. “Why, may I ask? It’s nothing to be afraid of. Lots of people see a counselor.”

“Do you?” I asked.

“Don’t need one now,” she said, looking down to examine her long pink fingernails and then sucking something out from under one.

“I don’t need one now, either,” I said.

“You do if it means getting yourself out of SCC. It’s called playing the game, kiddo, and the game starts now.”

Classic Mrs. Sheehan. Heavy on the clichéd metaphors.

“I just can’t, okay?” I said.

“I don’t think you understand.” She was no longer making any attempt to whisper. “This is a last, *last* chance, and when it’s gone, it ain’t coming back, so make up your mind now.”

“I already have,” I said.

“Suit yourself,” she said, throwing up her arms. She started off down the hall, digging around in that huge purse for something and then turned abruptly to face me. “You are going to regret this.”

“Possibly,” I said.

“And you can’t say we didn’t try to work with you.”

“No,” I said.

“We’re not asking too much here, are we?” she said.

I shrugged and smiled. If you didn't know Mrs. Sheehan, you would think she was sort of cartoonish, with her crazy colorful clothes, her fake tan, and all her makeup, but you would be making a grave mistake if you pegged her for a pushover.

"Come on," she said, reaching up and flicking my hair into my face. I flinched. You never quite knew what she was capable of, and it was like she wanted to make sure you never forgot it. This made her laugh, her lowest stomach roll jerking upwards with each snort. "Let's get you home before you starve to death."

We were almost out the doors, Mrs. Sheehan clomping through the hall a few paces ahead of me, talking loudly to someone on her cell phone, when I thought about Cori. She would be eating lunch right then, and I figured it would be better to just pop into the cafeteria and talk to her. Too much to text and I didn't want her to worry or keep texting me with questions. Plus I might be able to snag a soft pretzel from someone if I was lucky. Mrs. Sheehan stomped on for a few steps before noticing I wasn't right behind her.

"Christ! First I can't keep you in school and now you don't want to leave?"

I hated asking Mrs. Sheehan for a favor, but if I wasn't in school, Cori would walk home by herself, or, worse, walk with Kelsey Pollock, like she had done a few times. And that bothered me. A lot. The Pollocks were a rough crew, straight up ghetto skanks if you asked me, and it didn't matter if it was a boy or a girl Pollock, there was always drama, a fight, or some kind of scene with them. I'm pretty sure that Kelsey was the one who beat up a 7th grade girl on the way home from school because the girl had accidentally walked in on Kelsey while she was taking a piss in the C Wing bathrooms. People who aren't from Gloucester assume we're all river rats, poor white trash like the

Pollocks who fight for the fun of it or beat people up because they look at them the wrong way. But it's not true. Now, I'm not going to lie; there was definitely some white trash, but there are way more good people. Our neighborhood is decent. Mostly old homes, a mix of singles and twins, but people took care of them. Sometimes you'd see some druggies slithering around waiting for the bus to Camden, but for the most part, we had a good thing going on on Sherman Street. But a lot could happen on the one-and-a-half mile walk from Gloucester High to Sherman Street when Kelsey Pollock is your partner, though, so I was going to make damn sure that Cori was not.

Mrs. Sheehan's skeptical blue eyes traveled back and forth between my eyes and my mouth as if to see which one would give me away first if I were lying. She exhaled all dramatically and glanced at her skinny gold watch, which, like the rest of her bracelets, looked like it was slowly being eaten by the fat on her arms. "Hurry it up! I have a meeting with the superintendent in fifteen minutes," she said and then spun around and continued her purposeful walk toward the double doors, purple pants swishing with every step. "And if you come out of there with any food, you're walking."

I was not prepared for the noise—it sounded like an elementary school playground at recess, only instead of first and second graders playing on the jungle gym, the 8th graders were sitting down at long tables, eating, talking, and laughing. Loudly. There couldn't have been more than 125 of them—150 tops, but it sounded like the entire school was in there for a pep rally. Junior high kids are such a pain in the ass. Scanning the tables, I spotted Cori's choppy, dyed black hair. Seated next to her and seeing me first as I made my way along the wall was one of the Fludds, whose family just moved to somewhere near our neighborhood from Camden. She nudged Cori in the arm and

nodded in my direction. Cori's hand froze just as the nacho it was holding was inches from her open mouth. The expression on her face made the rest of the kids at her table turn to where she was looking. I immediately regretted my decision. She thought something was wrong with Mom.

The only other time I went looking for Cori in school was to give her bad news. Back in November. Mom had been acting weird that morning, so I cut out early. That was the day I found her unconscious in the bathroom. In the emergency room later, the doctor told us that Mom had had a grand mal seizure and suffered third degree burns on her back and arm from the radiator. The scars from those burns, like deep purple ropes, looked like a grizzly bear had taken a swipe at her from behind. And unlike the scars from her high school sports days, those pale, shiny lines that crisscrossed her knees and lined her shins—battle wounds, she called them, sort of bragging—the scars from the seizure humiliated her. They must have been like a permanent reminder, not of what she had earned in battle, but of what was taken from her without a fight. I saw those horrible marks on her arm when she wore short sleeves or if her shirt hiked up her back in her sleep. I never got used to them. And Mom was never the same after that.

I smiled a little to ease Cori's mind as I approached the table, but the nacho was still in suspended animation in front of her face.

"I'll take that if you're not going to eat it," I said.

"What is going on?" she asked.

"Nothing. Relax," I said. "I'm suspended, so meet me at Wawa after school."

"Why?" she asked, like it was the craziest thing she had ever heard anyone say.

“Because, that’s why,” I said. Kelsey Pollock sat at the end of the table, stretching her skinny neck in our direction. “I’ll be there at 2:30,” I said, shooting Kelsey the stink eye that I hoped said *stay the hell away from my sister*, but the little bitch just gave it right back to me. I wanted to go over and slap her ugly, pointy face, but I would never hit a girl. I would never hit anyone, actually.

Cori looked unsure for a moment but finally mouthed, “Okay.”

“Later,” I said and stole a few nachos from her tray. I gave Kelsey one last warning shot on my way out. She returned the look, scratching her cheek with her middle finger.

“See you Friday, Zeppelin,” Mrs. Sheehan said as the car lurched to a halt in front of my house. The anxiety that had started in my stomach that morning moved down and was now heating up my intestines as I sat there, unable to force my hand to pull the latch on the door. I surveyed our house, hoping it would give some clue to what was going on inside. It didn’t. It looked as normal and average as it had for as long as I could remember. Brick with white siding, basically like every other single house on the street, only we had a ramp that zigzagged along the side of the house by the driveway and up to the front porch.

“Come on,” Mrs. Sheehan finally said. “I’m late.” She reached over me and pulled the latch on my door herself, allowing a brisk whiff of clean air to cool my face.

“Thanks,” I said before I shut the door. She sped off down the street without a word, coasting through the stop sign at Broadway.

I made my way around the side of our house to the back door. We pretty much stopped using the front door after Mom's seizure, leaving the back door unlocked in case she needed help from one of the neighbors. A few tufts of pale green grass sprouted up in spots here and there amid the dog shit and straw-colored patches of Zoysia. It never really took off into a lawn, just a few clumps of thick, dark green grass in the summer that faded to light brown in the winter.

Shuggy, our dog, must have heard Mrs. Sheehan's car door slam because he was barking his head off inside. "Shush! It's me," I said as I came through the back door and up the steps into the kitchen. Usually when he realized it was me, he would start jumping and prancing around, but that morning he did not approach me for the customary back scratch. He sat in the archway between the kitchen and the dining room, looking at me intently.

"It's me, Mom," I sort of whispered, hoping she could hear me if she were awake. When her balance and the numbness in her feet became too bad for her to go up and down the stairs safely, we moved Cori into Mom's huge bedroom upstairs and Mom into Cori's little room across from mine downstairs.

"What's the matter, Shuggs?" I asked. His adoring brown eyes searched for something in mine, his tail tucked under and still as he led the way into Mom's room. Mom always said that Shuggy was good company during the day. He loved to take naps, especially next to someone else who was napping, and he didn't ask for much except maybe the occasional belly rub. He used to love to sit on her lap while she ate lunch, hoping to catch some crumbs or a handout, but when she developed muscle spasms in her legs, it made him too jittery to climb up. Instead, he would sit on the arm of the loveseat

and watch her, shyly wagging his tail if they made eye contact. She said she felt like he was courting her.

“Mom?” I called a little softer as I followed Shuggy into the bedroom. The stench of vomit hit me before it registered that she was not in the bed. I wheeled around and rushed into the bathroom. *Please, God. Not again*, I thought. The surge of relief at seeing the harmless radiator was immediately replaced by alarm.

“Mom!” I yelled this time, running through the dining room, finding her empty wheelchair in the living room where I’d left it that morning. I stood for a moment, paralyzed by uncertainty, my heart pounding against my chest. Had she asked Mrs. Young to take her to the hospital? No. They would have taken her wheelchair.

As I pulled out my phone, I heard Shuggy whining inside Mom’s room, the kind of whine he used when his favorite toy was stuck too far under the couch for him to reach. Entering the room, I walked around to the other side of the bed, where he stood at my mother’s bare feet as she lay on the floor between the bed and the wall, pale and unmoving, chunks of yellow puke clinging to her face and throat.

“911. What is your emergency please?”

I did not remember dialing. The woman’s voice was confident and friendly.

“I need an ambulance at 307 Sherman Street. My mom had a seizure and fell out of bed.”

“Is she conscious?”

“No.”

“Is she breathing?”

“I’m not sure. I think so.”

“I need you to check to make sure, hon. Kneel down next to her and put your cheek real close to her nose and mouth and tell me if you can feel her breath on your face.”

I shoved the bed aside with my legs and knelt down next to her head. The sour smell of vomit caught me in the throat as I leaned my head close to her face, my arms quivering to hold my weight. I held my breath and lowered my cheek as close to her nose and mouth as I could without touching her and, I don’t know why, but I began counting—*one, one-thousand; two, one-thousand; three, one-thousand*. I got up to twelve before I felt the faintest puff of warm breath on my cheek.

“There. I felt it. She’s breathing,” I said, relieved to be breathing again myself.

“Alright. Good. How old is your mom, hon?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Okay. Does she take medication for seizure disorder?”

“No. Well, yes. She takes a bunch of different medicine,” I said. The rapid tapping of fingers on the keyboard in the background was oddly comforting. Someone else was taking charge for the moment.

“Okay, hon. I need you to hang on the line with me until EMS arrives. Will they be able to get in the house?”

“Tell them to go to the back door.”

“Is anyone there with you now?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’ll need you to gather up any prescription medication your mom is taking and give it the EMT’s when they arrive.”

Some of Mom's pills had to be taken with food, but she hadn't been ready to eat anything in the morning, so I left her medicine, a water bottle, and a banana on her nightstand for when she felt better. She took three different pills couple times a day, which we placed in one of those pill organizers that old people use. She also took Valium for when she had trouble sleeping, and that we kept in the nightstand drawer so she could get to it herself. I checked the pill organizer. She hadn't taken her pills yet. Could she have had a seizure after missing only one dose?

"Are you still with me, hon? I need you to get all of your mom's medication and give it to the EMT's when they get there."

"I'm afraid to leave her."

"She'll be okay for a minute. I'm here with you. Do you know where she keeps her medication?"

"Yeah, I'll get it," I said. Scooping up the amber pill bottles from the counter in the kitchen, I could hear the chirping siren of the nearby ambulance and was glad for once that Gloucester was so small. Back in the bedroom, I opened the drawer of the nightstand to get the Valium bottle. It was empty. Why didn't she tell me she needed it refilled? No wonder she was having trouble sleeping. I made a mental note to call CVS to have it refilled and put the empty bottle in my pocket with the others.

The ambulance must have arrived because I no longer heard the siren, but Shuggy was running and barking, back and forth through the living room and dining room like we were under attack. I tricked him into going in the bathroom by throwing a treat in and shutting the door. He quieted down just long enough to eat but resumed his barking as the EMT's entered the kitchen with their packs.

“She’s in here,” I said, leading the way into her bedroom.

They asked me her name.

“Michelle,” I said and walked out. I couldn’t stay in there while they worked on her. I felt like I was going to cry or scream or just take off sprinting, out of my house, out of my town, out of my life. Total strangers could now see that, along with being covered in her own puke, my mom had pissed her pants. I leaned over the kitchen sink and ran the faucet as the tears started to come.

“Drew, is there anything I can do?” Mrs. Young placed her cool, smooth old lady hand on my arm. She must have let herself in the back door. Ashamed and unable to speak, I could only shake my head. She tried to gather me up in her little arms for a hug, but I quickly turned and tore off a paper towel to wipe my face.

“What is it? Another seizure?” she asked. I nodded this time and she shook her head, her own eyes filling up. We stood in the kitchen for a few moments, looking away from each other, the white sunshine casting a slanted rectangle on the cracked linoleum between us, the brown-and-gold specked floor that Mom swore she could never get to look clean no matter how often she mopped.

“Are you her son?” the lady EMT asked. She indicated her head to the stretcher, which the two other guys were maneuvering carefully through the tight angle between the bedrooms and the dining room. Mom looked like a mummy with an oxygen mask on, swaddled in sheets and strapped down. My eyes burned with fresh tears, seeing the stark contrast of her dark brown hair on the white sheets. I could only nod my head yes.

“It’s okay,” she said. “We are going to transport your mom to Underwood Hospital in Woodbury. Do you have her medications? I’ll need to give them to the docs in the ER.”

I reached into my pocket and handed her the four pill bottles. She took them in both of her hands and held them, one at a time, at arm’s length to read the labels before dropping each into a Ziploc™ plastic bag.

“Do you know if your mom took her meds today?” she asked.

“I don’t think so, at least not the ones in the case,” I said.

A flicker of doubt pulled down her eyebrows for a moment before they sprang back into shape. She opened her mouth to speak but stopped, looking first at me, then at Mrs. Young. Her portable radio blipped twice, prompting a fresh round of muffled barks from the bathroom.

“Ok,” she finally said. “Do you have transportation to Underwood?”

“Yes. I’ll take him,” Mrs. Young answered for me.

“I’ll see you there,” she said, and then hurried through the dining room and out the front door.

The siren yelped three times as the ambulance pulled away from the curb, reaching a full-blown wail as it eased through the same stop sign that Mrs. Sheehan had ignored, what seemed like days, before. We would follow the same route as the ambulance, down Broadway through Brooklawn and Westville into Woodbury. The same trip we took in November.

The polite toot-toot of Mrs. Young’s car horn, so different from the blast of Mrs. Sheehan’s, was my signal to go, only I was stuck in that glitching video game again.

Chapter 2

I counted 38 chairs, cushioned but still uncomfortable, most of them taken by groups of two or three—the sick and injured along with the anxious and exhausted, waiting their turn to be called back to the ER. As soon as one group was called back, it seemed like a new group replaced them, clustered in the drab tan seats somewhere along one of the rows of back-to-back chairs. Other than the people, there wasn't much to look at in the waiting room at Underwood Hospital. Three walls the color of putty. Two muted flat screen televisions. Two vending machines. We had been there for almost two hours and still had no idea what was going on with Mom. Mrs. Young dozed in the chair next to me, the harsh lighting painting her face a sickly yellow. Her old-school white sneakers reminded me of Nana and how much I missed her. Nana loved Mom, even though she was only her daughter-in-law. If she were still alive, she'd have been there, like she was through that first year of devastating news and disappointing treatments.

“Remember me, Drew? I'm Linda Schnell?” It was the same nosy bitch who had talked to me in November, and there she was again standing over us, holding out her hand, smiling her fake smile. Her little speech had startled Mrs. Young back into a blinking consciousness. “I'm a social worker here at Underwood? I'm so sorry to hear about your mom.”

“Yeah, I remember you,” I said. “When can I see my mom?”

She dialed back her smile a notch when I refused to shake her hand. “She is being admitted now, and the doctor will be out to see you shortly.” Offering her rejected hand

to Mrs. Young, she asked, “Grandmom?” Mrs. Young told her the same thing she had told her before, that she was our neighbor but like family. Linda Schnell squinted at the chart she was holding, looking for what, I don’t know. I wanted to snatch it out of her hands and whack her in the face with it. I knew what she was up to. The last time we were here, she asked Cori and me all kinds of ridiculous questions, like was there food in the fridge, was Mom awake when we got up for school, did we have a curfew, did we know how to use the washer and dryer. She even had the nerve to ask us if our toilet flushed.

I freaked on her back then. I told her that we weren’t animals or little kids who couldn’t take care of ourselves. Besides, we had plenty of help. Dad came down from Hamilton every week or so to do the grocery shopping, and we also had Mom’s sister, Aunt Tina. She lived in Philly, but she called Mom almost every day and stopped by at least once a week. Aunt Tina even switched to the night shift at the hospital so that she could take Mom to her doctor’s appointments during the day. And in an emergency, there was always Mrs. Young. But Linda Schnell must have forgotten to put that in that precious chart she found so fascinating at the moment.

“Drew, why don’t we go into the Family Room, just down the corridor,” she said, nodding her head and smiling again, “so we can have more privacy.”

Privacy? We? I’m pretty sure I would never, under any circumstances, ever ask her if *her* toilet flushed.

“Go ahead, Drew,” Mrs. Young said. “I’ll grab a cup of coffee.”

“No,” I said. I slouched into the stiff chair and pulled my hood over my head.

“I’m staying here until I see Mom.”

My life wasn't always so messed up. I'm pretty sure it was normal for the first ten or so years, but I think the last time I was happy, really happy, was in second grade when I made my First Holy Communion. I wore a white suit with a white shirt, white tie and white shoes, like all the other kids except for Patrick Dorton, who wore a blue suit. Sister Kathleen told Patrick in front of the whole class that he would ruin the picture if he was the only one wearing a blue suit. Patrick ducked his head into his Power Rangers t-shirt, trying not to cry, because if you did cry in front of her, Sister threatened she "would give you something to cry about." The next day after practice Mrs. Dorton was waiting for Sister in front of St. Steven's Church, and before she reached the bottom step, Mrs. Dorton marched right up to her and told her she could take that Communion picture and the white suit and shove them both straight up her ass. Sister just stood there with her mouth open, looking at Mrs. Dorton like she was an alien who dropped out of the sky. Dad said if he were there, he would have given Mrs. Dorton a standing ovation.

Sister Kathleen was short and fat and mean and ugly, and she terrified every Catholic kid in Gloucester under the age of 14. But if you wanted to make your communion—and, trust me, everyone did because of the party afterwards—you had to go through her. She hated the "publics," as she referred to us CCD kids. I could handle her dirty looks and the mean shit she said, but she scared Cori so bad that she threw up on her very first day of CCD. We sat together on the floor in the front vestibule of St. Steven's School, watching through the big glass doors for Mom's green minivan to pull up. A leftover sob, like a pitiful hiccup, bubbled up from Cori's chest every so often. The life-size statue of Saint Stephen stared down at us, either sad or disappointed that Cori had

gotten puke on her clothes. I'll never forget Mom's athletic body springing up the front steps two at a time and then stopping dead in her tracks when she opened the door.

Swooping down to pick up Cori, she stormed into the main office, her anger rebounding into the vestibule.

"This is how you treat a sick child?" she yelled. "You let her sit out there on the floor, covered in vomit? She didn't wait for a reply from Sister Kathleen. "And you call yourself a Christian." She flung the word *Christian* from her mouth like it was fly she had inhaled.

We never went back to CCD or Mass after that.

Every once in a while when I clean my room, I come across pictures from my communion day. My favorite is the one with all of us: me, Mom, Dad, Cori, and Nana, all huddled together in front of the church. I'm standing in front of them with my hands in full-blown prayer position, a ridiculous smile stretched out all over my face and my eyes looking up to heaven. Mom's hands are on my shoulders, and she's looking down at me with a crooked smile. Dad is looking at the camera, laughing, with one arm around Mom's waist and the other around Nana's shoulders. Nana is smiling her closemouthed smile, and she's got the one-arm death grip on her white purse. Cori is leaning close to Nana, holding Nana's one hand with two of her little ones. We are frozen in momentary joy on that day, at that exact time, forever now, or for as long as that picture holds up.

It's funny. As a little kid, I never gave a thought to whether or not I was happy. I just got up, went to school, came home, played, ate dinner, watched TV, got a bath and went to bed. Not much to it. I lived for the next moment, the next summer, the next time I went to the beach, fishing, the next episode of *Sponge Bob*, the next time I was allowed to

play Xbox. I don't even remember having that picture taken. And I know I wasn't aware that I was happy at the time. I only knew that I was happy then because I had a picture of my non-existent smiling family to prove it. That, and my life at 16 was about as non-happy as it could get, and getting worse by the second with Linda Schnell breathing down on me.

“Ok then, we can talk later, after you've had a chance to see your mom and speak with the doctor,” she finally said. “I can see you're preoccupied at the moment.”

Refusing to open my eyes and acknowledge her, I flipped her off with both fingers from inside my hoodie pocket. I knew I was being rude, but I really couldn't stand the sight of her, let alone have a conversation with her.

I must have fallen into a light sleep, but even with my eyes closed, even before Mrs. Young touched my arm to rouse me, I sensed that the energy in the room had changed, like the wind had suddenly shifted, or the sun had ducked behind a cloud . Opening my eyes, I followed the tide of interest. Whether it was his 6'4" frame, his clean-cut good looks, or the blue Mid-State Prison uniform, everyone in the waiting room eyed my dad with something between suspicion and curiosity as he and Cori made their way over to join us. There was just something about him. People sat up straighter, like they were waiting for him to tell them what they had done wrong and how to proceed correctly. But whenever he was stressed out, he had a habit of running both hands through his short, bristly black hair, all the way from his forehead to the back of his muscular neck. I counted three times in the minutes that it took me to fill him in on

everything. Everything except that Mom had lost control of her bladder and about me being suspended and probably having SCC.

Cori, as usual, sat there like a mute, bouncing her knee up and down, staring at whatever soap opera was on the TV, but the fear in her eyes was accentuated by the dark makeup that she recently started wearing. If Nana had come back from the dead and walked in at that moment, I doubt she would even have recognized Cori, so different looking from the Cori that Nana had last seen.

And if Nana had been there, she would have made sure that we talked to one another while we waited, asked questions that forced conversation, even if it was just meaningless stuff, anything other than this:

Dad—How's school?

Me—Okay.

Me—How's Jack?

Dad—Good. Real good. Getting big. How about you, Cor? How's school?

Cori—Good. (actually, it would look more like this: good)

Another minute or two of Cori staring at the silent TV and Dad and me checking our cell phones, and then:

Me—How's work?

Dad—You don't want to know.

Dad—Speaking of work, you should start looking for a summer job now, before the college kids snap them all up.

Me—Yeah. Okay.

“Gilmore? Michelle Gilmore?” a small, older doctor, a different one from November, called from the front of the room by the nurses’ desk. Dad stood to get his attention, and once again, all eyes in the room were on us. The doctor came over and shook dad’s hand, saying that we could see Mom in a few minutes, but he wanted to “apprise us of her condition” first. He looked briefly at me and Cori and then back at Dad with a question in his face. Before he could say anything, Dad took him by the arm and walked him to the other side of the waiting room by the vending machines, where they had a hushed conversation, both of them taking turns talking, listening and nodding their heads.

“I wonder what the hell that’s all about,” I said to Cori. She didn’t even look at me. She just shrugged her shoulders about a half inch, like it took the supreme amount of energy to do even that. I felt like screaming at her right in her face to make her wince or show some sort of reaction, but instead I watched as Dad and the doctor shook hands again before the doctor disappeared through a set of doors that whooshed open as soon as he approached, like they recognized how busy and important he was.

Dad didn’t look at either of us as he made his way back. Not good.

“Hey, guys. Why don’t we go over to McDonald’s and get something to eat? That’ll give your mom some more time to get settled and we can talk a bit,” he said.

Definitely not good at all. The last time we “talked a bit” with Dad, he told us that he was moving out. That he and Mom needed some time to work things out. It wasn’t anything we did. They both loved us very much, but sometimes mommies and daddies blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Now, to me, nothing tasted better than hot, salty fries and a Quarter Pounder with cheese, but I really just wanted to see Mom more than anything

right then. It didn't matter, though, because Dad never actually asked us our opinion or what we felt like doing. It always came out sounding like a question: *Why don't we get something to eat?* or *How about we go for a drive?* or *What do you say you come and stay with me and Kelly for a few days?* But he wasn't really interested in our response.

So all the same people who had watched him walk into the waiting room—the nurses, the sick people, their tired and worried family members, even the bored security guard—watched again as he led us out, like they felt sorry for us but also relieved that it wasn't them or their kids cutting through the parking lot, crossing busy Broad Street at the light, and entering the half-empty McDonald's. I remember wishing I could go back in time somehow, to a time when that familiar pressure wasn't twisting up my insides, when a trip to McDonald's was something to be stoked about, not feared, back before the summer after 7th grade, the very first time I ever heard the word *MS*.

Even though I was only 13 then, I knew that something was definitely, terribly wrong. Mom lay on the couch, bunched up at one end for two days straight. She didn't eat or drink anything I put on the coffee table for her, not even her favorite snack, peanut butter and strawberry jelly on crackers. She only got up to use the bathroom. I asked her so many times what was wrong, but she didn't speak, just shook her head almost imperceptibly and continued to stare at nothing, sometimes crying openly or throwing her arm over her face. She didn't even pay attention to Shuggy, who planted himself at the other end of the couch to keep an eye on her. Her manager from Acme called the house phone asking to speak to her. I told him that she was sick and couldn't come to the phone. He told me, in a voice like he was speaking to a two-year-old, to tell her that she had to

call out if she was not able to come to work so that they could cover her shift. I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself, but he hung up on me.

The morning of the second day, I heard her murmuring in the bathroom, the vibrations of her voice, high pitched and desperate. I listened, my ear against the door. She was on the phone with someone. It was hard to make out some of the words. In the small, dark cubicle of space between her bedroom and the bathroom is where I learned the reason she had trouble getting through kickboxing class or jogging, what was making her knees feel like rope burn and her feet have pins and needles was called MS. She choked out the words in a near scream, “It’s fucking MS, Tina! You’re a nurse, for god’s sake! You know what it will do to me!” It was the first time I heard Mom say *fuck*. “It won’t even have the decency to kill me,” was the last thing I remember her saying.

I sat down on the floor outside the bathroom for what seemed like an hour until she came out, her face red and blotchy and her eyes mere slits.

“What’s MS?” I asked. She looked at me like I had shot her and then slid down the wall on to the floor next to me. She pulled her legs up into her chest and rested her forehead on her folded arms, taking a few shaky breaths. When she could talk, in a voice that seemed disconnected from her body, she told me that MS was a disease that stripped the protective covering called the myelin sheath off the nerves. The kind she had would get progressively worse. It could cause tremors. Pain. She would lose her ability to walk. Her eyesight would diminish. There were treatments but no cure.

I felt sick and scared and confused. And a few moments later, ashamed. Utterly ashamed that my first thought, the very first thing I worried about, while she sat there in despair, was how all of that would affect me. How would I get to guitar lessons if she

couldn't drive? Who would take care of the house and cook for us? What would other kids think if my mom had to use a wheelchair? Leaning her head against the wall, she looked broken, like a trampled flower, and a tidal wave of different emotion overcame me. I stood up and offered her my hand. She considered it for a few seconds, as if she were about to take a chance on something that was more likely to turn out bad than good, before grabbing hold to lift herself up.

"Don't worry, Mom," I said. "It will be okay. I'll take care of you." Her face crumbled into mask of sadness as she started crying all over again.

I led her back to the couch, and after she had fallen asleep, I called Dad, who was camping up in New York with his wife Kelly and Cori, and told him everything. A little while later, it was Nana who finally got Mom off that couch. She walked through the front door, handed me a bag of groceries and instructed me to put some coffee on. When I returned to the living room with the mugs, Mom was wrapped up in Nana's arms, sobbing, asking over and over *What am I going to do? What am I going to do? What am I going to do?* Nana said nothing. Just held her and let her talk and cry, stroking her hair and wiping the snot off her nose and mouth. Eventually, Nana gave me a look that told me I should go somewhere. When I came back from a long walk to the river, Mom was in the shower and Nana was making meatballs, stopping every now and then to drop tiny pieces of raw meat into Shuggy's mouth.

