

1-1-2010

In The Cold, Quiet Dark

Chris Ludwig

Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in [English](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

Recommended Citation

Ludwig, Chris, "In The Cold, Quiet Dark" (2010). *Masters Theses*. 309.
<http://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/309>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

THESIS MAINTENANCE AND REPRODUCTION CERTIFICATE

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates (who have written formal theses)

SUBJECT: Permission to Reproduce Theses

The University Library is receiving a number of request from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow these to be copied.

PLEASE SIGN ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS:

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university for the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

Chris Ludwig

Author's Signature

5-10-10

Date

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University **NOT** allow my thesis to be reproduced because:

Author's Signature

Date

This form must be submitted in duplicate.

IN THE COLD, QUIET DARK

(TITLE)

BY

Chris Ludwig

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2010

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

 5/7/10
THESIS COMMITTEE CHAIR DATE

 5/10/10
DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL CHAIR DATE
OR CHAIR'S DESIGNEE

 5/7/10
THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER DATE

THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER DATE

 5/7/2010
THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER DATE

THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER DATE

In the Cold, Quiet Dark

A NOVELLA

Copyright 2010 by Chris Ludwig

This story is dedicated with love to my Mother and Father. Thankfully, they are nothing like the parents found within these pages.

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance and guidance provided by Dr. David Carpenter, Dr. John Kilgore, and Dr. Jad Smith.

Table of Contents

Pages 1-2: Title, Copyright, Dedication, and Acknowledgments

Page 3: Table of Contents

Pages 4-12: Thesis Introduction/Abstract

Pages 13-22: Chapter One

Pages 23-32: Chapter Two

Pages 33-41: Chapter Three

Pages 42-57: Chapter Four

Pages 58-72: Chapter Five

Pages 73-87: Chapter Six

Pages 88-101: Chapter Seven

Pages 102-112: Chapter Eight

Pages 113-122: Chapter Nine

Pages 123-133: Chapter Ten

Pages 134-148: Chapter Eleven

Pages 149-163: Chapter Twelve

Pages 164-179: Chapter Thirteen

Pages 180-192: Chapter Fourteen

Thesis Introduction:

Small Pieces of a Big Picture: The Aesthetics and Influences Shaping My Story

The story I wrote, called *In the Cold, Quiet Dark*, is about a teenaged boy named Will Jameson. To make his story interesting, provocative, and fun to read and write, I had to address and illustrate what I understood about what it means to be a teenager. The teenage years are what define a boy in transition, who is alternately yearning to be back at an age when he was too young to be called a teen, and simultaneously cognizant of the beginnings of the man he'll be if and when he decides to leave his boyhood behind. In essence, writing a story about a teenaged boy boils down to authoring a narrative ultimately concerned with identity, purpose, independence, and responsibility. Paradoxically, I found these themes to be best illustrated by depicting a struggle with respectively contrasting features—confusion, aimlessness, entrapment, and immaturity—in ascension, constantly bombarding Will with these opposite forces, skewing his desires, his comprehension of himself, and of the world around him.

This conflict of contradictions occurred naturally within the meat of the story, since, I intrinsically knew the frustration lying at the heart of the struggle for mature, complete understanding and self-reliability. What I didn't understand at the commencement of writing was how to transfer effectively individual knowledge and experience into a broad, generally understood narrative construct, one able to be instantly relatable while at the same time maintaining enough personal spirit in the workmanship to turn the familiar into the unique. Everyone has read a story about a desperate teenager before, so I knew going into the project that I was grazing on finely-cut grasslands, but I wanted to somehow turn the ordinary into the surprising, both to make my story stand out and energize myself as its author by constantly

enlivening my interest in Will's story as I was writing it and not allowing myself to write-by-the-numbers, filling in developmental blanks and building character bridges as I crossed them. To service this aim of creating a story that's able to be instantly understood as a familiar narrative track, while keeping full knowledge of who Will is and why he matters hidden from the eyes and the mind until the very end of the tale and beyond, I utilized the stylistic and developmental impressions left on me by three notable authors and their work, namely William Faulkner, Cormac McCarthy, and John Kennedy Toole. Inside the pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Blood Meridian*, and *The Confederacy of Dunces*, I had found stories that made me nod as soon as I poured my eyes through the opening chapters, then crease my brow as what once was familiar became strange, intriguing, something altogether unexpected, and yet wholly worth the experience of reading; the inspiration given to me by these men and their work helped me to achieve what I wanted to do with myself as a storyteller, and with Will Jameson as a character.

I believe the achievement of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is making frustration an enjoyable experience. So much of the story being told is obscured by the teller and the circumstances the tale is being told under. Take this passage as an indicative example of dictation utilized as a form of manipulation, and thereby having that manipulation stand as the only reliable record for what the story is, and what it means, for having been told: "[M]aybe someday you will remember this and write about it...Perhaps you will even remember kindly then the old woman who made you spend a whole afternoon sitting indoors and listening while she talked about people and events you were fortunate enough to escape." (Faulkner 5). These words are spoken by Miss Rosa Coldfield, described as a woman "in...eternal black...with that air of impotent, static rage...talking in that grim haggard amazed voice" (4). Through her mesmerizing words, a story is introduced, and through her story, the reader is trapped just as her

listener is bound in belief, perspective, and meaning, to what she says and what she wants us to hear.

Here is a condensed illustration of what the story of *Absalom*—and the practice of storytelling—amounts to: the act of shattering a mirror, and then asking a witness to reflect on what can be seen, and what is meant by the blur of the fragments. Incompletion is essential to *Absalom*'s narrative, and it is this fundamental lack of knowledge, orientation, and familiarity driving the interest in the story and its characters, enticing the reader to keep reading. Making a story full by pointing out what isn't there, what's past, what's escaped, what can't be remembered and recorded because it wasn't lived, only imagined, is a way to turn the simple—a family feud—into something wonderfully complicated, laden with existential implications and biblical allusions.

Faulkner's use of fragmentation to contribute to a bewildering composite that is absolutely larger than the sum of its parts definitely influenced the thematic and mechanical construction of who Will is, and why his story matters. Fragmentation, after all, is the essence of teenaged existence, thinking one thing, saying another, all the while bathing in an ocean of complex feelings, never allowing a single drop of that depth to trickle past a defensive barrier network, always keeping a tight lid on a never full compartment which contains only an idea of self, what that self wants, and how to get it. Being a teenager means attaining definition through that which is lacking; the innocence of youth, the security of age, and the means to give and take meaning by making self-dictated choices, all of these components are either missing, gone, or incomplete. Just as *Absalom, Absalom!* is a story told to people who weren't there to experience it, by people who wish the experience to remain as they see it and want it to remain so, Will's life as a teenager is entirely uncertain, a concoction of confusion and frustration where belief is

meant to be doubted, doubt only leads to frustration, and being frustrated paradoxically fuels his desire to comprehend, and to make that comprehension lend meaning to something he can believe in.

Whereas Faulkner's work imprinted a general sense of direction pertaining to the type of story being told in the authoring of Will and his world, and how this influential fragmentary format relates thematically and symbolically to the trials and travails broadly applicable to the developmental narrative, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* was a great inspiration in establishing the individual character traits of Will, his internal psychology and philosophical outlook. *Blood Meridian* is a narrative of strife, defined fundamentally by its unrelenting violence, bleak fatalism, and the omnipresence of an empowered evil. These attributes are illustrated in the introduction of *Blood*'s main character, an unnamed young man who is called The Kid for most of the story: "Night of your birth...God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. [The Kid] can neither read nor write, and [at fourteen]...in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (McCarthy 3). Defining the main character as a kind of lodestone for ill omens and negative personality traits is a calculated risk that subverts the expectations of the adolescent narrative, where ordinarily the main character is called away to adventure, expanding his understanding of and standing within the world. Here, the opposite is taking place; the protagonist is drawn not to adventure, but to murder, and his quest is one of such consequentially severe contraction of his humanity that it reduces him to lifelessness.

Proposing an adolescent character seemingly destined to kill and to die, even from before he was born—"The mother...did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off..." (3)—leant an interesting perspective on defining a main character by his immaturity, and having his carnivorous ignorance devour any semblance of attempted elevation and refinement,

intellectual or otherwise. Writing about and within the perspective of an adolescent killer seemed too daunting, but *Blood Meridian* contains an incredibly valuable lesson on how extreme passions—in McCarthy’s case, the desire to illustrate and qualify death—compose the meat of the teenaged psyche, and how the heat radiating from them can portend great personal and worldly tragedy.

Blood Meridian also showed me how poetry can be found in violence, and vice versa, as illustrated in the following passage: “And now the horses of the dead came pounding out of the smoke and dust and circled with flapping leather and wild manes and eyes whited with fear like the eyes of the blind...the scalped...lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust” (54). The density of the imagery, simultaneously natural—smoke, dust, and wide, white eyes—and mythic—corpses transform into clergymen due to their appearance in death—gives the scene an important feel, making the words about men, how and why they kill, instead of limiting the action to this group of killed men, whose killers were also specifically isolated to themselves. Making a scene of violence mean more than what it is immediately displaying was a main goal for me in writing Will’s story, as it hinges on the consequences of a particularly far-reaching, explosively violent collision.

The relationship between a mother and her son is complicatedly combative, particularly so when the son is either a natural adolescent, or stunted developmentally so as to think and behave as one. Such is the case with Ignatius Reilly, the engine driving John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Reilly is a construction made expressly and excessively unfit for his time and place, physically and otherwise. Described as having “[A] fleshy balloon of a head...folds filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs...blue and yellow eyes looked down upon...[and studied] the crowd of people for signs of bad taste. Possession of anything new and

expensive only reflected a person's lack of theology and geometry; it could even cast doubts upon one's soul" (Toole 1). His character is one busy with broadcasting disgust and being disgusting. Seized by a fever of supremacy, he judges, and yet, based on his shabby, gross carriage, won't care about the judgment of others. A philosophy of stubborn, seething, self-promotion is the dictate of adolescence, where the right way is what I think, and anything else is wrong. Staging the conflict between mother and son as one so defined by assumed entitlement makes Toole's writing seem authentically entertaining in its petty, perpetually unsatisfied, cringe-worthy humanity, as Ignatius's contempt is matched only by his mother's patience and charity. His mother enters the picture, a woman who had "driven him downtown in the old Plymouth, and while she was at the doctor's seeing about her arthritis, Ignatius had bought some sheet music" (2). The perpetual pains and perils she suffers on her son's behalf are given revolting insight further on: "Mrs. Reilly was...pressing her maternal breast against a glass case of macaroons...she [tapped the case with] her fingers, chafed from many years of scrubbing her son's mammoth, yellowed drawers [and said] 'Look, you wanna gimme half a dozen wine cakes, too? Ignatius gets nasty if we run outta cake'" (4-5). The relationship shared by Reilly and his mother is one consigned to co-dependence and consumption; each relies on the allowances of the other to provide momentum (literally in Ignatius's case) and meaning to his or her life.

The living arrangements established in the Jameson household aren't quite so gross, but it is in this partnership of extreme dependency, where the insidiousness of selfishness chains mother and child to each other, and each feeds into a circuit of debilitating negative reinforcement when they argue. When Will debates his mother, he feels dictatorial, righteous, and superior, and by baiting him, his mother fuels her need to be punished and belittled, due to the circumstances bringing about Will's state of paralysis. Defining the mother-son relationship

as an agony of escalating, enabling, wrong-headedness turns what should be an organized process of nurturing mentorship into a chaotic emotional and psychological minefield, where each blooming argumentative detonation causes a converse implosion of development; the son becomes infantilized and the mother sacrifices everything but motherhood, losing her independence and her womanhood in her fierce desire to keep her baby safe, happy, and secure within the confines of her nest.

The influences and aesthetics shaping the foundation of Will's story, the passions of his character, and the heart of his conflict are a curious alchemy of boyishness and brutality. The able authorship of Faulkner, McCarthy, and Toole contributed immeasurably to the tale I tell, helping me to see how a familiar story can also be more unusual, and frankly more meaningful, than I believed possible at the commencement of my writing. *Absalom, Absalom!* showed how fractured and laden seemingly ordinary lives could be, how the delusions of one person become gospel to another—all because of the beholden nature of witnessing—and defining the import of the art of storytelling not only as the story being told, but what meaningful manipulation is inherent in the telling. *Blood Meridian* catalogs the dark side of teenaged youthfulness, being throttled by the insatiable, passionate desire to impose one's will, all else be damned, ultimately including humanity itself. *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a cautionary wince put to paper, cataloging in terrific detail the plight of a piggish, immature, prejudicial man-child, and the woman who loves him as they are ravaged by their selfish excesses and ignorance.

Each of these three stories reflects a facet of adolescent existence, which is the core of the Will Jameson character and his narrative. Faulkner emphasizes the essence of incompleteness, feeling trapped, with nothing but contradictory skepticism and belief to drive one onwards. McCarthy defines and depicts a world of ceaseless misery, where consideration is

suspended in favor of acting on self-destructive desire. Finally, Toole satirizes ethnocentrism in order to cast a harsh light on what it means to judge and to be judged. *In the Cold, Quiet Dark*, my story about Will, a boy growing up, wouldn't be what it is without the influence of these developmental narratives.

Works Cited

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Random House, 1986. Print.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Random House, 1985. Print.

Toole, John Kennedy. *A Confederacy of Dunces*. New York: Random House, 1996. Print.

Chapter One

“Reach out! C’mon, stretch farther. Grab my hand.” Samantha’s plump face hovered behind tangled vines of light-brown hair died unnaturally blond at the tips. She frowned determinedly at Will, her green eyes big, expectant, and demanding. Will grunted, propped awkwardly against a foam-rubber cylinder wedged against a stack of wooden benches acting as an anchor behind him. He sweated profusely into his gray t-shirt. His sandy bangs clung to his forehead, and the hand he was using to brace himself stuck to the blue exercise mat he was stretching on, his blue eyes squinting in effort as he willed himself to bend and reach toward Samantha’s outstretched hand.

Will’s right arm raised and extended awkwardly, bunching with tension at the elbow and wrist, never becoming fully straight. His fingers splayed rigidly, shocking themselves open in a spasm of hard-won desire and concentration. His movements were characteristically graceless, but functional. He made steady, grinding progress towards Samantha’s wagging index finger. With his support arm filling with pins and needles from the strain of bearing his full body weight and his cheeks puffing out because he was holding his breath, Will made a last ditch effort and lunged forward towards the offered hand.

His fingertips grazed the heel of Samantha’s well-moisturized palm before he tumbled in a deadweight jumble of gangly adolescent limbs, falling cleanly on his face. He buried his face in the mat and allowed himself to breathe again, nearly becoming overwhelmed by the onrushing twin scents of sweat and disinfectant. There was a hard tug on the back of his shirt. “Come on, roll over already.” Will balled up his frustration and disappointment before venting it in a raspy groan. Samantha poked him in the back repeatedly, Will wincing each time. He growled, dug

his nails into the plastic mat covering and shoved up and away, flopping onto his side and panting. Samantha lightly pressed her hands into his chest and stomach, prompting those muscles into action. There was a brief push and pull between what Will mentally pictured himself accomplishing and what he physically achieved, but he had maneuvered himself onto his back, defensively closing his eyes against the harsh fluorescent glare shining down from where the light bank was embedded in the paneled ceiling.

His breathing was all he heard for a curiously long time, so Will opened his eyes curiously and cautiously. Samantha loomed above him, and the slumping of her shoulders, the crossing of her arms, and the pursing of her lips made her a monument of disapproval. She tried to stare at him disapprovingly but a stray curl of hair swung into her eye and she batted it back impatiently. Will chuckled at her, shading his eyes awkwardly against the glare from the ceiling with a hand that seemed to dangle from the wrist to which it was attached. "Hey, you said to grab the hand. I did, didn't I?"

Samantha was halfway through rolling her eyes at him before she caught herself and terminated the gesture, knowing it would only encourage him. She compensated by snorting at him loudly and shaking her head. "No, smart aleck, you did not. I think your pinky *may* have grazed me, but then again, it could have been a baby fly."

Will mimicked her snort. "Now you're just nitpicking. Did I touch your hand or not?"