"She'll be alright," was all Nana said, neither elaborating nor encouraging any questions. I believed her then, but I wonder if she would still say that if she could see those purple slashes on Mom's back, or if she had seen her lying limp and still on the floor in the bedroom.

We sat in a booth in McDonalds, Cori absently pumping the straw of her Shamrock Shake through the plastic lid, me staring at my tray with the Quarter Pounder still wrapped, Dad palming the coffee he'd ordered instead of food at the last minute. A mom with three little kids plopped down into the booth connected to ours, filling the suffocating silence with their chattering noise. The littlest one was about Jack's age, bumping up and down in his high chair, waving his arms for his Happy Meal. I wondered what was so important or awful that Dad had to drag us over to McDonald's to tell us. And when we were there, he couldn't get the words out. What could possibly be worse than what already happened? I couldn't take it one second longer.

"What's going on, Dad?" I said. "Just tell us."

He seemed not to have heard me at first because he turned his head to look out the window into the parking lot. Still looking out the window, he told me what I demanded to know. "Your mom didn't have a seizure. She took too much Valium. They don't know how many. She couldn't tell them, but they said it was lucky that she had vomited early on. You probably saved her life, Drew. They gave her charcoal to soak up what was left in her stomach. They're going to keep her a few days for observation. You know, make sure she's okay emotionally."

I remember thinking *Why is he telling us this?*

It was Cori's whispery voice that gave sound to the one thought that furiously ricocheted inside my brain, drying up my mouth and burning my eyes.

"So, by 'took too much' you mean, like, on purpose? Like OD?" she asked.

He sighed heavily. “I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. But he couldn’t look at us, and I knew what that meant.

The realization that my mom may have tried to kill herself pancaked me against the back of that booth. I felt like I had left my body, like I was looking at everything from somewhere other than my head. I could see Cori’s thin shoulders heaving gently. I saw the mom open the box of Chicken McNuggets for the little one and dump the fries into the empty side. I watched Dad reach out to touch Cori’s hand. I heard myself cough.

“Listen,” he said. “You know that MS can cause depression, and if you can’t sleep and you’re in constant pain, you get to feeling desperate, I guess. Think about it. You get confused, make mistakes. I can’t imagine what she’s going through, but I do know that she would never do anything to hurt you guys. Never. They’re going to give her new medicine that hopefully will give her some relief from the pain in her legs and help her sleep.”

The little kid held out a french fry and the mom gobbled it up, which made him crack up in that little kid laugh that made the other two kids crack up. When he held out another fry to do it again, I thought my chest would break open.

“Then what?” It was Cori again. I still couldn’t find my voice.

“For now, we wait and see and hope the new medicines work,” Dad said.

I knew that wasn’t what Cori was asking.

I couldn't look at Mom when we went in to see her. I stood by the window next to her bed and pretended to be interested in the view of the parking lot. I didn't trust my eyes or my voice, but Cori went right over and climbed into bed next to her. Mom stroked her hair and planted repeated kisses on the top of her head. I wondered how she could stand being stabbed in the mouth by Cori's spikey hairsprayed hair, and I hoped it hurt. How could she do it? Why didn't she tell us that it was this bad? She had to know that I would have been the one to find her dead body if she offed herself, and I hated her for it. I stormed out of the room and jogged down the hall to the waiting room where Dad was sitting in a chair, resting his head back with his eyes closed.

"Hey, bud. You ok?"

"I hate her!" I snapped. "Now I know why you got divorced. She is the most selfish bitch I've ever known, and I don't care if I ever see her again!"

"Hey! Come on now," he said, rising up and taking me by the arms. "Don't talk about your mother like that." And then he did something he rarely did. He hugged me with both arms. It felt like cold aloe on a bad sunburn. I breathed in deeply the smell of his leather jacket on his uniform shirt.

"Your mom is going through a rough time, and she needs you to be strong," he said as he let go of me.

"Why the hell should I bother being strong if she's just going to give up behind my back?" I said.

"Pull yourself together," he said, "and remember who you're talking to."

Chapter 3

“Drew? Open up.”

It was Sunday and Aunt Tina was knocking on my bedroom door. She had brought Mom home from the hospital Friday and stayed, cleaning everything in sight, even giving Shuggy a bath and clipping his nails. With her at the house, I didn’t have to do anything, so avoiding Mom was easy, and it was a good thing because I was still seriously pissed off. I didn’t even want to look at her. Taking advantage of the free time, I locked myself in my room and played guitar. I literally drowned myself in the blues that whole weekend.

Music was the one thing that had kept me from completely freaking out that year. Like how you hear people who win awards say, “First I’d like to thank God because none of this would be possible,” I would have legit lost my mind if I didn’t have music to get me through. Not to say I don’t believe in God, because I pretty much do. I just don’t believe that he cares all that much about what goes on down here. So whether I was stoked or bummed or pissed about something, I could pick up my Strat or my Washburn and play right on through it. Kind of like the same way people pray, I imagine.

I made Aunt Tina knock a few times before I opened the door. I turned off the light so she couldn’t see what a mess my room was. I’m sure if I hadn’t been home suspended on Friday, she would have snuck in to wash the sheets and pick up all the crap that was on the floor.

“Hey, stranger,” she said, flipping on the light. “That sounds great. Why don’t you come out into the living room and play for me and your mom? I haven’t heard you

play for a long time.” She looked like Mom, standing there with one hand on her hip and the other on the doorknob, only taller and heavier, not what you’d call fat, but pretty thick, where Mom was just average for a mom.

I turned away from her and sat down on my bed, scratching Shuggy’s head and back. After a few seconds I said, “Nah. I’m going over Nick’s in a bit. Maybe when I get back.”

“Oh, stop being such a little jerk, Drew!” she snapped, taking a step into my room. “Haven’t you made her suffer enough already? She’s in a very fragile state right now, and she feels terrible about what happened. She needs to know that you’re ok. Come on out.” She stood perilously close to me, her powerful arms folded over her stomach.

“She *should* feel terrible about what happened, and I don’t have anything to say to her,” I said as I slipped past her into the bathroom and shut the door in her face.

“Asshole,” I heard her say before I turned on the water to brush my teeth and drown out whatever else she was going to say.

Nick Montecalvo was my best friend. We started hanging out in junior high after we had jammed together at Savage Rock School a few times. Nick played electric and acoustic like me, but he also played bass and the keyboards. His parents fixed up their garage so that a five or six-piece band could play in it. Most of the time it was just me and Nick, though. We loved to sit around and just bullshit about music and different artists and bands. We could never agree on who was the greatest guitarist of all times—I said it was Hendrix, but Nick insisted it was Clapton. We did like the same contemporary

stuff, The Black Keys, The White Stripes, Gov't Mule. Nick wasn't one to ask too many questions. He was totally cool if we did nothing but hang out and play. I hadn't even talked to him since I got suspended, and he didn't answer my text that I was coming over.

From a few blocks away, I could see his yellow Nissan pickup parked next to the house, so I slowed down to catch my breath. Making my way up the inclined driveway towards the oblong garage that sat behind the house, I heard his unmistakable riffs from "People Get Ready" sliding away from his half-up amp and seeping through the closed door and windows of the garage. I could see him inside in the dim light—a familiar sight—sitting on the edge of the worn-out brown leather couch, eyes closed, picking away on his Telecaster. He opened his eyes and smiled when I pushed open the door, the musty warmth inside as welcoming as Nick and his music.

He closed his eyes again, not missing a note as I picked up his Ovation from the stand, plopped down in the lumpy chair across from him and began strumming along. We argued over who had written this song one time. I insisted it was Jeff Beck. Cost me ten bucks. I never bet him on anything about music again.

He shook his head slowly, smiling, totally into the song. I liked to watch him play mellow stuff. He sort of melted into himself. So different from the way he usually was. After we finished, he laid his guitar beside him on the couch and sat back, looking at me for the first time since I had come in.

"So, what's going on?" he asked.

I did some arpeggios along the Ovation's sweet neck while I thought about what I should say.

"Not too much. My mom was in the hospital for a few days last week."

“Again? Dude, that sucks. Is she okay?”

“Yeah. She’ll be okay.”

“That why you haven’t been in school?”

“Nope. Suspended.”

“Again?” he said. “Are you serious?”

“Yup,” I said. “I wasn’t even past Greenwood before Mrs. Sheehan picked me up.”

“Can I make a suggestion? Give it up. You’re no good at it, bro. You get caught, like, every time. It’s like Sheehan has a secret alarm that goes off in her ear whenever you leave the building. Like she’s sitting at her desk, shoving a hoagie in her face, and then all of a sudden her head pops up,” he moved to the edge of the couch and snapped his head to the right and then to the left, like a dog trying to figure out where a noise was coming from. Nick had to act everything out when he told a story. He jumped off the couch and started running around the garage, pretending to be Mrs. Sheehan. “God damn you, Drew Gilmore! I got my friggin high heels on today, and you got me traipsing all over Gloucester looking for your sorry ass.” He sounded exactly like her, the way her deep voice always ran out of breath at the end of her sentences. “You are gonna be sorry when I get a hold of you, Zeppelin!” He screamed as he ran out the door and down the driveway, shaking his fist and doing that patented Mrs. Sheehan stomping fast-walk all the way to the sidewalk. Nick never did anything halfway. He could always crack me up.

Sometimes just looking at him made me laugh out loud. He was on the short side and a little chunky, and he forced his straight, light brown hair into skinny dread locks that didn’t quite come to his chin. He had big blue eyes and small yellow teeth, and

though he swore otherwise, I think he only brushed them once a week. He wore this Mexican blanket looking thing as a coat all the time. He said it was an authentic serape poncho from the 60s. I said it was ugly and smelled like a wet dog, but Nick didn't care what anyone thought. He wore flip flops all year round, and his toenails were long and nasty. Cori thought he was a creep because whenever he saw her in the hallways at school, he would put his arm around her and say, "Yo, what's up, little sister?" Mom said she liked his individuality and creativity, but she knew for a fact that he smoked pot, which he did occasionally, but it didn't bother me. And one more thing about Nick, as David Bowie said, "Boy, could he play guitar."

"Do you even have enough days in school for this year to count?" he asked after catching his breath. He took the Ovation out of my hands and sat back down on the couch and began picking out a tune.

"Pretty sure I can do Saturdays. I'm passing everything. Well, maybe not gym, but I can do the make-ups. But Hartman says he's going to make me do SCC."

"That would severely suck. You used to be in honors classes last year, and now you're just a stoner like me, happy to be passing," he said.

"I am nothing like you," I said.

"You may as well be. At least you'd be having more fun."

He had a point. I picked up his bass and felt my way through the line he played to a song I recognized but couldn't name. I wasn't all that great on bass, but anyone who could keep a beat could play bass. We stayed out in the garage for a while, just playing, not saying too much. Nick with his eyes closed and me staring at the huge murals his mom had painted. It was the coolest thing—each wall was a Clapton album cover.

Some days we spent hours improvising. It was like an addiction. Something about the 1, 4, 5 chord progression could almost make me cry. Not because I was sad. More like because I was alive, like I wasn't just *hearing* the music. I was *feeling* it.

"I'm going to bounce," I said, standing up and stretching. It was getting dark and the garage no longer felt warm.

"You know if my mom finds out you were here at dinnertime and didn't eat anything, she's not going to be happy," he said.

He had another point. The Montecalvos was all the way Italian, so I don't have to explain what that means. If I stopped in to say hello, Mrs. M. would drag me over to the table and practically put a bib on me and spoon feed me some outrageously good pasta dish. If I didn't stop in the house, and she found out I had been in the garage with Nick, she would get her feelings hurt. She was one of those people who would do anything for anybody. She cooked a ton of meals for us after Mom's seizure, and whenever I saw her, which wasn't often anymore, she never failed to ask if there was anything she could do. But we weren't the kind of people who asked favors of other people.

"I'll stop in and say hi, but I really do have to get home because my aunt is making a big dinner," I lied.

Nick's house sat at the top of the steep terrace on Klemm Avenue, overlooking an open field of scrub grass across the street where people ran their dogs off leash and the geese hung out in rude, stubborn clusters. Mr. M. did some kind of construction work, and he was always working on the house or in the yard. I thought their house was one of the nicest in town, with its immaculate lawn and enormous second floor deck off the back

of the kitchen. You could literally fit three of my houses in the space that theirs took up. Mrs. M was an art teacher at some private girls' school over in Philly. They were super cool parents, hip and attractive. They had a gym in their basement and worked out together. I often wondered what people thought of the three of them when they went out together as a family, these two good looking parents with their not so good looking son.

"Nicky? That you?" Mrs. M. called from somewhere in the house when we came into the kitchen through the sliding glass doors.

"Yes, Reeree," Nick said. He thought it was funny to call his mom by her childhood nickname. "Someone's here to see you."

Other than Shuggy and my mom, no one ever acted happier to see me than Rita Montecalvo. Whether it had been two days or two months, the reception was always the same. "Drew! How you doing, sweetie?" and she would drop whatever she was doing to give me a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Who is—oh, it's Drew! How you doing, sweetie?" Wearing formfitting jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt, looking not much older than Nick and me even though she was in her forties, she still had an inch or two on me as she pulled me into her arms and patted my back. Her long dark hair was twisted up in a huge plastic clip, and she smelled faintly of frying meat and garlic but mostly of soap and summertime. I was totally content to linger in her hug as long as she allowed. "You're staying for dinner, right? I made gravy. Just give me a sec. Sit down. How's your mom? Your hair is so long! I like it," she said. She opened the basement door and hollered down to Mr. M., "Joe! Drew's here. Come on up," and then turning back to me asked, "What do you want to drink?"

Nicky, get Drew a drink.” And off she went, in her glory, buzzing and clanking around her gigantic kitchen, oblivious to my polite refusals of anything to eat.

Nick looked at me and shook his head. “Reet!” he yelled over the banging of heavy plates and bowls on the marble countertops. “He’s not staying for dinner. Chill, woman.”

“Why not? I made gravy. You’re not staying?” She looked utterly confused.

“No, sorry, Mrs. M,” I said. “I can’t stay, but really, thanks. My aunt’s making a big dinner, and I have to get back. Just wanted to say hey.”

“Oh, no. Really? You’ll take it with you then. Hold on a sec. Let me get a container. I have all this gravy,” she said. “Joe! Come up here! Drew’s leaving.”

“No, no. I really can’t. I ran here. I—

“Nicky will give you a ride home,” she said and continued with her preparations.

Two warm, strong hands clutched my shoulders and gave them a squeeze. I turned to face Mr. M., who grasped my hand in one of his sandpapery ones and crushed it with his signature handshake.

“What’s up, Drew? Long time, no see,” he said. His shaved head reflected the bright lighting of the kitchen, and his bicep bulged under his sleeve. He wasn’t very tall, maybe 5’8” or so, but years of lifting weights and doing construction had thickened his chest, neck, and arms with slabs of muscle that I couldn’t help but admire when I saw him. “What have you been up to?”

“Not much. Just stopped by to say hi,” I said.

“You doing okay?” he asked, peering at me through his stylish rectangular glasses, like he really cared. I had no doubt that he genuinely did care, that he really listened to what I said.

“Yup. Doing good, thanks,” I said. “But I have to run before I’m late. It was good seeing you, Mr. M. See you later, Mrs. M.”

It was only then that he let go of my hand, but his other hand still rested comfortably on my shoulder.

“Wait!” Mrs. M. said. “Nick! Tell him you’re taking him home!”

“He doesn’t want a ride, Mom! Will you stop?”

“Why don’t you want a ride? Are you going carry this all the way home?” She held up a blue plastic container filled to the top with red sauce.

“Mom! He said he didn’t want anything! Jesus Christ, woman!”

Grinning at his wife and son, Mr. M. draped his python arm across my shoulders.

“You come back soon. You hear me? Don’t be such a stranger.”

I promised I would and made a break for the doors, pretending I hadn’t heard Mrs. M’s question about Mom. Whenever I left their house, I felt full and happy, even those rare times when I hadn’t eaten anything.

“Tell Mama Gilmore I hope she feels better,” Nick called out from the deck as I made my way down the driveway. I had managed to get out of the house before Mrs. M. forced the container on me.

“I will,” I said, knowing that I wouldn’t.

Night had arrived while I was inside the Montecalvos', dropping a damp chill that was visible in the haloes of the streetlights.

I texted Cori for a check-in. I hadn't seen her at all that day when I thought about it.

I guess I should have been concerned that my little sister didn't seem to have many, if any, real friends. For the longest time, her best and only friend was Kati Ruiz, but she moved to Baltimore the summer before. Cori and Kati were inseparable, annoyingly inseparable, always sleeping over one another's houses and going on vacation together, but after Kati moved, it was like Cori moved away, too, sending her normal clothes and normal hair to Maryland with Kati. Cori had always been shy and not very talkative, but it seemed that she was down to about 20 words a day. Well, maybe it's more than that but not much.

I was always amazed that Cori could cry a river and not make a sound. One time when she was about three or four, I found her with tears streaming down her face by the big toy box. Silently, as usual. When I asked her what was wrong, she just looked down at her hand, which was pinched in the closed lid of her My Little Pony case. When I snapped open the lid to free the skin for her, she smiled at me through her tears and sat down on the floor to play like nothing at all had happened.

Cori's hands had become a pretty accurate indicator of her stress level. I don't remember when she first picked up the habit, but if she was nervous or worried, rather than whine or be all fidgety or freak out, she chewed on her knuckles of her thumb and index fingers and bit her cuticles until they bled. It was disgusting. She didn't do it in front of me anymore because I would slap her hand away from her mouth or yell at her to

stop. She hadn't stopped, though, because some days her hands looked like she had taken a potato peeler to them.

At ft nassau Cori texted back.

That stopped me dead in my tracks.

Fort Nassau was the name of the playground that sat in the middle of the jogging track between Johnson Boulevard and the creek. When I was in elementary school, the people in town got together and raised money to build one of those wooden parks that the kids designed and helped build. Ours looked like a castle with a sand moat all around it. It was nice for a few years. There was always a million little kids playing on the swings and the rope bridge, but that was before the older kids took it over and trashed it. Some people tried to save it, having someone on guard at night to keep the teenagers out, but I guess it got to be too much trouble because there were never any little kids down there anymore, even during the day. It was just a party spot, the sand and sawdust littered with Coor's Lite cans and used condoms. About once a week, the cops would drive their cars onto the jogging track to chase the kids away at night, but they always came back, like water filling in a hole you dug on the beach.

Get your ass out of there now! I texted.

My heart was pounding like I had just sprinted the 1600 as I crossed Johnson Boulevard, sidestepping down the gravel bank over the railroad tracks and onto the jogging track. I could hear them from 30 yards away, laughing, cursing, not trying to hide the fact that they were there. As I got closer, I scanned the dim silhouettes of the kids on the swings and the benches for Cori's hair. I was sure heard Kelsey Pollock's obnoxious laugh. There were probably 15 kids that I could see sitting and standing around the

outside of the castle, and Cori wasn't one of them, which meant that she was inside the castle. Worst case scenario. Walking back towards the street in case the cops chose that minute to bust it up, I texted Cori that if she wasn't out of there in two seconds, I was going to come in there after her.

I'm up by the stop sign. Move it, I texted.

WTF????? she texted back.

NOW! I responded.

What is your problem???

YOU!

Why????? U r such a creep!!!!

Lucky for her I didn't have to get in her face because a few seconds later, she was walking towards me, alone. I relaxed a little and answered a text from Dad while I waited for her, but when I looked up, she was walking along the railroad tracks, away from me. Now I was super pissed.

I grabbed her arm when I caught up with her.

"What the hell is your problem?" I said. "What are you doing hanging out at here? Are you insane? If Mom or Dad find out, you're in deep shit. And with Kelsey Pollock? Are you serious, Cor?"

She yanked her arm away with such force that I almost tripped. Whipping herself around, she screamed in a voice I'd never heard come out of her mouth, "Really, Drew? *Really?* Do you think Mom has a clue where we hang out or who we hang out with? Do you think Dad actually gives a shit what we do? You're the one who's insane if you think so."

Her face shone wet with tears under the streetlight, her huge pupils taking up most of the blue of her eyes. I just stood there, stunned.

“You might enjoy being a loser who has no friends, Drew, but I don’t! We weren’t doing anything. And you have to totally embarrass me like you’re my dad or something? Why can’t you just leave me alone?” she screamed, then turned and started walking again.

“Yeah, well, I’d rather have no friends at all than friends like those,” I said, trying to catch up. She whirled around again, this time looking like Ozzy Osbourne, makeup all running down under her eyes.

“Shut up! Just! Shut! Up! You don’t have a clue what you’re talking about!” She looked like she was possessed. “Why can’t you get it?” And that quickly, like the demon had been sucked out of her body, she crumpled down towards the ground, sitting on the cold, rusted steel of the tracks, crying like a normal person for once, loud and messy. I took a seat next to her and patted her on the back, feeling the knobby bones in her spine, until it felt weird and I took my hand away.

“I don’t have anything,” she whispered, wiping her nose and face on her sleeve. “You have your guitar and your music. Other than them, I have nothing. Nothing.”

“You have me and Mom and Dad and Jack,” I said, suddenly feeling like I could cry for her.

“Yeah, I know. But it’s not, like, real, you know? I know we have each other and that Mom and Dad love me, but it’s, I don’t know. It’s not enough, I guess. I can’t hang out with you or tell you my problems. Mom doesn’t even know what day it is half the time. Dad’s never around, and when he is, he only wants to know how school is going or

if I need anything from Acme. He never asks if I'm happy or if I want to do something. Some days I feel like I don't even exist, Drew. Like I'm invisible. People just look right past me. Do you know what that feels like?" her voice quivered, waiting for an answer, her wet eyelashes stuck together in black triangles.

I had to look away.

The streetlight cast our huge shadows in front of us, making us look like two bulky midgets, one with Bart Simpson hair and the other with Sideshow Bob. If I had to answer her truthfully, I'd say that being invisible didn't sound so bad most days. Instead, I jumped up and held out my hand. "Come on," I said. "Let's go home."

We walked along the tracks without talking for a little ways, the steady traffic from the Walt Whitman Bridge in the distance whirring comfortably.

"What's going to happen to us?" she asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what's going to *happen* to us, Drew? Mom's losing it. Will we have to move in with Dad and Kelly?"

"I'm not moving anywhere."

"Well, you can't stay here by yourself, you know. Mom tried to kill herself! That is so messed up! What if she tries it again? I'm kind of freaked out to be at home anymore."

"They gave her different medicine. I think she'll be fine now. You don't have to be freaked out," I said, doing the same thing to her that I hated adults doing to me.

"You're not scared she's going to, like, OD again while we're at school one of these days?" she said.

“No,” I said.

“Well, I am.”

“Well, I’m not.”

My cell vibrated in my pocket, and Cori’s must have, too, because she slowed down a little to look at her phone. It was a text from Mom’s number, but it must’ve been Aunt Tina. Mom hadn’t been able to text for a few months, since the tremors got bad.

Time to come home.

On my way, I texted back.

Like we were being pulled by invisible wires, we got off the tracks at the Little League field and, taking the same route we took home from school every day, up Johnson to Essex, where the cold wind from the Delaware River lifted my hair off my ears and chilled my cheeks. Pulling my hood up over my head, I tied the string under my chin to keep the cold out. Cori zipped up her hoodie and bunched her shoulders by her ears as we headed toward home, a few blocks away.

“Come on. Let’s run,” I said, picking up the pace, more for warmth than to get home quicker.

Cori trotted alongside me with her hands shoved in her hoodie pockets, looking down at her purple Chuck Taylors rather than where she was going, her feet swinging out to the sides before coming down one in front of the other with a slap on the sidewalk. Not very athletic looking. She always looked at the ground when she walked, sort of like an ice skater gliding along in her own world. I felt bad that all that time I had been so wrapped up in my own worries that I hadn’t given a thought to what she was going through. I didn’t mind being left alone; I actually preferred it. But it was killing her. I

told myself that I would have to make a point to check on her more often, see what was up. There was no way I was going to let her hang out at Fort Nassau. I'm not a narc or anything, but I wouldn't have a problem telling Dad if I found out she went there again.

Though we hadn't run far at all, Cori was out of breath so we walked the last three blocks up Broadway to Sherman. Across the street at O'Donnell's restaurant, two couples hurried across the parking lot to their cars, keeping an eye on us the whole time, like we might at any second cross the street and jump them. It was the oldest rule in Gloucester: the railroad tracks separated the good side from the bad side, so even though our house was only three in from the tracks, technically we lived on the bad side of town. That bothered me. Now, I'm not going to lie. The closer you got to King Street and the river, the more some of the houses looked like they had given up on life, like they were either falling into one another or one step away from jumping into the street in front of a car. And some parts of that side were straight up ghetto. Boarded up houses. Dirty kids playing in the street. Skanks hanging around doing drugs.

Nick and I were talking about Gloucester's ghetto side this one time when were jamming at Savage's, laughing about when we saw people sitting in beach chairs on the sidewalk, actually grilling hamburgers and hot dogs and drinking beer. A barbeque. Right out there on the sidewalk. Seriously. Well, this kid Jared started chiming in me and Nick's conversation, saying things like Gloucester people were welfare mutants who have no teeth, and the reason they call it a *toothbrush* and not a *teethbrush* was because it was invented in Gloucester. All of sudden it wasn't so funny anymore. I told Jared to shut the fuck up or I'd knock some of his teeth out and then he'd fit right in. It got real quiet for a minute, and I was shitting myself, thinking I was legit going to have to fight

Jared, but then Nick said, “Know who else is a welfare mutant, Jared? Your mom,” and we all just busted out laughing because there’s nothing like a mom joke to break the tension. Jared never said anything about Gloucester after that, at least not in front of me, but it still pissed me off that people who didn’t know the deal, people like Jared and those two couples at O’Donnell’s, and plenty of people who lived on the good side of town, somehow thought they had the right to consider me a thug or a skank just because of where I lived.

As soon as I opened the back door, Shuggy started barking like crazy and raced into the kitchen to greet us, jumping and running in circles. I felt bad for ignoring him all weekend, so I knelt down to give him a good rubdown. Slipping past me quietly, without so much as giving Shuggy a pat on the head, Cori mounted the steps to the second floor at the back of the kitchen.

“Hey, guys. Where’ve you been?” Aunt Tina said. Her tone went from friendly to interrogative in two seconds.

Neither one of us answered her.

“Come here, Cor. Where are you going? I haven’t seen you all day,” Aunt Tina said, moving towards the stairs.

“I’m just going to get changed. I’ll be right down,” Cori said, trying to make her escape.

“Stop!” Aunt Tina’s voice crashed like a cymbal. “What is wrong with you?”

I stopped petting Shuggy and stood up, looking at Cori frozen there on the steps. In the bright light of the kitchen, it was obvious that something was wrong with her. She

was a hot mess. Her face was bleached white and her eye makeup was smeared all down her cheeks. Her eyes were huge and glassy from crying. I guess I should've told her to wipe her face off before we came in but I wasn't thinking.

"Come here now," Aunt Tina said, but she already had a hold of Cori's arm and was pulling her back down the steps.

"What?" Cori said.

I'd never seen this attitude from her before, especially with Aunt Tina.

Aunt Tina got right in her face, practically bending her over backwards before pronouncing, "You're high."

"Oh my God. No, I'm not!"

"Don't tell me you're not. Your pupils are practically blown and you're paranoid as all hell. What did you take?" she said. She wasn't letting go of Cori's arm.

I was too shocked to say anything. Besides, I knew better than to cross Aunt Tina when she was pissed.

"What are you talking about? I didn't take anything! I don't do drugs. Oh my God!" Cori said. She thrashed her arm at the word *god* and made a break for the stairs again.