Samantha smirked at him, pointing with the same index finger she used to spur his earlier effort. "You managed to touch it, sure, but just barely. And you fell on your face afterwards." She drove this latter point home by jabbing the tip of his nose with the edge of a long, pink nail.

"Ah!" Will wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "I thought the whole point of what we were doing was for you to put your hand out of reach and for me to still end up reaching for it

anyway. I do what you ask and get stabbed for it! How awesome.” The outraged glare he threw at her was dulled somewhat by his newly pink nose.

Samantha decided to take the high road and not laugh at him. “The whole point of the exercise is for you to work on building your balance. You know this, and yet still manage to end up face-down.” She shrugged exaggeratedly and looked at him cockeyed, clearly entitling herself to some sort of an explanation.

Will sighed in frustration, becoming deeply interested in the half-circle of sweat blooming from his shirt collar to the top of his stomach. He was sopped in sweat from the day’s exertions, but only to a point. His shirt wrapped him in a damp, cold cocoon, but his jeans were bone dry, and although he couldn’t feel the confirmation in his hips, legs, and feet, he was struck by the realization that none of the sticky humidity that seized him from the waist up managed to claim any southern real estate. “What’s up with this?” He bunched the wet cotton of his t-shirt with three right-handed fingers and a thumb whilst lightly slapping a pristine denim thigh with lefty.

Samantha exasperatedly smacked her lips and groaned. “C’mon, Will, don’t change the—”

“I don’t know! Because I suck? Yeah, we’ve established my sucky balancing. What is up with this non-sweat?”

Samantha looked at him full in the face, deadly serious, her lips pressed into the thinnest of lines, sapping all color from around her mouth. Will tried to dodge her stare and drop his eyes away, but she held his gaze with an unnaturally steady intensity. He caved in less than ten seconds, and spoke up with the voice of a little boy. “I’m sorry, seriously, but it ain’t like you’re

the only one in this room who's frustrated. I fell on my face because I don't know how *not* to; I can't balance."

Samantha nodded slowly and allowed her face to soften. "Right now you can't balance. We're doing something about it, so pretty soon you'll be able to."

He echoed her nod with one of his own, but it was decidedly less assured. "I hope so," he said, and cleared his suddenly dry throat.

Samantha fidgeted, rubbing her hands together before brushing non-existent lint from her white sweat pants and walking across the mat, keeping her back to Will as she called behind her "Let's get you back in your chair. Times a'wastin'."

He stared at the middle of her back for a second before shooting a glance at the clock, seeing it was 4:55 in the afternoon, and grinning tactlessly since he was leaving five minutes left in the scheduled therapy hour. He was glad not to have a witness to his sly happiness. After flopping onto his belly, he dragged himself along by pushing and pulling with his elbows. Samantha was prepping his chair for him as he spoke to her ankles. "Will you tell me about this whole no-sweat thing, please? I mean, is it dangerous or what?"

Samantha recited in a textbook-tone without looking at him, busy with the arrangement of various straps, buckles, and bracers, "You do sweat, just not all over. The muscles in your arms, trunk, chest, shoulders, whatever, all of those are working, and they get hot. The body senses the increase—whoa, let me know when you're gonna do that, please!" Will had bolstered himself up on his haunches and toppled forward against the front of his chair, flinging his arms out to wedge in the sides of the seat cushion. "You sense the rise in temperature, and you cool down by sweating. YOUR LEGS," she raised her voice in anticipation of his next question and cut off what he was about to say, "and everything else south of the equator aren't getting worked

up, so they don't need to cool down by sweating. Satisfied?" She flashed him a goofy grin and adjusted the bridge of an imaginary pair of glasses on her nose.

He laughed at her good-naturedly. "I guess. God, I'm weird! Is this anything I have to worry about?" He took care hiding his eyes from her, suddenly self-conscious. His face, neck and chest burned uncomfortably, and the scar running down his back began to tingle and itch.

Samantha frowned down at him. "I don't think so, since there's not a heck of a lot you can do about it." She sought out his face, hoping to get a read on him, but he evaded her effectively. "Look, Will—"

"I'm glad it's not a problem," he announced loudly, looking up at her with a toothy grin. She raised her eyebrows skeptically, but he was already maneuvering himself away from her and out the door, struggling slightly with the resistance the beige carpet gave him. "Same time next week," he called over his shoulder while keeping eyes front, wheeling out to the lobby.

"Hey, Mom," he called to a woman sitting comfortably cross-legged in a chair with purple padding. She planted her white, flat slip-ons, smoothed her khakis, and was on him before the paper she'd been reading had stopped rustling from being dropped. Will had intended to just keep rolling right out the door (which was automatic), but she put a stop to that in a hurry.

"Did you fall out of your chair again?" Her hands fussed with the front of his shirt, picking at wrinkles. She somehow managed to sound concerned and annoyed simultaneously.

Will furrowed his brow disbelievingly. "Of course not, why would you—" Will inspected himself and saw the front of his shirt untucked. He swiped at it ineffectually.

"I'll bet." She exhaled slowly through her nostrils and gave him a probing look, seeing if he would change his story under scrutiny, but her son looked at her through over-long bangs

evenly, wearing defiance and impatience on his indignant face. Sighing, she stood and beat him to the door. "Let's go," she said, casting about in her purse for her keys.

She drove slowly and carefully, gripping the wheel firmly, keeping her gaze steady, focused, and alert. No one spoke and the lack of any radio noise kept the cabin quiet and controlled. The only noise besides the steady drone of the well-maintained engine sounded from the dry, brown leaves the tires were plowing through, sweeping away the last breaths of autumn. The natural crackling and the mechanical hum soothed him as much as the cool window he was pressing his cheek against, letting his eyes droop.

"Either you worked real hard today or you stayed up too late."

He pressed a knuckle into one eye and rubbed, letting himself smirk as he heard the laughter in her voice.

"I always work hard." He laughed a little, even though he meant it. She echoed him, but her chuckles had a bit more gusto than he would've liked. "Okay, almost always. Funny thing is, you always seem more worn out than me after therapy. It's supposed to help, or so Samantha keeps telling me. You don't need to take my therapy so hard, Mom. Honestly, I wish you wouldn't."

"I'm glad your therapy is helping, and I'll be here making sure you stick with it, but I don't like seeing you so tired and frustrated from it. We both know it's my fault you have to come here every week." She spoke with sincerity. He shoved against the window to sit straight, and he angled his head to look at her while he spoke. Her eyes were resolutely on the road, even though he was sure she could feel his eyes on her. Reflexively, she reached out and triggered the auto-lock, which made the doors click, but the indicative pegs didn't budge since they were already secured.

Will suppressed a critical sigh. "I've been wondering if this therapy stuff is working, anyhow. And could I get five free minutes away from the blame game, please?" He avoided looking at her as he said this, fearing her reaction.

"Working? What do you mean, 'working'? It's not a magic potion." His mother sounded agitated enough to actually look away from the road ahead of them, which was empty, and to ignore his irritation at hearing her blame herself for his problems.

This time he did sigh, and he fell over his words awkwardly, digging for the right phrase. "I know, I know. I'm not expecting magic—I don't—it's just, I want it to work, you know? I want obvious results, or some clear progress, and I've been going there for almost half a year now, and I'm not getting what I want out of it, so I'm pissed, and I hate it."

His mother scoffed. "That's real mature, Will."

He threw up his hands, sending one arm flailing and almost smacking her in the side of the head across the cabin, making her yelp. "So I'm—sorry—not mature, then. Excuse me for being scared and angry and completely confused and frustrated, but what the hell? I'm paralyzed, Mom. What am I gonna do? I'm trying, but nothing seems to be working, and what am I supposed to do?"

A heavy silence filled the car, making Will dig his chin into his sweaty t-shirt and stare hard into his lap, looking at nothing. He could feel his mother's eyes on the side of his head and hear her words of frantic reassurance echo in his mind before she breathed a single word. "Will, we're in this—"

"Don't, just please don't say anything." His voice was thin, pushing past the sudden tightness in his throat. "I know you're here, and I'm here, and we have each other and everything'll be just fine. I'm not gonna hear it again, so please drive and don't say anything."

She made a noise of such raw desperation that his heart skipped a beat. He turned away from her, mashed his forehead against the window, and squeezed his eyes shut. The motor made its same dull hum, and the rubber of the tires fizzed on the road as they constantly spun around. The twin noises overwhelmed him. His eyes began to feel very heavy.

Just as his eyes shut, a blast of heat, noise, and movement descended on him. At first it was a loud echo, but steadily became more solid, more vivid, and altogether real. He grunted, suddenly trapped with the shards of painful memories and images digging deeply in to his mind. In a brief moment spent between sleeping and waking, he hissed at the flash of headlights spilling into his eyes, and then a series of bee-stings and pin-pricks stamped across his nose and cheeks as he rolled sideways into a heaving wave of shattered glass. Finally, the distinction between sound and movement faded until it eventually dissolved to nothing, leaving him with a deep sense of loss. He shot his head from side-to-side, gaping frantically, seized by fear. An arm clenched his wrist, stunning him into silence. "Will!"

"What?" He stared hard at the hand holding him, following it up to a pair of eyes staring at him. His mother wore a tight, severe expression, brow and cheeks standing out in sharp relief, her eyes big with worry. He took three quick, panting breaths before pressing the back of his head into the chair's cushion. "Oh my god," he said quietly, shutting his eyes and swallowing heavily.

His mother steered the car to the shoulder and stopped, undid her seatbelt, and leaned across to take his face in her hands and inspect him with her touch. She swept his hair back off his forehead. "You're clammy. Look at me." Her statements were clipped, her tone sharp. She was in command and undeniable.

Will slowly opened his eyes and let a relaxed smile take over his face, hoping to calm her. "I'm fine," he said. "I'm just tired and I had a dream is all."

"A dream?" She was all but shouting into his face, not believing him for a second. "Are you sure you're all right? Nothing hurts? What do you mean you had a dream?"

He stifled a laugh he was sure she wouldn't appreciate and strove to make his situation even clearer, if it were possible. "I mean I had a dream. I don't know what else to tell you." He lifted his hands to her wrists and lightly squeezed them. "Relax! I'm okay." The vice clamping both sides of his face slackened slightly.

Her face became softer and her shoulders went straighter as the tension ebbed. She still held his face in her hands but had stopped inadvertently crushing him in her worry. She ducked her chin. "What kind of dream was it?" Her tone was more than a little embarrassed.

Will took advantage of the few seconds he had away from the scrutiny of her stare to consider what to tell her. He briefly felt like lying to her because the truth would turn her mood even more desperate and sad, but he found he couldn't do it; she thrived on his feedback, doing what he did just now, reducing tension and defusing situations. She needed him to be honest with her, and so he was. She only allowed her eyes to drop from his for a handful of seconds before they desperately sought him out again. He carefully guided her gaze with his own, floating it around the surrounding interior of their car. Then he looked into her eyes steadily, squeezed her wrists one more time, and quietly declared, "It was the usual kind of dream, Mom."

In less than a second all ramifications of what "usual" meant collided with his mother, and she shrank away from him, dropping him from her grasp and slipping out of the hands holding onto her wrists. "I'm sorry." Her voice was hollow, numb, and directed at the windshield.

“I really wish you’d stop acting this way. The first time you apologized, I accepted it.”

His voice was heavy with resigned disappointment. He looked at her turned-away face, hoping to see the turmoil wracking her fall away, but she sat resolutely blank-faced, angling the car back onto the road and carefully adjusting to the flow of traffic. He watched her for another minute, then once again directed his gaze out his window. Neither said another word on the drive home.

Chapter Two

When both of them were safely back at the house, Will made a last attempt to connect with his mom in hopes of getting that heavy, dark look off of her face. He turned sideways in his chair to block the path leading from the garage to the kitchen and reached for her hand. She dodged him, ducked her eyes, and seized the handlebars of his wheelchair, straightening him out and pushing him clear of the door before efficiently stepping around him. He felt frustrated and violated, groaning at her childishness.

As he was wheeling himself down the main hallway and to his room, he decided he couldn't stand being with her in this house right now. The rubber of his tires hummed with a purpose as he cruised to the door of his room, which he always left slightly ajar so that he could run his feet into it and proceed uninterrupted. He wheeled over an old pair of khakis, one red long-sleeved shirt, and one white t-shirt before he remembered how upset his mom got over the state of his clothes. Glancing back, he saw the line of fresh dirt streaked across them from his tires and felt only a tiny bit of guilt as he bent awkwardly to scoop and toss the offending articles deep into the back of his closet. He fisted a handful of the shirt he was currently wearing and sniffed it apprehensively. He twisted away from the rising wave of sweat inhaled up his nostrils before tugging the shirt over his head. He found a new one hanging in front of him, reasonably unwrinkled and clean-looking, and spent five minutes poking his head through the collar and pitched from side to side in his seat unrolling the bunched dark-green cotton down his upper body. It was always harder to put clothes on than to take them off, and when he was frustrated even tasks he was used to doing seemed to take forever.

A cursory inspection of his jeans and the patches of dirt at his knees along with the overall worn and crushed look of the material told him he should change those too, but he decided against it; he would need help to get his pants and shoes off and on again and he wasn't in the mood to ask for it from anybody, let alone his mom. Blindly rummaging in a black bag with a red strap he had slung over one handlebar on the back of his chair while half-heartedly scrutinizing himself in the hanging mirror affixed to the inside door of his closet, Will fished out his cell phone. Fisting it tightly in one hand, he seized the edge of the folded top half in his teeth before flipping it open, thumbing the number two and listening to it ring.

An echoing bang from the back of the house told his mother that Will was on his way out. He opened and closed doors as softly as he could when he hung around the house and slammed them when he decided to leave. She looked at him skeptically from behind the counter she was leaning on as he appeared from the mouth of the hallway. He pointedly ignored her gaze. "I'm going down to Burger King to meet up with Sarah," he said in a rushed and defiant tone before habit made him stop and sniff the surrounding air of the kitchen. This made her smile despite herself. He caught her and answered with one of his own. He looked sweet and goofy with a smile on his face, especially when he had been doing his best to seem sullen and brooding only a minute past. "You're not cooking anything?"

She shook her head. "It's leftover night." Setting her palms flat on the cream-colored countertop, she rolled her head on her shoulders and let out a tired sigh with the boney pops rattling from her neck and back. "I think I'm gonna go take a bath."

"Well, I'll be back later, I guess. You'll be all right for a while, I hope?" He managed to sound simultaneously sarcastic and sincere in his asking and this warmed her.

She looked at him skeptically nonetheless. "Are you going to be all right?"

He frowned before crossing his arms defensively. "God, it's just down the street, Mom."

"That isn't what I meant," she stated flatly.

Will dulled his haze of anger enough to finally see how worn and raw she looked. Deep worry lines sat in the corners of her eyes and her cheeks were pasty and drawn. The end of her nose was red and he saw a wadded clump of tissues piled nearest to her right hand. His mouth went dry when he realized she'd been crying over the dream he had that never seemed to leave either of them. "I love you, Mom. I'll be back later." He went through the kitchen and the laundry room and out the garage without seeing any of it, thinking he really should stay and comfort her, but he was at a loss for what else he could possibly tell her to make things better for both of them as he left the house behind.

He sat outside at a reasonably clean table out of view of Burger King's large display windows plastered with corporate logos and decals of the latest new special sandwiches. The mid-November weather was cool, maybe too cool to eat outdoors, but these tables were not bolted to the ground and the chairs moved freely since they weren't attached directly to the table. He'd poured half of a box of fries onto some napkins and munched idly on them as he waited. He was in the middle of shaking salt from his fingertips when Sarah popped into view, walking in a bouncy kind of way that made her seem strangely light and unstable. He shook his head at her while laughing through his nose. She shrugged easily and grinned disarmingly at him, adjusting the denim bag she had slung over one shoulder. The movement of the bag caused the various pins and buttons she'd attached to it to wink at him in the light of the setting sun. "*You know* I'm always late, so don't even start, please." She sounded serious and in command but this pretense was derailed by the slightly bashful, mostly defiant grin she tried out on him.

“What am I gonna start? I just think it’s weird, me having to rely on a four-wheeled, self-propelled machine to get around, and yet I still manage to get where I say I’m going to be, when I say I’m gonna be there.” He was laughing at her before she reached a thin arm out to swat him.

“What’d I just say? And the whole self-propelled-machine thing worked for the Flintstones, and they’re way cooler than you’ll ever be.” She snatched up a couple of fries from the pile on the table and tossed them in her mouth before he said anything. Will shook his head at her as she settled into the chair opposite him. He carefully studied the way the material of her jeans stretched as she tucked her legs into a curl under her, tracked the smooth skin of the calves she left exposed because the jeans she wore cut off above the ankle. He was watching her so closely he could even see her wiggle her toes inside of her purple sneakers.

A soft thud jolted him out of his trance, and he looked up into Sarah’s face. She’d shrugged her bag off a shoulder wrapped in a horizontally striped black-and-white long-sleeved top and was looking at him with a mixture of pity and anxiety. He cringed mentally, realizing she’d caught him staring at her, again. There was a painfully awkward moment when all he did was study his hands and all she did was toy with her maple-colored bangs before both of them silently agreed to go on as if nothing had happened. She stole another fry to ease the tension and he flashed a faux-irritated grin. He fanned a hand across the mound of fries and said, “Just take them already.”

“All of ‘em?” She raised her eyebrows skeptically, to which he nodded. “Aw, how sweet of you.” She pulled the greasy napkin toward her and sat content.

“Hey, what can I say, I’m a nice guy.” He paused before dramatically revealing the half-filled fry box he’d covered with a stack of napkins. “But not too nice.” He was the picture of mischief as he dug into the slightly warmer stash of fries. She rolled her eyes and laughed a

little. At the sound of it, his heart slowed and then sped at random, and he mentally kicked himself for being so smitten.

“So how was therapy?” She managed to sound genuinely interested and nosey in her inquiry.

“Okay, I guess. It was the usual routine, just working on different things.” Will was puzzled. “I do other things too, Sarah. We’ve been friends for, what, a couple of months now? You could try asking how my day was, or how my Mom is doing.”

Sarah looked a little confused and showed him a frown. When he didn’t say anything more, she folded her hands in her lap, pulled her shoulders back so she was sitting up straight and tall, and addressed him in a perfectly enunciated, utterly serious tone of voice. “Okay, Will, how was your day?”

Thrown off by her behavior, he raised his eyebrows quizzically and began, “Well, it was pretty—”

“Great!” She chirped, effectively cutting him off. “So, you were working on what? What things?” Sarah took on a breathless tone and was leaning forward in her seat, digging her elbows into the edge of the table, shelving her chin on top of her palms, and staring at him intensely.

“We do some stretches, some balancing moves. I dunno. Why’re you so interested anyway?” Will felt his happiness at being out of the house and away from his mother slowly evaporating. He stared into his depleting box of fries and twisted one of them around in his hands nervously.

“It’s just different and unexpected, I guess. I’m sorry I find you interesting, Will.” Her tone was defensive and her presence felt overbearing.

He felt like she was gradually pressing him into a hole and trapping him. He took a much-needed breath and carefully considered what he wanted to say before finally speaking. "I don't think you find *me* interesting," he said with quiet hesitation, afraid to admit the truth of what he was saying to himself, and wary the effect of her reaction would have on her willingness to further spend time with him. "I think you find this interesting." He slapped the metal tubing ringing the frame of his chair. "It seems you're more interested in what's sitting in front of you, instead of who's sitting in front of you."

"That isn't true!" Her voice was cut through with shock, making it come out shaky and thin. She sat leaning back in her chair, chest thrust out with her arms slung defensively across her breasts, she cocked her head to one side in a challenge and her face was framed in sullen disapproval. "You're different, Will. I don't know anyone else who's like you, and I'll admit I don't really know how to act around you. I don't know the right thing to say. I don't know the right way to act. Hanging out with someone like you isn't normal for me, okay, and I don't—"

He cut her off, unable to hear her say "don't" again. "I'm just a dude, Sarah! Yeah, there's the chair and the being fucked up from here on down." He jabbed a thumb in the waistband of his jeans to illustrate. "But you don't need a damn instruction manual just to talk to me. How do you think hearing you say that makes me feel?" His eyes stung and there was a hitch in his voice. He hastily looked away from her, thoroughly embarrassed. He could hear her breathing heavily through her nostrils, also sounding on the verge of tears. He had no idea what to do if she started crying, so he turned all of his energy toward pulling her back from the emotional edge she was teetering on. "Are we friends, Sarah?" His voice was ragged with nerves and sadness. He sat in terror of her answer as the silence stretched into eternity. His heartbeat thudded in his ears and he kept his eyes on anything but her anxiety-stricken features.

Three seconds after he'd asked the question, she cleared her throat and answered him. "I guess," she said. She sniffled before self-consciously tucking loose, upset strands of hair behind her ears. "I mean, I hope we're friends. Or, I think we can continue to be friends." She laughed self-deprecatingly at her awkwardness. "However you want to say it, I consider us to be friendly. Now, please say something before I die of embarrassment."

He released a short, tight chuckle he wasn't prepared for. It came out strangled, making him sound like he was choking on something. He quickly mimed a cough, even though the sound he just made was obviously not a cough and they both knew it. "You don't have to be embarrassed. You should be happy with what you said; I can breathe again. Not having my suffocation on your conscience must be a relief."

She laughed, and hers, by contrast, sounded relaxed and genuine. "At least I know I'm not killing you, so there's something to take away from all this."

She did indeed sound relieved. He chanced a glance at her face and was glad to see it open and smiling instead of rigid and bunched up around the eyes. He noticed her cheeks held a light natural blush, and this made him smile. The crisis of imminent, public tears spilling from either or both of them was averted, for now. Finding some of his courage again, he made sure to keep his smile on, but made his voice turn serious when next he spoke. "Sarah, I need to hear you say you're my friend for me, and not for the weird thing I roll around in to get places."

Her gaze and voice were as steady as his when she gave a firm nod, stating, "You're my friend, Will. I'm glad to be friends with you." She reached across the tabletop, gently laying her hand over his.

He certainly clued in to the contact. The second she touched him, his eyes fell from hers to their stacked hands. In a spasm of nerves, his hand flinched up and away from her touch as if burned by her.

"I'm sorry!" They both yelped simultaneously. He narrowly avoided smacking himself in the face, and she was so surprised by the sudden, violent movement she nearly lost her balance and toppled out of her chair.

"Oh, my God! I didn't hurt you, did I?" She gripped the side of the table hard and wrenched herself back into a centered, upright position, watching him closely. "I didn't even know I was touching you. Did my nails scrape you?"

"It's fine. Sarah, believe me, I'm all right." He could feel his face turning completely red and nearly died in his seat. "It's no problem! Look, I'm fine." He haphazardly thrust his hand out for her inspection without looking at it, nearly slapping her in the process.

"I knew it! You're bleeding." She seized him by the wrist and started efficiently dabbing at the little red scribble running across the back of his hand with a napkin.

"What?" He was completely taken aback. Only when she started tending to it did the tiny wound begin to persistently sting. "I'm bleeding!" he shouted, only to immediately regret the volume he used in the face of such a wimpy injury.

"I know," she commiserated, sounding miserable. "I'm really sorry. It doesn't hurt too badly, does it?"

"It doesn't hurt at all," he stated firmly, hoping to recoup some machismo. "I just didn't expect to see any blood, though, since I'm not in any pain whatsoever." He made repeated attempts to reclaim his hand from her care, but she held fast.

“Wait,” she persisted, “I think it’s still bleeding somewhat.” She peered at the bright red lines expectantly.

“Sarah, I think I can take it from here.” He increased his efforts to thwart her doting.

“But two fresh drops just popped up.” She pressed a fresh corner of the napkin to his thoroughly uncooperative skin.

Catching on to her steadfastness, he stopped pulling away from her and relaxed into her grip. There was something undeniably soothing about the depth of her concern, and how gentle she was being with him. He watched her, sitting there so focused on his well-being, holding his hand with both of hers. He was slowly leaning into her, and when he was close enough for the tip of his nose to bump against her cheek, he said, in as quiet and sincere a voice as he could muster, “It feels really good when you do whatever it is you’re doing.”

Feeling his breath on her cheek made her flinch. Flinching made her knock into his head with her own. “Ow!” She cried, abandoning his injured hand to furiously rub her suddenly throbbing forehead.

“I’m sorry!” His head stung ten times worse than his hand, but he let it be, deciding the best use of his hands right now was to shove against his armrests and thrust himself as far back in his chair as he could go.

“What’re you doing?” She shot him through with a glare of plain discomfort and outrage.

“I don’t know! I was just appreciating you being nice, I think.” He winced at the phrasing.

“You think?” Her eyes shrewdly narrowed. “What do you think?”

“Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...you know.” Fumbling over his words, he made an indicative motion with the hand she had just been looking after, like he was reeling in the line of a fishing pole, only to have this imaginary line get snagged on something unidentified and immovable beneath the surface.

“No, Will. You definitely shouldn’t have leaned in so close to me. Were you trying to kiss me? I have to get out of here.” There was a vicious flapping and tightening of denim as she hitched up her bag, put herself together and started to storm off.

“Wait, what? Sarah! Stop!” She was stomping away already before he even got his chair brakes off. He had ducked his head and was wrestling with the release levers when he heard each distinct crack of every one of her sneaker steps smacking the pavement with authority. The sound gave him pause; even her feet were furious with him. He decided to follow her anyway and wheeled fast enough to catch her pace. “All right, I can understand how you feel.” He felt odd and exposed making an earnest appeal to the waves of brunette hair whipping and slashing against her shoulders with each alternating lockstep. “Talk to me, please.” When he got close enough to see her shaking and sagging like a giant weight was perched at the apex of her head and was grinding her into the asphalt of the parking lot, he realized she was crying. He stopped following and steered his eyes away from her. His face and neck were burning. “I’m sorry. Okay, Sarah? I’m sorry, and I didn’t mean to make you cry, so please stop crying now.” He spoke loud enough for her to hear even while in the midst of beating a hasty retreat. She gave no discernible response except to widen the distance between them. “I SAID I WAS SORRY! GOD!” He’d screamed so loud his eyes shut. When he opened them he was alone in the evening air, sitting at the mouth of a mostly empty parking lot, surrounded by his frustration and the stench of stale grease hanging in the air.

Chapter Three

Each push of his wheels embeds the ache stretching across Will's shoulders a little deeper in the muscles. The rubber of the tires skids across each square of drab gray sidewalk in staggered bursts of exhausted movement. Panting heavily, he lifts his head from the agony of movement. The night air has chilled, enough so he could just make out the puffs he pushes and pulls from his gaping mouth. He paints his chin with his tongue to catch two lines of drool squirting from the corners of his mouth. Squinting into the dark, he recognizes his block and releases a wordless exclamation of relief at being so close to home. The last half-dozen pushes are a pleasure cruise until his feet break the plane of his driveway, and the incline facing him, an afterthought most any other day, turns his moan to a groan. His heart twists a little as he starts going up against the pull of gravity. His shoulders scorch as more weight, more pain presses into his arms, spreading to his head, making his temples throb. He gnashes his teeth at the strain, squinting and grunting with each lunge upward. Finally leveling out at the top of the climb, he goes limp with exhaustion, head hanging low enough to smell the grime clinging to his shoelaces. If his seatbelt didn't catch him by the hips, he'd be dumped onto the cold cement driveway and suffer the indignity of sliding all the way back down to the curb. He takes a minute to breathe and be still before digging his house key out from the bottom of the pack dangling from the left handle off the back of his chair and letting himself into the house as quietly as possible.

A light clicks on after some awkward searching, and he scans the empty house. Evidence of his mother's displeasure is everywhere. Dirty dishes and cups are left out in conspicuous places in the family room, stacked on top of trashy celebrity magazines and newspapers. Food is

left upon countertops in the kitchen. He frowns, watching a lone fly busy itself with a carton of exposed strawberries. He plucks at his collar nervously and is suddenly reminded of her obsession with orderliness and cleanliness; hours ago she'd frowned severely at his scuffed clothes and convinced him to change despite his not caring. She had never been messy, even before the accident, but these days, she was a woman possessed. Will didn't fully comprehend her need for spotlessness, and chalked up her control-freak tendencies as a response to the general messiness of himself and his father. The latter made the biggest mess, leaving his mother when Will was still in grade school.

He sets about cleaning the mess she no doubt left for him, which is in itself an arduous task when only one hand can be spared for the carrying and transportation of filthy objects while the other fumblingly provides a distinctly zig-zag pattern of movement as it pushes the wheelchair along. Deep into his task of setting individual plates and glasses in the sink to soak—since the kitchen is not wide enough to accommodate the open dishwasher and his wheelchair—he berates himself for not calling home. His phone had been on for every second of his fight with Sarah and every one that came after, but the notification of his mother never occurred to him in those weird hours after Sarah left him dumbfounded in the parking lot.

On the way home after the argument, the hours felt like minutes as he wandered endlessly across cracked sidewalks, letting the greasy-spoon restaurants fencing him in on both sides fade to bare, chipped light poles. When the canopy of tar-colored power lines stopped buzzing above his ears, he came to his senses hugging the unfamiliar curb of a dead-end street. Fear fell on him like a sudden rain then, and he clutched his phone automatically. There were zero bars of reception, the battery a sliver, and he'd missed about a dozen calls from his mother.

Having to rely on strangers' directions he'd passed or flagged down on his way back to his house made him take twice as long to get to a street he'd personally rolled down before and felt comfortable navigating. Streets and sidewalks he'd never pushed his chair across before made him nervous, since most of his navigation was done by feel, being bent forward mid-push most of the time and having a limited view in front of him. Once he finally had reception, he didn't have the battery power and was forced to complete the journey home in the soundless dark.

The dishes were as done as he could make them. Will clenched an empty plastic trash bag in his teeth, and set himself to the task he'd been avoiding since he flipped the lights on. Wadded white anthills of Kleenex fanned out across the navy-blue couch cushions his mom preferred for their softness. Will roughly swept the soggy things into the trash bag while keeping his eyes anywhere but on the task at hand; he was too tired and shaken to directly recognize the physical evidence of his mother's sadness and frustration.

After competently cleaning up after her, he wheeled down the far hall leading to both of their bedrooms. The going was slow and cautious since he didn't turn the hall light on. This meant he had to be extra careful not to slam into a wall or door with his feet or wheels. He found himself in front of the closed door to her bedroom without raising any alarms, raised a hand to knock but paused, suddenly unsure. What if she were asleep? What if she wasn't asleep? What could he do or say to make her better? His fist unclenched and he pressed his palm flat to the door. He leaned forward and listened closely, hoping to pick up a clue on how to proceed from her side of the door, but he heard only silence.

He sighed as he abandoned his mother to her long night, made for his room, and plugged his cell phone into its charger. Feeling exhausted by the day's physical and emotional trials, but

not sleepy in the least, he left his bedroom for the family room and wrung his hands, seized by nervous energy. Before he knew what he was doing the cordless house-phone was in his hand and he was three numbers into calling Sarah's cell before he reconnected his brain and disconnected the phone call.

He thought she hated him now, and a part of him wanted to know for sure, but a bigger part had his best interests in mind and halted him mid-dial, when he was in such a state of unbalance, drowning in a lack of confidence. He felt he needed to keep his hands busy, however, and used the phone to check messages, making sure to keep the volume at a low level.

The first voice was feminine and unfamiliar. "This is Stacy from Doctor Ray's office calling to confirm William's appointment for—"

His thumb had stabbed the arrow on the keypad, and the next message rang in his ear at the same time Will was reflexively sliding his tongue over his teeth in anxiety, having forgotten about his imminent dental checkup. The voice that had supplanted Stacy's was high, raspy, and out of breath. "Charlene, hi, this is Bob from Bridgestone, Uuuuh..." there was a long pause and a muffled noise of paper being shuffled before Will left Bob to his paperwork. As far as he knew, there was nothing wrong with the car or its tires. Will worried his mom was being paranoid about safety or maintenance again as a familiar voice popped into his ear. First there was the mechanical click of the message beginning, then a rattle of whooshing air as someone who was holding the receiver of the phone too close to their lips let out a breath in a nervous rush. A second of silence hung on the line, followed by a shaky inhale. "Hey, Char, hey, Willy! This is Ben. This is...it's Dad, just, uh, just callin' to see how you guys're doing, and what you're up to." The voice was eager, loud and rushed. Will held the phone out of contact with his ear.