"What's going on?" It was Mom asking in the panicked voice of someone who had just been woken up early in the morning by an unexpected phone call. No one noticed that she had wheeled herself out into the archway between the dining room and the kitchen. She looked pale, exhausted and confused, blinking in the light. We stared at her through the big, uncomfortable silence that had pressed itself into the kitchen

alongside her wheelchair, as she waited for an answer from one of us. I jumped a little at the sound of the heater kicking on.

“She’s high. Look at her,” Aunt Tina finally said. She grabbed Cori’s arm to turn her towards Mom.

“Let go of me! I am not high! I didn’t take anything! You’re crazy!” She said, but she was no longer screaming, just standing there crying with her hands covering her face.

Mom slowly wheeled herself as close to Cori as she could get. I moved aside toward the basement door to give her some room. Shuggy took this as his exit cue and scampered down the basement steps, as he always did when voices were raised. It made him nervous.

“Let me see your face,” Mom said, deadly serious.

Cori’s hands fell to her sides. She stood there, eyes closed, chest and stomach quaking, while the three of us looked at her as though she were slowly disappearing before our eyes.

“Look at me!” Mom’s scratchy voice cracked as she tried to yell, her knees practically touching Cori’s.

Shuggy whined and scratched to be let out the back door. I had the urge to run, too, but my feet were glued to the floor. Aunt Tina took a step away from Cori. It was all Mom’s show then.

Still crying, Cori slowly opened her eyes and looked at Mom. Where I expected to see anger or indignation boiling over, there was only defeat, like she couldn’t believe that Mom, of all people, could possibly think she was high. Mom looked at her for a few seconds before turning to me.

“Where were you guys?” she asked me.

“What do you mean?” I asked. I don’t know why I felt like *I* had done something wrong. I should have just told her the truth. I snuck a look at Cori, who had closed her eyes again. Everything about her looked like the air had been let out; even her hair was flattened.

Mom rolled her eyes and shook her head a little, clearly disappointed in me.

“What I mean is, why does your sister look like a train wreck after she walks in the door with you? She’s fourteen, Drew. Now, where the hell were you guys tonight?”

I could not believe I was getting blamed for that shit.

Cori was looking at me intently, probably thinking I was going to throw her under the bus.

I bit the bullet. “Nick wasn’t home, so I walked down to the river to watch the boats unload. Cori was down there hanging at the gazebo with some kids until they kicked us all out when it got dark. We walked home together, and she was, she was upset, you know? About all the stuff. About everything. We were just, like, walking and talking until we got home.”

I figured anything would sound better than the truth.

Mom looked from me to Cori and then back to me. I could see Aunt Tina out of the corner of my eye shaking her head, arms folded across her chest.

“You know you’re not supposed to be down there on a school night,” Mom said to me, and turning to Cori she said, “Go get ready for bed and do your homework.” Then she wheeled herself out of the kitchen without another word. The three of us just stood there, watching her disappear into the darkness of the dining room. Shuggy appeared at

the top of the basement steps, cautiously wagging his tail like he was testing out the temperature of the ocean before jumping in.

Pointing her finger at us one at a time, Aunt Tina said, “This is *not* over,” and then followed Mom out into the living room.

Chapter 4

Tiffany Cortland was studying her vocabulary flashcards as I slid into my seat next to her in homeroom.

“Hey, Drew. Where’ve you been? Sick?” Her eyes traveled down to my shirt—Bob Marley tie-dye—and she smiled a little, nodding her head. She was into music, too, and she had sort of asked me a few times to teach her to play guitar.

“Yup.” I’m good now, though,” I said. I thought for sure someone would have heard about my being suspended and all the stuff with my mom.

“Well, you missed it. On Friday, Chelsea and Ray-Ray had a huge fight in gym class. I mean a *fight* fight. They were both suspended. Mrs. Cappelli and Mr. Storms had to separate them. Chelsea was off the chains—kicking her feet and screaming. She straight up punched Ray-Ray in the mouth. He was bleeding and everything. It was insane.” She looked at me with disbelief, as if to ask how people could be so stupid to fight in gym class. That’s what I liked about her: she was innocent but not dumb.

“Wow,” was all I could fake. I was so over Chelsea and Ray-Ray’s drama. I wish they would just break up or go away forever. It seemed like it was all the kids in my class talked about, and it felt like it had been weeks since I’d opened a book or sat in a desk. I couldn’t think of anything more to say to Tiffany, but I couldn’t look away from her face either.

She cocked her head and zeroed her yellow-green eyes on me. “I can tell you’ve been sick. You still don’t look good.”

Great, I thought. We were literally inches apart—I could hear her breathing—and all that came out of the moment was that she thought I looked like shit.

After the Pledge of Allegiance, Mr. D'Ambrosio handed me a pass to Guidance. Only six minutes into the day and already it was going downhill. Time to face the music. Every time I got suspended, I had to meet with my guidance counselor to discuss the “ramifications of my decisions and their effect on my future.” I knew Tiffany must have seen the blue pass, but she didn't say anything other than, “See you in English,” when the bell for first period rang.

I didn't even have to open the Guidance Office door to hear Mrs. Sheehan's big mouth barking out orders. I looked through the glass and saw her sitting in one of the chairs, her small feet not quite touching the ground, pointing her finger and yelling at the kid who was standing in front of her with his head down. She looked like a toad princess I'd seen in a picture book once, all dressed up in fancy clothes and jewelry, sitting on her toadstool throne. All that was missing was the little crown. I couldn't hold back a smile as I opened the door and met Mrs. Sheehan's eyes. She raised her eyebrows and looked me up and down like I just walked in on a party that I wasn't invited to.

“What's so funny, Zeppelin?”

“Hey, Mrs. Sheehan,” I said, nodding to the kid she'd been giving shit to.

She turned to face her prey again. “Beat it, Buster. Back to class. And the next time I catch you cutting I'll yank your skinny butt back to school by the seat of your pants. Got it?” she hissed at him, running out of breath at the end. The red-faced kid nodded back at me before slinking out of the office. “And pull your pants up!” she hollered after him.

Hoisting herself out of the chair, she gave me a little nudge towards the conference room in the back of the office. I could see my guidance counselor, Mr. Gershenowitz, sitting at the end of the small table; he was listening to a woman's voice I did not recognize.

"Move it, kiddo," Mrs. Sheehan said, poking me in the back with her finger and keeping it there until I went through the door of the conference room. She had such a way with words.

"Good morning, Drew. Glad you're back. Have a seat." Mr. Gershenowitz pointed to the chair to his left as Mrs. Sheehan squished herself between his chair and the wall to take the seat facing me. The voice I had not recognized belonged to a pretty lady sitting opposite Mr. Gershenowitz. She was looking right at me, smiling.

"This is Ms. Kersey, Drew. She's with the Children's Advocate Office, and she's here to speak to you about how her agency can assist you with whatever you need at home or here at school," Gershenowitz said to me but he was looking at Ms. Kersey the entire time.

"Nice to meet you, Drew, and you can call me Nicole," she said, stretching out her hand across the table to me. I looked at her thin fingers and short painted nails before I shook it. It was soft and cool, and as she pulled it away, I caught a whiff of her perfume, just a hint of something like vanilla, nothing like that nasty shit Mrs. Sheehan dumped over her head to cover up her cigarette smell. I nodded a little as I looked into her eyes. They were light brown and liquidy, and I could feel my face getting red. I was pretty self-conscious around girls my own age already, but good looking older women made me feel like a total loser. There was no way I was ever going to call her Nicole.

“I’m here because the social worker from Underwood Hospital contacted our office last week. She thought that it would be a good idea for us to get involved now since things at home have become more difficult for your mom to manage. We have several programs that offer assistance with things like housecleaning and meal planning, but our primary purpose is to ensure that you and your sister are receiving adequate and appropriate care.”

Linda Fucking Schnell, I thought.

“Let me tell you something about my mom—she doesn’t need your help, or anyone’s help for that matter,” I said. “She’s a good mom. You people need to mind your own business.”

I saw a flicker, just the slightest hint of surprise or maybe anger in Nicole Kersey’s eyes, but then it was gone and she was leaning forward a little closer to me with her fingers laced together, looking me dead in the eyes. “I certainly didn’t mean to offend you, Drew, and in no way insinuate that your mom is not a good mom. For that, I apologize. We are a support agency. We work to keep families together in times of crisis. Technically the courts could sue your mom, for your,” she glanced at the paper-clipped stack of papers in front of her, “38 unexcused absences this year, but the attendance committee,” she looked at Mrs. Sheehan and Mr. Gershenowitz, her teammates, “has been lenient and very understanding in light of your situation at home.”

I thought my head would explode right off my neck. If I had learned anything in school that year, it was what adults did when kids disagreed with their ideas or refused to buy into their little schemes: they threatened to fail us, suspend us, expel us, sue our sick mothers, or straight up remove us from the home. I wanted to scream, “*You don’t know a*

fucking thing about 'my situation at home'!" But instead, I did what I do best when I felt like a dog that was backed into a corner by a snarling pack—locate the nearest exit and bounce. Only Gershenowitz, by that time familiar with my habits, had stood up to block my way out.

"Hold up, now. Hear us out. We're trying to help you here," he said, closing the door.

"Sit down if you know what's good for you!" Mrs. Sheehan yelled. "Ms. Kersey here is going to talk to Mr. Hartman about SCC, if you know what I mean." She knew this would get my attention. "Unless you really had your heart set on going." She gave me that smirk of hers as I blazed my hatred for all of them straight into her fat pink face. I wanted to reach across the table and crack her one.

"Mr. Gershenowitz and Mrs. Sheehan, would you mind giving Drew and me some time to speak in private?" Ms. Kersey waited until the door clicked shut behind them before speaking again.

"I am sure you don't want to hear this right now, but I know what you're going through. My dad left when I was in third grade, and my mom got sick with cancer when I was in 8th grade. We had to move in with my aunt and uncle. It was rough, but I got through it, mostly because I let people who wanted to help, and who were able to help, do whatever they could for me and my two younger brothers."

Her sob story held my attention for about four seconds. I stared out the window watching puffy white clouds race across the sky, every few seconds allowing a bit of startling blue to peak out. We sat there for a few minutes, her looking at me, me looking out the window. I acted like I couldn't give a shit about her, her mother, her brothers, or

anything else about her, but if it got me out of SCC, then I figured I'd better get to faking it, so I took a seat.

"So what do you want me to do?" I said, seeing her face relax with a trace of a smile.

"Will you at least agree to let me go through the list of services we provide? You may not think they're necessary right at this moment, but there may come a day when you will."

"Fine. Let's hear it," I said.

By the time she finished explaining the "services" her office provided for "families in crisis," second period had been underway for five minutes and I was itching to take my seat behind Tiffany in English. I wasn't being a creep or anything; I just felt better about myself when I was around her. And I'm not going to lie, the thing where they have a person come to the house a few times a week to check up on someone and bring them lunch or whatever didn't sound so bad. At least on those days I would be able to concentrate on school a little more. But it would never happen. Mom would be humiliated if anyone other than Cori, Aunt Tina, or me had to help her.

I tried to be as cool as possible when I got around to asking Ms. Kersey about SCC.

"So how are you going to get me out of SCC?" I asked, sort of as a second thought as I was almost out the door.

She raised her eyebrows. "I'm not *getting you out* of anything. Legally, you still have to make up that time. Mr. Hartman agreed that SCC would be an increased burden on your family, so he's working with the attendance committee for a reasonable solution.

He's actually a really nice guy," she sighed, like she had a crush on old, bald Hartman.

"You're lucky to have such concerned, caring people here."

Whatever. Concerned, caring, nosy. All the same thing. I shook my head and walked out of the conference room.

"I'll be in touch, Drew," Ms. Kersey called after me.

I didn't doubt it for one minute.

Cori and I walked home with Gaynelle Fludd after school that day. She talked nonstop the entire way about her brother Tyrik, who was in the Army over in Iraq. She must have had about ten brothers and sisters from the way she was yapping. I would never be able to keep them straight. But it was a great day to be outside. The clouds and wind had blown out, leaving the strong, steady sun to warm the air and soften the ground, releasing the smell of the earth. Wet dirt. I loved it. It smelled like spring. Breathing in deeply, I unzipped my hoodie and slung it over my shoulder, tuned out Gaynelle's babbling, and thought about how sweet it would be to take a walk with Tiffany on a day like that, maybe even hold hands.

I could see from the corner of our street that Aunt Tina's car was not in front of the house. That was a relief. I knew she would start interrogating us the second she got a chance, and I did not want that drama again. Aunt Tina was like a reverse tornado: instead of creating chaos and destroying everything in her path, she blew into town, picking up things and putting them back in their place, cleaner and neater than before. Nothing escaped her intense sprees. I had seen her eyeing up my hair, probably cooking up a scheme to cut it while I slept. Mom said that Aunt Tina had always had a keen sense

of justice, and if she hadn't been a nurse, she would have made a great lawyer. I shuddered a little, knowing that she would be back, probably sooner than later, ready to pick off the protective scab that had already formed over our wounds from last night so that she could be entirely sure that the whole truth had been exposed. Cori and I needed to have a talk before that day came.

Entering the kitchen from the backdoor, I could see that Mom was sitting in her wheelchair in the living room.

"Out here, guys," she called over Shuggy's barking and yelping.

Her voice sounded stronger and cheerier than it had in a long time. Cori and I exchanged a look before she dumped her book bag on the stairs and strode out to the living room, leaning over the back of the wheelchair to give Mom a hug.

"Drew? You coming out?" Mom called again.

"In a sec, Ma," I yelled over my shoulder as I checked out the contents of the fridge, trying to sort out my feelings. I was still seriously pissed at Mom, but I figured it would be too much trouble to keep acting mad and ignoring her, so I microwaved two hot dogs, poured a big glass of milk, grabbed a sleeve of Ritz crackers and headed into the living room to act like nothing had ever happened. Cori was sitting on the loveseat, so I sat on the couch and began eating, pretending to be interested in college softball. Shuggy jumped up next to me, resting his chin on my leg, his eyes going back and forth between my face and the hot dogs like he was watching a tennis match.

The sun poured in the windows on either side of the fireplace, bleaching out the picture on the TV screen. Mom could sit like that for hours watching games on ESPN, especially softball. Dad said it was like watching paint dry. It was kind of sad that no one

else in the family enjoyed sports the way she did. She tried when we were little, signing us up for soccer, football, basketball, and baseball, but it was no use. Neither one of us was very good at games that involved handling a ball. If it bothered Mom that her kids inherited little of her athletic DNA, she never showed it. Instead of insisting I play one more miserable season of football in fifth grade, she started taking me running with her instead. She signed up Cori for swimming lessons at the Y, which, believe it or not, I think Cori actually liked. I'm not going to say she was very good, but she went every week.

At the next commercial, Mom pointed the remote and the TV snapped off, plunging the room into sudden silence except for the sound of me crunching Ritz crackers. We watched her, waiting, as she looked at the blank TV screen as if it were still on. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before beginning.

"We need to talk, about a few things actually, but first let me say how deeply sorry I am for what happened last week. I don't know what I was thinking. The muscle spasms and the pain. I hadn't slept in over four days. I don't know. I was desperate for sleep, I guess. I just wanted to get some sleep," and just like that her cheery exterior crumbled and she was crying, her chin to her chest, sad little gulping sobs that tore me up. Cori was at Mom's feet in two seconds, her head on her lap, hugging her useless legs. I sat frozen there on the couch, powerless to move or even say anything, the remnants of chewed hot dogs boiling away in my esophagus.

"The new medicine seems to be helping..." her shaky voice trailed off. She reminded me of a little kid who got lost on the boardwalk, being comforted by a stranger, scared and lonely, a mixture of hope and doubt in her watery eyes. I knew that I should

say something to reassure her; she expected me to say something, anything, but my mind was as stuck as my body. What could I say to her, really? That she would be just fine, that bullshit line that Dad had given me, when she would clearly never be fine again? Tell her not to worry about Cori and me, that we were ok, that we'd already forgotten about last Wednesday, don't give it a second thought, while her eighth-grader was just last night hanging out at Fort Nassau, *inside* the castle? There wasn't anything meaningful to say, so I said the only thing I knew to be true at the moment.

"Shuggy hates to see you cry," I said. At the sound of his name, his stumpy little tail quivered just a bit, but he was watching Mom closely. When she dragged her eyes over to where he sat perched on the arm of the couch like a sphinx, keeping her under close surveillance, her face melted into a sad smile, and just like that, the gloominess that had smothered the room and incapacitated me lifted; I could move and think again.

On my way out to the kitchen with my plate and cup, I bent down to kiss Mom on the forehead. She patted my cheek with her shaky hand, hanging on to that smile. Shuggy jumped down from the couch and started barking and prancing around like he was outraged that I kissed his girlfriend without permission. We'd seen him do it so many times, but it always cracked us up when he did that.

I left the room when I could see that Mom was gearing up to start the next phase of her speech. Cori had no such concerns.

"Did Aunt Tina go home?" she asked Mom.

"Yes. She has to work tonight. And I want to talk to you about last night," I heard Mom reply.

“Oh my God, Mom! There’s nothing to talk about. Aunt Tina has totally lost her mind. I wasn’t doing anything last night. It’s just like Drew said. I was upset about you. Why are you making such a big deal about it?”

That line from Shakespeare, “The lady doth protest too much,” flashed in my head when Cori flew past me in the kitchen, stomped up the steps and slammed her bedroom door. Shuggy trotted past me on the other side and scooted down the basement steps. Poor little guy. One minute he was having a happy moment with us, and Cori went and flipped shit the next.

“What the *hell*?” I yelled after her.

“Drew? Come in here please,” Mom said.

Damn. I had to decide quickly if I was going to be Drew the reliable son or Drew the cool brother.

She had maneuvered her wheelchair around so that she was facing the kitchen as I walked through the dining room. Seeing the look on her face, though, stopped me dead.

“I want to know the truth about what you two were up to last night,” she said.

She spoke slowly, emphasizing the words *the truth*, like she was speaking to someone who didn’t know English very well, which totally pissed me off but solved my dilemma.

“I told you the truth last night,” I said.

“You’ve never lied to me, Drew.”

Yeah, right, I thought. I lie to you all the time--about emptying the lint trap on the dryer, about flossing my teeth, about writing thank-you notes

“And I’m not lying to you now, Mom,” I said.

“Tina knows what she’s talking about, and she’s not one to over exaggerate. Why would she say Cori was high if she wasn’t?” she asked.

“Because Cori looked like she was high, I guess? I don’t know. Maybe because Aunt Tina doesn’t have kids of her own, so she has to get all up in our faces?” I realized too late that I sounded a little like Shakespeare’s lady who protested too much.

Mom didn’t even blink. “Do you think Cori could’ve gotten high before you showed up at the river?”

You mean before I showed up at *Fort Nassau*, I thought.

“I think I would know if my little sister was getting high, Mom,” I said.

At least I hoped I would know.

She looked at me for awhile before motioning me to come back in the living room and sit down.

I obeyed, as I usually did, and taking a seat on the couch, asked her what was up. I figured she wanted to talk about Cori but didn’t want her to overhear.

“There’s something else,” she said. “I...This is...” She groped for the words that seemed to desert her. “I have never wanted to, I hoped I would we never have to have this conversation.”

I stood up, knowing that whatever she had never wanted to say was, first of all, not about Cori, and more importantly, something I definitely never wanted to hear, and that if I stayed there on the couch and let her talk, my life would become more fucked up than it already was.

“Where are you going?” she said. “Sit down, Drew.”

But just like that, my feet propelled me through the kitchen, out the back door, along the side yard, down Sherman Street and across Broadway. I ran past the row homes on Essex that inched closer to the curb as I neared King, where I crossed at Holt Cargo and ran along the river walk until I reached the end of the fishing pier. Leaning over the railing, I looked down into the dirty brown Delaware and breathed heavily its sweet, oily smell. A half mile of water was all that separated me from the noisy port of Philadelphia, but all I could hear was the blood swishing in my ears and my heart thumping in my chest. Across the river, the city's silhouette gleamed in the sun as rush hour traffic piled up on the bridge to my right. There weren't many people on the pier or in the park at that time of day, just a couple of old dudes sitting on a bench, looking out over the water, not saying anything. That's why I liked going down there; I could sit next to someone else and not have to say a word. It's like we were all there for different reasons, but it was really the same reason when you thought about it, and everyone respected that the other person just needed to chill with the water and his thoughts.

I needed to talk to Cori. I had to ask her straight up if she was smoking weed or taking pills or whatever. She would tell me the truth. Besides, I could always tell when she was lying. She didn't lie very often, but when she did, her face got red. It was so obvious. But what if she did lie about it? I would know immediately that, number one, she had lied, and number two and more importantly, she had done drugs after all. What then? I had to get this straight in my head before I could even begin to think about what Mom wanted to talk about.

All of a sudden I was shivering. I had run out of the house without my hoodie, and what had been an unusually warm March day had, there on the water in the shelter of

the pier, turned breezy and chilly. I needed to get inside somewhere, but I didn't want to go home. Taking out my cell, I called Cori.

"What?" was her greeting.

"Take ten bucks out of the coffee can and meet me at Pat's. And bring my hoodie."

There was a pause and then she exhaled loudly.

"Why?"

"Because we need to talk."

"About what?"

"Everything. Hurry up."

I hung up before she had a chance to argue or question anymore and started jogging back towards King Street and on to Pat's Pizza. Ever since Mom had to stop working, we kept a small stash of emergency cash in an old coffee can that we stashed in the freezer. The money came in handy if we needed milk or lunch money or whatever. Dad checked the can every time he came down, topping it off if we had dipped into it. I honestly tried never to take any money out of there, but I'm not going to lie, every now and again I would take five or ten bucks just to have in my pocket. Dad never asked what the money had been spent on. I liked to think that he wouldn't have minded if I stopped at Wawa and bought some sunflower seeds and a Gatorade once in awhile.

By the time I reached Pat's, I wasn't cold anymore, but I went inside anyway because Cori would take forever to get here. She would never think of running. Pat's Pizza was on Broadway at the other end of town, almost to Brooklawn. Mr. D'Ambrosio

always joked that only in Gloucester could a guy named Patrick Doyle get away with owning a pizza place. Kids hung out at Pat's because he didn't care if you only bought a soda. He would let you sit at a table as long as that soda lasted.

The smell of pizza was pretty much the greatest smell in the world, and even though I had just eaten two hot dogs and a ton of crackers, I was pretty sure I could have inhaled a whole pie the minute I walked through the door. The place was empty except for two older guys in dress clothes sitting at a table eating cheesesteaks while the news blared from the flatscreen TV on the wall above the soda case.

"What's up, my man?" Pat said from his usual seat behind the counter. His eyes left the TV only briefly to make contact with mine. He called all the guys *my man*.

"I'm waiting for my sister," I said, taking a seat in a booth by the window facing Broadway. I waited, thinking about how I should word my approach. She had totally flipped out on both Aunt Tina and Mom, so I better do it right.

I spotted her figure up by the nail place about two blocks away; her skinny legs seemed to be too far in front of the rest of her body to hold her up straight as she glided along, head down, hands in her hoodie pocket. She didn't even look as she crossed George Street into the parking lot. She took out her phone and checked it before opening the door.

"What's up, sweetheart?" Pat asked. That's what he called all the girls.

It's a good thing that she hadn't even bothered to look at him with that pissy face she was wearing. She slid into the booth and pushed my hoodie and a ten dollar bill across the table, not once making eye contact with me.

"You want to order something?" I asked.

“Fries.”

“Anything to drink?”

“Coke.”

I wondered if this was such a good idea after all, but I had no choice. I felt like I couldn't go back home before I knew for sure what was up with her.

We ate our fries without talking for a few minutes while Pat and the two guys practically shouted over the loud commercials. The sun had fallen below the skyline, casting that side of town in the long shadows of the factories on Water Street. The streetlights on Broadway flickered on one at a time in the graying daylight. It occurred to me that Cori would probably be content to sit there like that all night as I watched her drag each fry through a puddle of ketchup, scraping off the excess along the edge of the paper boat before taking three or four small bites to finish each one off. It took her *forever* to eat, and she never really appeared to be that into her food, kind of like she couldn't decide if she should do something else or go on eating.

“So,” I said, still not at all confident about how to begin this.

She finally looked at me. She didn't respond right away, just continued chewing, her eyes looking at me with such, well, loathing, I think is the right word.

“So what?” she said.

“You're going to make me ask?” I said.

“Why are you making such a big deal out of this? I didn't even do anything,” she said.

And there it was: a slight blush creeping up her neck and jaw. I was totally not expecting it. My eyes burned as she turned her reddening face to look out the window

into the parking lot. She swallowed hard as a fat tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek

“Why are you crying then?” I said. “And why is your face red? I’ll tell you why: because you’re lying, that’s why.”

She wiped her face with the sleeve of her hoodie and taking a shaky breath, in a low voice said, “I didn’t even like it. I only took one. Everyone else took two. It was stupid. It just made me feel sad and scared.”

I was totally not expecting a straight up confession out of the blue, either.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” I yelled. The two older dudes snapped their heads around to see what was going on, but I didn’t care. “What the hell did you take?”

“Will you *shutup*?” Cori whispered.

“Tell me,” I yelled, so loud that she winced, and Pat stood up behind the counter.

“Yo, my man. Keep it down,” he said.

“You have two seconds to tell me or I call Dad,” I said, kind of feeling like her dad at that point.

“Percs,” she said.

“*Percs*?” I said.

“Yeah, you know, Percocets?”

“I know what they are, idiot, I just can’t believe you’d be such a skank as to take them,” I shot back.

“I told you I only took one.”

“Why should I believe you? You friggin lied to me two seconds before you said that.”

“Because I’m telling you the truth now,” she said, crying freely, quietly. “Don’t tell Dad. Please. I’ll never do it again.”

I had a million questions but nothing came out of my mouth. All I kept thinking was that my little sister all of a sudden looked like someone I barely knew. What else had she done that I didn’t know about?

“I am dead serious when I say this,” I said. “If I ever catch you near Fort Nassau again, I am so going to rat you out. I should rat you out right now, you know that? I’m glad you felt sad and scared. Pills are for skanks.”

She nodded her head a little and then blew her nose on a napkin, crumbling it into another napkin and tossing the whole thing on her fries. She sniffed a few times while she played with the drawstring on her hoodie, her face no longer red, just blotchy around her eyes, giving her a sort of raccoon look. She looked up, the scowl she had worn on the way in erased by dejection.

“I won’t. I’m sorry,” she said, but the Cori that I used to believe in, the little girl I would have lifted up a car for, couldn’t look me in the eye and make a promise.

I didn’t want to tell her it was okay, because it wasn’t, and even though I had the information that I thought I needed, I felt worse than when I had walked into Pat’s. Like the time when I asked Mom in third grade if there was really a Santa. *I just want to know that truth*, I said, and she said she would never lie to me. I remember walking around for weeks wishing she had.

I wondered how old Cori was when she learned about Santa. The gifts under the tree the Christmas before were all signed “Love from Santa.” She probably never had the

nerve to ask anyone the truth and just went along with the charade, hoping not to draw any attention to herself.

And just like that it dawned on me that the redness around her fingers and knuckles wasn't ketchup stains.

"What is *up* with your hands?" I said, reaching for them.

She snatched them away, slipping them up into her sleeves and letting her arms fall to her lap. She knew that I knew what it was.

"Is that chapped skin?" I asked, giving her the out. I felt kind of bad calling her on it like that.

She shrugged her shoulders a little—everything she did was little.

"You need some serious hand lotion," I said. "They look like Jersey Day's."

Cori's lips twitched around on her face as she looked down at her lap. Jersey Day was Gloucester's homeless guy. He used to be a professional boxer, or at least that was the story of how he got his name. The skin on his face and hands was red and scaly and dented, and it looked like it was ready to fall off in chunks.

She never truly smiled, nothing like a face-breaking, eyes crinkling, teeth flashing smile; she just sort of gave a lopsided smirk even when she was really happy. But that was as close to a full-out smile as I ever got from her. She even laughed a tiny bit when I put my fists up like I was ready to spar, like Jersey Day did whenever he got into it with kids who teased him for begging or picking through dumpsters.

I was so ready to move on from the moment, my feet tapping the floor beneath the table.

“Let’s go, champ,” I said. That’s what the kids would yell at Jersey Day as they ran away laughing.

“Take care, kids. Thanks for stopping by,” Pat said as we headed out into the cool, damp, almost dark evening. Traffic on Broadway was steady, cars with their headlights on, taking their drivers home to warm, well-lit houses that smelled of meatloaf or pork chops cooking in the oven. I missed the smell of walking into the house at dinnertime.

We had walked only a few blocks when Bon Jovi’s “Wanted Dead or Alive” thundered on my cell phone. My ringtone for Dad.

“Yo, Pop.”

“Where are you guys? Your mom left me a message, freaking out. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. We’re on our way home now. We went to Pat’s for some fries. It’s cool.”

“No, it’s not cool to worry your mom by running out of the house like that. Now what the hell is going on?”

I held the phone away from my ear. He was not happy.

“Nothing, Dad. Relax. We--”

“God damn it! Don’t tell me to relax! Now I’m working a double, and I get a frantic message from your mother saying that you took off like a bat out of hell and then Cori stormed out. Now, one more time, what the fuck going on?”

I stopped walking. I had to think quickly. I did not want to piss him off any more than he already was. Cori watched me, her eyebrows raised, but other than that, her face was blank. I was not good at snap decisions like this. I needed a plan.

“Drew!” he yelled.

“Dad? You there? Dad?”

Dropped call. Purposely.

“You did not just hang up on Dad,” Cori said.

“Well, what did you want me to do? You heard him! He wants to know what’s up. Shit!”

“Now he’s really going to freak. Just tell him the truth.”

“What? That you were high on percs last night? Really, Cor?”

She shook her head and whipped out her phone in one movement. I stood there, transfixed, the blue light from her phone illuminating her face as she searched through her contact list.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m calling Dad.”

“What are you going to say?”

With her phone to her ear, she began walking. Not knowing what else to do, I walked along with her, either speechless or scared shitless; I couldn’t tell which.

“Hey, Daddy,” she said in her little monotone voice and proceeded to tell him exactly went down last night and this afternoon. Our version, that is. Not the Fort Nassau version. Not the *truth*.

“He wants to talk to you,” she said, handing me her phone.

I bugged out my eyes at her to let her know that I didn't appreciate being called out like that.

"Hey, Dad."

"Don't ever hang up on me again, or I'll have your phone turned off," he said.

"I'm not totally convinced by Cori's story, but I do know this: we need to have a serious talk. You, Cori, and me. Tomorrow. I'll pick you guys up at 4:30."

"Ok, Dad," I said, but he'd already hung up. Now it was my turn to be pissed.

"Why the hell would you tell him all that shit?"

"Oh, and hanging up on him was a great idea, too. Don't be such an asshole."

"He's coming down tomorrow."

"So?"

"So? Is that all you can say? So? You're the asshole."

"Why? Because I told him the truth?"

"The *truth*? You didn't tell him the truth! You left out that part about you being high at Fort Nassau with a bunch of skanks. You want him to know the truth? I'll tell him the truth."

"And I'll tell you the truth!" she yelled. Well, it was yelling for Cori.

"What?" I asked.

It was just above a whisper, but I heard it. She said, "You wouldn't understand because you have no life."

Wow. Pity sounds pretty harsh when it's barely audible.

"Whatever, Cor."

"Whatever, Drew."

We started walking in silence. I would've ditched her right there on Broadway and headed to Nick's if I trusted her to go right home, but I couldn't trust her. She had lied so easily before, to all of us. Well, about everything except that part about me not having a life. I couldn't think straight. Dad was coming down tomorrow to have a "serious talk." Mom wanted to "talk." A tightness wrapped around my chest, forcing me to take deep breaths, but no matter how much I inhaled, I couldn't get enough air. I felt like I was looking down a tunnel, in a weird sort of dream, where the audio was not in sync with the video.

Running was the only way out.

"Be right back," I said over my shoulder and took off like a rock from a slingshot.

I sprinted three blocks up Broadway to Market Street, did a one-eighty, and jogged back towards her.

"What is up with you? You're acting like a freak," she said.

"I have to run. Can't you walk any faster?"

"So run, then. I don't need a babysitter, and you are embarrassing me."

I started off again, this time hanging a right on Market for one block and then a left on Railroad Avenue for two blocks, pumping my arms, the only sound it seemed was my sneakers lightly tapping the blacktop and my breathing. As I looped back around on Broadway by the dry cleaners, I got a text.

It was Tiffany.

did you finish your part of the lab? she said.

Damn. Good thing she reminded me. I had forgotten all about our bio lab being due the next day.

not yet, I said. *working on it*

what r we saying in the summary? she asked.

The summary? I barely remembered what lab it was. I needed to think about that one.

call u later? too much to text, I said.

Any excuse to have a prolonged conversation with Tiffany was a good one in my book. I was just stoked that she was even thinking about me, even if her thoughts about me were intertwined with her thoughts on the parts of a crayfish or a starfish or whatever it was we dissected.

sure!!! :) she said.

Three exclamation points *and* a smiley face? Before I knew it, I was standing there on Broadway doing an imitation of my favorite Hendrix picture called “The Fist.” Eyes closed hard core, teeth clenched, left fist raised and clutching a guitar pick, or in my case a cell phone. I didn’t care what I looked like. I felt like Hendrix in that picture, like I could kiss the sky, my guitar the only thing keeping me tied to the earth. Only in my case at that moment, it was my sister, walking towards me.

“You’re acting like you’re the one who’s doing percs,” she said.

That was actually pretty funny for Cori.

“You wouldn’t understand,” I said.

“I don’t want to,” she said. “And don’t walk with me if you insist on being a freak.”

But we walked together the rest of the way without saying much. I tried to forget about all the drama Cori had caused in my life over the past few days and focused instead on what Tiffany and I would talk about when I got home. Hopefully it would be about more than crayfish. Or starfish.

Chapter 5

Mom was waiting in the kitchen when we got home, sitting in her wheelchair at the foot of the stairs to the attic. Shuggy strategically blocked the living room entranceway. Good one, Mom. She had effectively eliminated both escape routes to our rooms. Shuggy looked up at us sheepishly from where he lay gnawing on a rawhide chew, acknowledging his part in the scheme. He never could say no to Mom.

“I want to know what is going on with you two.” Her words were measured and calm, like she had practiced them, but her eyes glittered with something like excitement. “Drew, I’m going to start with you.”

Of course. It was always me.

“You told me Nick wasn’t home last night,” Mom continued, “but Rita dropped off some food a little while ago and said you were there around dinnertime, hanging out in the garage with Nick.”

I should have known Mrs. M wasn’t going to let that blue container sit in her fridge for too long. But I would be damned if I was going to take another one for Cori.

“I think you should start with Cori,” I said. Cori straightened up for a second, clearly not expecting me to throw her under the bus like that. She brought her hand up to her mouth and then tore it away quickly, shooting me a look out of the corner of her eye that said, “Game on.”

Mom looked back and forth between the two of us, as if she were saying *eenie, meenie, minee, mo*.

“Alright, Cori. One more time, where were you guys last night?”

“No, not *us guys*, Mom,” I said. “I mean *her*. Ask *her* where she was. I was at Nick’s.”

“Yes, we’ve established that you were at Nick’s,” Mom said, “but you walked in here together, her looking dreadful, with a bullshit story about being at the river.” She turned her attention back to Cori. “So where were you then? I guess it’s safe to assume that you were not at the river either, like you said last night?”

“I never said we were at the river. Drew said that. I would have told you the truth if he hadn’t come up with that lame story.”

Damn. She burned me right back.

“Oh, really, Cor?” I asked, joining her under the bus. “Go ahead. Tell her. Tell her where I found you.”

“First of all, you didn’t *find* me.” She turned to face me, pointing her finger. “It’s not like I was hiding from you. I was hanging out with some people when you texted me and made me leave.”

“Because you were with skanks inside the castle!”

“What’s it to you?” she said. “I’m allowed to have friends, aren’t I? Or do you have to approve everything I do?”

“Quiet!” Mom rasped. She leaned forward in her wheelchair and broke into a coughing fit. MS had slowly been taking her voice. If it was a bad day, she sounded like an old lady who barely had the strength to finish a sentence. On good days she sounded like she was on the verge of laryngitis.

Cori and I stood there like dumbasses as Mom struggled to clear her throat, until it finally dawned on me to get her a drink of water. I held the glass for her as she took a few

sips from the straw. She continued, but clearly out of steam, “Neither of you is allowed at Fort Nassau, especially—”

“I wasn’t,” I corrected.

“Stop!” Mom slapped her legs with her hands, her voice coming out like the yap of a small dog. She motioned for a few more sips before she could go on. “*Cori*, who were you there with?”

“Just some people from school,” she said, looking at me, red blotchiness moving up her throat like a heat rash.

“What people? I want to know their names,” Mom said.

Cori folded her arms and sighed. “Gaynelle Fludd, Kelsey Pollock, Emily Murphy...” her voice faltered.

“Who are Kelsey Pollock and Emily Murphy? Why have I never heard you mention their names before?” Mom asked.

“They’re my friends, Mom,” she said. “You would know their names if you asked me what was going on in my life once in a while.”

Mom literally winced at this cruel rebuke, but I wasn’t letting Cori off the hook that easily.

“Why would you ever want to hang out with Kelsey Pollock? She’s a total dirtyneck loser,” I said, pointing my finger right at Cori’s lying little face. “And there’s only one reason kids hang at Fort Nassau at night!” I raised my voice to make my point and glanced at Mom for support, but Cori’s remark had taken its toll. Mom was looking down at her open hands, as if she couldn’t remember what she had done with whatever she had just been holding.

“What do you care who I’m friends with, Drew? At least I have friends.”

“Really, Cor? When did you all of a sudden become so cool? Because just last week you were sitting at the special ed table in the cafeteria.” It wasn’t true and it wasn’t nice, but she had it coming to her.

“Whatever, Drew,” she said.

“If I ever hear you were at Fort Nassau again, you will be grounded with no phone or computer,” Mom said, still looking at her empty hands

Cori gave no indication that she had even heard Mom. We were standing exactly where we had stopped when we came up the back steps into the kitchen a few minutes before, as if we were waiting for someone to wind us up and send us on our way again. Mom had been so ready to take us down, but with just one whispered jab, Cori had sucked the fight right out of her. Nothing had changed, just as nothing had changed in that kitchen in so long—the same yellow curtains with faded apples on them, the same broken paper towel holder over the sink, the same blender and mixer on top of the fridge, furred with years of dust. It was like a bizarre scene of suspended animation, the only sound was Shuggy’s grinding his rawhide into a soggy mess.

“Is that *it*?” I asked. “She gets caught and then lies about it, and all she gets is a warning? If it had been me, there would have been no waiting until the next time to ground me or take my phone away.”

“You’re the one who lied, Drew,” Mom said. This feeling of, I think it’s called *righteous indignation*, rose up in me like a wave of boiling water. I had to cap it before I said something I would never be able to take back. I strode out of the kitchen, stepped

over Shuggy, made the hard left into my room, and slammed the door, knocking over my autographed Stevie Ray Vaughan photo on the bureau.

There I was, trying to help both of them, and that's the thanks I got. I picked up Stevie and threw him on the floor. He landed face up, not even broken, perfectly aligned in the vacuum cleaner tracks that Aunt Tina had etched in my dark blue carpet. I don't know why I was so pissed. It wasn't like I was the one Mom threatened to punish. I guess it was because I felt that even after all the stuff I did to be helpful, in Mom's eyes I was no better than Cori.

My Epiphone stood in its stand in front of the closet like a proud soldier reporting for duty. Hugging it to me, I situated myself on my bed so that my back rested against the wall. I thought of Tiffany, how she was happy all the time and nice to everyone, how that sweetness made her even more beautiful. I wondered what she thought of me, what she saw when she looked at me. Sitting up, I studied my reflection in the rectangular mirror above my bureau. I smiled hard, but it didn't look like me so I stopped. My long hair did a good job of hiding my big ears and the zits that tended to cluster around my cheekbones and jaw every time I shaved. I was on the skinny side but when I flexed my biceps, I had some definition. If I was forced to, I would have to say that I was okay looking, probably slightly better than average. Definitely better looking than Nick, which wasn't really saying much. I wasn't sure if Tiffany thought as highly of me as I did myself, but I knew one thing for sure: I looked a thousand times better with that guitar strapped to my chest. I stood up and peered closely into my own dull blue eyes, trying to see what she would see if I ever got close enough to kiss her. I hoped that I never saw that look of disappointment in her eyes that I had seen in Mom's a few minutes before.

The cool, flat weight of the guitar against my belly and its slender, firm neck in my hand calmed me. I stopped looking and thinking and just let the music take over, melting into the progression from E to A to B7 and then back to E, improvising until the heat in my chest evaporated and the muscles in my face and legs relaxed. All my secrets, my deepest shame poured into every note, yet no one could touch me.

As I lay in bed the next morning, ready to bust a kidney while Cori was using up all the hot water, I made up my mind about two things: I was going to let her do the talking with Dad later on, and I was going to ask Tiffany if she still wanted me to give her guitar lessons. I figured I couldn't get in trouble with Dad if I didn't say anything, and even if I doubted I'd ever have the nerve to legit ask Tiffany out, at least I could spend some time alone with her that way.

I knocked on the bathroom door when I couldn't wait any longer.

"Wait a minute!" Cori said.

We had worked out a system over the months since the big seizure, where I took care of the morning routine, and Cori would take care of the nighttime routine, which was totally cool with me because I'm more of a morning person than Cori is. She didn't usually utter her first sound until about two hours after she woke up. If I woke up early enough, I can go for a run and shower, all before 7:00.

"Let me get in there to take a piss," I said.

She opened the door and pushed past me without looking, clutching her bundle of clothes to her chest as the flowery-smelling steam rolled out after her.

"I'll only be a sec." I said.

She didn't answer. I knew she was still pissed about me laying her out the night before. She'd get over it eventually, by 4:30 anyway, when Dad got there. I'd like to see her pull the guilt maneuver on him like she did to Mom. Dad didn't often get too involved in our lives as far as the day-to-day stuff like school, friends, and chores were concerned, but when he did, he was no bullshit. I remember one time when I was in eighth grade, Nick invited me to go to the shore with his family for the weekend. Technically I was grounded at the time because I had gotten a *D* in science on my progress report, but I had worn Mom down to the point where she waved her hand and said something like, *Do whatever you want. If you have to go to summer school, that's on you.* So I went to Wildwood with the Montecalvos for the weekend. Well, when the *D* on the progress report had become an *F* on my report card, Dad made sure I had a lawn to mow practically every day after summer school, and I didn't get paid for plenty of them. He gave me money for gas, but I had to push that mower all over Gloucester in the heat.

Mom was sitting on the side of her bed when I came out of the bathroom. Whenever she could do that much herself, I knew she would probably be able to get through the day okay until we got home. I helped her to a stand and waited while she got her balance. That was never a given. Some days she woke up feeling pretty good, but her feet just would not hold her weight.

Those were bad days.

Since the wheelchair was too wide to fit through the doorways, I would have to piggy back her into the bathroom and sit her down on the toilet. I know it killed her,

having to be carried like that. She had always prided herself on being a jock and keeping in pretty good shape. A few times, we didn't get to the toilet in time. Hot piss ran out of her and wet the back of my shirt and jeans. It totally skeeved me the first time. I think I may even have hollered when I realized what the sudden warmth spreading down my back was. It had to have been the absolute worst for Mom, though. On those days, Cori would have to go in the bathroom and help her, and then I'd bring her back out after I changed my clothes.

Yeah, those were definitely not good days.

That morning, though, I only had to hold her arm while she shuffled the ten or so steps to the bathroom. She steadied herself on the towel rack and sink and then waved me off so that she could get cleaned up by herself. While she did that, I let Shuggy out, made the coffee, and got the paper from the front yard. Then I poured cereal in a bowl and placed a banana, a spoon, and her morning pills at her spot at the table. I opened a little carton of milk, the kind they gave us in school, so she could grab one from the fridge with no problem when she was ready to eat. When she was finished in the bathroom, I walked her back to the bed and got her clothes out of the bureau, and then left her alone to get dressed. This was the only time we shut the door to that room. While she dressed, I fed Shuggy, made Mom a turkey and cheese sandwich for lunch, poured her coffee, and took it to the table where she could read the paper. She used to love to do the crossword puzzle, but there was no way she could even hold a pencil in her hands anymore. When she was all dressed, I put her sneakers on and tied them and then helped her out to the table and into her wheelchair, where Shuggy waited by her spot, wagging his entire body. She always saved her first smile of the day for him.

I grabbed my hoodie and bent down to give her a kiss on the forehead. She patted my cheek like always, her hands smelling like mint and flowers.

“Love you, baby,” she said.

It was looking like a good day for her.

It was going to be a good day for me, too, because it was my day for Behind-the-Wheel lessons in Drivers' Ed., meaning that I got out of history class with boring Mrs. Klotz and would be one day closer to getting my license. The only bad thing about it was that one of the three people in my group, Pauly Corcoran, was the worst driver ever. Mr. Schultz, our teacher, said that in his 31 years of teaching Behind-the-Wheel, Pauly was the only student who made him seriously consider waving the white flag and retiring. Last week, Pauly hadn't even been driving for a full minute when Schultz made him pull into King of Pizza parking lot and told me to drive because Pauly had jumped the curb when he pulled out of the school. Then the next day he was lane jousting on the highway, what Mr. Schultz liked to call the condition of not being able to stay in one lane. Truthfully, the real problem was that Schultz made Pauly nervous. It was like the kid couldn't do anything right. Pauly would be adjusting his mirrors and Schultz would be telling him to hurry up. Or Pauly would be pulling out of the parking spot, and Schultz would be flipping on him to take his time. I swore he had something against Pauly because he wasn't an athlete. Schultz revered athletes.

The other person in my group was Tiffany's friend, Grace Vargas. Some people probably considered Grace a geek because she got really good grades and played percussion in the marching band. I didn't know her that well, but she seemed nice and

was an okay driver. We would sit in the back seat and exchange worried glances if Pauly's driving was a little erratic, but most of the time she just smiled and didn't say much.

I slithered into homeroom just as the morning announcements came on and caught Tiffany's eye. She smiled, glanced up at the clock, and shook her head. I timed my morning entrance to the building to coincide with the first bell—I didn't see the need for just standing around waiting for school to start, talking to people I didn't have a whole lot in common with—which gave me three minutes to navigate the packed hallway to my locker and then fight my way upstream to homeroom. If you consider the start of homeroom to be the Pledge of Allegiance, which I do not, then I was usually late, but if you consider the start of homeroom to be the announcements, which I do, then I was usually on time.

"Hey. Cool shirt," she said. I was wearing my George Harrison *Dark Horse Years* tee shirt. I had a decent collection of classic rock and concert shirts, and I had worn that particular one at least ten times since I got it for Christmas, but she always said something about it. "Your favorite Beatle, right?"

"That's right," I said, my face heating up in her radiant attention. My heart knocked on my ribs as I planned my next line. I plunged ahead before I lost what little nerve I had left. "So, you still want to learn how to play?" I asked, bracing myself for the answer, which I was not sure I wanted to hear either way.

She looked slightly confused for a heartbeat, but then her face brightened. “Are you serious?” she asked.

I gripped the desk with both hands to keep from running away. “If you are.”

Three seconds of excruciating wait, but her freckles were cute.

“Yeah. That would be awesome. When can we start?” She leaned closer to me, resting her chin in her hand.

I must have been holding my breath because when I exhaled it sounded like I’d just had a close call.

“Whenever you want,” I said, knowing that if she had said six in the morning on Saturday, I would be ready by five.

We settled on Sunday at 1:00. My house.

“Awesome. I can’t wait. Thanks, Drew,” she said, and then she did something I was not prepared for: she reached across the aisle and touched my arm with her fingertips, only for a second, and my insides shattered like a lightbulb hitting a tile floor. Her touch was cool and light, but the spot on my forearm felt like I had been branded, and I wanted another.

“No problem,” I said. I hoped I wasn’t smiling like an idiot, but what else could I do on the absolute best day of my life? And it wasn’t even eight o’clock yet.

When the bell for first period punctured the moment, she picked up her books and stood looking down at me. “See you in English,” she said and walked away. Paralyzed in my seat, I watched her every step out of the classroom. In five days, five incredibly long days, I was going to be spending an hour alone with Tiffany Cortland, an hour of sitting close enough that our knees would probably touch, an hour of my arranging her fingers in

the correct places along the frets, an hour of being close enough to smell her hair and count her freckles.

“Are you staying here for Algebra II with the freshmen, Gilmore, or are you going to class?” Mr. D’Ambrosio asked. He was at the front of the room, leaning on the podium and looking at me with an understanding grin. I realized then that I was still smiling, and I wondered briefly if he or anyone else had overheard my conversation with Tiffany, but just as quickly I realized that I didn’t care. I was happy and it felt good.

Whenever the thought of having to deal with Dad after school tried to crowd in on my good mood during the day, I shoved it away with thoughts of Sunday’s possibilities. Even Pauly’s driving seemed a little better at first, but as soon as we were approaching the circle in Brooklawn, Schultzy hollered, “Jesus H, Corcoran! Brake! Brake!”

While he ragged on Pauly about the importance of keeping a safe distance, Grace turned to me and said, “So you’re giving Tiffany guitar lessons, huh?”

I could only nod and smile, surprised that Grace had initiated a conversation and that Tiffany thought it was important enough to tell her right away.

“You know she doesn’t own a guitar, right?” Grace said. She pulled her long thick braid, jet black with thin streaks of pink, over to the other shoulder and shook her head, kind of like she felt it was her duty to inform me of this unfortunate situation.

“It’s cool,” I said. “She can use one of mine.”

“BRAKE! BRAKE! Don’t you listen to anything I say?” Schultzy had both hands on the dash board as he screamed at Pauly. “Pull over before you kill us. Vargas! Drive!”

As Pauly pulled over into the parking lot of Rita's Water Ice, his face and ears looked like they were on fire. Even his scalp was beet red under his blonde buzz cut, and his lips were twitching like he had Tourette's or something. His sad old beagle eyes made contact with mine in the rearview mirror, and I couldn't just sit there and take it, even if that was all he could do.

"Why don't you take it easy on him?" I said. "He wasn't doing that bad. How's he going to learn if you never let him drive for more than a minute?" Schultzzy looked up from his battered notebook and stared at me like I was crazy. "He was doing alright, wasn't he?" I said to Grace. She was holding her unbuckled seat belt in front of her, looking at me like I was crazy, too, but she nodded, kind of like she was afraid not to.

"You were doing fine, dude," I said to Pauly's reflection in the mirror. "You just need more practice."

"When I want your opinion, Gilmore, I'll ask for it," Schultzzy grumbled and then turned to Pauly. "Do you think you can manage to stay in the lane and keep a safe distance?"

Pauly thought about it for a moment and nodded.

"Let's go then, before Gilmore gets up front and takes over my job," Schultz said, and then over his shoulder added, "*Dude.*"

Grace let out laugh that sounded like a horse nickering, and just like that, we were all cracking up, even Schultzzy, who I never knew had a sense of humor.

*

When I walked into the kitchen after school, I spied on the counter a foil-wrapped, squat rectangle about the size of Mrs. Young's banging chocolate chip pound cake and gave a silent fist pump, knowing that the rectangle would be a much smaller square by the time I got done with it. Cori would have to deal with whatever was left. She had ignored two of my texts so I jogged home myself. Mrs. Young was sitting with Mom in the living room. I could smell her powdery perfume lingering all around. Shuggy raced out for a quick greeting and then charged back to the living room. He loved Mrs. Young because she fed him treats over the fence all the time. Same reason I loved her.

"Hey. Thanks for the pound cake," I said. Sitting on the coffee table was an open container of homemade chocolate chip cookies, and sitting at Mrs. Young's feet with his chin on her lap was Shuggy, politely begging. I was pretty sure that he had already received at least one by then even though he was never supposed to have chocolate.

"Cookies, too? Yes!" I said and grabbed about five of them on my way back to the kitchen to get some cake and milk.

"I'll be in my room until Dad gets here," I called before shutting my door.

"Wait. What? Come out here," Mom said. "He's coming today? Why?"

"He wants to talk to me and Cori," I said.

"About what?" she asked, a little annoyed.

"I don't know. Everything, I guess," I said.

"Well, I better get back now, Michelle," Mrs. Young interrupted, rising from the couch a bit unsteadily and bending down to give Mom a kiss on the cheek. She patted my shoulder as she passed me in the dining room while Shuggy followed her until she reached the door to the back steps.

“I love how he informs me of his plans,” she muttered. “Where’s Cori?”

“No clue. Haven’t seen her all day, and she blew off my texts. I’ll be in my room,” I said, walking away. I had a little more than an hour to play until Dad arrived, and I wanted to stretch out my good mood as long as possible.

I don’t know how long I had been playing when Mom called my name. Figuring Dad was there, I put my guitar back on the stand and came out of my room.

“She’s still not home. Call her from my phone,” she said, wheeling her chair back around towards the dining room. “We’ll see if she blows me off.”

I couldn’t tell if she was more concerned or angry. It was 4:00. School let out at 2:30, and the walk home, even a slow walk home, would take no longer than 30 minutes. Cori always came straight home after school. I should have waited for her by the sign, just tagged along with her even if she didn’t talk to me.

“Dial for me,” Mom said and inclined her head toward her cell phone.

I scrolled through her short list of contacts, punched Cori’s number, and put the phone in Mom’s shaky hand. She kept her eyes leveled on me

“Cori?” she asked, as though Cori was able to listen to her voicemail like an answering machine. “Where are you? Your father will be here soon, so you need to get home. Call me as soon as you get this message. Bye.”

She was worried.

“I’m going to look for her, Ma,” I said. Guilt spread up through my throat and threatened to choke me.

“Not yet. If she doesn’t call or show up in fifteen minutes, then you can go.” She held out her phone to me. “Check to see if I have any messages. Do you have any idea where she could be?”

Until Sunday night, I hadn’t given a second thought about who Cori’s friends were, but I would start at Gaynelle’s house and then go to Fort Nassau. Her ass better not be in the ghetto with Kelsey Pollock, I thought.

Shuggy’s body-piercing barking went through me like an electrical current, my hand going instinctively to my heart as I turned to see Dad making his way up the basement steps and into the kitchen, squatting down to give Shuggy, who had fallen prostrate at his feet, a vigorous belly rub. I looked at the clock on the mantle. 4:10. He was early. As usual. My happiness had lasted a total of eight hours and ten minutes.

Chapter 6

I had always relied on running to get me out of unpleasant situations. Like in 7th grade, when the cops busted a bunch of us for stealing someone's recycling can and smashing the empty bottles against the side of the abandoned rug factory down on Water Street. Or one time on my way home from picking up a loaf of bread at Heritage's, a carload of kids at the light was yelling some nasty things to a chick at the bus stop, and she waved a pistol at them just as I was crossing the street. But running out on Dad was not an option. Straightening up to his full height, a height I doubted I would ever reach, he cut an imposing figure in his black leather biker jacket and his uniform pants tucked into his black work boots. He blocked out the door to the basement with his bulk. Everything in the kitchen around him kind of shrank in his presence. Even though he had acquired somewhat of a beer gut, he was still a pretty handsome guy for a 40-year-old in my opinion. With sharp, deep-set eyes with irises that bled completely into pupils and hair the same color, he could have passed for Hispanic or Native American, but Nana always called Dad the black Irish. Mom would roll her eyes and mutter that the Irish wouldn't be satisfied until they could make everyone and everything Irish. The only obvious genetic material of Dad's that I inherited was the dimple in my chin, and a lot of people said that I had his smile, which was cool because he had a nice smile—perfectly squared-off white teeth with no help from braces.