"Hello, hello? Pick up if you're there." He was about to hang up the phone, and leave his dad waiting expectantly forever, but he kept listening because he wanted to hear him talk, even if it was in an awkward circumstance; given his mother's hectic and harried state, he doubted she would've been out anywhere tonight. He sighed, looking over at the barren couch still vaguely holding the slight imprint of Mom's outline. If he squinted, he could see her curled up on the couch. Her head would be down and her hair hanging lank across her face, shading everything but the tip of a nose colored a strange pink, sniffing intermittently. She would've made a pillow of her arms and buried her sour expression in it like a discontented toddler, shut off from the world, or at least attempting to appear so. Will's jaw clenched in degrees with each word Dad was rattling off into the cold digital keepsake of the answering machine. "Well, I guess you're not there, huh?" He saw in his mind's eye his mother huddled petulantly, half-buried in the couch cushions, yet still perfectly capable of hearing every single word of his dad's plea as it rang out to the four corners of their lonely house. All she had to do was pick up the phone. He'd be there to hear her every sob, scream, and the latest admission of her not being able to do this alone anymore. "Listen, call me when you get this, okay? It's been too long and I can't wait to talk to you two. I can't wait, all right, so call me back as soon as you get this." There was an unnecessary pause as his dad let his hope of reconnection hang in the air for five seconds of silence before the phone clicked dead so solidly it made him need to swallow against a sudden irrational tightness seizing his throat.

"End of messages." The robotic clang of the message-machine's voice sounded in his ear with crisp efficiency. He dropped the phone to his lap, but still held it with limp fingers. He should call his dad. Even though he saw out of the half-shaded window hanging on the side wall to his left the height of the moon and the deep blackness of night, and he was telling himself it

was too late, and he didn't want to wake his dad, and he wouldn't know what to say to him if he did wake him, he reckoned he should let all of the piled-up evidence to the contrary be damned and call him anyway. He was halfway through dialing his dad's home number before he suddenly realized what he was up to. Will was hugely nervous and definitely unsure of what to say to him, given the lateness of the call, the recorded-for-posterity desperation oozing thickly from each syllable his dad had uttered, and having to explain being in trouble with his mom again. The phone shook slightly as he shoved it against his ear. He kept it pressed too tightly to the side of his head because he was afraid of dropping it. A dull ache was growing in his temple and his teeth were crowding against the inside of his cheek uncomfortably, but he barely noticed.

Each familiar ring rose up, feeling like it was thundering inside his head since the phone was kept so close to him. The sound hung in the air, ebbed, died, and was replaced by its twin. Will was swallowing reflexively, licking his lips to make speaking easier, and he could feel sweat starting to bead on the hot shelf of his forehead. Pick up, already, he thought in the space of one second. Please, for the love of God, be asleep, he begged in the span of the one following. As each ring toned off, Will changed his mind half a dozen times according to what he was hoping would happen.

After the fourth ring there was silence, then the characteristic snap of a phone being picked up, and then there was silence again. He sucked in a breath and held it, wondering if he'd somehow been hung up on or lost the connection. The silence was broken by a hacking cough, someone clearing their throat, and some mumbled words being made louder and quieter as someone was wrestling with the receiver. "Hello?" he asked in a rush of released air.

"Yeah, who's this?" The responding voice sounded hoarse with sleep, and irritated at being woken up.

"It's me, Dad. It's Will."

"Will?" The voice sounded suddenly distant. "Jeez, I almost dropped the thing. Hello? Will? HELLO?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Dad! Relax! I'm here. Sorry for calling so late, and waking you up."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I just dozed off during Leno, is all. How are ya? Is everything okay? It is *kinda* late, not saying I mind, but, you know." He cleared his throat again.

"Everything's good. There's no emergency or anything, so don't worry. I was, just, awake, I guess, and I got your message. I'm not tired enough to go to sleep yet." He nervously tapped the plastic casing of the phone and fretted over sounding dumb.

"Well, thanks for calling. Really, anytime you wanna call is fine. Thank you, for calling back so soon."

"No problem," he said, shrugging because it wasn't. The conversation lapsed into them trading breaths across mouthpieces, which became awkward quickly. "So, I'm probably in trouble with Mom." He shocked himself at blurting this out, but reasoned it was better than listening to the man breathing.

"Why? What happened?" His dad sounded more intrigued than annoyed.

"I think I stayed out too late."

"Party I didn't know about?" The smirk behind his voice was unmistakable.

"Girl trouble, actually." He came right back, wearing a smirk of his own.

"Really?" The word was drawn out across three syllables. "Who we talkin' about?"

He laughed, suddenly picturing his dad moving to the edge of his seat in anticipation.

"Her name's Sarah. I don't think you met her. At least I hope not, since she's my age."

His dad laughed before growling in mock-anger, "Watch what you're implyin' there, kid. The name doesn't ring a bell. So, how's she look?"

"She looks really good." His answer was immediate.

"What's the problem, then? We both know what a stud you are."

He frowned into the phone, not sure how to take his dad complimenting his looks. He decided to play it safe and just answer the question. "She likes being friends."

There was a beat of expectant silence, before his dad asked in desperation, "So, what's the problem?"

He groaned into the phone before putting it all on the table. "She likes being *just* friends, Dad. Come on, I know you get what I'm saying."

"Yeah, we've all been there. Hell, your mother was just the same. She was stop-traffic pretty, but sort of stuck up, you know?"

"I guess." His reply was non-committal, since he had no idea what his mother was like when she was in high school. He was also pretty sure his dad was insulting his mom. "So how did you, like, win her, or whatever it's called?"

"Girls like your mom want a challenge. They're used to getting what they want, getting their way all the time. You have to shake 'em up a little! They're sick of being bored all the time, Will, and if you capital 'L' like this girl, you've got to fight against what she's used to. Get in her face with how you feel. She'll love it."

He frowned into the phone for a second time. "I don't know, Dad. We just had a fight. She started crying and everything."

His dad was quick to brush this off. "Oh, girls cry all the time! They cry if they're five minutes late. Do you have any idea how much your mom used to cry to me?"

His eyebrows went into his hairline. "I don't remember seeing her cry a lot when I was younger."

"She did a good job of hiding it from you, I guess. The point is, she did."

"Well, why was she crying all the time?" An edge started cutting through his voice.

"How should I know? It's just something girls do. Look, don't let something like a little waterworks get in your way, or you'll never get anywhere. Show this girl how much fun being more than friends can be."

"I don't know the difference between them yet, Dad! Sarah'd be my first real girlfriend."

"Believe me when I tell you this, son," he chuckled knowingly before continuing, "friendship is overrated."

He didn't know how to respond. "I guess," is what he came up with. He closed his eyes in frustration, before boldly lying to his father. "I'm pretty tired, Dad. Why don't you catch the end of Leno?"

"The credits rolled five minutes ago. So, how's your mom?" From his tone, it was clear he felt like talking until sunrise.

"She's been crying. But it's no big deal, right?" The sarcasm in his voice was thick enough to chew on.

"Ha! Do I know your mother, or what?"

"I have school tomorrow, Dad." He barely ground the words out from between his clenched teeth.

"All right, all right, I guess I'll let you go. Talk to you soon, Will."

"Yeah," he said without enthusiasm. "Bye, Dad." He hung up before either could say another word, put the phone back in its cradle, and wheeled to his room.

Chapter Four

The next morning was a world in silence as two people got ready to face the day in different sections of the familiar house. Will determinedly dressed himself with a laser's focus, losing himself in the arduous, slow physicality of the daily ritual. His mother agitatedly clanged plates, pots, and pans in the kitchen. There was noise here, then, but it consisted of metal and glass announcements; the people were stubbornly tight-lipped.

The boy left his sanctuary layered in a navy-blue, long-sleeve shirt, a pair of thick and dark khakis, and black-and-white gym shoes that he left untied, having little choice in the matter since he lacked the necessary coordination for the task. He'd carefully and painstakingly tucked the laces beneath each shoe heel. This was done more to keep them from sight than anything; if his mom saw the laces dangling, she would immediately and without fail stoop to her knees and rectify the situation. No matter her mood, she couldn't allow herself not to fuss over him. He wasn't the only one in the house who indulged in rituals when they presented themselves.

Wearing this meager armor, he breached the safe zone of the hallway that naturally separated the kitchen and living room from the bedrooms and invaded her kitchen, enveloping himself in the clanging tempest. One look at the garbage can leaning full and heavy against the sink-side countertops told him she'd used the last of the bread. The stretched plastic of the empty loaf wrapping sealed the top of the trash heap like icing on a cake. Crushed next to the bread bag was a mangled and empty carton of eggs, and a drained gallon-sized milk jug was tossed topsy-turvy into the adjoining recycling bin. He cautiously wheeled closer to her, towards her back. She was hunched over the solid white countertops buttering toast next to the sizzling

stove that was churning fried eggs in a pan. She was wearing a faded pink robe he recognized as a classic comfort item she always broke out when she was feeling sick.

Looking into the pan when he was close enough to do so, he confirmed she was making breakfast for one. This was perfectly sensible, since he was right on time according to his usual schedule; every morning, after tugging the fridge open, digging out the carton of orange juice, and partaking without the benefit of a glass, within a minute after the first gulp, he'd hear the laryngitic rumble of the school bus's poorly maintained diesel and be on his way out the door. Today was no different. Will took two minutes to correctly recap the carton of juice while his mother surreptitiously edged aside the gauzy eggshell-colored curtains obscuring the room's only window to confirm with her eyes what her ears already told her was parked at the foot of her driveway.

The specially equipped school bus sat coughing small, steady black puffs, looking like it was too big to be a toy, but too small to be a realistically functioning, street-worthy vehicle. If an ordinary, everyday, iconic school bus had been decapitated, the remnants of what was usually long, boxy, and imposing sat outside her window, short, squat, mashed together, and somewhat pitiable. A haggard, slightly-fat looking woman wearing an oversized, bright-blue windbreaker serving mainly to obscure her shape and features had tramped around the short bus and was routinely gearing up the wheelchair lift, prepping it to carry her son up and away. Will peeled the fridge open and bumped it closed in the space of a second, having finished his drink. Neither of the two said anything. He reached out a cautious hand and gently rubbed the tips of his fingers over the fuzzy texture of the back of her robe. He squeezed her arm above the elbow before spinning away and shoving his way out of the house and onto the bus.

She stood where she had been before he left, resting her hands on the counter, looking down at the plate of food she'd made for herself. Arranged like this for some time, still and quiet, she let herself be warmed by the mute kindness of Will's gesture, reflecting on what a sweet boy he could be sometimes, and smiling because of it. She dug into her food after the ticking of the clock started getting to her, and although the breakfast was lonely, it tasted better than it ought to have because she was suddenly in higher spirits than she'd been in for more than two days.

Setting about her morning routine following the meal, she discarded the frayed robe, changing into a long-sleeved gray top, then into a white one when she spied herself in the closet mirror, because the dreary color was getting her down again. Finishing with a favorite pair of broken-in jeans and a wooly pair of slippers, she was in the midst of collecting her laundry when the phone rang. The refreshing lightness of her mood led her to pick up before the machine could catch it.

"Hello?" Her voice was high and cheery, almost girlish, making her self-conscious. She stifled a laugh aimed at herself.

"Are you all right?" The voice on the other end was choked, hurried, and immediately recognizable.

She pulled the phone away from her ear and frowned heavily at it, even though there was no way she could be seen. "Yes, Ben. Fine, in fact, not that you should care."

"What? I can't hear you. Hello?" He was hoarse and frantic.

Repositioning the phone between ear and shoulder, she repeated herself. "I said I'm fine. Why? What's going on? Stop talking so fast, you're making me nervous." She tossed the half-

full clothesbasket onto the nearby bed where it would sit forgotten until she was ready to go to sleep much later on.

“Well, you’re making me nervous.” He’d released a long, hissing breath into her ear after he heard her say the word “fine,” dispelling most of the tension in his voice. “Will called me late last night, said you guys were fighting.”

She frowned again, but kept the phone lodged against her shoulder. “He did something he wasn’t supposed to do. By the way, I got your message, but I didn’t call you because I was upset.”

“Well, maybe I could’ve helped. I would’ve talked it out with you, at least. You should let me know when stuff like this goes on! He has two parents, and one of them shouldn’t be told there’s a problem after the fact, in the dead of night.” He was high-voiced and indignant.

“He’s a teenager! We yell at each other at least once a day. It’s just how it is. I’m not gonna run to you every time he rolls his eyes at me; you’re being completely unrealistic.” Her defensiveness and irritation were rapidly peaking. “And if the second parent wants to be more involved, he should do something more productive than whining about it.” She spoke louder than she’d meant to, and a furrow was digging its way in between her knitted eyebrows.

“He said you were crying!”

“Well, I was upset.”

“Jesus, I’m just checking to make sure you’re okay and being totally blown off for my trouble. Thanks a lot, Char.”

“You don’t care about me and Will fighting! And, if memory serves, you never minded if I was upset about anything. You’re just needling me, playing the victim and trying to make me feel bad. Last night, you talked to Will for the first time in a while, and now you realize you

miss him, and you want to spend more time with him, so you're laying a guilt trip on me." She was mulling her lower lip against the top row of her teeth and squinting hard.

"So, wait—I mean—you're gonna sit there and tell me it's a bad thing if I want to be with my kid more?"

In her mind's eye, she could picture him compulsively pinching the collar of his shirt and darting his eyes in every direction as he stumbled over what to say. In the end, he settled for the familiar and didn't really say anything. She could see him throwing his hands up in agitated resignation as clearly as if her phone were a secret key hole she could peep through and see across every closed door and wall the two of them had built around each other, whether they were real objects or symbolic barriers. Confronted with a newly crisp vision of his completely unhelpful uselessness, she ground her teeth and clenched her fists in frustration. "I'm telling you it's a bad thing to fake some concern to get my guard down and then weasel your way closer to him. I'm with him every day, I see him, and speak with him whenever I want to because I earned the right to do those things by being with him every step of the way."

"Are you gonna throw that at me forever? I'm being serious right now. Okay, all right, I fucked up way back when, and I wasn't there for you, and I wasn't there for him, and I'm real sorry about it. But I wanna be there now. I really do, and I think it's just about time to let the past be the past so we can both work together to raise this guy. You two're fighting, a lot, if what you're saying is true. I want to be there. I want to help. All I'm saying is, I'm here now, and I want to help!" His volume overrode hers, but where she was focused on being upset, stark fear and uncertainty dominated his end of the line. He yelled because he didn't know what else to do. She yelled because she wanted to yell at him.

"I don't care if you want to help! I don't want your help, because when you *help*, you just fuck everything up even worse!" She shrieked so loud her voice cracked.

"You really think so? Well, *Will* asked for my *help* last night. He didn't ask for you. He asked for me!" He screamed so strongly and let his words out in such a rush he would've been unintelligible to anyone else besides the one person he was currently speaking to.

"And what could you possibly help him with?" The volume was sapped from her voice and she became overwhelmed by a sudden and powerful onset of outsider status. She covered her mouth with one hand and stared at the blank wall in front of her.

There was a beat of triumphant silence from the other end, briskly shattered by a round of gloating. The tremor of doubt ringing through her voice did not go unnoticed. "I don't think I'm gonna say. No, I think what me and Will talked about is more of a guy thing." Ben panted twice, either because of all the yelling or he was suddenly feeling giddy at holding a secret he and Will shared. When his baiting wasn't met with a reply, he took a deep breath that served to slightly calm him. "He's at that age, you know. Maybe we'll make a habit of our guy talks, what do you think?"

She tuned back into the conversation once her brain picked up on his asking her a question. When he got to screaming, she'd trained herself to shut out the situation. "I hope you know he only went to you because I was asleep. He talks to me about everything, and he'll tell me about this, sooner or later. All I have to do is ask him."