“Hey, bud,” he said walking towards me. Giving me a quick hug, he looked at Mom and asked how she was. His eyes scanned the living room and rested on the

container of Mrs. Young's cookies, which was still lying open on the coffee table. "Mind if I have a one?" he asked, pointing to them.

"Help yourself," she said, but before he could move she blurted out, "Cori's not home from school yet, and she's not answering her phone."

Dad immediately looked at me. "Where is she?" he asked.

Did he think I was hiding her?

All I could do was shrug my shoulders like a little kid who'd been caught doing something wrong and asked to explain why.

"She knew I was coming, right?" he said.

"Yeah, she definitely knew," I said.

"It would have been nice if you had included me in your plans, Frank," Mom said.

Dad's eyes flicked down to her sitting in her wheelchair but then came right back to me. "Well, why don't you know?"

"Because I don't. I texted her twice but she didn't answer," my words tumbled out in a rush to explain. "I figured she was still pissed, so I walked home myself."

He rubbed his buzz cut a few times and then laced his fingers together, resting them on top of his head, nodding as if he was beginning to comprehend the situation. "That's what you figured, huh?" he said.

I braced myself for one of his interrogations.

"Frank," Mom said. "It's not his responsibility to see that Cori gets home from school. It's *her* responsibility to get *herself* home."

"She's fourteen fucking years old," he roared.

Shuggy skittered past me into the kitchen, stopping to look back before he descended the basement steps, like he was apologizing for bailing on me.

“Precisely my point,” Mom continued. She hadn’t yet realized that Dad had frozen her out of the discussion.

With his cell phone to his ear, he continued, “I don’t think it’s too much to ask,” pointing a cookie at me with his other hand, “considering you attend the same school and live in the same house, that you see to it that your sister gets to and from school safely, do you?”

I knew it was pointless to remind him that most days I did exactly that, so I did what I always did when Dad plowed me over with his point: I looked at the floor and shook my head.

“Cori, if you don’t answer the god damn phone in two seconds, you won’t have a phone or a computer or an iPod or anything else I pay for,” Dad enunciated into his phone in what I called his menacingly calm tone, one that I was pretty sure the inmates were accustomed to but that never failed to make me feel like I had just been pantsed. When I left the shed unlocked one time the year before and our bikes got stolen, he told me that I was the most irresponsible kid he’d ever met, and if I wasn’t mature enough to take care of a bike, how could I ever be expected to take care of a car. He said he would never buy me another thing. I know he was probably just talking out of anger, but it really tore me up the way he spoke to me that day.

I slid into my hoodie and told him I was going to find her. He didn’t acknowledge me, only shook his head and snorted as he reached for another cookie. I wanted to slap his hand away from that container. I would have rather crushed every last

one into dust and dumped them in the trash than see him enjoy what was intended for *us*. He had someone at home to make him his own cookies whenever he wanted.

Shuggy's muffled yelps from his hiding spot in the basement got my attention just before the back door opened and Cori stepped inside.

"She's home," I said, cool relief washing over me like a river breeze. I wanted to hug her and choke her at the same.

"What?" she said as Shuggy snaked in and out of her legs.

I didn't have to answer. Her eyes traveled behind me to where I knew Dad towered. She tested a shy smile but it fell away quickly. He cut her off just as she opened her mouth to speak.

"Where the hell have you been? And why didn't you answer the phone?"

In an instant, her face reddened, and it was like the tears that threatened to spill from my eyes had jumped into hers, but she continued to look directly at Dad as Shuggy disappeared into the basement again.

"My phone is dead, and Drew told me you were coming at 4:30."

I looked at the digital clock on the microwave. It read 4:25. I don't know why, but I looked over my shoulder to the clock on the wall above the sink, the apple-vertically-sliced-in-half clock that ran a few minutes fast. It read 4:29.

"You didn't answer my question, did you? Where have you been?" Dad persisted.

She looked at me quickly and then back at him. "I went to Emily's house to work on our civics project."

Bullshit. I wanted to turn to Dad and say, *See what a liar your daughter has become all of a sudden?*

“Who the hell is Emily?” he asked.

“Emily Murphy,” Cori said

“So if I called Emily Murphy’s house, her parents would verify that you were there?”

Her gaze didn’t waver. “They were at work,” she said. She still had not come up the basement steps into the kitchen, her backpack slung over her shoulder, her left hand on the knob of the open door. I felt like I was in the middle of a standoff, where Cori was the bad guy and Dad was the police, and right then, the bad guy was talking her way out of a crime. If I were the police, I would ask to see her phone, because I would bet my entire CD collection that it wasn’t dead, and I would throw in both guitars that she wasn’t at Emily Murphy’s house either.

“Frank, if she says she was at Emily’s, then she was at Emily’s,” Mom said.

“Leave her alone.” She sounded like the old Mom, the one who told off Sister Kathleen and the one who wasn’t afraid to take the beer out of Dad’s hand if he’d had too much. Her voice was thin and scratchy, but her eyes were wide, ready to do battle.

At that, Dad whirled around and finally acknowledged her. “And that’s the problem you seem to be having here. You know what happens when you leave teenagers alone and just take their word for everything, right?”

“Like you’d know,” Mom shot back.

“Looks like I know a whole hell of a lot more about this situation than you do right now.”

“I’m the one who’s here with them every day. Every day for the past six years. And for your information, I don’t take their word for everything.”

“It takes more than just being here to do the job,” Dad said.

“You think you can do better?” This was Mom’s ace in the hole every time. Even if he did really believe he could be a better parent, he didn’t seem to want the job full-time. It seemed like the few weeks we spent with him, Kelly, and Jack in the summer were enough. For all of us.

Arguments like that used to be a daily occurrence towards the end, before they divorced; what started out of normal bickering escalated until their voices ricocheted around the house like boomerangs out of control. I remember thinking that if I could distract them in the midst of it with something clever or funny, they would look at me and laugh, smile at one another, congratulate themselves on what a great kid they had, and everything would go back to the way it was supposed to be. But it never did.

Cori’s face revealed nothing, but I wondered if she was remembering the times when their screaming shattered the darkness of our bedrooms long after we had fallen asleep. Many nights, with her beat-up yellow blanket and Winston, her stuffed polar bear, she would climb into my bed, where we would wait out the storm together. We rarely talked about it, not even the next day, when the light of morning revealed no obvious damage. Dad getting dressed for work, Mom making coffee and breakfast in the kitchen. Until one day Dad packed his clothes and left. It was a while before they sat us both down at the dining room table and told us they were getting a divorce.

Dad knew he was beaten in this round, so without another word he stalked out to the living room and the rest of us knew to follow. He settled into the loveseat, stretching his arms along the back cushions and resting his right ankle on his left knee. Cori and I sat on the couch opposite him and Mom took up her usual spot facing the TV. He studied

us for a few seconds before saying that he was not happy to get a call at work that something was up with us, and he was there to find out exactly what it was because he never wanted to receive another call like that again.

“Now I’ll be the first to admit that Tina can be a kook, but I’ll also be the first to admit that she knows what she’s talking about when it comes to that stuff. And your mother may believe that bullshit you fed me last night about being at the river, but I’m going to tell you something right now, little girl: if I—“

“They weren’t at the river, Frank,” Mom said. “Drew was at Nick’s and Cori was at Fort Nassau, but she was just hanging out with some friends.”

Dad looked at Mom like she said that she had seen Tupac shopping in Acme. “And you believe her.”

“Yes, I do.”

He ran his hands from his forehead to the back of his neck a few times before laying his head on the back of the couch. Looking up at the ceiling, he asked in a tired voice, “Then why lie about it?”

“I made up the story because I thought Mom had been through enough last week, and I didn’t want her to have anything else to worry about,” I said.

A car alarm blipped twice out front, unleashing a flurry of barking from the basement.

Finally Dad lifted his head and leaned forward with his elbows on his thighs, rubbing his palms together. He seemed to be weighing his words carefully. “Didn’t we agree a long time ago that if you guys were not truthful with us then you could not expect us to trust you?” He didn’t wait for our response. “Cori, I don’t care if you’re picking up

trash with the Girl Scouts, if it's anywhere near Fort Nassau, forget about it. You are not to go there. Ever. And I'm not an idiot. I know what goes on down there, so even if you're just hanging out with your friends, as you say, if they're partying and the cops come, you're going down, too. Don't be such a dumbass." Leaning back again, he gazed at the ceiling for a few seconds before asking, "And who's Emily Murphy anyway? Don't you hang out with Kati anymore?"

Cori whispered, "Oh my God."

I don't know if it was the eye rolling or if he heard the *Oh my God*, but Dad leaped up off the couch and stabbed the air in front of Cori's face, yelling, "Don't you EVER—"

"Frank! Calm down!" Mom said.

"Don't you tell me to calm down!" He turned to Mom like a Doberman at the end of a chain. "Why don't *you* know who her friends are? All of a sudden she's not hanging out with her best friend anymore, and you're sitting here wondering why she's acting different?" he said, looking around at each of us like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Am I the only one who gets it?"

Cori picked at the scabs on her hands while Mom held her right arm against her stomach to control muscle spasms. I noticed that her one sneaker had come untied, and I had to restrain myself from reaching down and retying it.

Celebrating his triumph with another cookie, Dad sat back on the loveseat, shaking his head and chewing slowly. The roar of a descending plane bore down on the house as it passed overhead on its way to Philadelphia International. I remember thinking, was it really that long ago that Dad and I used to walk down to the river after

dinner in the summertime to watch the planes come in? He would sit on a bench out of the sun with a cigarette and a cup of Wawa coffee, while I stood on a bench at the railing by the water with Pop-pop's old binoculars, waving frantically, willing the pilot or a stewardess or a passenger, someone, anyone, to wave back. I was sure that I could see people in the small windows, so they must have been able to see me. Every two minutes another plane would follow the last. "Maybe the next one," Dad would say, renewing my hope and determination. When he finished his coffee, he would stand up, stretch, and say, "Maybe tomorrow, bud." Then he would tussle my hair and we would head home as the bats began their flights through the trees and the mosquitoes swarmed around us. I wondered if he ever thought of me when he heard a plane overhead.

Sighing, Cori reached down for her backpack and then stood, getting everyone's attention. "Kati moved to Baltimore last year, Dad," she said, and walked past us without another word.

Bonesaw, as only Cori could. He hesitated a moment before calling after her, "You're grounded this weekend, little girl," which was answered with stomping up the steps. He rose from the loveseat, and I held my breath, fully expecting him to go after her, but he turned to me instead. "And you're grounded, too, bud. Don't ever lie to me or your mother again," he said and walked into the dining room.

"This is bullshit!" I said, standing up.

He was standing next to the dining room table, looking over the stack of bills that we always set aside for him. I walked out to face him, shaking but determined to say what I had to say. I'd never stood up to him before.

"What did you say?" he asked, smiling slightly.

“This isn’t fair, Dad. I didn’t do anything wrong. I’m sixteen years old. I take care of Mom. I take care of Cori. I take care of the house.” I could feel that my face was on fire. “I do everything that is asked of me, and the one time I tell a harmless lie, you treat me the same way you treat Cori, who needs to be more than grounded if you asked me.”

He shrugged on his leather jacket and tucked the bills into the inside pocket. “Well, when you can take care of the bills, then you can make the rules, too,” he said, no longer smiling.

“Dad, please. I told Tiffany Cortland that I would give her a guitar lesson on Sunday,” the resolve in my voice giving way to whining. I turned to Mom for help, but she was totally somewhere else, hugging her arms to her faintly rocking torso.

“Not this Sunday you’re not,” Dad said.

“But I need to make money for car insurance.” One last-ditch effort.

“Keep arguing and it’ll be the next weekend, too,” he said and started to go, taking my dream with him.

I wanted to run out and jump on his back and pummel his face from behind. He didn’t care about me; he hadn’t cared about me in six years. All he cared about was that I made his life easier, so that he could look like he was not a complete dickless asshole for leaving his sick ex-wife to care for their two kids while he was up in Trenton with his new family, probably taking his new son to watch the planes come in somewhere.

“This is total fucking bullshit,” I said. My feet, which had waited patiently since Dad arrived, lifted me past him, down the back steps and out the door, stopped to kick the driver’s side door to his Jeep, and then urged me down the street towards the river. Broadway was clogged with rush hour traffic, but my feet wouldn’t stop. A red pick-up

lurched to a stop to avoid hitting me. The driver leaned on the horn and called me a fucking asshole kid. I pulled up sharply and pounded on his hood with my fist.

“Fuck you!” I said. “Go ahead and hit me! Hit me, you fucking pussy!”

Horns all around started honking as the driver of the pick-up opened his door and stepped into the street.

“What did you call me, you little piece of Gloucester shit?” he said, taking off his baseball hat and coming towards me. He was old, in his fifties probably, his gut straining the buttons of his flannel shirt. People in the other cars blew their horns and yelled out their windows for us to move.

“Fuck you!” I said, pointing my finger at him. “What do you know about me? What do any of you know about me?” My voice sounded harsh and desperate.

He held up a flat palm to me like he was stopping traffic and said, “Take it easy, will you?”

“Why? What do you care?” I said.

He scratched his head and put his hat back on “Sorry, kid, but you’re going to get killed like that. One way or another, you’re going to get killed.”

“I hope I do,” I said to him, making my way around the traffic and onto the sidewalk. “I hope I do,” I said as my feet carried me towards the river.

“You tell him!” someone called to me and laughed as I ran past Sudz Laundromat. The littlest Fludd kids, two boys about 6 and 7, were sitting on the front steps of their sagging row home, looking at me through squinted eyes. The youngest one was holding a black and white kitten with both hands, like he had just been handed a bouquet of wilted flowers. Across the street from them, juke box music from inside

Dobey's Taproom spilled out through the open door to the street, where two guys smoking cigarettes watched me as I ran by. I flew down the last two blocks of Essex, pumping my arms like I was sprinting the final straight of a 400, and was about to swing a wide left on to King when a familiar voice cut through my trance and ground me to a halt.

"Zeppelin! What the *hell* are you doing?" Mrs. Sheehan yelled through the open window of her Corolla, which she had stopped midway through the intersection. "I thought I was going to have to scrape your ass off of Broadway a minute ago!" she yelled again and then broke into a fit of coughing. I don't know why I stopped. She had no authority over me outside of school. I guess my feet were trained to freeze at her orders. Opening the driver's side door, she lifted her left foot out like she was going to come after me, but a honk from the car behind her stopped her.

"Bite me, buddy!" she yelled over her shoulder to the driver. Almost as a reply, a boat on the river blasted its lonely sounding horn. Mrs. Sheehan's shiny yellow shoe hung inches above the blacktop, like a butterfly preparing to land on a flower.

"Get in," she said to me. "Now, before that guy in the pickup changes his mind."

The driver behind her leaned on his horn with way more attitude this time. Mrs. Sheehan slammed her door with a force that hurt my ears, and throwing her fat left arm out the window like she was flinging off a clump of seaweed, flipped him off.

"Asshole," she muttered and gunned the Corolla down King Street.

I had never been a passenger in Mrs. Sheehan's personal car, but I'd swear that the same newspapers, soda bottles, empty cigarette packs, and gum wrappers on the floor and back seat were the same ones that littered her work car. Something about the smell of

this car—a mixture of motor oil, perfume, and corn chips—made me feel safe, though. Resting my head on the seat back, I watched the crystal rosary hanging from the rearview mirror refract the sunlight, filling the car with a million tiny rainbows. Mrs. Sheehan steered with her left hand and with her right hand fished through her huge purse for something. We drove in silence for the nine blocks to Proprietor's Park, where she swung a hard right into the short, narrow drive that led to the river.

"You want to tell me what your major malfunction is?" she asked. She'd brought the car to an abrupt stop in a parking spot facing the water. The pier was empty of fishermen, but the surrounding benches were occupied by the usuals. As good as it was to be safe inside Mrs. Sheehan's car, I envied those men. They could sit, peacefully working out their problems on their own, while she would, I think the word is *harangue*, me until I answered her. She rolled down the window on her side and fired up a cigarette, the smoke curling around her face like a rising cobra.

"My dad is not going to be satisfied until he ruins my life," I finally said. "I didn't do anything wrong, yet he's grounding me, *me*, because *Cori* was hanging out at Fort Nassau Sunday night, and my aunt, who's a nurse, accused her of being high when we got home, so Cori was freaking out and my mom was ready to freak out, so I lied about where we were because I didn't want my mom to worry about Cori, especially since she was in the hospital and all, but then Cori told my mom the truth the next day so I look like a liar and my dad was pissed so he came down today to chew us out and Cori got cocky with him so he grounds *both* of us! *She's* hanging with skanks and druggies, and *I* get grounded for trying to help! It's such bullshit," I said, turning to face her.

Mrs. Sheehan's bloodshot blue eyes peered at me from over the top of her sunglasses. Her elbow rested on the door in the space of the opened window, the cigarette between her curled fingers standing at a lazy angle. "You have got to be kidding me," she said.

"I'm totally serious. He thinks he—"

Before I could finish, she flicked me—a quick, stinging snap to the arm. "Are you out of your mind?" she asked. "How old are you anyway? Ten? You get grounded and you act like you did back there, practically getting yourself killed? You almost gave me a friggin' heart attack," she said and flicked me again. "Big whoop. So you're grounded. And you *did* do something wrong, you lied to your parents. That gets you grounded in my book, kiddo."

Rubbing the stinging spot on my bicep, I turned towards my window, not wanting her to see the tears in my eyes. A FedEx plane glided along in its descent over the water, making the air big with its rumbling.

"I'm supposed to give Tiffany Cortland her first guitar lesson this Sunday," I said in the quiet between planes, the lump in my throat stealing most of my voice.

"Yeah, and? Can't you just reschedule it for the next week?"

My hand inched its way to the door handle as I mentally prepared my exit line. Why did I expect her to understand in the first place?

Just as I was ready to bounce, a big sky blue Caddy pulled into the spot to the right of us, slowly inching up and back several times before getting it just right between the lines. An old man wearing a brown flat cap and a tweed jacket stepped out of the driver's side and stretched his back, nodding at me with a smile. I nodded back but my

mouth refused to smile. He walked around the front of the car to the passenger side, resting his hand on the hood once or twice, and opened the door to help his wife out. She stood, sort of wobbly, gripping his arm with one hand and the door with the other. Looking down into her face, he smiled and it looked like he asked, "You ready?" She nodded and hooked her right arm through his as she let go of the door. They shuffled together over to an empty bench a few feet away, where he eased her down and then plopped next to her. He looked at her again, smiling, his face crinkling into a series of concentric curving lines. She leaned into him, laying her head on his shoulder. Watching them made me angry and sad at the same time. I never knew my grandfathers, and with Nana being gone and Mom and Dad not being able to stand the sight of one another. It just wasn't fair. None of it was fair.

"You don't understand," I said. "Tiffany is really stoked about it. I can't tell her to wait until next weekend. She'll think that I'm not into it. And I'm not telling her I'm grounded. That's so lame."

"Aha," she said, taking one last drag off her cigarette and flicking it out the window. It traveled in an impressive arc over the railing and into the water. "You like her?"

"Who?" I asked. "Tiffany?" I had never told anyone how I felt about her.

"No, genius, that old woman over there. Yes, Tiffany! Isn't that what's got your drawers in a bunch?"

"Yeah, I like her."

"Does she like you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I guess. I have no idea, really. Probably not."

Out of nowhere, Mrs. Sheehan erupted into a raspy string of laughter that shook the rolls of her belly and sent her into another coughing fit. Watching her having such a good time at my expense should have pissed me off, but I couldn't help laughing, too, which made her laugh even harder. We sat like that—her laughing and coughing, me laughing at her laughing and coughing.

When she could breathe normally again, she told me that I deserved to have a good girl like Tiffany, and if my “date” with her next Sunday meant that much to me, I should man up and try to reason with Dad, but if he could not be reasoned with, the best thing to do is be honest with Tiffany. She would understand and respect me for trusting her enough to tell her the truth.

I had never given any thought to whether or not I cared if Tiffany respected me. I just wanted her to like me. Well, more than *like* me.

Craning up to the review mirror, Mrs. Sheehan dabbed the corner of each eye with her pinky finger and then pulled at a few strands of her short hair before settling back. She looked downriver at the approaching Maersk ship loaded down with containers stacked four stories high. Then she asked how my mom was doing.

My usual response to that question—the lie that I gave to everyone whenever they asked—tasted sour and heavy as it sat on my tongue. I waited until the Maersk liner passed in front of us, when the old driver of the Caddy used his cell phone to take a picture of the ship blotting out the entire Philadelphia side with its mass. Just as a passenger plane passing over looked like it would collide with the top tier of containers, I spoke.

I told her everything, things I had never told anyone about my mom and MS before. About the muscle spasms that made her legs and arms jump like she was being electrocuted, about the boiling hot radiator and the purple scars that slashed her back and arm, about the mornings she cried in my arms because she had only slept for one hour, about her losing control of her bladder. Even about me finding her unconscious on the floor by her bed, covered in puke and soaked in piss, barely breathing. Everything. But not about the Valium. That much I needed to hang on to, as much for myself as for Mom.

Mrs. Sheehan patted my arm four or five times with her small hand, like she was tapping time for the band.

Suddenly cold and tired, I folded my arms into myself tightly and shivered. My head felt too heavy for my neck. The huge empty hole in my chest threatened to collapse in on itself and suffocate me with each breath I took. The Maersk liner was making ready for port under the giant ship-to-shore crane that hovered patiently, waiting to scatter the neat pile of containers. Plane after plane thundered past every two minutes, swallowing up all other sounds. The old couple rose from the bench, taking one last look at the ship before tottering back to their car. My eyes burned with the sight of it all. How could the world go on like always, how could everything look so normal, when I felt like dying inside?

Mrs. Sheehan sighed and sniffled and then blew her nose like a man. She turned on the car and fidgeted with the vents so that the heat blew in my direction. I laid my head back, closing my eyes on the warmth as she lit another smoke.

“My god, kid,” she said as she exhaled. “Your life’s sure no picnic, is it? What are we going to do with you?” She took a long drag and pressed her hand into my arm at the

same spot she had flicked earlier. “Now, listen to me: everyone gets dunked into life’s tank of shit. You’re just getting your dunking at an early age. But you’ve got to remember that you have people who are here to help you. Even if it’s just to blow off steam. You cannot carry this load all by yourself. It’s too much.” She released her hand from my arm, but the warmth remained. “And lying to protect Cori? Don’t do it. You’ll be hurting her more than you know.”

I loved her for not feeling sorry for me.

“Let’s get you home,” she said, pinching the cigarette between her bright pink lips as she backed out of the parking spot.

“Would you mind driving me out to Sylvan Avenue?” I asked.

“Yeah?” she asked looking at me, eyebrows arching up over the top of her sunglasses.

“Yeah,” I said.

The streets on that side of town are curved *avenues* named after trees instead of New Jersey counties and or dead soldiers. The houses are big, with front yards and back yards, many with above-ground pools, some built-in. Most houses have driveways. I like to walk around that part of town at night during Christmas time. The lights looked so cool. None of those big blow-up Rudolfs or Grinches. No life-size posters of Santa on the front door. No light-up nativity scenes. Even though the people who lived in that neighborhood had more money, they didn’t do nearly as much decorating as people on my side of town did.

“You going to go up and say something or sit here like a big dummy?” Mrs. Sheehan asked. We had been parked in front of the house for a full minute at least, both of us looking at it like we were waiting for someone to come out.

I really liked Tiffany’s house. Not just because it was hers. It was all brick. Brick houses always looked neat and clean and sturdy. The third little pig definitely had it going on when he built his house out of brick. No amount of huffing and puffing was going to matter to that house. It had a nice front door, too. Black with vertical panes of glass on either side. The mailbox and the door knocker and the 303 all shiny brass. The bleach-white driveway could fit two cars side by side.

Reasoning with Dad was out, I knew, so that left honesty as my only other option. If things didn’t go well, I could always blame Mrs. Sheehan. It was all her idea.

Stepping out of the Corolla, I couldn’t help noticing how quiet it was out there, how loud my sneakers sounded on the walkway, how much smaller the planes looked above those houses, the exhaust from Broadway’s traffic and the river’s scent a memory on my clothes. I felt like I was getting smaller with each step.

The chimes of the doorbell swelled inside the house as I waited on the steps, not daring to look through the glass panes. No cars in the driveway. No sounds from within. I could turn around and be back in the car in three seconds. Pretend this never happened. My heart thumped out the message: Dude. Run. You. Do. Not. Be. Long. Here.

A whiff of cinnamon and apples escaped when Tiffany opened the door in her softball practice clothes—blue Under Armour shirt, black sweatpants, and dirty white socks. She was definitely surprised to see me.

“Hey, Drew! What’s up?” She stood holding a yogurt in one hand and a spoon in the other, smiling like she hadn’t seen me in weeks. “Do you want to come in?”

Did I want to come in? What I wanted to do was pull her Under Armoured body against mine and kiss her.

Instead, I inclined my head towards Mrs. Sheehan’s car to let her know that I wouldn’t be coming in and that I definitely would not be staying very long.

“What’s up?” she asked again.

“I’m sort of grounded this weekend, so is next weekend ok with you?”

“Grounded? For real?” she said.

“Yeah, my dad. You know. He’s a military guy,” I said, saluting her. “Old school discipline and all.”

She laughed. “No problem. It’s cool. You could’ve just texted me, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, but I didn’t want you to think that I was blowing you off,” I said.

There was something unbelievably sexy about her, standing there on the steps in those socks with orange dirt stains around the ankles and the toes. She still smelled like her usual self but I could definitely tell that she had worked out.

“So, I guess I’ll talk to you later,” I said, turning to go, when all of a sudden her dog—this tiny little thing that looked like a long-haired rat—shot out of the house past us.

“Einstein!” Tiffany yelled. “You get back here!”

Einstein proceeded to take a piss on the neighbor’s lawn, acting like he hadn’t heard her. She handed me her yogurt and ran after him.

“He’s so bad,” she said as she brought him back, tucked under her arm like a hairy football. I went to scratch his pinhead and he growled.

“See what I mean?” she said. “Just a sec. I’ll put him in.”

I would have waited there for an hour if she asked me.

“So, yeah. That’s no problem. Next Sunday,” she said. “I can’t wait.”

“Cool,” I said. “Me, too.” My face was giving me up again, I knew. “I better go. See you tomorrow.”

“Hey!” she said when I reached the middle of the walk.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Can I have my yogurt back?” she asked and laughed at her punch line.

I don’t know what came over me, but I decided I was going for it. All in. Hard.

“How bad do you want it back?” I asked. “I’m pretty hungry.”

Looking me up and down with a crooked smile, she said, “You don’t have a spoon.” She held hers out, like she was ringing a dinner bell.

“Then I’ll just take yours,” I said and walked up to where she stood on the bottom step, with one hand on her hip and the other dangling the spoon. I took it out of her hand, sunk it into the cup, and scooped a huge spoonful of blueberry yogurt into my mouth. It tasted better than anything I’d ever eaten in my life.

She threw back her head and laughed. I helped myself to another spoonful and smiled, and then she grabbed the spoon out of my hand and fed herself an overflowing spoonful. She laughed again, a small purple blob falling from her mouth and landing on her chin. All I could see was her lips and that yogurt.

The Corolla’s horn made us both jump.

“I better go,” I said.

“You better,” Tiffany said, wiping the yogurt from her chin with her finger and then licking it.

Opening the door to Mrs. Sheehan’s car, I had a revelation.

“I’m not a taxi service,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “And thanks for the ride. I think I’m going to run home, if you don’t mind.”

She allowed her eyes to drift somewhere beyond me and nodded her head with a smile. “If you say so, Zeppelin,” she said, and the Corolla rolled toward the corner.

Jogging after her, I twirled my finger for her to lower the window. As the glass slid down, I leaned on the door. “Thanks for everything, Mrs. Sheehan,” I said.

I flinched as she reached her hand out to pat my face. “You got it, kiddo,” she said. “Now get out of the street before somebody makes road kill out of you.”

And with that, she was off like a shot, speeding around the bend out of sight.

“I will,” I said and started running into the sinking sun, towards home.