"You're sure he wants to talk about girls with his mother?" Adding suspicion to his pettiness didn't score any points with the woman to whom he was speaking.

"If there really is a girl, and you're not trying to make me upset, he'll come to me when he's ready." Her deadpan tone made it obvious what she thought of his observations.

“We’ll see. When I was his age, I remember learning pretty quickly how valuable it was to keep a secret here, tell a little white lie there. Kids’re crafty like that, Char; just ‘cause you think he’s gonna be your little boy forever don’t make it so.” There was a tinge of mischief and cunning in his voice.

“When you were sixteen, Ben, you used the newfound freedom of your mom’s station wagon to get away with a lot more than little white lies. You don’t need to worry about the trust I have with Will.” She spoke with humor, and it was clearly humor directed at his expense. “Believe me, if I ask him, he’ll tell me.”

“Well, how was he this morning then? Was he feelin’ pretty chatty?” He did a decent job of burying the pain and irritation he felt, but he was conversing with the mother of his son. Having only an average emotional disguise was as good as having no disguise at all.

She sighed dramatically to savor the agony she knew she was putting him through, and to give herself some time and get her words in order. “We didn’t say much, but he let me know he loves me. It was enough.”

“What’d you do, poke your bottom lip out and make with the puppy eyes so he’d fall all over himself to make you feel better?” There was something in his eagerness to accuse her. A sense of relief and vindication flooded into his speech so completely it was unseemly.

“What do you mean, what’d I do?” Immediately struck with the impulse to hang up the phone, she pulled up short because her pride wouldn’t stand for what he was inferring. “This is ridiculous; I didn’t do anything.”

“Well, you said you guys had a fight, right? Didn’t you start it?” He was clearly back to gloating now, and relishing his chance to do so.

“Why did I have to start it? That makes no sense!” She only realized she was biting the inside of her cheek when she swallowed some blood.

“You always started all our fights.” He stated this so baldly, with such exactness, even he felt a small tingle of shame prick up the nape of his neck.

“Who started this one, asshole! God, I’m not listening to this. I have to get to work. I’m not gonna stand here and be talked to like this.” She was pacing back and forth in a high-stepping march, her feet mashing the cream carpet of her bedroom.

“Look, just tell me I’m right when I’m right, okay? I deserve to hear it, at least.” His wheedling tone rose so high he started sounding like he was talking out of his nostrils.

“No, you don’t. All you deserve is to be treated like the asshole you are for making me feel bad.” As his voice rose, hers tumbled until she was practically growling at him.

“Why did I call in the first place? You heard me say it when you first picked up the damn phone. I said ‘Is everything all right?’ And it’s not—Will’s upset. You’re upset. I wanna fix what’s goin’ on over there.” He sounded far away from the phone, like he was holding the receiver at arm’s length so he could contain and deflect whatever she would throw at him.

“I’m upset because you pissed me off. I was fine until you started bugging me. It’s the story of my life. Goodbye, Ben. I have to go.” She stopped grinding a trench in between the bed and the bathroom door and had already started lowering the phone from her ear, making a bee-line for its cradle.

“Wait! Tell me what time would be good for me to come by. Just take a second and give me some days, please. I deserve—” he was yelping into his phone at this point and she cut him off with the press of a button.

After slapping the phone into its charging station, she wrenched her fingers into twin fists, thrust them down towards her feet, slammed her eyes shut as she lifted her head to the ceiling, and howled. The scream was a short, sharp burst, and her rage crested and left her cleanly and quickly with one simple gesture. She was relieved to be rid of it so easily after the messy build-up throughout the bulk of the abruptly terminated conversation.

She stood at the foot of her tidily made bed, looking around her room in a moment of hyper focus and sensation. Her gaze coasted around the robin's-egg blue of the continuous four walls until she found herself in the mirror running the length of the closet door opposite her. She looked pale, lines of unhappiness dug into her face, which was still clenched in residual frustration. Her hair was stringy and messy, alternating between clingy wisps sticking to her hot cheeks and forehead, or tangled chunks, making her head look like a lumpy asteroid.

The space under each of her eyes was blotted with purple. She ran shaky fingers from her brow line to the tip of her chin, worried about looking this tired and worn in the morning after having just gotten up only a little while ago. She clucked her tongue at the state of her reflection, shook her head disdainfully, and felt her eyes sting with tears she desperately didn't want but felt like she deserved. The picture she made was not of a woman who was happy, confident, or sexy. She hugged herself and cried in silence, folding her hands against her sides and sighing.

She turned away from the staring reflection and willed herself to think back to a time when she had been a happy woman. Her memories gushed out and she was flooded with images and instances of her son. She saw him as a boy, dashing through the front door with a school project held over his head and the biggest grin she'd ever seen stuck on his face. It was a picture of him, as a stick figure in a cape, standing with his hands on his hips on top of a half-green,

half-blue ball she intuitively understood to be earth. She'd felt happy then, as well as confident. Will had put his ambitions to paper in his drawing, and she was thrilled he'd aimed so high. His confidence had bolstered her confidence, since she was able to instill a sense of power and hope in her son.

Will was everywhere in the pictures her mind painted. Almost every instance she was able to recall drained the nastiness Ben had lately embedded in the tightness she felt in her chest and the sick heaviness stuck in her stomach. She thought of her baby and nearly floated, she became so uplifted by the thousand smiles, hugs, and slobbery pecks on the cheek they had shared over the years. As her memories sped by and Will became older, switching from a baby to a boy, and then more recently a young man, the smiles gradually faded, becoming grimacing frowns. He mainly pushed her away now instead of hugging her, and there were no kisses worth remembering. Finally, instead of being simply unhappy, her memories of him twisted into exhibits of agony, broken glass and blood. In her mind, she heard a shriek of rubber, roaring metal, and a radio gone silent. She bellowed a wall of sound as she flew against him, crushing him against and through the passenger-side window glass. A thousand colorless gems flew in every direction. She heard them dash against the slick road or fly off lost in the night, instinctively closing her eyes against the flashing edges and points of the fragments. Her face stung and burned. Hot, sticky wetness spilled over her and it did not feel like the rainwater steadily drumming against the asphalt. She felt her son's weight press heavily on her back, and she let herself imagine she was wrapping herself protectively against him, instead of the other way around. Nothing bad is happening, she thought to herself, though she was sick with the knowledge of the world flipping upside down. The car was overturning. The noise of rock,

metal, water, and glass screaming together in noisy competition was better suited to a mythic monster stalking the ocean floor for scraps instead of an out-of-control automobile.

The vehicle was onto its roof, Will hanging unseen halfway outside of it. She prayed not to turn into chum as the wreckage scraped across the wet road. She had been repositioned as the car flipped, and no longer felt the weight of her son's body against her. His reassuring presence was replaced by an almost unbelievable series of images. She pictured him being crushed in her mind's eye, unable to lift her eyelids to know the true situation. She screamed. The noise was hoarse, dreadful, and ancient. Will echoed her. He howled a protest against death that must have been embedded in his genes, traveling an unknowable route from some dark cave of the past to this particular road in this particular car. He screamed until the air was viciously squeezed from him, and then the two of them were bombarded by a merciless silence and senselessness.

Later, she saw him lying still as death, bleeding from everywhere in a dark and unfamiliar bedroom. Her mind steered her back to that hated place, and soon she was overwhelmed by unbelievable images. They piled one on top of the other, collecting into an inescapable reality, which began irrevocably changing her life and the life of her son a little more than a year ago.

She stood just outside Will's hospital room, unsteadily planted on two feet encased in a pair of white sneakers. The laces were stretched and frayed, and the shoe leather was cracked, faded, and deeply worn, smudged with accumulated dirt stains to the point where the original color was barely recognizable. It didn't matter how they looked, because they were the most comfortable shoes she owned, and she could use all the comfort she could get right now. Her

palm was pressed flat against the room's main observation window, giving her an anchor as she looked at him lying on the other side of the thick, transparent barrier.

Most of his body was shrouded from her, lost in an unending spread of blankets, tubes, and wires. His chest rose and fell under that layered heap in a soft, predetermined rhythm as some of the machines her son was connected to monitored and controlled his breathing. His face was without expression, unconscious in the most profound sense of the word. His eyes were firmly closed, and most of his face was obscured by a massive hose that had been inserted through and secured to his mouth. The unnatural hiss of mechanical respiration, paired with the concert of inhuman beeps and clicks surrounding the boy's bedside squeezed a fresh round of tears out of her exhausted eyes. Crying literally hurt as the tears ran down swollen cheeks, staining still-healing bruises. She impatiently wiped them away, and stinging pain erupted at the abrupt contact. She winced and ducked her head.

"Please, be careful Mrs. Jameson. Some of those bruises still look fresh." The admonition came from beside and above her, intruding on her observation of the nightmare strapped to the bed in the nearby room.

She had plainly forgotten she wasn't alone. After breathing her tears back in, she lifted her suddenly heavy head and glanced apologetically at the man standing next to her. "I'm sorry, Doctor Davis," she said, speaking hoarsely. "All of this is still overwhelming. Could you say what you just said again, please? I don't think I understood some of it." She was lying. She didn't understand anything about this impossible situation.

The man sighed. She couldn't tell if it was out of sympathy or frustration. Nonetheless, he dutifully set about complying with her request. Before he started speaking, however, the clipboard he was reciting from fell against the side of his long, white doctor's coat. He reached

out and very gingerly squeezed her upper arm, conscious of her tender state. She welcomed the contact since she didn't have any swelling, bruises, or wounds on the arm he touched. "Maybe there's someone you'd like to call, someone who could be here with you right now." The doctor's suggestion was gentle and earnest.

She quickly shook her head, indicating the negative. The situation was impossible enough already without Ben stumbling in and torturing her already frayed emotions. She was protectively wrapped in a thick, grey, hooded sweatshirt. The hood in question was down at the moment, and after her eyes had once again focused on Davis, she reflexively ran a hand through her hair in a weak attempt to make it look nicer. It was rough to the touch, feeling sticky, ratty, and unclean. She sighed at her state, flipped her hood up, crossed her arms just beneath her breasts, and put a shoulder to the surprisingly strong support of the window she had lately been looking through. She toed the eggshell-white tile of the hallway floor with one sneaker, watching the loose material of her matching sweatpants flap around as she moved, then decided to stand still once she realized her shoes were making streaks on the smooth surface. Looking once again at Davis, she nodded for him to continue.

He smiled encouragingly. He had an angular, handsome face, with high, whiskerless cheekbones, large, expressive green eyes, and a short and professional hairdo that was kept in check with just a hint of gel. When he smiled, almost all of his straight, white teeth showed. The authority of his starkly white doctor's attire was complemented by the dark-brown slacks and expensive-looking black shoes he wore. He seemed to have a naturally genial disposition, honed to perfection because of the demands of his profession. Davis was just over six feet, and built like he took good care of himself. His smile faded by degrees, replaced by a serious

expression. Severe as he now was, he retained some of the warmth he projected when he was grinning, and when speaking his voice was simultaneously commanding and compassionate.

As he dropped his smile, Davis lifted his clipboard, found his place on the top page, and began speaking the words that would fundamentally change her life and the life of her son.

“William is paralyzed from the waist down.” He cleared his throat after this statement, giving the weight of his words time to sink in.

She sagged against the observation window. Her shoulder made a squeaking noise as it slid across the pane. Davis fell from her view as the world turned upside down before her eyes. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears as she asked him in a shaking voice, “What does that mean, exactly?”

Davis looked from his clipboard to her face. He saw the blood draining from it. He abandoned the pages collected there once more and said, “Mrs. Jameson, I’m sorry to have to be the bearer of bad news, here.” He made like he was going to reach out and place his hand on her arm, to brace her.

She flinched beyond his reach, and the violent motion nearly sent her crashing to the floor. She pressed both palms against the window in an effort to keep on her feet, and vigorously shook her head at him. “Don’t give me an apology!” she yelled. “What am I supposed to do with your apology? What good is it?” She felt fresh tears burning on her bruised cheeks, but did nothing to wipe them away because she would collapse if she did. “What I need you to do, right now, is tell me what my son can and can’t do, now that he’s—” her voice faltered on the word. She swallowed and tried to speak again, but only a low moaning sound pressed past her lips. She looked at Davis in desperation and nodded for him to continue speaking.

Davis looked her up and down very carefully, noting she was on the brink of passing out. She had started shaking, and the shakes were getting more violent the longer he kept silent. He sighed heavily, avoided her eyes, and said, "Well, in most but not all cases of paralysis, what is typically expected—"

Hearing the word paralysis again set her off, and she sank against the wall, fiercely clutching the bright blue frame of the window through which she could see her son doing nothing but lying in a bed, letting machines breathe for him. She ended up in an awkward squatting position, halfway between sitting and standing, with her posture twisted towards the cold wall. "Oh, my god," she sobbed, "my baby! My baby's never gonna walk again!" She lost her words, giving way to noises of regret and pain as she cried.

He watched her hysteria for a single overwhelming moment before his training and experience kicked in. He marched toward the nearby nurses' station taking strides twice as long as usual and called out, "Hey! I need some help over here, please." He slapped his clipboard down on the countertop as two nurses came around to him at a jog. The woman in the lead was middle-aged, heavily filled out her baby-blue scrubs, and was pasty-faced with her mixed brown and grey hair kept efficiently short and tidy. Following half-a-step behind the older woman was a blond girl with an eager, open face. She looked young enough to be freshly out of school, and she was remarkably taller than the woman ahead of her. Her build was lean enough to make her identical blue nurse's outfit seem very big on her, and her eyes showed a mixture of concern and enthusiasm, confirming her neophyte appearance. The two nurses were looking expectantly at him, so he pointed to the younger one and loudly told her, "I need you to calm that woman down." He pointed at Will's mother. The eager nurse raced to do as she was told as he looked to the calmer of the two women and said, "I need you to get a sedative for her, but make sure it's

nothing too strong and kept at a low dosage; she's on pain medication for her injuries, and I don't want anything to mix badly with what she's already taking." The second nurse nodded and set to work finding an appropriate drug. He walked back to where two women were locked in a struggle, one wailing in misery and the other speaking calm reassurances, careful to keep her voice low and even. He allowed himself a deep breath before plunging ahead.

Her recollections stopped when the doctor, flanked by two determined women, descended on her, and all around her the colors and lights of the world faded and dimmed. Shaking herself from the disturbing reverie and back into the quiet solitude of her bedroom, she noticed her hands were shaking. She made herself take a few deep breaths to calm down, and then set herself to the task of finishing getting ready for work. Turning the lights out as she went, her expression was as heavy and dark as the shadows now crowding the walls she was leaving behind.

Chapter Five

Will came home from school tired, bored, and uncomfortably chilled by the fall weather that was rapidly on its way to becoming winter. Annoyed at his persistent physical discomfort since he was dressed in layers, wearing a black sweatshirt over a green t-shirt and a thick pair of khaki pants, he sighed as he steered himself on auto-pilot along the familiar course, beginning at the foot of the driveway and extending through the garage. He rolled over the bump separating the laundry room from the garage, skidded into the kitchen, and pulled to a stop in front of the refrigerator. He quickly cracked the fridge door open, hunted down a carton of milk, and had a generous sip halfway swallowed before he heard voices coming from the T.V. His surprise at the unexpected noise made him choke on his drink, and he precariously clung to the carton of milk as he coughed and gasped.

If the noise startled him, he was stunned when a hand started thumping him on his back. He jumped in his seat, losing his grip on the milk carton. Before he could flail after it, another hand had reached out and snatched it as it was sliding away from his fingertips. A potential mess was saved from being made as his mother's familiar voice called out, "Be careful!" She thumped him harder between his shoulder blades before asking, "Are you all right?"

He made to answer her and choked on the words before he could speak them. He roughly cleared his throat and tried again to respond, but was still frustrated. He waved off her thumping, and gestured for her to give the milk back to him. He grabbed the carton and took a sip to wash down whatever was stuck in his throat, pounded his chest, and freed up his voice. "What are you doing here so early?" His voice was full of shock and concern as he cautiously looked her up and down to make sure she was okay. "You didn't get fired or something, I hope?"