Chapter 7

Since Dad put the choke hold on us, Cori and I walked home from school together every day that week. We didn't say much. I was still pretty pissed at her—the whole situation was her fault, even though Tiffany was cool about rescheduling the lesson and all. It wasn't even that I was grounded because I didn't usually go out that much anyway. It was just the whole idea that she got off with the same punishment as me even though she was the one who messed up. And she didn't even act like she was sorry or apologize or anything! That pissed me off, too, but I didn't want to spend all my time thinking about how much Cori pissed me off, so instead I walked a few yards ahead of her and concentrated on the image of Tiffany's lips smeared with blueberry yogurt and the blistering heat of her fingers on my arm. I also thought of some other places she could put her fingers.

For the first time ever, rather than sleep through my Saturday detention, I actually did work. I banged out my history research paper, and it wasn't half bad if I said so myself. Probably could have gotten an *A* if I had handed it in on time, but I figured I would be okay with a *D* at that point. Anything was better than a zero. At least I could pass Ms. Klotz's class for the year, and it would finally get her out of my face. She'd given me an extension but never let me forget it.

I felt a sense of accomplishment, something I had not felt about school for a while, when I walked out of detention that day, like maybe I could pull it together grade-wise by the end of the year after all. I even did four hours of homework on Sunday to try to get caught up. It felt good getting everything all organized in my backpack Monday morning, kind of like it was September and I was starting school all over again. I was

betting old Ms. Klotz would shit herself when I dropped my paper into her upturned palm.

It can't be for me, I thought, as Mr. D'Ambrosio made his way down the aisle in homeroom, waving the blue Guidance pass between his knobby fingers and smiling his crooked smile.

It was.

"Looks like you're the reigning MVP for Guidance this year, Drew," he said. "They must know what a cool guy you are." He placed the pass on my desk and gave me two quick pats on the shoulder. I really liked Mr. D, but it was hard not to get an attitude when he was handing me a guidance pass every other day. What did hell did could they possibly want? I went to my Saturday. I stayed in school for one straight week. Grades maybe? I loved how they take you out of class to tell you that you're failing that class and to stress how important it is to not miss class.

Tiffany gave me a *what's up?* look. I shrugged an *I have no idea*. We had been texting steadily for over a week, but I wouldn't say that we were "talking" yet. She still walked to class with her friends and sat at their same table in the cafeteria, and I still pretty much loned it in the hallways and sat with Nick at lunch. She smiled and turned back to her opened bio book. It was Bio Lab day. Sweet. She even looked cute in the safety goggles and lab apron. Amazing how the thought of being with Tiffany could make me forget everything else.

As I made my way to Guidance through the A-Wing, I spotted Cori walking in the hallway ahead of me, which was weird because they rarely let the junior high kids out of

the C-Wing, only for lunch and gym. They would destroy the school if they were allowed to roam freely. I decided then and there that, since I was in such a good mood, I was going to forget that I was pissed at her. I didn't want to be pissed anymore. It was pissing me off. So I decided to have a little fun at her expense. My sneakers barely made a squish as I closed the gap between us in two seconds.

"Boo!" I said, jumping in front of her.

It was impossible to startle that girl. She smiled a fraction of an inch and, gliding around me like an ice skater, continued down the hall.

"What are you doing up here?" I asked.

She didn't stop or turn around or say anything. She merely held up the blue pass and kept on walking. If you didn't know Cori, you might think she was a little slow or stuck up maybe. Mom said she was an observer, someone who takes in her surroundings rather than reacting to them. I don't know what she was, but it was not easy to joke around with her.

Mr. Gershenowitz was standing at the secretary's desk with his hand in the candy jar that she kept there for the students.

"Hey, guys," he said popping a few Swedish fish into his mouth. "Why don't you go on back to the conference room and have a seat. I'll only be a minute," he said and walked out of the office.

We followed the scent of vanilla perfume into the conference room.

"Hi, Cori. Hi, Drew," Nicole Kersey said. "It's nice to see you both again."

Wait a minute, I thought. Did she just say it was nice to see us "again"?

Ignoring the bright smile Ms. Kersey shot my way, I tugged on Cori's sleeve.

"When did you talk to her?" I asked, not caring if Ms. Kersey heard.

Cori looked at me like I smelled or something. "I don't know. Last week some time," she said.

"What did you talk about?" I said.

"Stuff. Okay?" Cori said.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said.

"What is your problem?" she said.

"What's with you and all these secrets lately?" I said.

"Oh, my God. You sound like Dad," Cori said.

Ms. Kersey was about to say something when Mr. Gershenowitz appeared carrying two Styrofoam cups of coffee, looking like a chimp who'd just scored two bananas for himself. He walked around the table to give Ms. Kersey her cup and then settled into the chair opposite her. "Cheers," he said. He lifted his cup to his mouth and slurped through the little *oh* his lips made, surveying the scene around the table. "Everything okay?" he asked.

No one was willing to vouch that everything was okay.

"Why don't we give Drew a chance to say what's on his mind before we get started. It might help to clear the air," Ms. Kersey said, setting her cup aside and folding her hands all business-like.

"Alright then, Drew," Mr. Gershenowitz said. "What's on your mind?"

Normally I would clam up in that kind of situation, but I figured what the hell. The only place clamming up ever got me was into more situations like the one I was in.

“Well, to tell you the truth, the only thing on my mind before you called me down here was getting all my work in to my teachers today, like you told me to. But instead of sitting in Geometry, I’m sitting here, missing even more class. And then I come to find out that my little sister has been talking with Ms. Kersey and I didn’t know anything about it. I’m just a little weirded out. I mean, I don’t know, wouldn’t you be?”

“So what is it that’s bothering you, that Cori talked with Ms. Kersey or that you didn’t know about it?” Mr. Gershenowitz said.

“Both,” I said. “I figured Ms. Kersey and I had it all worked out with the services and everything, so why does she have to bring Cori into it? And then Cori doesn’t even tell me? And now here we all are, everybody all chummy, except I’m the only one who doesn’t know what’s going on.”

“Cori, why don’t you tell Drew what you and I discussed,” Ms. Kersey said.

Cori sat like a statue in her chair, looking down at her crossed-legged lap, the only thing moving the scarcest rise of her chest as she took in a breath.

“It’s okay,” Ms. Kersey said. She reached over and placed her hand on Cori’s arm for encouragement. I wanted to slap it off.

“I want to go live with Dad,” Cori said.

“What? Are you serious?” I said. “Since when?”

“Since Mom OD’d. I tried to tell you when we were walking home from Fort Nassau that night, but you didn’t want to hear it,” she said.

“She did not OD!” I said. “She didn’t mean to do it!” How could Cori lay Mom out like that in front of these people who didn’t know her, didn’t know the first thing about what she was going through?

“What’s the difference, if she meant to or didn’t mean to?” Cori said. “It happened. She swallowed a freaking bottle of pills while we were at school.”

“She couldn’t sleep. That’s why she took them,” I said. I was so goddamned tired of having to explain. “To go to sleep.”

“Yeah, to go to sleep and never wake up,” Cori’s small voice cracked as black-stained tears rolled down her cheek in a little stream. A squeezing pain bloomed in my chest. “What if she dies? What if I find her dead? I can’t handle it anymore. It’s all I think about and I’m so freaked out. What if she tries it again, and you don’t get to her in time? What if you can’t save her next time?” She was sobbing now, her shoulders convulsing, her chin almost touching her chest. She looked like a shivering animal folding in on itself for warmth, for survival. I wanted to pick her up and take her home.

“Look at me, Cor,” I said. “You don’t have to be afraid. I will never let anything happen to you. Haven’t I always taken care of you?”

She nodded.

“That’s never going to change. I’m always going to take care of you. We will be okay. Mom is doing all right now on the new meds. Let me worry about Mom.”

“You can’t fix this! Don’t you see?” She dragged her sleeve across her nose and wiped her blotchy cheeks with her hands. “You’re sixteen. You shouldn’t *have* to worry about Mom. Or me. This is so messed up!”

She hugged her legs to her chest, resting her forehead on her knees, the exact same position Mom had been in when she first told me about MS. Cori continued to cry, each whimper hollowing out my insides a little more, allowing the truth to rattle around before it settled like a stone in my gut.

Deep down I knew that Cori was right. I couldn't fix it, and no amount of pretending on my part was going to slow down the progression of symptoms any more than I could slow down the planes coming in for landing. Just when the seizures are under control, the muscle spasms get worse. Get control of the muscle spasms and there's no more feeling in the hands and feet. No feeling at all is better than the searing nerve pain in the knees and arms that no amount of pain medication could touch. I knew what was coming. Cori knew what was coming. Mom certainly knew what was coming. There would come a day when she wouldn't be able to get out of bed. Wouldn't be able to feed herself. Wouldn't be able to reach out her shaky hand to pat me on the cheek or stroke Cori's hair. Wouldn't be able to talk. Wouldn't want to wake up again.

Mr. Gershenowitz was speaking, but his voice was drowned out by Hendrix's searing guitar in "All Along the Watchtower." The lyrics exploded in my head: "There must be some kind of way out of here." I stood up and tried to focus on Mr. Gershenowitz, but he appeared to be getting smaller.

"You okay, Drew?" he asked from far away.

I shook my head and groped for the door, yanking it open with all my strength. A flood of fresh air washed over me. Hendrix's dreamy reverb was replaced by pop music playing softly in the background as the secretary rapidly typed. She laughed and hung up the phone, and then turned to me and frowned, restoring my sense of reality.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I need a pass," I said.

"Drew, wait," Mr. Gershenowitz called. "Come on back into my office and you and I will talk."

When I looked back into the conference room, there was Ms. Kersey, practically a stranger, leaning close to Cori, comforting her, when Cori was *my* sister, *my* responsibility. And what was I doing? Running out on her when she needed me. Running away because I couldn't face the truth, caring only about what I wanted.

And I felt like a colossal piece of shit.

"I need to talk to Cori," I said. "Alone."

Ms. Kersey cleared out of the conference room and shut the door, leaving us alone with the two abandoned cups of coffee.

"Have you talked to Dad about this?" I said.

She shook her head.

"Then I'm guessing Mom doesn't know either?"

At this, her face crumpled and she resumed crying.

"Look," I said. "Stop crying. We will work it out. What do you want me to do? Do you want me to talk to Dad first, you know, to make sure he's on board with it?"

"He better be on board with it! We're his kids, too!" she said.

"Relax, will you? We have to have plan is all I'm saying. And just so we're clear, I'm not living with Dad," I said. "But it's cool if that's what you want."

"Didn't you hear anything I said?"

"Yeah, I heard every word, and I get it. I really do. But what's best for you at the moment is not what's best for me," I said.

"You think Dad is going to let you stay with Mom all by yourself?" she said.

“Let’s just figure out what we are going to do next, okay?” I said. “I’ll worry about that later.” I hesitated to say that I didn’t really think Dad gave a shit one way or the other where I lived as long as I didn’t cause him any trouble.

“I think we should tell Mom first,” she said. “If we talk to Dad before we talk to her, it will seem like we don’t care how she feels, kind of like it’s the three of us against her. And you know how Dad can be sometimes when he talks to her.”

She definitely had a point. And I swore the next time Dad acted like an asshole to Mom I would tell him what was up, and I wouldn’t care what he did to me, either.

“You’re right,” I said. “So when do you want to tell her?”

“I’ll let you decide,” she said.

“Awesome. Thanks a lot,” I said.

She smiled, a real one, the gratitude that she couldn’t express without crying all over again. And god was I sick of seeing her like that.

“Better clean up before you go back to class,” I said. “You look like hell.”

She laughed, a real one.

“See you after school,” I said.

By the time I got to the cafeteria at lunch, Nick was sitting at our usual table, oblivious to everything except the hot ham and cheese he was making it with and whatever was playing in his earbuds. I never could understand how he beat me there every day, considering we were both coming from the B wing, and he was about as quick as a sloth.

“What’s up?” he said. He removed one earbud and eyed up my chicken tenders and fries.

“Wipe your mouth, dude. You got shit all over it,” I said.

Watching him eat made me sick sometimes. I looked over towards the middle of the cafeteria, where Tiffany sat with the girl jocks and Grace Vargas. She was talking and laughing and eating, like a hundred other people were, yet somehow she stood out from everyone else. To me, if you didn’t know a single kid in the school and walked into the cafeteria and looked around, you would spot Tiffany right away. The shiny, straight red hair would get your attention first, but then you would realize how everyone around her sort of leaned towards her, like she was the natural center. She wasn’t a snob, though. Not like the Brittany’s—two smoking hot girls on the Dance Team who you would notice right after you discovered Tiffany. They surrounded themselves at all times with a shield of other hot girls from the Dance Team, but no one at their table ever ate, they didn’t talk, and they didn’t look like they ever really laughed a day in their lives. They were too busy putting on makeup and fixing their hair. They sat there looking totally hot but totally bored, like they were somehow assigned to this lunch by mistake, or as a punishment for being too perfect.

No, Tiffany was different, and I wanted to be something more to her than what I was at that moment. I definitely got the vibe that she was into me, more flirtatious than just straight up nice like she was to everyone else. And I don’t think it was just me being that guy who imagines that a hot girl is into him because she said hi. Like when we were texting, if I would say I was getting ready to go to bed, and she would ask if I were going to bed alone. Little stuff like that. Just kidding around and all, but still. Yet as much as I

was dying to go all in with Tiffany, in the back of my mind, I worried about what she would think of my life when she got to know me better, how things were at home. I couldn't handle the thought of her feeling sorry for me, or worse, being weirded out by the situation.

Turning back to my lunch before she caught me staring at her, I noticed that one of my chicken fingers had disappeared.

"Two sandwiches aren't enough for you, asshole?" I said. I should have known better than to leave my food unattended for so long. That boy could eat.

"See something you like over there?" he asked, indicating Tiffany's table with his head.

I could feel my face flaming up, but what the hell.

"Tiffany Cortland," I said.

Nick chewed on one of my fries and studied my face for a few seconds before turning around to get a look himself. "She's cute," he said, nodding his head as if he were finally agreeing with me. "Very cute."

"And she's nice, too," I added.

"She's in my gym class. She's hard core, man."

"She's an athlete. Of course she goes hard in gym," I said.

"Relax. I'm just saying. I'm impressed that you're setting your sights that high. Go for it," he said.

"I'm giving her a guitar lesson this Sunday," I said.

"Cool," he said. He put a fist up for a pump and snagged a few more of my fries with the other hand. "But can I make one suggestion?"

I hoped that he, the guy who would walk around the rest of the day with dried mustard on his chin, wasn't seriously going to give me advice on how to handle girls.

"Let her use your Fender—it won't hurt her finger tips as much as whatever she's got. Don't overwhelm her. Go over the strings and teach her a C major scale. She'll be able to practice that on her own after one lesson."

I should have known. Nick had a one-track mind. Not even the subject of girls could animate him as much as his music could. As always, he knew what he was talking about. It was an excellent suggestion except for one problem.

"She doesn't have a guitar," I said.

"She'll have to get one if she's serious. Savage has a decent Yamaha acoustic at the studio. It's used but nice. A hundred bucks if she's interested. Are you going to eat the rest of your fries?"

"I'll mention it to her," I said and pushed my tray across the table to him, but that quickly he was drooling over the sight of the Brittanys and the Dance Team, with their shiny lips and serious faces, strutting across the cafeteria on their way to the bathroom. All of them. At the same time.

"I would love to be a toilet seat in that bathroom right now," he said, turning his attention back to my fries.

I crumbled up my napkin and chucked it at Nick's face. He grinned with a mouthful of ketchup and fries. I couldn't help but laugh, picturing the horrified look on the Brittneys' faces as they went to sit on the toilet and looked down through their bare legs at Nick's leering yellow-toothed smile. I doubted I would ever be able to get that

picture out of my head when I thought of them, girls who didn't even want people to think they ate, let alone take a piss. Leave it to Nick and his sick sense of humor.

As it happened every day, people started clearing off their tables all at once. It was almost time for the bell to ring. I looked over at Tiffany and wondered if I should walk to Bio with her. Nick stood up and shouldered his backpack.

"Throw your trash away, you slob," I said.

"That's your trash, mi amigo. Adios." He inserted his other earbud and walked off into the crowd.

I looked back at Tiffany's table but it was empty. Merging into the crowd and through the cafeteria doors to the hallway, I caught sight of the Brittany's walking up ahead.

"What are you smiling at?"

Tiffany's voice caught me off guard, but it was a good thing.

I shook my head. "Just something Nick said at lunch."

"Yeah? And?" she asked.

The way she was looking up at me at that moment, like I was about to tell her the best news of her life, well, I didn't have it in me to ruin her enthusiasm with Nick's raunchiness.

"You have to know Nick to understand," I said.

"Oh, whatever," she said. "Probably something perverted." She adjusted her purse and her backpack and started walking faster.

"Wait! Why do you say that?" I sped up to keep the pace.

“Because you won’t tell me. And guys are perverts, that’s why,” she said, refusing to look at me.

I felt like the sun had slipped behind a cloud and plunged me into the chilly shade. Until she nudged me, her warm, silky skin brushing against mine.

“I’m just messing with you,” she said, clearly pleased with herself. She nudged me again. “Guess you have to know me to understand.” She giggled and leaned against me for just a second, her hair dusting my elbow like a feather. I wanted to put my arm around her and pull her to my side and bury my face in that hair.

But instead I smiled, afraid to say anything that might ruin the moment, and nudged her back. We took turns nudging each other like that until we arrived at the door to the bio lab. I pulled on the handle and held open the door with my foot, motioning her inside with a wave of my hand, but just as she was about to go through, I nudged her one last time, throwing her off balance a little. I caught hold of her arm and helped her with her backpack, which had fallen off her shoulder, both of us laughing easily.

“Pervert,” she said.

I liked the sound of it. Our own private joke.

Chapter 8

Cori was waiting by the sign after school, talking to a girl I didn't recognize.

"Emily wants to walk with us," Cori said.

I looked at Emily, who I guessed must be Emily Murphy. She stood a little hunched over, just like Cori only shorter, with her thumbs hooked around the straps of her back pack, squinting in the sun. She was smiling, but it was a nervous smile. Her braces were the clear kind, with little specks of metal that somehow looked even worse than the full-out metal ones.

"Whatever," I said and started walking towards Market Street. It would give me some time to just be in my own head and think about Tiffany and how much fun we had messing around in class. I started getting excited again when I thought of how she held up her hair above her shoulders and asked me to tie her lab apron in the back. She had taken off her hoodie and was wearing a black tank top underneath. The thin pink straps of her bra peeked out on either side where her shirt gapped and I caught a glimpse of dark red underarm stubble. Her toned, freckled arms shone with a covering of almost-blond hair. I imagined them draped around my neck as she leaned against me when we made out, which would hopefully be this Sunday. I didn't think I could wait much longer.

"You better watch your back, you fucking little rat!" someone yelled.

A group of about five girls stood at the intersection of Hudson and Johnson ahead of us. I immediately recognized Kelsey Pollock by her freakishly tall body and pointy head and her filthy mouth.

"Who the fuck are you talking to?" I said.

“Not you, asshole!” she fired back. She stood with her arms folded and her head cocked to the side, like she wasn’t one bit afraid to come after me.

I swear to God, I will never understand girls. Here I was, a normal size 10th grade guy, and here was this bony 8th grade girl giving me shit. All but one of the other girls with her looked like they would rather be home looking at Facebook or whatever junior high girls did than be standing here with Kelsey Pollock.

“Where do you live?” I asked Emily.

“Hudson,” she said. I could tell she was shitting herself, and that somehow this had to do with her, but how a scrawny little mouse like Emily Murphy had crossed Kelsey Skank Pollock was beyond me.

“Let’s go,” I said, and turned us around to head up Bergen rather than having to walk by Kelsey and her posse. I wasn’t putting it past them to jump Emily or Cori if we walked by, and I wasn’t in any hurry to hit a girl, which I totally would not mind if that girl were Kelsey.

The houses in that section were old and big and sat up on terraces that required two sets of steps to get from the street to the front door. When I was little, the cops would block off Hudson Street if it was really icy so us kids could go sledding. It wasn’t a huge hill, but given the right conditions and the right sled, you could fly down, cross over Johnson, get airborne over the railroad tracks, and coast into a stop just past the basketball courts. We would literally spend the entire day doing the same thing, laughing our asses off on the way down, breathless but happy on the way back up.

Cori and Emily and I reached the corner of Brown and Hudson just as little kids tumbled out of a school bus and ran to their waiting parents or grandparents. Emily

stopped dead in her tracks. Kelsey and the others stood in the middle of the block, in front of the brown house with the great big porch that wrapped around the side.

“Come on,” I said. “I’ve so had it with this little bitch.”

They watched us as we came towards them, not budging.

“Sorry, but I know where you live, Emily,” Kelsey said. “Your bodyguard can’t protect you forever.”

“Sorry, but they don’t allow dogs off their leashes in this neighborhood, so you better take your fleas and get out of here,” I said.

“Why don’t you stay the fuck out of it, douche bag?” Kelsey said.

“No, see, you’re the one who’s going to stay the fuck out of it,” I said. We were close enough to see her zits and a hickey the size of an Oreo on her dirty neck.

She laughed, looking me up and down. “And what if I don’t?” she said.

“If you don’t turn around in two seconds,” I said, taking out my cell phone, “I’m going to call Clarissa Beauchamp to come and beat your skanky ass all the way back to the ghetto where you belong.”

That wiped the sneer right off her face. Clarissa Beauchamp was the biggest badass girl in Gloucester. I didn’t know her personally, so I hoped Kelsey wouldn’t call my bluff. The other girls with her looked like they wanted to puke at the mention of Clarissa’s name. Kelsey snuck a look at them and seemed to shrink about six inches. Flipping me off, she turned in a huff, but only went a few yards away when she spun back around, pointing a finger.

“Like I said, Emily, watch your fucking back!” she said.

Across the street, a mother walking her kid home from the bus stop told Kelsey to watch her mouth.

“Fuck you, lady!” Kelsey said.

The lady’s mouth dropped open and she grabbed her kid’s hand. Then, looking over at us, she clamped her mouth shut and shook her head, no doubt thinking we were all the same, and hurried down towards Johnson.

We stood in front of the brown house and watched Kelsey and the others disappear as they crossed over Brown.

“It’s okay,” I said. “She won’t bother you anymore.” I tried to sound convincing, cool and calm, like I did this every day. Emily looked at me like a puppy who had just been yelled at.

“Thanks,” she said and started up the steps. When she got to the porch, she turned around and waved.

“Text me,” she said to Cori.

We waited for Emily to go inside then headed towards Johnson and walked in silence for awhile, the music coming out of my dangling earbuds sounding small and distant.

“What the hell was all that about?” I asked. “I mean, how does somebody like Emily piss off Kelsey Pollock?”

Cori didn’t answer. I wondered if maybe she was afraid that it would get back to Kelsey somehow and make things worse for Emily if she told, so I didn’t push it. We walked along for a few more blocks before she spoke.

“Emily’s mom found a couple Percs in her bureau, and her parents had a straight-up intervention on her, thinking she was hooked on them. They made her tell them who she got them off of. So she told them it was Kelsey, so her parents called the school, and Dr. T. called them both down to the office. Kelsey swore it was the first time she ever did it, so she got off with a warning because they both said it didn’t happen in school. Which is all a big friggin lie because Kelsey sells them for five bucks a piece in the C-Wing bathroom. Even senior high kids buy them from her,” she said in a quiet rush of words..

I let this disturbing information sink in as we passed the Peewee Baseball fields, freshly cleaned up after hibernating all winter, the signs of local businesses hanging from the outfield fences signaling the start of a new season. The only thing missing was the little kids in their too big uniform caps and tiny spikes and the parents shouting in the stands like they were watching a major league game. In another month, you wouldn’t be able to find a parking spot on this part of Johnson Boulevard from five to nine at night, and it would be that way until June.

“Was Emily with you when you were down at Fort Nassau that night?” I asked.

She nodded, looking straight ahead.

“So, did you and Emily take Percs when you were at her house last week,” and here I used the air quotes, which I hate when people do, but I felt like being sarcastic, “working on your civics project?”

She drew out her *no* into two syllables, like it was spelled *nowuh*, which I also hate when people do because it usually means they’re lying. Like Cori was that very second.

“I swear to god, if you ever take another pill again and I find out, I will tell Dad. Instantly,” I said. “For real.”

“You told me that already,” she said.

“Are you seriously getting cocky with me right now?” I said. “After I just saved your druggie friend’s ass?”

“She’s not a druggie,” she said.

“You know what, Cor? I’m so sick of your shit. Don’t even talk to me for the rest of the night,” I said.

“When are we going to tell Mom then?” she said.

“What’s this “we” shit? Pretty sure you and Ms. Kersey elected me to do that by myself. Behind my back, that is.”

“Whatever,” she said.

I wondered if she told Ms. Kersey about any of this, and that’s when it hit me: Cori needed to get out of Gloucester as soon as possible. She recognized the fact before I did. She wasn’t even in high school yet, and this is what was going on in her life? I knew I couldn’t deal with having to worry about her throughout four more years of this shit.

The cold blast of the river winds hit me in the face when we made the turn on Essex. I flipped up my hood and sunk my hands into the pockets of my jeans. Another school bus was unloading in front of the swim club, bundled up kids being claimed by adults who hurried them into idling cars or hustled them down the street towards home.

“And don’t even think about bringing it up again until I’m ready. I need to think, and I’m not doing anything until after Sunday,” I said. “You’re not going to ruin it for me again.”

“You seriously think Tiffany Cortland is into you?” she said. “She’s just using you for free guitar lessons.”

That felt a hundred times worse than when she told me I was a loser who had no friends.

The train whistle sounded two quick toots and one longer blast as the signal flashed on and the crossing gates came down, cutting Essex Street in half. The ground shimmied slightly under my feet though the engine was not yet visible. If I ran, I could make it under the gates before the train crossed, leave Cori and her attitude on the other side. I told myself it wasn’t true, what Cori said. Tiffany wasn’t like that. She had money and didn’t need free guitar lessons. Plus I think we were kind of sort of talking already.

“You know what? Tell Mom yourself, you little fucking ingrate,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Yeah, you did,” I said. “Don’t fucking talk to me.”

It was too late to run. The train rolled itself out in front of us, graffiti-decorated tank cars clanking and screeching, tying up traffic on both sides of the tracks.

*

The closer it got to Sunday, the less space I had in my brain for anything other than Tiffany coming over. We had decided that since she didn’t have a guitar, we would have the lesson at my house because it would be too hard for me to carry two guitars across town to her house. But I totally would have. I was, however, a little nervous about her seeing my house. It’s funny. I don’t ever remember caring about how my house

looked or smelled or what anybody thought about it until then. I guess knowing that two of my houses could fit into hers didn't help my confidence.

Aunt Tina came down on Saturday and helped me clean the entire downstairs after my detention. We even moved the furniture and vacuumed the tumbleweeds of dog hair that lay hidden underneath for months, maybe years. There was something very satisfying about the scent of lemon furniture polish, scouring powder, and bleach all mixed together, like an added bonus, extra proof that everything was spic and span, as Nana used to say. Aunt Tina was in a good mood and seemed happy for the company, not asking anything about that night Cori was at Fort Nassau, though I was sure Mom told her everything already.

"Everything okay with you?" she asked while we were putting clean sheets on my bed.

"Yeah," I said. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Look. Don't get an attitude," she said. "I'm just making sure you're okay. I know things were pretty rough around here for a few weeks."

"Everything's fine," I said, careful to omit even the slightest attitude.

"So, what's going on then?" she said.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Well, you picked up the dogshit out back without being asked. There are no dirty dishes in your room. You changed your sheets. Your clothes are put away," she said.

"You're being sociable. It's a little scary." She waited with her arms folded for an explanation, but she was sort of smiling, like she already knew the deal so I just told her that a friend was coming over to hang out the next day.

“Ohhhhh, I see. A friend,” she said.

My face blazed up right away.