She jammed her fists into her hips and scowled at him. "Of course I didn't get fired. Always, you go to the worst possible scenario." She was wearing a loose-fitting, cream-colored blouse, a pair of tan, fitted slacks, and black high-heels. The footwear looked decidedly uncomfortable, but was undeniably stylish and sharp. The little bits of ankle and foot peeking between the cuffs of her pants and her professional shoes were draped in dark nylon.

He studied her face and couldn't help noticing she was wearing more makeup than usual, especially in the shading around her eyes, and her hair held evidence of heavy styling, looking more voluminous and eye-catching thanks to whatever product she used. He frowned, confused by her look now more than her unusual presence. "So, why are you still in your work getup, since you're home now?"

She shrugged. "I just got home about fifteen minutes ago and haven't had time to change, yet. I left early today. It's not like there was some big problem. In fact, it was pretty slow at the office, so I figured: what the heck? I have some back-logged sick days saved up just for days like today, in fact."

He gave a shrug of his own. "Well, welcome home early, I guess." He gave her a wry smile. "I do have to say, though, I find it difficult to imagine a slow day at the law offices of Smith and Boring."

She rolled her eyes at him. "I told you, it's *Slate* and *Worthing!* And believe me, they usually find or invent ways to keep their file clerks busy." She sighed, suddenly sounding tired, and left him in the kitchen in favor of collapsing on the couch in front of the T.V. next to where she had tossed her coat.

He put the milk away before following her into the living room. "You sound worn out for a light work day," he began. "Are you sure you didn't waste a fake sick day because you're

actually feeling sick? Maybe you're coming down with something." He tried to see if she were paler than usual and was foiled by the disguise of her make-up. He narrowed his eyes and watched her closely, becoming suspicious when she palmed and massaged her forehead, slouching into the couch cushions. He shook his head in irritation, realizing she was covering for something. "All right, what's wrong?"

Her hand dropped from her head, and she turned in her seat to look at him defiantly, arching her brows and deeply down-turning the corners of her mouth. Seeing the amount of seriousness and certainty crowded into his frowning expression, her shoulders drooped and she sighed. Pinching the bridge of her nose she admitted, "Your father called this morning. We talked, the talking turned to fighting, and the fighting stirred up some thoughts and feelings I would've preferred to've left unstirred." She chuckled dryly. "On top of it all, I had to go into work. The whole day, I couldn't stop thinking about the fight and some old stuff gone by. I couldn't concentrate on my work, so I left early. It happens," she claimed, giving a curiously easy-going shrug.

He digested what she said, looking over her head to stare at the bloated, navy-blue couch back, parsing what she said in his mind to make sure it sounded believable. He nodded to himself and lowered his eyes to look at her fully once again. "What thoughts and feelings upset you so badly? And don't go saying it was nothing important. I won't believe you."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Never you mind about it. Sometimes I just get upset. Doesn't everybody?"

He craned his head back and laughed self-deprecatingly. "It was about me. Wasn't it? The two of you started fighting about me, and you got upset."

“It isn’t always about you, Will.” She leaned closer to the edge of the couch cushion, sweeping her hands into her hair and rubbing her fingers through and thoroughly upsetting the previously well-maintained stylization.

“It was this time though, right? You guys had a fight over me again?” He scratched at his chin with one hand and bunched the leg of his pants into a fist with the other.

She dropped her head and slapped the cushion on either sides of her. “Okay, yes. We got into a fight about you. You got me to admit it.”

He crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side, looking at her suspiciously. “What was it about me this time?”

“Oh, the fight wasn’t such a big problem.” She looked at him with a plain, no-nonsense expression and deadpanned, “I think I know how to deal with your father by now. You have to at least give me the upper hand there.”

“So, what was it then?” He wheeled closer to her. “Why play hooky? Why do you look so worn out? What’s the problem?”

She clucked her tongue, turned her face away, and addressed the wall. “Arguing about you and how things are going now got me to thinking about how it was, you know, when you were little.” she trailed off. Even with her expression hidden, she cracked a smile wide enough to still be spied from the side.

Catching a whiff of nostalgia wafting from her suddenly coy activities, he hung his head and gave a heavy snort. “Here come the baby pictures.” His tone was thick with distaste and awkwardness.

She whipped around to face him very quickly. “Ooh! what a good idea. She kicked off her high heels and leapt to her stocking feet, stepping quickly over to the cabinets lining the wall

behind the television. The lower one was where they kept DVDs and tapes, while the one above contained photo albums.

She was up on her toes and rummaging within the higher cabinet up to her elbows as he was swiveling in his seat, watching her with mounting trepidation. "So, wait, if you had visions of baby pictures dancing in your head all day, what were you upset about, exactly?"

She exhaled raggedly, leaned on the frame of the cabinet, and spoke with her back to him. "I wasn't only picturing you when you were *that* little." She shook her head, turning to face him. "I thought a lot about the accident, too. I couldn't help it."

He leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "How many times do we have to go back there, Mom?" He shrugged. "What can be changed? It happened, and we're dealing with it. Constantly digging it up again isn't dealing with what happened."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I said I couldn't help it. I remembered what I remembered, and it just happened."

He scoffed before making his voice go flat and toneless. "So, when do you start laying apologies on me? It was all your fault, right?"

"How can you sit there and be so—so—I don't even know how to describe it! You sound *bored* when we talk about this. We're talking about your life, Will. We both know how it's changed since the accident." She set her hands on her hips and fixed him with a very doubtful, suspicious expression. "You can't sit there all smug and detached from everything you've been through. I don't buy that for a second. I think you just don't want to face it, so you shut me out."

"*I* shut *you* out?" He shook his head in disbelief, beginning to roll his chair backwards, across the room and away from her. "Whenever you mope around like you are now, I have to

squeeze every word out of you. Like, how many times did I have to ask you basically the same question until you finally told me what was really going on with you? And now that I've found out what it is, I seriously don't even want to bother with it right now. I'll be in my room. Please, leave me alone for a while." He spun around and started pushing himself forwards, barreling through the house. He almost made it to his room without hearing her bounding footsteps.

"Hey! Will, come on. We don't have to—I mean, I'd like to talk with you, but we don't have to right now. We can watch T.V., or something." She sounded a little breathless from the chase.

He waved an arm behind him, warding her off. "Later! We can do whatever you want later, but not right now." He was rapidly losing his forward momentum, and it was a struggle trying to guide himself one-handed. A hallway wall was crowding in on his right side. He had to lean hard to his left, momentarily lifting two wheels off the ground, to avoid smashing into it. "God! Just leave me alone, Mom." He was doubly irritated now since he almost tipped over, and he'd yelled louder than he meant to. The pounding footsteps behind him faltered. He bent into his pushes, throwing all his weight and anger into his shoulders and triceps. He zoomed across the threshold of his room. Quickly, he lunged to the side to grab the yawning door and shove it closed. His bedroom was sealed off with a solidly reverberating bang. He sat suddenly surrounded by quiet stillness, breathing hard.

Spying shadows creeping into his room from the open slit at the bottom of the door, he frowned at the solid white-wood rectangle and listened. A soft thump sounded from outside of his room, not quite strong enough to be a knock. He stared at the spot on the door where the noise came from, and his eyes followed the sound as it changed from a bump to a scrape, sliding down the face of the wood panel. He pictured his mom, now alone in the rest of the house,

slapping and scratching at his door. Pressure started building in his chest at her desperation. He looked at the unmoving gold door handle, waiting to see whether she would let herself in. A moment passed where he breathed raggedly and sat there, watching the door. The handle still didn't even rattle. Soon, the shadows breaking through the bottom of the door fled, and he listened to her stomp down the hall. Another door slammed, signaling she was now alone as he was. He closed his eyes and sighed in a mixture of relief and disappointment.

He lazily rolled over to the desk placed parallel to the wall opposite his closet. Tugging the chain of the green shaded lamp on the desktop, he hissed and tightly squinted his eyes shut as light flared into life, drowning out the previous dimness of the room. His eyes were automatically drawn to the objects propped up prominently on either back corner of the desk. Both of the objects were framed pictures. One of the pictures contained his family. He was situated in the front of the picture, seated in his wheelchair, facing the camera. The smile on his face was tight and impatient, with his eyelids half-closed in anticipation of the flash the camera would set off when it automatically snapped the picture. His mother was kneeling next to him with only the top half of her body and her face visible within the perimeter of the photograph. Both of her arms were looped around his left arm. The fingers of her hands interlocked across his bicep, and he could see she was gently pulling him towards her. Her head was slightly tilted to the side since she was pressing her cheek against his shoulder, and her slightly off-center smile had what he presumed to be all of her teeth showing.

His dad stood over the pair in the portrait, resting both his hands, palms down, atop Will's seated shoulders and lightly squeezing them. His father's smile was the most restrained of the three on display under the glass of the picture frame. A simple, slight, upwards tug of both corners of his mouth is all his father gave to the camera. And while both he and his mother were

looking right at the camera, the eyes of his father strayed, falling slightly to the side of the focal point the pair in the foreground were dutifully grinning at. The entire family was decked out in dress attire for the picture. He was wearing a long-sleeve, black, button-down dress shirt with khaki pants, gleaming black shoes with crisp laces, and a black belt worn only for appearance's sake. His hair had a wall of spikes in the front, meticulously plastered to his head with the aid of hair gel. His mother wore a close-fitting, burgundy turtle-neck sweater, with her shiny hair cast down below her shoulders. Her lips were painted a deep red, and she had a darker-than-usual shade of eyeliner on in order to make her eyes pop. His dad's pants and shoes were obscured by Will's chair and body, but he could make out a white dress shirt patterned with skinny, vertical green stripes. The cuffs of the shirt were linked with something golden. The light of the room sparkled off of them. His dad's face looked freshly shaven, but his hair was cut off at the top of the picture. Whether this was because of how the picture was taken or how it was situated in the frame he didn't know. All he could make out were the bangs, combed forward and sitting heavily across his dad's forehead. They were posed in front of a solid, light-blue background.

There was a measure of happiness in the image, he conceded. He judged his own smile to be genuine enough, even if he did look on edge and ready to be done with the picture-taking process. Of anyone in the picture, his mom was obviously the one who was most openly happy. There was no sense of distraction in her face, no desire to have the moment completed and put behind her. If anything, the breadth of her grin and the focused look in her eye made her seem eager to have the moment of happiness in the picture captured and preserved, so it could be put on display later. Closely studying her face in the portrait, he realized just how heavily made up she was. He couldn't tell from his present viewing angle, but he wouldn't be surprised if the cheek she was resting against his sleeve left a residue behind that would've made the garment he

was wearing there a one and done affair. He couldn't remember wearing the shirt since the day of the picture, and had no idea where it was in the crowded closet.

His eyes drifted fully to his father, and he frowned, puzzled. He could see his dad was standing straight and tall in the picture, and this posture lent the man an air of pride. He grabbed the picture off the desk and held it under closer scrutiny. He saw now how tightly his father was gripping his shoulders, seeming fiercely possessive. And yet, there was a very distracted look in his eye, and the smile he was wearing did not convey any intense, genuine feeling, be it happiness or otherwise. It looked to him like his father was smiling because it was expected of him, not because he really wanted to.

He shook his head at the family portrait and set it back down on the desk top. On the opposite corner, across from the picture he had just let go of, a second picture stood in a rectangular frame. This image, in contrast to the first, held two people instead of three, and instead of showing a complete family, it showed a father and son, by themselves, both acting like little boys. He could be permitted to act young and innocent, because in the picture he was studying he embodied those attributes. Perusing the brightness in his eyes, his baby-teeth filled grin with the requisite gaps on both the top and bottom rows readily displayed, and his Mom-approved bowl haircut, he guessed he was five when this picture was taken.

Instead of being rigidly posed and prepared beforehand, the action and framing of his boyhood was spontaneous, frenetic, and slightly out of focus. His dad had plunked him down on top of his shoulders, and his short, skinny legs, stuffed into bright blue jeans bracketed either side of his dad's smile, which spread from ear to ear. He had clapped one of his tiny hands across his dad's forehead, probably for the sake of balance and security. The other arm was a

powder-blue blur. He was madly waving at the camera with his free hand, which was sleeved in a blue-sky-colored wind-breaker. The jacket was zipped up all the way to his chin.

His dad's gaze held none of the distraction dominating the family image. The man was looking up at his boy, who plainly held his full attention. His dad's eyes seemed bigger than normal in the picture. He wondered if this was because the camera was so close to the action as it captured the two of them at play. But there was that carefree sense of youthfulness draped over the whole affair, and when he grabbed this picture and held it under the lamplight, inspecting it carefully, he admitted to himself the undeniable childishness seizing control of his father in this frozen moment. According to the perimeter of the photograph, there was nothing below his father's neck; there was nothing to the man but his big grin and whom he chose to have parked above his shoulders. Having physical evidence attesting to his father's ability to just kick back and have fun was a solid comfort.

At the same time, seeing such a clear expression of so vivid a feeling from days gone by underlined how little of this depicted version of his dad he now saw reflected in the man when he thought of him presently. It should not have, but such a deep exclamation of joy as relayed by this picture made him sad. When he further noticed no background in the picture, meaning the focus was entirely on the father and son in happier times, it made him feel even worse. He let out something close to a growl and tossed the picture away. Its light-blue frame, nearly matching the tint of the coat he was wearing in the picture (and undoubtedly chosen by his mother) spun haphazardly across the slick surface of the wood desk. The photo almost—but did not—carry over the back of the desk and fall to the floor. It came to a rest on the edge of the desk near the corner, teetering precariously. Once he was confident it wouldn't fall, he turned away from his desk and rolled to the other side of the room. He wanted to be away from those

pictures, away from being stuck in the middle of his awkward family, and most especially, gone from the mocking happiness of his childhood, with its present, happy, carefree father who put a smile on his face and made sure he didn't lose his balance and fall from a very high place.

If his memory was correct and he was aged five years while anchored by his father in the picture he'd tossed across the desk, that same year was defined more by his tears than that particular grin of his captured in the flash of his mother's camera. His parents had separated when he was five. He remembered being in a much more brightly lit room when he was much younger, distractedly bashing Superman and Batman together. There was no quiet outside his door, however, and he wasn't allowed to have the door completely closed when playing all alone. He'd make his own sound effects to complement the battle he was staging with his toys.

He now clenched his fists and could almost feel his hands closing around the smooth, molded plastic of the action figures. After closing his eyes, he saw Superman's plastic helmet of hair adorning the grinning head of his six-inch likeness, complete with a curlicue of hair plastered onto his forehead that made his head look like a chunk had been carved out of it. Batman's cape was made out of cloth rough to the touch and prone to static cling. It kept getting stuck to his jutting, square-shaped jaw. He couldn't remember why he'd always make the two heroes fight each other, but he very clearly recalled the pair of them were his favorites, and he took them anywhere he went when he was a little kid.

The problem was, if he was in his childhood room, playing by himself, neither of his parents were with him, which usually meant they were with each other. And when his parents were together without him acting as a buffer between them, the sound effects they would make in their fights easily overwhelmed the explosions and impacts he concocted for the plastic drama he was staging. He heard the booming footsteps as clear if they were outside the door of the

room in the house he now shared with his mother. The sound was too heavy and loud to belong to a woman, so when he heard the booming footfalls of his father bouncing off the hallway walls, or felt them vibrating up from underneath the floorboards of his bedroom, he knew to drop his opposable heroes and scoot as close as he could to the barely open door to his bedroom; reality was about to get much louder and more interesting than fantasy.

He'd squeeze himself into a tight, low crouch, lean hard on his elbows and stick his butt in the air. As slowly and quietly as he could, he would peer with one eye into the open gap between the door and the doorjamb. In the middle of remembering the old house, it came alive in his mind as the excitement and fear tethered to his memories of ducking and spying ignited his awareness. On the left side of the upstairs hallway containing his childhood bedroom, there was a cramped bathroom. Because of that dead end, he always knew to angle himself just right to face the wraparound banister of the main staircase, barely outside the mouth of the hallway leading to his room. The support bars of the banister were starkly white and very widely spaced apart, making objects behind them stand out in deep relief. Whenever his parents fought, wherever it started, they always took to the stairs on the way to the master bedroom, their room far away on the other side of the second floor of the house.