“How about I get some munchies and stuff to drink for you and your friend then? Or would you rather get pizza and wings? We can do both,” she said. “Get two twenties out of my purse. God knows Frank has no imagination when it comes to junk food.”

“That’s okay,” I said, sorry I had even told her as much as I did. “It’s not a huge deal.” The next thing she would be doing was laying out my clothes for the occasion.

“Whatever you think. I’ll leave you the money in case you change your mind. It’s a crime that there’s nothing for kids to do in this town except eat,” she said. “And get into trouble.”

She left it at that, which I was grateful for. It would have been absolute torture to have both her and Mom interrogating me about Tiffany at the same time. Mom was bad enough. When she hadn’t mentioned it by dinnertime, I reminded her that Tiffany would be coming over the next day. I think part of me was hoping that Mom would somehow be able to control what kind of day she was going to have, like if she knew it was important to me, she could order herself to get a good night’s sleep and contain the muscle spasms. She got all excited and started asking all these questions about Tiffany and her family, like were her parents originally from Gloucester, what was her mom’s maiden name, were they related to the Cortlands who used to own the bakery on Jersey Avenue. I didn’t have too many answers, so I tried to move around the house to avoid her, but she found the strength to push her wheelchair after me from room to room.

“Is she hot?” she said.

That was definitely the old Mom coming out. The old Mom smiled a lot and everyone loved her sense of humor. She had a laugh that sounded like the brass section of the middle school band warming up. I tried not to smile, but I couldn't help it. Her greenish-brown eyes glittered with fun

"Yes she's hot, and do not shark on her when she's here either," I said.

"What do you think I am?" she said.

"I have no idea, but you sound super nosy and a little creepy, so don't ask her a bunch of questions. It's not like that," I said, but I couldn't keep my stupid mouth from smiling.

"I am truly sorry," she said. But it was obvious that she wasn't one bit sorry. She tried to hide her grin with a shaky hand. I almost laughed. Even Shuggy acted like he was in on it, circling around me and wagging his tail. If dogs could laugh, he was definitely yukking it up.

"I'll hang out in the bedroom while she's here, so you guys can have the living room to yourselves," she said.

"That's okay," I said. "We'll be in my room."

"Uh uh. No way," she said. "That's completely inappropriate. I'm sure her parents would not want her in a boy's bedroom. Besides, there's no place to sit down in your room other than the bed, and there's no way you're giving her a guitar lesson on your bed."

"Oh my God, Mom! You can't be serious!" I said. "What do you think is going to happen? It's just a guitar lesson."

She looked at me like I had just told her that I got all A's on my report card.

“Well, if it’s just a guitar lesson, then what’s the big deal about having it in the living room?”

“I don’t ask for too much,” I said. “I’m just asking that this one time you let me handle this. I promise you I won’t do anything to embarrass anyone or hurt anyone.”

The playfulness in her face dissolved into sadness or something like it. Her most recent muscle spasm had morphed into a sort of perpetual head shake, so that she looked like she was constantly disagreeing with whatever anyone was saying.

As I got up to go, she reached out her hand for mine. “I know you wouldn’t, hon,” she said. “You do what you think is best.”

I leaned down to kiss her on the cheek, her head bobbing slightly.

“But keep the door open,” she said, patting me on the head.

*

Sunday, April 1, April Fool’s Day, felt more like June 1. People dressed up in church clothes walked down the street with no coats on, little kids in short sleeves and light colored pants running up ahead until they reached the corner, where they waited impatiently for the adults to catch up. Shuggy, rather than scooting out to do his business and then scratching at the door ten seconds later to be let in, stretched himself out on the bare concrete patio, blinking slowly until he fell asleep, like a fat lizard on a warm rock. He refused to come in for about an hour but jumped up in a flash when Cori asked him if he wanted to go for a walk. He probably wondered what the hell was going on, first a thorough brushing the day before and now a walk. Poor little guy hadn’t been walked in weeks.

.....

I backed the wheelchair out the front door and then down the ramp to the sidewalk. The bright sunlight accentuated the M-shaped scar on Mom's forehead, from when a "screaming grounder took a wicked hop" back in the day. Inside, Shuggy whined the entire time Cori got him all suited up in his harness and leash until he busted out the opened door, hopping and wagging and barking, just so damn happy to be alive on such an awesome day. Cori and Mom laughed at how psyched he was, and as I watched the three of them go off down the street towards Broadway—a skinny girl pushing a woman in a wheelchair with a squat, happy dog leading the way—I had the overwhelming feeling that this was going to be the best day of my life. It looked like I would have the house to myself for Tiffany's lesson. I should have known that Mom would come through for me.

She stood at the front door at exactly noon. I had been watching for her out the living room window for almost twenty minutes. I caught sight of her turning the corner from Broadway. She was wearing jean shorts, a purple tank top, and purple flip flops. My heart started pumping and my mouth dried up instantly, leaving me with the sensation that I couldn't swallow.

When she walked into the living room with me, the earlier pleasure I had felt in the unmistakable clean smell dissolved into embarrassment. Everything about Tiffany was bright and shiny, like the surface of the river on the super sunny day. I cringed at the dingy light blue carpet that had been there all of my life. Ditto for the saggy furniture that didn't even match. But she didn't seem to notice. She walked right over to the fireplace to

check out the baby pictures and other family photos on the mantle. She said I was a cute baby, but Cori was way cuter. I think she was only messing with me, though.

“That’s so cool,” she said, pointing at Mom’s collection of carved wood giraffes that stood on the little corner table. She picked up the one of the baby nuzzling its mother, Mom’s favorite. “Giraffes are so cute,” she said.

I led her through the dining to the kitchen for something to drink and told her that Cori and Mom had gone out for a walk. She took the glass of iced tea I offered and drank it down in about five seconds. Then she burped. Like a guy.

“That was epic,” I said, putting up my hand for a high-five.

“That is so good,” she said. “Can I have some more please? I didn’t realize I was that thirsty.”

I watched her face as she let her eyes wander around, taking in everything. God, she was adorable.

“I love that clock,” she said, pointing at the apple clock.

“It’s just a clock,” I said. “It’s, like, 900 years old.”

“It’s cute,” she said. She pulled at the neck of her tank top a few times, revealing the soft swell of her cleavage. “I can’t believe how hot it is.”

“I can’t believe how hot *you* are,” I said, my voice sounding not quite like my own. I couldn’t believe I still had to balls to keep looking at her after saying something so lame.

She smiled a smile that I can only describe as naughty and put her glass down on the counter. Taking both of my hands, she pulled them behind her and stepped so close to me that her boobs flattened into my ribs. An instant hard-on strained against my jeans and

pressed into the softness of her belly. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed me with wet lips. Her tongue, cooled by the iced tea, swirled slowly and sensuously around mine. I'd hooked up with a few girls before, but no one ever kissed me like that. After a few seconds, she pulled away and leaned back against the counter, looking up me with that same wicked smile. She reached for her iced tea and drained it in a three gulps, setting the glass back down with a satisfied *aaahhhh*.

"So where are your guitars?" she asked, like making out me was the furthest thing from her mind.

"In my room," I said.

"You ready to get started?" she said

I've been ready for about two years now, I thought.

She moved around my room with the same curiosity that she did the living room and kitchen, inspecting things on my bureau, turning her head sideways to read the titles in my bookcase. I answered a few of her questions, briefly wondering if we could do it really quick before Mom and Cori got back, but instead we sat on the side of my bed, with the door open, alternately making out and playing guitar.

She was not a quick learner, her fingers refusing to stay in the correct position for long, and by the time I figured she had the G chord mastered, she'd forgotten C, so we had to go back to the beginning. I didn't mind, though, and she was a good sport about it. She laughed at her mistakes and when I teased her about how she stuck out her tongue when she concentrated really hard. When her fingers got sore, she sat with her back against the headboard and listened as I played some of my favorite tunes and a few of her

requests. She stretched out those perfect legs, crossing them at the ankles, her bare feet putting slight but obvious pressure on my hip.

When I said that I didn't mind, what I meant was that it was the most fun I'd ever had in my life. Nothing else even came close. I was surprised to see the time was 1:18 when Cori texted that she and Mom were out front. Tiffany came outside with me and talked to them for a little bit, bending down to pet Shuggy before saying goodbye.

"Why don't you walk Tiffany home, Drew?" Mom said.

The perfection of the day split wide open and scattered all around me like marbles falling from a kid's pouch. Mom just couldn't keep out of it, could she? Of course, I wouldn't mind hanging out with Tiffany for the rest of my life, but really, Mom?

"Oh, I'm okay," Tiffany said. "I'm actually going to hang out at the Frozen Cow with Grace. She's working. But thanks. It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Gilmore. Bye Cori. Thanks again, Drew."

She started walking towards the railroad tracks and then turned back with a little wave, catching all three of us, well, four if you count Shuggy, watching her.

"She's *so* cute," Mom said. "I think she likes you. What do you think, Cor?"

Cori looked me up and down and shrugged. "She doesn't seem like his type."

"Why? What's his type?" Mom asked. "I think they would be adorable together."

"I'm out of here," I said after I'd heard enough and started up the front steps.

"Call me when you two are done humiliating me."

Mom thought that was hilarious and called after me to come back, that they were only kidding. I didn't, though. I didn't want them to see the smile that I could no longer

keep hidden. I spent the rest of the afternoon in my room, practicing and listening to music, but mostly reliving the greatest hour and 18 minutes of my life.

It was Cori's turn to cook that night, which meant that we'd be having one of the four meals she knew how to make: hamburgers, spaghetti, grilled cheese and tomato soup, or tuna casserole. I was pretty hungry since I hadn't eaten lunch, so when I heard her banging around in the kitchen, I went out to see what was up. She stood at the sink, filling the big pot with tap water, a box of spaghetti and a jar of Ragu on the counter by the stove. Spaghetti in our house looked and tasted nothing like the spaghetti at Nick's house. I knew that if I showed up at the Montecalvos' door, no matter how far into their meal they were, or how many other people were at their table, they would make a place for me and feed me like a king. That's how Italians are. It's all about the food with them.

“Do we have anything to make garlic bread with?” I asked, knowing the answer but looking through the cupboard anyway.

She wrenched the hot water knob off and looked at me like I was crazy.

“What about a salad?” I asked.

“Dude, what am I, your personal chef?” she said. “If you want a friggin salad, *you* make it. You’re the only one who eats it anyway.”

“Damn, I was just asking,” I said, trying not to let her ruin my good mood.

“Well, don’t ask!” she yelled, slamming the towel drawer shut. “I’m not your slave!”

“What the hell is your problem?” I said. “You need to chill the fuck out.”

“*You* chill the fuck out!” she yelled.



Cori was not a big curser, especially when Mom was around, so I was pretty shocked that she dropped the f-bomb in the house. I let her think she was having the last word for a minute while she zigzagged the kitchen towel across the floor with her foot to sop up the water she had spilled.

“Why are you being such a bitch?” I asked. “I asked you a simple question.”

“It was two questions, and I’m sick of having to do all this shit around here,” she said. “It sucks!” Picking up the wet towel with her toes, she brought her foot up to meet her hand and then flung the towel towards the basement door.

“What sucks?” I asked. “Why don’t you try getting your ass out of bed in the morning to help me get Mom ready? You have nothing to complain about. You’re too lazy to even bend down and pick up a dirty towel and throw it in the hamper.”

“Oh, and I don’t do anything, right? What do you call making dinner and doing the laundry and the cleaning?” she said, seconds away from a straight-up freak out. “I swear to god I can’t wait to move in with Dad!”

“And I can’t wait for you to go!” I yelled back.

“What’s going on?” Mom asked. She sat in the doorway to the kitchen, her head shaking, her cheeks and forehead pink with sunburn. Neither one of us spoke. It was like we had been caught stealing red-handed.

“What do you mean, move in with your dad?” she repeated. “Are you serious?”

Cori stared at a random spot on the floor and nodded.

“Does he know?” Mom asked.

I kept my eyes on Cori because I couldn’t bear to look at Mom. This was not how she should have found out.

.....

“Have you talked to your father about this?” Mom persisted.

Cori shook her head.

“What about you, Drew?” Mom said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Mom let her head sag down towards her chest, like it was too much for her to hold it steady any longer. When she raised it a few seconds later, her eyes held something that I couldn’t identify, something between annoyance and excitement.

“What I mean is, do you want to go live with your father, too?” She wasn’t posing it as a question. It was more like she was being forced to translate something that I should have understood on my own. “It’s what I’ve been trying to talk to you about.”

“I live here,” I said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Because I think it’s a good idea,” she said, like she hadn’t even heard me. “What I mean is that it’s, if that’s what you think will make you happy, if you think that you would like to live with your dad, you should do it. It makes sense at this point. For all of us.”

She pushed her wheelchair a few inches closer, practically pinning me against the counter.

“Not for me it doesn’t,” I said. I felt like the floor had shifted slightly. I gripped the counter behind me for support.

“We need to talk about this,” Mom said.

“You two talk about it,” I said. “I don’t want to live with Dad. I want to stay here. With you.”

.....

I pushed off the counter and headed out the back door into the fading daylight. Even at a full-throttle sprint, I couldn't outrun the fact that Mom thought that it was a good idea for me to go live with Dad, too.

It makes sense at this point. For all of us, she'd said.

I understood that it made perfect sense for Cori, but how did it make sense for Mom and me? Who would take care of her? And what about me? Everything I ever knew, everything I ever wanted was right there in front of me. How would it make sense to take it away from me?

I needed to talk to someone.

I half-expected Mrs. Sheehan's Corolla to come careening around the corner on two wheels at that second, screeching to a halt in front of me. I wanted her to order me into the car, flick my arm and yell at me for running in the middle of the street. She would know what to say to calm me down, and even if she cursed at me and called me an idiot, whatever she said would make me feel better.

But she wasn't a superhero. She was just the attendance officer at my school. I had to work this out another way.

I could be at Nick's in five minutes, where I could eat until I couldn't move and no one would ask me to do anything except pass the gravy.

.....

Chapter 9

“Hey, paisan! How you doin, pal?” Nick’s Pop-pop Testa got up from the table to greet me with a hug and a two-handed kiss on the cheek. He held my arms and looked me up and down. “Jeeze, you look like a skinny runt, Andrew.” He refused to call me Drew, but I didn’t care. “Boy you shot up, though, didn’t you? Come and sit down.” He guided me over to where Nick and Mr. M. sat waiting to be served. Huddled together at the island, putting last minute touches on something that smelled insanely delicious, Mom-mom Testa and Mrs. M stopped what they were doing to hug and kiss me, too. Even though I only saw them a few times a year, Nick’s grandparents always acted like they were so happy to see me, like they had known me all my life. The huge, state-of-the-art kitchen rang with happy voices all talking at once. Everyone was smiling.

Nick’s mom never disappointed at mealtime. To start, gravy with all the meats—meatballs, sausage, beef, braciole so tender you could break it apart with a spoon, and pork—homemade manicotti (pronounced *mahnahGUT*) oozing with thick ricotta cheese (pronounced *rigGUT*), fried meatballs on the side, salad (served at the end of the meal), and chewy bread from Cacia’s bakery. And always, always a “sweet,” which is what they called dessert, with coffee to end. That night, the sweet happened to be chocolate-chip cannoli the size of a hot dog bun. Afterwards we all, at least the guys, sat around the long rectangular table, leaning back in our chairs, moaning from the pain and pleasure of an epic meal.

I loved eating with the Montecalvos, not just because of the sheer outrageousness of the amount and taste of the food, but also because once you sat down at the table and shared a meal with them, you became one of the family. It was like the act of eating from

the same platter of meatballs entitled you to be part of the conversation, no matter what it was. For instance, if Mom-mom was talking about how Aunt Angie was starting to get forgetful, she would turn to me and say, “Angie is my mother’s sister. She’s 87 and still lives in her own house on Eleventh, but she’s getting up there.” Or if Pop-pop was talking about trading in his Cadillac for a new one, he would turn to me and say, “Always buy American, Andrew. You’re putting Americans out of work otherwise.”

Inevitably, the vein of conversation ran in my direction: *How’s your mother? What is it again? Heaven forbid. Already in a wheelchair? So young.* I gave them just the specifics, keeping my feelings out of it, Mrs. M. jumping in to add some details now and then. Of course I left out the part about possibly having to move to my dad’s.

Pop-pop grabbed my forearm in his cinderblock hand and gave it a squeeze. “You’re a good boy,” he said.

He always told me that. Last year he crammed a crumpled twenty into my hand on the sly as I was leaving, saying, “Have some fun, Andrew. You’re a good boy.”

It was all so different from my family, especially how meals and conversations went down in my house. Don’t get me wrong, I loved my family more than anything in the world, but we didn’t seem to enjoy each other’s company or really celebrate having a meal together like Nick’s family did. Maybe because we didn’t have the time anymore? Or maybe because there was just the three of us? Maybe we just stopped trying. To me, it was clear that despite his obvious physical shortcomings, Nick was, straight-up, the luckiest guy in the world, and I wanted a family like his when I grew up.

As usual, Nick and I went out to the garage for a little after-dinner jam session, where I told him about the lesson and making out with Tiffany. Well, not *everything*, like

how she could burp like a dude or how her French kisses did more for me than any Internet porn ever did.

“Good work, bro,” he said, “but can I make one suggestion? If you really want to impress me, honk on her tits next time.”

“If there is a next time,” I said. “I don’t want her to think that’s all I care about, but if she—”

“Save the altar boy act for your mom, dude. It’s me you’re talking to. Life is short. Get laid when you can.”

“Oh, and speaking from one who gets laid all the time?” I asked. I regretted saying it even as it was coming out of my mouth, knowing full well that Nick was not very fortunate with the opposite sex. Even younger chicks totally blew him off like he was a joke.

“This is not about me,” he said. “This is about you living the dream.” With that he settled into his chill groove and let his music take him away.

I was glad I hadn’t insulted him. He didn’t deserve it.

We jammed for a good 15 minutes straight, me playing rhythm behind his always-solid lead, before he stopped and spoke again.

“So while I salute your major breakthrough with Tiffany Cortland,” he said, “I’m merely suggesting that when the opportunity presents itself again, go for it.”

The words *breakthrough* and *opportunity* ping-ponged around in my head as I starting strumming on the Ovation again. Since the day I had the panic attack in the Guidance Office, I’d been sort of stuck on Hendrix’s cover of “All Along the Watchtower,” every part of it: his solos, the rhythm guitars, the lyrics. It was like I had

just discovered it. Every time listened to it, I saw something different. Nick recognized the intro chords right away and picked up the solo as I drove the rhythm.

There's too much confusion. I can't get no relief.

Those words totally summed up my life at that point. Whenever I'd feel stoked about having something more with Tiffany, someone or something threatened to fuck it up or take it away all together. And I couldn't even begin to think about what it would be like to live with my Dad and Kelly.

"I think Cori is going to live with my Dad," I blurted out in the interlude before the next song materialized.

"Yeah? Whose idea is that?" he said.

"Cori's, but my mom thinks it's a good idea," I said. "Actually, she said that it makes sense for me to go, too."

We let that bit of news settle into the space between the two resting guitars.

"And what do you think?" he said.

"Does Cori need to go live with my dad? Absolutely," I said. "She's going to get in trouble if she stays around here."

"Okay, but what I meant is what do *you* think about *you* living with your dad?" he said.

"Are you serious? You have to ask?" I said.

"I'm asking," he said.

"I don't want to," I said. "First of all, who is going to help my mom?"

"Isn't your aunt a nurse or something?" he said.

"Yeah, but she lives in Philly," I said.

“My point is that they probably already have a plan worked out if your mom is saying it makes sense for you and Cori to live with Big Frank,” he said.

“I’ve lived here my whole life. I’m going to be a junior next year. I am not starting a new school as a junior,” I said.

“That would completely suck,” he said, “if you gave a shit about school.”

“I do give a shit about school! I can’t help it if I have to be at home a lot!” I was starting to get pissed by that point. He was not helping matters.

“So if you weren’t needed at home, if you had your choice, you’d rather be in school?” he said.

“Duh,” I said. “I’m not saying I love school or anything like that, but, yeah. Of course I’d rather be at school if my mom didn’t need me at home.”

“Interesting,” he said.

“What’s so fucking interesting about it?” I said. “It’s a no-brainer. I get to see Tiffany every day I’m there. And right now, she’s the only thing that makes me feel like I matter.”

He nodded in deep, understanding, approving dips as he cradled his Telecaster.

“Then that would definitely suck if you had to move,” he said.

We left it at that, jamming right into the dark, until Mom-mom and Pop-pop banged on the garage door to say goodbye, practically trying to drag me into the Cadillac for a ride home.

“Pops! Cease and desist!” Nick finally got through to them. “He likes to run.”

He shook his head as we waved goodbye to them from the driveway. “Italians,” was all he said.

I don't know how, but talking to Nick somehow managed to help me clear my head, and, as always, I felt better leaving his house than when I arrived. Still too full to run, I walked home instead, taking my time, cutting up Brown Street at Martin's Lake. I liked to look at the big old homes in this neighborhood at night, with their lights on in almost every room. Most of them still had the windows open, and I could see people going about their lives inside. A few houses were almost completely dark except for the flashing blue haze of television light. Old people, I assumed, ready to call it a day. Even though I was not the least bit hungry, the unmistakable aroma of meat on the grill filled me with a comfort I couldn't explain. Dogs barked, doors slammed, trashcans were hauled to the curb, cars rode up and down the street, and always the ever-present rumbling of planes overhead. It was a beautiful night for a walk. I was tempted to keep on going all the way to the river to look at the boats and the bridge all lit up, but I had already been gone without checking in for almost three hours.

All of the downstairs lights were on in my house, too, which was weird because Mom preferred to watch TV in the dark. Shuggy bounded out into the kitchen to greet me like I had finally arrived home from a year-long vacation, and then spun his wheels to race back to the living room. The sight of the unopened jar of Ragu and box of spaghetti still sitting on the counter sent a stab of guilt through my bloated belly.

"It's me, Mom," I said.

"Out here," she called from the living room.

A pizza box and a stack of photo albums covered the coffee table. Cori sat curled up on the couch, sorting through loose pictures. Mom had a photo album opened on her

lap. Shuggy stood guard at the pizza box.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Just looking at some pictures,” Mom said.

“I can see that,” I said, picking up the album on top. Memories of our summer camping trips to World’s End flooded my head space as I flipped through the plastic-covered pages. There I was with no front teeth, holding up a stringer with two tiny catfish dangling from it; there was Cori, a chubby baby in a pink bathing suit and swimmy, clinging to Dad as he stood waist-deep in the clear creek; there was Nana sitting at the picnic table by the camper, looking uncomfortable in her white pants and red jacket; and there was Mom sitting on Dad’s lap on a lounge chair by the camp fire, both of them smiling, holding cans of Coors Light.

“We need to make some decisions, but you have to be part of those decisions,” Mom said, or at least I think that’s what she said. I could barely hear her over the thunder of the waterfalls as we hiked through Ricketts Glen, Cori on Dad’s shoulders, me and Mom single file up ahead of them, taking sure strides on the narrow, slippery path.

“Drew, are you listening to me?” Mom said.

The waterfalls dissolved into a distant hiss that sounded an awful lot like bridge traffic, but I clung to the deep green smell of damp earth.

“It sounds like you two have already made up your minds,” I said, “so why don’t you just tell me what you decided while I was out.”

“We didn’t decide anything yet. We discussed some things. And I’ve been trying to talk to you about for a few weeks now, but you run out of the house whenever I try.”

“I told you how I felt. I don’t want to live with Dad,” I said.

“I know you don’t, but sometimes we have to do things we are resistant to at first when they make the most sense,” she said.

“You keep saying ‘it makes sense, it makes sense.’ How does it make sense for me?” I said.

“You need to be a normal teenager. You *deserve* to have a normal life. We can’t keep pretending that it’s okay for you guys to have to live like this.” Her voice, which had started out strong and matter-of-fact, faltered a little.

“Live like what—a family?” I said. “So you have MS and you need some help doing things. So what? That’s what families do. They help one another. *That’s* normal.”

“It’s not normal that you have to help me get dressed,” she said, “or do all the cooking and the cleaning because I can’t. It’s not normal that you can’t take guitar lessons or run track, or that Cori can’t have friends sleep over. And it’s not *fair*. Not when there’s an alternative.”

“What’s not fair is that you’re asking me to give up everything,” I said. “That’s what would happen if I went with Dad. A new house. A new town. A new school. New friends.” I hesitated to say *new girlfriend*. “That’s what’s not fair.”

“You’re right. It’s not fair,” she said, “and I am so sorry that you will be getting hit the hardest. But the bigger injustice, what I can no longer accept or allow, is that you are responsible for my care.”

“It’s not a major deal. We do okay, don’t we?” I looked to Cori for some backup, forgetting that she was on Team Mom.

“*Yes*, oh my god, yes, you guys do more than okay.” She somehow seemed to gain strength as she continued. “But what happens when the day comes that I can’t get

out of bed? When I can't feed myself or speak? When I'm in diapers? She looked away as if embarrassed by the mere thought of it. "No," she said. "We can't do it anymore."

"But if I don't mind, what's the big deal?" I said.

"Drew," she said.

"There are services that we could get. Programs to help us. I'll talk to Ms. Kersey at school tomorrow. We could get somebody to stay with you while I'm—"

"God *damn* it, Drew, listen to me!" she said, her voice like shattered glass. Her spasming legs knocked the photo album from her lap to the floor with a *thunk* that sent Shuggy running for cover. "We can't do it anymore. *I* can't do this anymore," she said.

Neither Cori nor I made a move to pick up the photo album where it lay spilled open, like bloodless roadkill. Shuggy tiptoed closer to it, inspecting it for pizza crumbs.

"What will happen to you?" I asked.

"I will live with Aunt Tina until... I will stay with Tina at her place. She is all set up," she said.

"Why can't Aunt Tina..." I couldn't finish my question. It was no use. My head was pounding and my stomach was ready to heave Mrs. M.'s awesome dinner all over my feet.

"I spoke with your dad while you were out," she said. "He's ready, too. And Cori offered to share a room with Jack so you could have your own room."

If Cori was expecting any gratitude from me for that one she was shit out of luck.

"You can come down every weekend and visit whenever you want," Mom persisted in her hard sell. "You could take the train to Thirtieth Street if we can't get you a ride. You could take the speedline over here and spend the day with Nick. Or Tiffany.

You'll be driving soon, too. We will do whatever we can to work it out. You don't have to give up your friends here just because you will be living somewhere else."

The thought of spending an entire day with Tiffany had only existed in my fantasies up to that point. I let the idea gather some momentum: a whole day with the train schedule as my only concern, being responsible for just myself. Hanging out. Jamming out. Making out. Straight up having fun. It kind of scared me a little, so I reeled it back in before I got too carried away, knowing what usually happened when really I looked forward to something.

Mom sat with one arm pinning the other to her stomach, doing her best to absorb the unrelenting spasms, waiting for some kind of response from me. Her face lit up with a look of hopeful expectation that I didn't have in me to take away.

"I need some time," I said. "If Cori wants to go right away and get it over with, that's cool. Whatever. Just promise me that you won't make me do anything until after spring break."

I could either pretend for the next two weeks that nothing was up, keep hanging out and hooking up with Tiffany. Act as if I were going to be around forever, and spring it on her at the last minute, like I just found out, "*Oh, hey, by the way. I'm moving to my dad's house an hour away.*" By that point, hopefully we would be in love and she would have no choice but to keep it going. I had gotten pretty good at pretending.

Or I could tell Tiffany straight away that I would be moving soon and hope like hell that she wouldn't think, *then why bother keeping it up?* and forget about me before the end of the day.

"Of course," Mom said. "We don't have to do anything right away."

Everything about her appearance seemed to soften, like someone had taken a sponge or something and smoothed out the rough spots along the edges of her face. “It doesn’t seem possible that Easter is in two weeks,” she said. “Before you know it, the school year will be over.”

“I’ll get the Easter baskets down from the crawl space after school tomorrow,” Cori piped up.

I sat there, thinking about how much had changed since last Easter, when Mom was still working at the Acme, when Cori and Kati were still inseparable, when I still believed that music could save me from anything. When I still hadn’t worked up the guts to talk to Tiffany.

“I’ll call Duffy’s and put in an order,” Mom said. “I hope it’s not too late. They run out of the big solid chocolate bunnies if you wait too long.”

I think we all chose to forget that she couldn’t dial the phone, couldn’t walk the five blocks down Broadway to Duffy’s Candies, and couldn’t make up our baskets after we’d gone to bed on Easter Saturday. But it was enough that she wanted to.

“I’ll get a large butter cream egg for us to share, too.” She smiled right on through the head shaking and leg spasms.

“I love Duffy’s butter cream eggs,” Cori said.

“Can you get some of those little coconut eggs, too?” I asked. “They are so slamming.”

Shuggy whined and paced near the pizza box, reminding us how much he loved the crusts. I finally relented, tearing one in half and offering it to him. He snatched it out of my hand like a piranha and bolted into the dining room to enjoy his treat in peace

under the table. We all cracked up at that. Shuggy killed me sometimes, with his crazy yet predictable ways. It was all about the food with him, too.

“Is Aunt Tina going to let Shuggy live in her house? You know how she hates dog hair,” I said.

“Yes, she said as long as he doesn’t sit on the furniture,” Mom said.

We all cracked up at that one, too, knowing full well that Shuggy would be all over that furniture the minute Aunt Tina left the house.

A rush of sadness came over me, thinking that I wouldn’t have that little guy to greet me when I came home every day, like I was his best friend in the whole world and he hadn’t seen me in a year. There was no question that Shuggy had to go with Mom, though. They needed each other.

The photo album that had fallen to the floor was opened to a page of Christmas pictures. There I was with my first guitar. A present from Nana, a second-hand Yamaha FG700S that she bought at Old Towne Music “for a song,” she said. Funny how it looked so big in my arms in the picture but how quickly I felt like I had outgrown it. I took it back to Old Towne Music two years later and traded it in on the Washburn, the same guitar that Tiffany had learned, or tried to learn, a few chords on that day. I felt myself smile, thinking about how musically un-inclined she seemed. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she was more into hearing me play than learning for herself.

That night, long after Mom and Cori had gone to bed, I played for hours, improvising, my ten fingers and six strings giving voice to my soul, a voice that howled with grief, soared with ecstasy, and wailed with anger. I let it cover me, pass through me,

fill me up, and then pour me out like water. I felt all of it, but it couldn't touch me. I just acknowledged it and kept playing until I was too tired to keep my eyes open.

At least that much had not changed in a year. Music still had the power to save me.

*

It was pitch dark when a series of short, half-hearted whistles from the 5:20 train woke me. I had fallen asleep in my clothes with my guitar on the bed next to me. The window was open and the warmth of the early morning guaranteed another summer-like day. A million jumbled thoughts crowded into my head and threatened to short-circuit my brain if I didn't slow everything down. I changed into shorts and sneakers and then jumped out my window, hoping that Shuggy didn't hear me. He would never let me out of the house without waking everyone up.

Traffic was sparse so I ran in the middle of the street, settling into an easy pace, no iPod, no watch, only the sound of my deep, rhythmic breathing. Like a slow-moving train of UFOs, the red-eye flights descended every two minutes. A creepy vapor from the too-bright LED lights illuminated King Street like an abandoned carnival. I cut behind the fire house and picked up the river walk at the old Coast Guard base. Jersey Day lay curled up on a bench in front of the pavilion. At low tide, the pier looked like it was on stilts. A lone fisherman had already cast his line out.

I sprinted to the end of the pier and pulled up sharply a few feet from the railing.

"For chrissake, kid, don't jump," he said. "You'll scare the fish."

I ignored him and looked down at the black water. The glassy surface didn't fool me; just a few feet out from where I stood, the bottom of the channel dropped 40 feet, the current swift, deadly.

"Ain't you Frank Gilmore's boy?" the fisherman asked.

He looked kind of familiar, but I couldn't tell for sure who he was in the dull light.

"Yeah," I said. "Frank's my dad."

"I thought that was you when I seen you running up. I live on Morris. Me and your dad went to school together. I'm Scott Rogers," he said, putting out his hand.

"I'm Drew," I said.

"Nice to meet you, Drew. I see you running all over the place. You play football?" he said, shaking my hand with his surprisingly soft one.

"I played midget football," I said, "but I wasn't very good. I stick to running now."

"Running ain't a sport," he said shaking his head. "Least not a very exciting one. You oughta be a wide receiver, like your dad."

Whatever, dude, I thought and turned back to the water.

"Frank and me played football for Coach Farrish all four years together. Did you know that?" he said.

"I know he played football," I said.

"Your old man, he was pretty good. You're probably faster, but he had great hands. We won a lot of games because of them hands. Never any championships, but we come close."

I never knew that. Where Mom talked often about playing sports in high school, maybe even jokingly bragged a little about how good she was, Dad rarely talked about it, and I never once remember him telling anyone about how good his hands were. He must have been really disappointed when he realized that, even as a little kid, I didn't have the hands or the heart for football.

"He's doing pretty good for himself, huh?" Scott Rogers said. "We lost touch when he left town, but we see each other around sometimes. Pick up where we left off. That's how it is with us Gloucester boys, right? The rest of the world might think we ain't shit, but we stick together. He still up Trenton State?"

"Yeah, but they call it Midstate now," I said.

"Don't matter what they call it. They can call it Happy Acres, but it don't change the fact that it's a bad, bad place," he chuckled at his joke but it got him hacking his smoker's cough like Mrs. Sheehan. "I could never work there," he said.

"He's a sergeant now," I offered.

"Well, maybe one day your old man will be Warden. He's a good guy. You be sure to tell him Scott Rogers was asking for him. He'll remember me."

"I will," I said.

"Nice meeting you, Drew," he said, offering his hand again. "And it ain't too late to go out for football. All you gotta do is let Coach Farrish see you run. Be like Forrest Gump and run right through practice while they're working the seven-on-seven drills. Coach'll be like, 'Who the *hell* is that?' like in the movie."

That sent him into an epic laughing/coughing spasm that I'm pretty sure woke up Jersey Day over on his bench and scared all the fish to the other side of the river.

I made a note to remember to ask Dad about Scott Rogers and Coach Farrish and his good hands.

It seemed like it went from spring to summer in one day. All along Johnson Boulevard, the trees and bushes, which barely had buds on them one day, were covered in white and pink and yellow flowers the next. Kids walked to school slowly, wearing shorts and flip flops, all pumped up about having the week after Easter off. Cori was really slowing me down that day, but I guess I was walking extra fast on account of being jacked to see Tiffany. Things were getting pretty serious. We texted constantly and held hands in the hallways between classes. We talked on the phone every night, and she came to my house for two more Sunday lessons, Mom and Cori clearing out again to give us some space. We didn't get a whole lot accomplished during those lessons, music-wise anyway. Especially the last time, when she straddled me on the bed and then took off her shirt and bra. She had let me touch her boobs under her shirt before, but I had never them naked. When she reached back to undo her bra and unleashed them, I thought I would explode right then.

I checked my phone like twenty times to make sure I hadn't missed a text from her on the way to school. I called her the night before when I hadn't heard from her after the lesson, but it went to voicemail. I knew that she had hitting lessons and a family party or something, so I just left a "seeing what's up, no big deal" message. I didn't get anything back from her.

When I walked into homeroom as the late bell was ringing, she didn't look at me and shake her head, like she did every morning. She didn't look at me during the Pledge of Allegiance. She didn't even look at me when I sat down next to her and said, "Hey." She just turned and started talking to Dan Eston, like he was the most interesting person in the world. I felt like someone had thrown a bucket of cold water in my face. Maybe she hadn't heard me.

"Hey," I said again, touching her lightly on the arm.

"Hey," she said, moving her arm away and still not looking at me.

Something was definitely up. My face ignited with an instant fever.

"What's going on?" I asked.

She didn't answer, just rummaged through her backpack and pulled out a notebook.

What the hell had happened in less than 16 hours? The last time I saw her she was half naked, and now she wouldn't even look at me. I felt sick, trapped in the midst of twenty people who I imagined were staring at me, waiting for me to puke all over myself. I would have to suffer through two classes of this not-knowing shit before I saw her again in English, where I would have to sit next to her while she went out of her way to ignore me. I knew I couldn't take it that long.

She was intent on writing something in her notebook, her face hidden by her hair when I turned sideways in my seat to face her. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" I said.

"Nothing's wrong," she said, closing her notebook with more force than was necessary.

The brightness that normally gathered around her was gone, like she was in power-save mode. She stood and began packing up her stuff even though there was still five minutes left in homeroom. I was not letting her walk away from me.

“Can I talk to you in the hallway?” I stood and moved a little closer to her, not caring if anyone overheard.

She sighed heavily and, as if for permission, looked at Mr. D’Ambrosio, who nodded his head slightly, like he knew exactly what was going on.

I could feel the nosy eyes of everyone following us as we walked out into the hallway, where a few stragglers still cramming books into their backpacks and slamming locker doors rushed off in one last effort to avoid a tardy detention. While I stood there, waiting for the right words to form in my mouth, Tiffany fired off a text and then looked past me down the hallway, looking painfully bored.

“Are you going to tell me what I did?” I finally asked, sounding like a whiny girl.

She shook her head and looked down at her feet. “It’s more what you didn’t do,” she said.

“What? What didn’t I do? Just tell me. I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, still whining.

She continued to look at her feet or the floor, anywhere but at me.

“Tiffany, I swear to god that I do not have a clue what is going on. How can I apologize or do anything if I don’t know what I did? Or didn’t do?” I said.

Finally, finally, she turned those gorgeous green eyes on me, only they weren’t shining with niceness and fun like usual, but brimming with tears and seriously pissed

off. She opened her mouth to say something, but clamped it shut again and started walking away.

“Wait a minute,” I said, starting after her, but the first period bell rang, and from every doorway in B-wing, hundreds of kids poured out into the hallway like water bursting through a dam. I lost her in the flood.

The noise should have been deafening, but it seemed far away and indistinct, like the sounds of a crowded beach just before you doze off on the sand. Standing there looking like a freak, I allowed myself to be jostled by the flow of traffic, which had started to thin the closer it got to the beginning of first period. There was no way I was going to make it even if I sprinted, and I didn’t even want to exert the effort because Mrs. Lewis would give me a bunch of shit whether I was two seconds late or two minutes late.

I almost collided with Mr. D’Ambrosio as he leaned against his open door.

“You’re going to be late,” he said, and as if on cue, the bell rang. “You want me to write you a pass?”

“Yes, please,” I said, making to go back into homeroom.

He stepped away from the door, letting it close almost all the way before sticking his head in and telling his class to get started on their warm-up.

“You know, it’s none of my business,” he said, “but I’ve learned that things have a way of working themselves out if you let them alone for a little bit.”

I was not in the mood for him to go Oprah on me, but I genuinely liked him so I let him talk.

“Kind of like a mosquito bite,” he continued. “If you can get past the first few minutes of that excruciating itchiness and not scratch it, it’ll subside and go away. But if you keep scratching it...”

“How long is a little bit?” I asked.

He smiled and scratched his head, as if all this talk about mosquitoes was making him itchy.

“Not long enough for her to think that you’ve given up,” he said.

I’ll never give up, I thought.

So I sulked through geometry. I bit the calluses on my fingertips through Spanish, wondering how I would handle English, having to sit behind her while she ignored me. While she ignored me in English, I paid attention and took notes like it was my job. We had a sub for history, so I put my earbuds in and tried to take a nap, but Tiffany’s teary, angry eyes kept floating around on the backs of my eyelids. All I could think about was having to face her again in biology.

I almost lost my nerve and bounced at lunch time—the cafeteria crowd offering the best cover for the slip out—but Nick made me stay, going on and on about the Harley Davidson he wanted to buy and customize with his dad. He knew something was up with me, but he didn’t ask questions when I didn’t get into it. I can’t tell you too much about what he said, but I can tell you that he didn’t shut the hell up until we split up in the hallway after lunch. He flashed me a peace sign and rolled away in true Nick style, checking out the girls like he was a rock star.

English must have toughened me up for bio because I managed to get through it without feeling like I was fighting off a seizure. She sat on the other side of the room with her friends, but I caught her looking at me once. She didn't look as pissed off, just really sad. I had snuck a few looks at her during lunch, and it was obvious even from the distance of half the length of the cafeteria that she was still majorly upset. The not knowing was killing me.

Eighth period was Behind the Wheel with Pauly and Grace. Our last one. I could play 1000 questions with Grace about Tiffany while Pauly got yelled at by Schultz. It might be weird because even though Grace and I could talk about music with no problem, we rarely talked about anything else. I had to get over it, though. Even if Grace went back and told Tiffany that I was acting like a stalker, at least she would know I was asking and maybe I would find out the truth.

I took my turn first, remembering to adjust all the mirrors and use my turn signal when I pulled out of the parking spot.

"Nice, Gilmore. Nice," Mr. Schultz said, and then turning towards the back seat he said, "If you fail to check your mirrors or use your signals, you will fail the road test. Guaranteed."

In the rearview mirror, I saw Grace roll her eyes and smirk. Schultz said the same thing every single time we drove, no matter who went first, if you remembered to check your mirrors and use your signals or not. You could tell he was secretly proud of his play on words because he would nod his head as if he were agreeing with himself. At the stop sign on Market Street, I caught a glimpse of Pauly. He looked like he had just

been asked to explain what his dad found attractive about his mom, and his bottom lip was moving like he may have been praying.

“Corcoran, you’re next,” Mr. Schultz said when I pulled into the parking lot at Payless to switch after a flawless run. I was an excellent driver.

Pauly’s hands quivered as he fiddled with the rearview mirror. He caught my eye and I gave him the *You got this* nod. I had pulled through a parking spot so that he wouldn’t have to back out, one of the things he was particularly bad at. He signaled properly and approached the driveway that led to Route 130. Curbs were a big problem for him, too.

I almost cheered when he eased out on to Browning Road with barely a bump and came to a smooth stop at the red light. Schultz let go of the dash board and sat back. Grace turned to me and smiled. Though he still gripped the wheel at 9 and 3, Pauly’s shoulders slid down his neck away from his ears as he waited for the light to change. The blinker ticked off a steady duple meter—one two, one two, one two, one two.

“Alright now,” Schultz said. “I want you to go up to the light at 130 and Klemm and make that left. Let’s see if you can manage to stay in your lane this time.”

Pauly nodded gravely as if he were accepting a solemn challenge. Staying in the lane was still pretty tricky for him. If he didn’t have a good outing today, Mr. Schultz would make him do six more hours next marking period before he gave him credit. I don’t think he would have been as bad a driver if Schultz didn’t rag on him constantly. What Pauly needed was a coach, someone to tell him when he was doing a good job, boost his confidence to get him through when he wasn’t. I suddenly felt bad for the times when I had sat in the back seat and laughed at his jerky stops and careening turns.

“You got this, Pauly,” I said.

“That’s right. Bang it out, kid,” Grace said.

As he coasted to a perfect stop in the turning lane at Klemm, Pauly’s mouth twitched with what looked like a smile struggling to show itself.

“By god, I think you did it, Corcoran,” Schultzy said, “and it’s about time, too.”

Grace and I both let loose with a *woohoo*, and a huge smile broke out on Pauly’s red face. ‘ “Pipe down back there, you two,” Schultz said. “You’ll distract him.”

But it was all Pauly after that. He killed it.

As we walked back into the school, I was getting ready to bring up Tiffany to Grace, but Grace spoke first.

“So when are you moving?” she said.

It was as if someone had pegged me in the head with a soccer ball.

“How do you know about that?” I asked.

“My little sister said that your sister posted something on Facebook about this being her last week here because you guys were going to live with your dad,” she said.

I swear to God, if Cori were standing next to me, I think I would have choked her. For real.

“Listen, I didn’t mean to...” Grace said.

“No, it’s cool,” I said, cutting her off. I took out my cell phone to text Tiffany. I hoped she would read it.

Chapter 10

I figured it would be too stalkerish to ask someone to get Tiffany in the locker room for me before softball practice, so I went around to the back of the gym, where she would come out to take the walkway to the softball fields. She would have to run smack into me to get there. I didn't care if she made me follow her, crawling on my knees past track practice and all the way across the soccer field. I couldn't let another minute go by without talking to her. She had to have seen my text by then. At 2:42, I sent: *Have to talk, I know why ur pissed. I can xplain. Plz.* By 2:55, still nothing from her. At least I knew what was up, and though I was still shitting myself, I felt hopeful that she would understand if she would just hear me out.

When I got the text at 2:59, my sweaty hands almost dropped my phone trying to open it. Finally. Even if all she said was that she didn't want to talk, anything was better than being ignored. I silently thanked Mr. D. for his advice about not scratching mosquito bites.

I fumbled the phone again, trying to make some shade with my hand so that I could see the screen. It was only Cori, wanting to know where I was. Too much to text, so I pressed the Call button.

"Yeah?" she said.

"I told you to never put anything about me on Facebook! You have no idea what you've done!" I said.

"What are you talking about?" she said.

"You told the whole world we were moving, you idiot. And Tiffany found out about it before I had the chance to tell her," I said.

“You haven’t told her yet? You’re the idiot,” she said.

I swear to God if you fucked this up for me...”

“Where are you?” she said.

“Out by the football field,” I said.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I have to talk to Tiffany,” I said.

“Oh my God. For real? Didn’t you just spend all day with her? You are—“

I snapped my phone shut as the exit door of the gym burst open, spilling out clumps of loud-talking girls, each with a bat bag hanging from her shoulder and a blue “G” painted on her left bicep. I spotted Tiffany in her uniform right away: skin tight gray pants and a blue sleeveless jersey with “Lady Lions” written across the chest. Her long hair was pulled up high in a ponytail that dangled through a blue visor. She was wearing sunglasses. I hadn’t realized that it was a game day. I’d never even seen her play.

The groups quickly evened out to couples walking side-by-side as they took to the path. Tiffany stepped out of the crowd and walked toward the back of the bleachers that formed an alley with the rear of the school. Taking that as my cue, I followed her, trying not to look too much at her ass in those pants. When she reached a patch of shade, she plunked her bag down and sat on top of it. She still refused to look at me. Game face all the way.

I was going for it, all in. I didn’t care who saw or heard or thought they heard what. This was one thing I was determined not to let anyone else mess up for me, even though I had done a pretty good job of messing it up myself. I had to make it right. I eased myself down on the bat bag right next to her. Our legs were touching, but she made

no move to put any distance between us. She smelled like sunscreen and lemonade, and I wanted to kiss her right there in front of everyone.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about moving,” I said.

She didn’t respond, just toed at the grass with her Adidas flip flops.

“I can’t believe it myself,” I continued. “I wake up every day thinking it’s only a dream, that things will go on like always. I can’t bring myself to think about what it’s going to be like not living with my mom anymore, not seeing her every day.”

Tiffany pushed her sunglasses on top of her head and looked me dead in the eye, waiting for more.

“But the thought that tears me up more than anything is that I won’t be able to hang out with you or see you in school every day,” I said. “Being with you has been the most awesome, incredible time, the only thing in my life that makes me happy right now and when I think about losing that, I cannot deal. Not at all.”

“You should have told me right away,” she said.

“I know that now, but I was afraid that—”

“What? That I would say *Why should I bother if you’re just going to move anyway?* Give me some credit, Drew,” she said.

“I know, but I didn’t want to think about—”

“Oh, please!” she said, standing up abruptly. “When were you planning to tell me? After you moved? Were you just going to all of a sudden stop coming to school and hope I would figure it out? Pull another one of your disappearing acts?”

“No, but I’m trying to tell you that it was too hard—”

“Bullshit. You can’t just ignore things and hope they’ll go away or fix themselves. You have to face them head-on. Do you have any idea how I felt when Grace said, *That really sucks that Drew is moving, huh?* and I had no friggin’ idea what she was talking about? I couldn’t believe that you, of all people, would do that to me. I thought that you—“

I stood up and put my hands on her shoulders. “I’m sorry. It was stupid. I should have told you. I never meant for you to hear it from anyone else.”

“It *was* stupid,” she said, knocking my hands off her shoulders and giving me a little shove. “And if you ever do anything like that again, I will never speak to you again. Ever.” She heaved her bat bag onto her shoulder and linked her pinky finger around mine. “Call me later,” she said and brushed past me, walking fast and looking straight ahead the entire time. On a mission, as Nana used to say. I watched her until she rounded the bend and disappeared behind the bleachers on the other side of the stadium before I started for home.

“You’re pathetic,” Cori said. I almost ran right past where she sat on one of the benches that lined the side of the school by the cafeteria. Only it wasn’t just her—it was Gaynelle Fludd and Emily Murphy, too, sitting there with their big brace-face smiles. My own personal heckling section.

“What are you, stalking me, you little creeps?” I said.

“No, we’re just waiting here to see how bad your girlfriend messed you up,” Gaynelle said. “You look alright, though.” The three of them collapsed on one another, laughing like a pack of hyenas. Junior high girls. Flat-out the most annoying human specimens around. I couldn’t help but smile, though, even if I was still seriously pissed at

Cori and even though they were laughing at my expense. I was so relieved that Tiffany and I were cool again that I could not give two shits if Gaynelle never shut the hell up. I could deal with her blabbing on the walk home as long as they didn't expect me to talk to them. Plus, she called Tiffany my girlfriend. I could deal with hearing that a few more times, too.

"Let's go," I said.

"How come you're not going to her game? Is that why she's mad?" Gaynelle asked. "If I had a boyfriend like you, I would tell him what was up."

I ignored her and kept walking, liking the sound of *boyfriend*.

"She's going to be even madder at you tomorrow if you don't go to her game," she added. "She might even knock you down next time." This caused another outbreak of laughter. I didn't care, though. My mind was on Tiffany's ass in those gray pants.

By the time we left Emily on Hudson, all I could think about was that I had never even seen Tiffany play. Not so much because Gaynelle said that made me a bad boyfriend, but in not seeing her play, I realized that I was overlooking a big part of understanding what made Tiffany who she was.

So I guess that made me a bad boyfriend after all.

And I was determined to fix that.

When we reached the curve of Johnson at the swim club, my plan was solid, if everyone went along with it, but I had to move quickly if it was going to work.

After we split with Gaynelle in front of our house, I told Cori. She was in.

Then I ran next door to Mrs. Young's house and told her. She was in, too.

Mom was dozing in her wheelchair but perked right up when I laid it all out for her. I told her that Tiffany really wanted her to see the game that day. They were playing Pennsville. I knew that much because on the way home, we passed their players getting off the bus. Penisville, or “Penisville” as we called them, was Gloucester’s biggest rivalry, the team that Mom had been playing against back in the day when she earned her most obvious battle wound: that heinously crooked middle finger. I think in a way it was her favorite of all her scars from sports. Maybe because she could see it every moment of every day and be reminded of a time when she was hardcore enough to slide headfirst stealing second base, break a finger, and continue to play the rest of the game without telling anyone because her team needed her, a time when she wasn’t crumpled up and spasming in a wheelchair, waiting for one of her kids to take her to the bathroom.

“I think it’s a great idea what you’re doing,” Mrs. Young said to me on the sly when she dropped us off. “Call me when you’re ready. I’ll be waiting.”

Ignoring the stares from the kids in the stands at the jv game, I focused my attention on keeping the wheelchair from tipping over as we bumped along over the thick lumpy grass. Cori and Shuggy had to stop frequently for us to catch up. I don’t know who looked happier—Mom or Shuggy. He kept Cori moving at a quick pace, using all of the available lead on his retractable leash, and then bounding back to Mom and me when Cori held him up to wait for us. It had to have been the roughest ride of her life, but Mom never stopped smiling, laughing at Shuggy as he ran full speed ahead, and then really cracking up at Cori’s humiliation when Shuggy took a dump that she had to pick it up with the doggie waste bag.

Up at the top of the football stands, I spotted Mr. Hartman's chrome dome reflecting the sun. From that vantage point, he could see all the games going on at the same time: softball, track, and baseball. I wasn't sure if I was imagining it because he was wearing those mirror sunglasses, but I felt his eyes on us the whole time. So I raised my hand and waved. He waved back in a kind of salute, letting his hand hang in the air for a few seconds.

"Is that Ed Hartman up there?" Mom asked.

"That's him," I said.

"I can't believe he's still here," she said. "He was my gym teacher in junior high."

"I knew he was from the Crustacean Period," I said.

"Hey! It wasn't that long ago," Mom laughed. "And is that even the right word?"

"Close enough," I said.

"I liked him," Mom said. "He was a nice guy. Very dedicated."

"He's all right," I said. "As far as dinosaurs go."

It wasn't that funny, but you wouldn't have known it by Mom's laughter.

I glanced back at Hartman one last time to see if he was still watching us. He looked like an old sea captain, standing at the helm of his ship, staring down the sun, his bald head towering over the high tension wires behind him.

Tiffany waved from the dugout as we searched for an open spot along the fence. By the time we settled into a space behind left field, it was the top of the second inning with no score. Tiffany played third base—that much I knew—but I never realized how far in she had to play. It made me kind of nervous to think that she was only a few feet

away from the batter, every one that inning being left-handed and looking like she had no idea how to swing the bat.

“What’s going on with the way they’re hitting?” I said.

“It’s called slapping,” Mom said. “It’s big in college softball. They’re kind of running towards the pitch just to slap or bunt it into play.”

“That’s crazy,” I said, but what I was thinking was, *these girls have way bigger balls than most guys I know.*

“It manufactures base runners. That’s why Tiffany’s playing in so shallow,” she said. “When she sees a left-handed batter in a straight-legged stance, she knows that the ball will be put in play on the left side of the field to give the runner more time to get to first.”

“But what if the batter decides to swing instead and knocks Tiffany’s head off with a line drive?” I asked.

“Tiffany looks like she can handle herself,” Mom said, and as if she could hear what we were saying, Tiffany charged toward home, snatched the ball off the ground and fired it to first, where it landed with a loud pop in the first baseman’s glove to make the third out. Mom looked at me as if to say *told you so.*

Both of them impressed me that day—Tiffany with her ferocious level of play, and Mom with her knowledge of the sport.

With two innings still to go and a comfortable Gloucester lead, I figured I should be getting Mom home before the crowd. She had to be tired, and Shuggy was showing obvious signs of boredom, so I called Mrs. Young for a ride. Behind the backstop in a bright yellow batting helmet, Tiffany waited her turn for the on-deck circle, taking slow,

deliberate practice swings. She smiled and waved as we made our way past the home stands. I thought she never looked more beautiful, red-faced and so alive, the front of her uniform covered in orange dirt. She said something to one of the coaches who looked our way and nodded. She dropped the bat and sprinted towards us.

Squatting down and resting her hand on the arm of the wheelchair so that she was eye level with Mom, she said, “Thanks for coming, Mrs. Gilmore.”

Mom stuck out her spastic hand, the one with that hideous middle finger, and Tiffany grabbed hold with that filthy batting glove. “Thank *you* for inviting me,” Mom said. “I had a great time. The game has changed a bit since I played. I’m stunned by how fast it moves. You’re a terrific player.”

Tiffany looked up at me and smiled. I knew that I had this cheesy grin plastered all over my flaming red face, and I knew that all the girls in the dugout were watching us because one of the coaches hollered, “Eyes on the game, girls!” and then, “Tiffany!”, but I couldn’t help it: I winked at her.

She winked one of those lime-green eyes right back at me.

I thought my chest would rupture. I knew all along that she would be in, too.

“Oh my god,” Cori muttered.

“Gotta get back,” Tiffany said. “See you Sunday.” And then she raced back to her spot behind the backstop.

“She’s so sweet,” Mom said.

“I know,” I said.

I love her, I thought.

“Let’s watch her bat one last time,” Mom said.

For once, what held me in place was not the weight of fear or dread, but a comforting pull, like an anchor that keeps a boat from drifting too far in the current, or a root system that holds a tree upright in a strong wind.

My feet were right where they needed to be.