The old house also had thick, tan carpets running the length of the upper story of the house, and with his face pressed so low to the ground, the musty smell held in the fabric always made his nose twitch. He always tried his best to ignore it, keeping one hand hovering at the tip of his nose to cup and squash any threatening sneezes.

The bangs of his father's heavy, marching shoes died away, and he heard two muffled, fast-talking voices rolling up to him from the first floor, each sounding distinctly upset even without the benefit of readily decipherable words to help with clarity. When he heard these

dueling tones, he'd start to hold his breath. His mother's and father's argument would range throughout the house as one would pursue and the other would evade. Inevitably, their fight would track to the stairs leading to the second floor. Each would be yelling freely when the argument got to this point, but the volume didn't scare him, since it was just noise. However, whenever he'd see the top of one of their heads through the gaps in the bars of the stairway banister, he'd dodge behind the cover of the door and start breathing hard. Witnessing his parents fighting never bothered him too much, but being discovered spying on their arguments was always something he tried desperately to avoid. The reason why they would always lead their disagreements into their bedroom and shut themselves away in there was that they thought doing this would hide their anger from him. What their incessant retreats into familiar, private territory actually accomplished was to alert him to something secret and exciting going on, which made him all the more bold in attempting to observe what his parents were trying very hard to keep from him.

The two overriding shouts—one high-pitched and nagging and the other baritone and dismissive—would blow down the upstairs hallway he always thought of as his since all it contained was his bedroom and a bathroom only he used. His father's low-pitched voice would fade slightly as it went across the second floor to the master bedroom. Light, quick footsteps would make their way down to his room and he would hastily turn his back to the ajar door, once more taking up his action figures briefly in an effort to appear occupied. He'd half-heartedly make the noises of superheroes fighting again, to make the performance convincing. The floor just outside his room's doorway would creak, and he could sense his mother standing there, watching him. He'd bash Superman and Batman together with renewed gusto, and she would never say anything before gently latching his door shut. He listened for the click of the door

closing, followed by her retreating footfalls, before allowing himself to finally abandon the two figures and risk cracking his door open again.

Panting, he'd inch his gaze past the slightly open door, carefully scan the outside hallway, even sparing a glance for the dead-end bathroom, and once he was sure the coast was clear, he'd creep out into the hall.

The arguing voices of his parents were like rushing water. The sound was a constant, flowing gush, and every cautious step he took towards the source swelled the angry tide. He tried as hard as he could to recall specific topics they fought over, to put words in the mouth of his memory, but he couldn't come up with anything clear or definite. Perhaps he was too young, scared, and anxious to remember the final details of the experience. He stood just in front of their closed bedroom door, conjuring it in his mind. It appeared much bigger than normal. The wood was unnaturally tall, having a stretched, distorted shape to it. He remembered, more clearly than any other detail, how he'd carefully press his ear against the wood, settling his cheek into one of inset grooves of the rectangular design pattern decorating the face of the door. Breathing only through his nostrils in shallow, silent gasps, he'd listen to the sound and the fury of his parent's hidden contests and wonder what they looked like when they were fighting, and why they had to be so loud.

Of all the times he spied on his mother and father arguing and got away with it, the one time he got caught in the act stood out most obviously to him. He'd been listening to the contained yelling for some time, lulled into a state akin to relaxation, busy picturing what they were doing shut away in their room. Abruptly, the voices stopped talking. There was a moment of silence he puzzled over. Then, too quick for him to retreat, the heavy steps of his father stalked to the door and roughly yanked it open.

He was so stunned he collapsed into a heap inside the room. His father made a noise of pure, outraged surprise while he collected himself and stood up once again on shaky legs. His eyes frantically darted around his parent's bedroom looking for somewhere to hide or a possible escape route. He felt the bulk of his father looming just behind him, barricading the now-open door he had just tumbled through. He had been so panicked at being discovered, seized by such a surge of adrenaline, that he couldn't clearly see or make sense of the room he now found himself in. He was breathing so hard he could feel his chest fully inflating and deflating over and over again as his heartbeat thudded heavily in his ears.

He remembered feeling very dizzy and terrified, and this was even before his dad's voice thundered overhead, demanding, "What did you think you were doing outside this room? Your mother and I were talking in here with the door closed. It's not a good thing for you to be sneaking around."

He couldn't catch his breath to say anything in response, and he wouldn't know what to say if he could have calmed himself down. He remembered how he felt, like his head was swimming and he couldn't focus on anything. Thinking back on it now, he realized how close he was to passing out. He remembered badly wanting his mother to help him. Instead of her soothing touch, his dad grabbed him by the upper arm and pulled him out of the room the same way he came in. He was dragged down the hall he had crept through and deposited back in his room next to his toys. He felt his dad take his hand away, and he lurched forward unsteadily, barely catching himself with his hands. He remembered his father giving orders. "You stay here," he said, clearly angry. "And you keep this door shut until we open it again and say it's okay to come out." After his father had slammed the door behind him, he vividly recalled curling up next to Superman and Batman, waiting for his breath to come back.

Chapter Six

Will bumped through the garage door into the laundry room. Rumbling wheels rolled him in, muffled by the closed steel hatch barricading the garage from the rest of the world. He was done with school and he was home, so he sighed in a mixture of pleasure and weariness. A convex rush of cold air bulged ahead of him as biting autumn breached the halls at the same time a rush of warm, closely regulated in-house air fluted through his ears. Being stuck between the hot and cold worlds left him disoriented, and he had to blink a few times to adjust, even as he closed the door behind him and kept pushing himself through the narrow laundry-room hallway and into the familiar living room. The aluminum rim of his rear wheel clanged sharply against the bulky washing machine as he passed it, making him jump. He shook himself, rubbed his hands together, and blew into them. He could tell the house was empty at a glance, and his shoulders reflexively loosened at the absence of his mother. He frowned at being so glad she was gone, but he didn't stop being glad for it.

His stomach grumbled at him, so he proceeded into the adjoining kitchen and made a bee-line for the refrigerator. The note his mother had presciently taped to the handle of the fridge door went unnoticed until he knocked it from its perch and it sailed to the floor making the telltale crackling noises that only loose, disturbed paper can make. He only stooped to grab her message after grabbing some lunchmeat, opening the zipped plastic bag with his teeth, giving it a cautious smell test since he'd been in too big of a hurry to check the date, and finally chowing down in earnest once it was discerned he wasn't poisoning himself. He flattened the crunched paper brusquely, smearing it with healthy streaks of turkey grease, and read slowly while chewing with his mouth open.

Stop forgetting your lunch money every day! It isn't good for you. We'll talk later.

He nervously mopped his lips with the back of his hand while puzzling over her note. It was short and direct, which meant she was mad. She didn't sign it, which meant she was really mad. He turned his mind over, thinking about what he'd done to tick her off. The only incident he could think of was staying out too late, but if she was upset with him because of that, she'd have let him have it this morning before school. He remembered her mentioning having a talk with his father. Well, there was the culprit; any conversation between the two of them disintegrated into a shouting match. He was concerned about what his mom thought was interesting when it came to what he and his dad talked over, but decided to push it into the back of his mind until he talked to her face-to-face. Shrugging this off, he folded the paper roughly in half and slid it from the counter to the garbage before cleaning up after himself in the kitchen.

He felt like calling his dad again, in spite of the fact that he knew his dad wouldn't be there; the absence of the man made him easier to talk to. "Hey, Dad, it's Will. Mom gave me your message, or, uh, you gave Mom my message, or, whatever. We need to talk, so I'm gonna head over to your place. Don't worry, I know it's a hike, and I don't care, okay? I don't feel like talking over the phone. All right, I should be there right when you get off work. That reminds me: come straight home after work, please?" He exhaled heavily through his nose, careful to keep from breathing into the mouthpiece of the receiver and garbling his words. "I'll see you soon, Dad." He paused and wondered if he should say something else, add some more detail about what he wanted to talk about, but he was true to his word when he said he didn't want to talk about it over the phone. He left his message at that after a tense pause and hung up.

He glanced at the wall clock hanging over the oven in the kitchen, and groaned in frustration. A quarter to three. It was still too early to take off, even though it would take a long

time for him to wheel over there. He cruised into the family room in a huff, hunching over his wheels and pushing too hard. He pulled to a stop just in time before putting the toes of his shoes through the T.V. screen. After aimlessly putting on a show he didn't recognize and stubbornly not watching a second of it, he stared off into space and gnawed on a thumb nail. The T.V. was on for its noise; feeling as anxious as he was, he knew he wouldn't be able to stand the silence of the house. With the distracting white noise of the boob tube filling his ears, he calmed himself enough to reflect on what an awkward and strange day he'd had at school.

He'd been frustrated when he left in the morning. He was upset at his mom, pissed off at Sarah, nervous about talking to her, and disappointed in himself for not being able to settle his mom down and know what to say to Sarah to make her think he was cool, smart, mature, and able to have the slightest idea of why *she* was upset with *him* when what he pointed out to her before their fight seemed as if it should have had the opposite result. He was mad at her for being mad at him, and since she was mad at him, she was taking all the fun out of being mad at her. He'd streaked onto the bus with a thousand barbs he was sharpening in his mind, preparing to throw them her way the first chance he got, which was lunchtime.

The persistent rattling of the wheelchair lift and the heavy drone of the diesel engine put him to sleep in his chair while on his way to school. He was shaken awake with an aching neck and an empty head. He was so muddled he went to his second-hour class when he should've gone to his first hour, parked behind the back row of desks where his extended knees and feet wouldn't disturb anything, didn't realize where he was until ten minutes after the tardy bell, and sat there petrified, surrounded by strangers who were busy glaring at him over their shoulders in a mixture of hostility and confusion, trying to figure out who he was and what he was doing

there. The unfamiliar teacher didn't seem to notice as he drooped and droned over his overhead projector.

At lunchtime, all confidence and hopes of confrontation drained from him. He and Sarah saw each other coming from opposite ends of the cafeteria. One zigged while the other zagged, both determinedly keeping their eyes locked in the vague middle distance in front of them and keeping their heads meekly lowered and disengaged from the world around them. He mulled a tasteless packet of greasy chips into mashed cud without speaking to anybody, feeling stupid and cowardly. He'd stolen the small bag from the food line, pressing it into invisibility between his thigh and the frame of his chair. Periodically, he felt the back of his neck burning, and guessed these were the moments Sarah occupied herself with staring daggers into his head, but maybe this was wishful thinking on his part; for all he knew, she was gone already.

The rest of the day passed in a haze. He would've thought it was a dream if he didn't know his eyes were open. Successive classes blended and twisted together like half-melted wax sculptures, becoming a dense, thick blob he didn't recognize or care about. He winced, startled, and stared accusingly at the thumb he'd been gnawing. The tip was capped in slick redness, varnished in spit. He shook his hand out, sucked on the bite mark, and decided to get going to his dad's no matter what the clock said. After carefully smoothing his sweatshirt so it clung to him in such a fashion as to keep the wind and the cold away from his body without feeling like it was choking him to death, he made his way out of the house.

The main garage door was nearly forgotten about before reflex and past punishments conspired together to guilt him into glancing over his shoulder. After fishing in pragmatically deep pockets, he thumbed the button of the remote operator and the door ground down to cement in an uneven, rickety dance of gears, chains, and plates of metal. He should've left a note, he

told himself. He decided to call her when he got to his dad's building, thinking it better than nothing, and then shoved off.

He leaned into the wind, which made him get colder, faster, but also took some of the pressure off of his arms, and his dad lived about a mile away, far enough for the compromise. He kept his eyes in slits, but they still smarted and leaked. His brain shut off, since he was unable to have a truly confident idea of where he was going being hunched over so close to the ground and half-blind. Muscle memory took over and reliably steered him where he wanted to go. Internally, he agonized over what he wanted to talk to his dad about. For sure, there was something going on with Mom, and also the rejection he felt from Sarah. Those were two subjects churning malevolently in his chest, making his throat tight, his eyes glassy, and his head hurt, but he wasn't sure he actively wanted to talk about them, with anybody, let alone his dad. Bringing up his mom to his dad never did anybody any good, and he had an idea where asking for advice on women from a man who was divorced would take him based on their late-night chat on the phone. Still, there was nobody else to go to. No other guy, at any rate, and part of the problem he was having with Mom dealt with being unable to talk to her. Talking about his love life with his mother was not going to happen anytime soon either.

He looked up sometime later, unaware of how much time had passed, but surprised to find the sky blanketed in darkness and the wind having an extra bite to it. He fished out his cell phone, took the overhanging lip of the top half between his teeth, and unfolded it. The clock said 4:30, and even if his dad was dead on time, he'd have at least another forty-five minutes to wait. He swore, turned the phone off to conserve the battery he'd forgotten to charge again last night, and he did his best to ignore the Dunkin' Donuts beckoning kitty-corner from the apartment complex since he didn't have any money. He turned tight figure eights in front of the yawning

entrance to the resident parking lot, to keep his mind occupied, his muscles moving, and his blood up.

An hour later, he spotted the tell-tale grimy side-paneling of the beet-red, four-door Taurus and only just managed to stop himself from turning on a dime and gunning it back home. He was shivering, crabby, and still at a loss for how to handle the situation. His dad wore a drowsy, robotic expression until the headlights bounced off of the wheelchair's aluminum frame and neon-orange reflectors. Then he went bug-eyed, leaned forward and squinted to be sure of who he was seeing, tried and failed to look relaxed, and started drumming his fingers nervously on the rim of the steering wheel. Two pairs of eyes met through the filmy, streaked windshield. The car rhythmically blasted dark tufts of poison behind the bumper, making it seem like his dad had showed up in a broken-down magic carpet floating on rain clouds. Will waved lamely. He didn't know what else to do. His dad duplicated the gesture, made as if he were getting out of the car, remembered it was still on, and sat undecided about what to do. Will slowly backed off to the side of the parking lot entrance and waved his dad through. The older man nodded, mouthed "Be right back" through the glass, and drove on ahead. Will drummed the rims of his wheels in the same way his dad tapped the steering wheel and sighed heavily.

He heard the slapping of his dad's shoes before he saw him. The footwear matched a grocery bag in look, the brown outer shell worn, faded, and slightly cheap-looking, almost as if the apparel were imitating a classier example. White socks flashed with each step, clashing with the shoes. Working his way upwards, Will saw a broken-in pair of khakis and a slightly stretched red sweater wrapped in a tan windbreaker that seemed too light for the weather but was probably the only jacket his dad had. His awkward step was somewhere between a jog and a walk, and with each planted foot it seemed like he had a very good chance to stumble and end up

facedown, but he somehow managed to stay upright. His slightly chubby face was on the oily side and he needed a shave. Besides the somewhat dubious getup, his eyes held a genuine concern and gladness and were looking only at his son. The intensity and honesty on the face of the father warmed the boy slightly, and Will couldn't help smiling at him.

"What's going on? Are you all right?" The man leaned on the boy in an effort to get a closer look at him. The brakeless wheels went flying backwards and the two of them were nearly tossed to the ground.

Will hastily checked his rolling and left his dad to catch himself. The rims skinned the cold skin of his palms and he winced, briefly, thereafter deciding to keep his face sternly neutral and his hands folded in his lap, palms down; showing pain or upset especially to his dad made him feel babied. "I'm just fine, Dad. Thanks."

"You're sure?" He was squinting heavily in the darkness. "Man, it's cold out here. What're you doing here, then? Do you wanna, maybe, go inside?" His tone faltered and he flinched with a spasm of recognition, then buried his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his feet nervously. "Sorry. Look, you know this place is just temporary, and I gave them hell about—what do you call it? Updating?—I told them they should update the building so my son could get around okay." He gave the left side of Will's chair a tap with the toe of his shoe and chuckled humorlessly.

"It's fine, really. I just need to talk." He ducked his head after his dad kicked the chair and puzzled over what was worth laughing at.

"We could go over there." He thrust a pointing hand over Will's head to the nearby donut shop. "It's warmer."

"Here's fine."

“You sure? They have donuts, you know.”

“Me and Mom aren’t getting along. There’s problems.”

A heavy silence blanketed the pair after he spoke, broken only by the tiny ticking of his dad’s wrist-watch, hanging suspended over Will’s head. When the silence went on too long, he looked up and stared hard at the man, who was looking off to the side with a foggy, tense expression on his face. “When aren’t there problems, Will?” His dad reeled his arm back in and stuffed the hand back into his pocket, where it fidgeted.

He waited a beat for his dad to say something else, and when there was nothing, he responded with an edge in his voice, “Yeah, well, these are different, they’re big, and confusing, and I don’t know what to do about them because I don’t want to talk about them, but mom does, except she acts like she doesn’t want to talk about them.”

His dad laughed and said, “What?”

He clenched his jaw and breathed through his nostrils, “What do you mean, what? I just told you what.” He paused for a second time, full of expectation, and when his dad didn’t say anything else and still was not looking at him, he yelled, “Do you need me to come out and say it? I could use some help here.”

Whether it was the volume or the emotion in the plea, his dad’s eyes shifted from the universe over his shoulder to his face. He puffed out some air in a hiss and rolled his shoulders resignedly. “Not a one of us *really* gets your mom. I don’t know what to say here, guy. I think if I did, I’d be living in that house with you and her.”

Will leaned forward, not quite trusting what he heard, and his eyes bulged a bit. “That’s it?” His dad shrugged again. “Thanks. Great. That’s what I needed to hear. Next time I need some adult advice, I know whose door to knock on—even if I can’t get past the welcome mat.”

"I told you we could go to the donut place." He frowned heavily, straightening up on tall legs and looking down at Will. "Hey, what do you want me to say?"

"How about something useful?" Will thrust his arms out in either direction and shrugged exaggeratedly. "Maybe, I dunno, but maybe you could help me out here? I think she expects me to be the man, since you aren't there, okay? It feels like she's quiet all the time because she expects me to jump in and—and—and I don't know, okay? I have no idea what to do or say." He laughed heartily at himself. "I don't even know if I'm even guessing right. I'm just assuming it's what she wants because I have no other clues of what she needs me to be."

His dad crossed his arms and put his chin to his chest. "What did she say?" His voice sounded far away and his speech was so carefully enunciated the gears he was turning over in his head were nearly audible.

"She didn't say anything. I don't know what's wrong with her."

"Stop saying 'I don't know.' It's distracting."

"But I don't know! Jesus, how about some compassion here?" His breaking voice overrode his indignation, and he could feel his face flushing.

His embarrassment went unnoticed as his dad appeared to be heavily scrutinizing his shoes while not even really seeing them at all. "You're a guy. You should be used to being totally thrown by what women say and do, even if the woman in question gave birth to you. In fact, you should expect it more from her. Moms hide a lot from their kids to protect them. They tell themselves it's to protect them. Believe me, yours is no different."

His dad was addressing the gritty stretch of concrete serving as a transition from the sidewalk to the asphalt of the parking lot. Will felt equally ignored and patronized. "How do you know? And if you know so much about Mom—"

Immediately, his dad's head snapped. Frosty blue eyes pinned him in his seat. "Stop going where you're going, especially if you want me to work this out with you."

He held the challenging gaze for five seconds before ducking and speaking to the empty ground. "Whatever," he mumbled in an unnaturally quiet voice. "But she didn't say anything specific."

"She had to say something. Women don't do the silence thing unless they said something utterly important that was ignored, more or less."

He scowled at his dad. "I'll officially stop saying I don't know if you officially stop talking like you know everything."

Up went his dad's eyebrows as he said, "But I know more than you, don't I? Otherwise, you'd ask somebody else."

It was his turn to cross his arms as he declared, "If I had somebody else to go to, I would."

The truth of this statement was awkward for the pair of them, for different reasons. It reminded Will he had no one else to talk to, and this made his chest feel uncomfortably tight, and cut his father deeply at the same time, as the older man had a clear-cut example of his son's distance from him. Pain fanned across the man's face, exposing him as cleanly as would a searchlight. Fortunately, Will couldn't look at him, and the man and boy permitted themselves to pretend the moment of revelation didn't happen for either of them. He swallowed with difficulty while his father cleared his throat and repeated himself. "It had to start with her saying something. I don't know everything, but I know your mom; she fights with her words. Think back for a minute."

He sighed with heavy teenaged drama, but did as he was told, replaying what he could remember of the recent conversations he had with her. Nothing suspect jumped out at him immediately, so he was inclined to give up. The words “I don’t know” clogged the back of his throat and were on the tip of his tongue before he caught his dad’s eye. He sighed again, and properly took some time to consider. Visions of his mother represented her as unhappy and tired. He clenched his fists in anger at the realization of her perpetual turmoil. He was mad at her for being unhappy and mad at himself for making her so and not being able to stop her unhappiness. He seized on her unhappiness in his mind, as it was constantly in his reflections of her, and puzzled over it. While it was true she was miserable on average, her feelings had been even more pronounced lately. He traced the latest severity of her mood, and conjured an image of desperately angular cheekbones as they stood out in sharp relief from the rest of her face, a frown carved in granite, and snow-white skin.

This version of his mother’s face hung disembodied in his head until he closed his eyes and made the place where he had seen it. Their car bloomed to life behind her unhappiness. The windows were smudged and filmy, the driver’s seat was positioned straight as a ramrod, sapping her posture of comfort and filling it with rigid attentiveness and control. The gray steering wheel was clutched tightly enough to rip it in half. He groaned in tired, resigned frustration. “On the way home from therapy, in the car, I was tired, had a bad dream, and was dumb enough to tell her what it was. I should’ve made something up.” He pressed his knuckles to his eyes and rubbed until his mom was replaced by blinking red and yellow blobs.

“You think she’s this upset over a dream you had?” The disbelief in his voice came thick and fast, nearly to the point of mockery. “What, did you have a sex dream or something? Ha, I remember what it was like to be sixteen, and if there’s one thing your mom or any mom doesn’t

want to think about, it's what their baby boys spend most of their time thinking about when they hit your age."

He sighed, rolled his eyes, and drummed his fists nervously on his thighs without realizing he was doing so. "No, it was nothing like that. It's just a stupid dream I have over and over again. About the accident," he blurted before the inevitable inquiry. "I dream a lot about the accident, and that's what I did when we were in the car, and I told Mom about it, and now she's upset. More upset than usual, anyway."

"How's therapy going?" The question came in a brightly interested tone, as if a sudden and unexpected reminder had just flashed in front of his dad's eyes.

"What? Fine, I guess. Who cares right now? So, I know why she's upset, and I still don't know what to do about it, which is making me feel worse."

"But you're trying when you go there, yeah? I mean, you're taking it seriously?"

He squinted and rubbed his face in frustration. "What the hell, Dad? Please stop coming out of nowhere with stuff, especially if I'm talking about something completely different."

"Come on, Will. It's important. Doing good at this could really help you, really improve your independence." His dad was revving up his authoritative-parent voice, speaking slowly and with more than a hint of reproach.

"I'm talking about Mom right now! She's important too, or at least I think she is. You could at least be nice to me and pretend she is to you, too." He scoffed and shook his head.

"Your mom's important to me. But what's the problem? You figured out why she's upset, so talk to her about it."

"You have no idea. I've talked to her about it." He spread a palm out across his lap and drummed a finger into it as he listed off his points. "I tell her it's not her fault. I don't blame

her. She shouldn't feel guilty because it was an accident—and I'm telling the truth! That's what makes *me* so upset; I try to reassure her, to make her feel better, and she just shuts down, because she doesn't believe me." His voice broke while saying those final four words, since he suddenly realized how true they were. He twisted his head away, more to keep him from seeing the look on his dad's face as he began to cry than to make a solid effort to hide his tears. He pawed at his face, wiping his tears off with shaky palms.

His dad pursed his lips together, stared hard at the face curtained by two stiff hands, looked away, looked back, cleared his throat, then placed his hand on top of the crown of the boy's head and gently stroked his hair. Will shivered at the touch, considered pulling away from it, but instead leaned forward with his head ducked before he knew what he was doing and sobbed without restriction, resting his forehead lightly against his dad's chest. The two of them stayed together like this until he became conscious of the tears soaking into the older man's shirt, and feeling as if his nose were about to pour snot all over his father. Hastily, he leaned back, snorted, and dragged the forearm of his sweatshirt back and forth across his eyes until they stung. He coughed, cleared his throat, cautiously wiped away some non-existent tears because he was dreadfully self-conscious at this point, and made himself raise his eyes up to his dad.

His father was looking at him with somber seriousness. Fleshy ribs engraved themselves in creases in his forehead, his eyes were big with worry, and he was inhaling and exhaling exclusively from his nostrils long enough for him to become mildly hypnotized by the narrow whistling sound. Finally, he licked his lips and said, "You can tell me, if you want. It's okay to say it if you really do blame your mom for what happened. I won't tell anybody."

He gulped, screwed his face up in shock, and didn't believe what he was hearing. "What?" was all he could manage.

“I said you can talk to me, Will.” His dad put his hands on Will’s shoulders and gave him a light shake.

He shrugged him off and stared at his knees. “I’ll talk to you about a lot of things, Dad, and maybe I should start lying to you; it could make things easier. But I’m not gonna say what you’re trying to get me to say—not just because it’s a lie, but because it’s a lie I could never live with. You know, for a while right after you dumped me and Mom, I really wished I could be with you a lot. I looked forward to seeing you all the time. Now, I look back on when I was younger, and I’m honestly embarrassed at how dumb I was, then. I think I’m going home now.” He kept his head down as he spun in the opposite direction and shoved off from his dad’s building.

Distantly behind him, he heard his dad holler, “Come on, Will! I’m not trying to get you to say anything. I just want to help; I want to.” The wind and the cold ate whatever he had left to say.

Traitorously, Will wondered if his dad might’ve been up to giving him a ride back home, but pride and anger made him keep going. His dad used to chauffeur him to and from his old apartment when the wheelchair was new and unusual, and he was afraid to go out alone. That building was different from this one, being closer and accessible enough so he could at least make it into his dad’s place. Right now, he was physically and mentally near his breaking point, with numb hands, throbbing arms, and a curiously racing heartbeat. The sun was down, and he guessed it was close to six in the evening; his mom would surely be home by now and wondering what was going on. He rolled down the block and around the corner, out of sight from his dad, waited a minute or two, then ducked into Dunkin’ Donuts. He had to scrape around the bottom

of his pack, but he found enough to buy a small coffee and some warmth. He caught his breath, and continued home.

Chapter Seven

Will made no effort at subterfuge as he crashed through the familiar door. He was shivering, with splotches and streaks running from his eyes and staining his cheeks, his nose as red as a signal flare. His arms, he was sure, had fallen off three blocks back, only he didn't feel it because he was so numb with cold and shock. His mother was right where he expected her to be; she was curled defensively on the couch, tucked into a corner of the lumpy cushion with her chin set on her knees and her hands looped around her shins. When he came in, she startled at the racket, and he saw fragments of her gearing up to unleash her outrage when her mouth disappeared into her face and her hands fisted cushion on either side of her. He raced to her, released his seatbelt with a snap, and fell on top of her. He was crying again before his cheek even touched her thigh, only he made no sound. He thought he probably didn't have any breath left for it.

At first, his mother didn't know what to do. Then she felt him shiver and saw his shoulders heave, and her intuition cannoned her anger out of her. She covered the nape of his neck with her hand and squeezed with gentle reassurance. Even though his face was buried away from her, she could picture his misery from the volume of his sobs, and was there for his tears because she was his mother. She wanted to ask where he'd been and what he'd been doing, but was wise enough to first let him cry, and to cry with him.

The face looking up at her was so boyish and vulnerable she caught her breath. She thrilled at the opportunity to be so needed by him while at the same time feeling an intermingling of fear and loss since she so hated it when her boy was in pain. When he saw she was crying, he

jerked his head so violently she heard his bones pop, and she saw him make such a determined, torturous effort to dam his tears she had to close her eyes in spite of it.

When he spoke, he was sixteen again. His voice was hoarse and shamed. "It's okay," he sniffled, "you don't have to cry, Mom. Stop crying."

She clucked her tongue, retorting, "What if I want to cry?" She knit her fingers behind his head and held him even as he started to squirm.

"I don't want you to cry. It means you're sad, or I did something stupid, or bad." His mouth was a straight line, and he spoke with a mix of regret and authority. It didn't suit him.

"It can mean other things," she said quietly, squeezed him for emphasis, and offered a watery smile.

He reached up and mopped at her cheeks with clumsy tenderness. "Not to me it can't."

"I'll try," she said.

"Okay," he said, sounding confused or disappointed.

There was a beat of silence, and then she said, "So, tell me where you were." There was a trace of anger in her voice, but both of them knew it wasn't entirely genuine, not here, not now.

He tensed in her grasp. "I thought I left a note?" He gave a guilty glance. She shook her head. "Didn't I call?" Again, she indicated in the negative. He bit his lip. "I'm sorry. I meant to do one or the other."

"So, where were you?" This time she was more annoyed than angry, until she watched him struggle onto his forearms, leverage himself up briefly, and show her a somewhat sheepish, apologetic smile. At least the tears were gone.

"I went to see Dad," he sighed.

She clutched at him reflexively. "It didn't go well. What happened? Exactly," she tacked on hastily, as he was breathing a reply. "Tell me exactly what happened." She looked at him severely, channeling the jealous territoriality from her eyes to his.

He ducked his head, considering, looked up into her fierce gaze, evaded again, and chose to address her left shoulder when he finally stated, "I went to see Dad to talk about you."

Her grip slackened immediately, and when he dared to look into her face, she was staring at him as if she'd bitten into an unpeeled lime. "What about me? You needed to talk to him, about me. Why'd you *have* to talk to him about me?"

"I don't know." He was muttering out of the side of his mouth, full of embarrassment.

"Yeah, you don't know. Did you know when he called here before, he was saying crazy stuff I don't even wanna think about right now?"

"Mom, listen—"

"You listen to me." She barely stopped herself from clutching his cheeks in a pincer grip with one hand and forcing him to look at her. "If you have a problem with me, you talk to me about it. You're getting older now. This tattle-tale business is baby stuff."

His eyebrows raised incredulously. "Mom, I didn't tattle to Dad about anything. Just let me talk, please? You're blowing this completely out of proportion."

She crossed her arms, slid farther down the couch to put distance between them, and wore a look on her face like she was sharpening her words to a razor's edge in her mind before overriding whatever he had to say.

He studied the utterly defensive lines in her body, sheathed in the same ratty robe from before, with the limbs tightly pulled against her, either as a protective gesture or a warning against her percolating inner outrage, ready to burst outward at any second. Her eyes were bright

with the pressure of tears hanging on the edges of her eyelids. Her face was hard with anger, bent with sharp angles in her cheeks and the point of her chin because of her clenched jaw. Her hair was incongruously soft and shiny, looking freshly washed. The gentle, silky strands swished with every quick breath. Deceptive in its light-hearted, girlish swaying, her hair almost baited him to underestimate the tumultuousness of her emotions. He took careful stock of her boiling expression before choosing his words with precision. "I love you, Mom."

She flinched when she heard him because she had been expecting something horrible and had received the opposite, totally unprepared for it. Her mouth was half-open and ready to automatically, sarcastically echo his expected excuses before she shook herself out of it. She cleared her throat and smoothed down imaginary wrinkles on the front of her robe while she schooled a reply. "Uh-huh," she said, trying her best to sound shrewd and on-the-ball, "what else?"

"And—"

"And I love you, too, by the way," the mother in her blurted out what she really wanted to say before her son could pair syllables. She then gave an imperious nod to give an impression of authority as she said, "Continue."

He smiled warmly at the war of personality being waged in front of him and then stopped when he saw the sharp look on her face. "I've been upset, lately, because I could tell something's bothering you and I didn't know what it was or what to do about it." She was already shaking her head before he finished his sentence, so he sighed and said, "Yes, Mom, something was bothering you. Something is bothering you. I couldn't figure out on my own, so I went to Dad to see if he could help out. Well, he did and he didn't, but the point is, I

remembered how you reacted in the car, about the dream, and I want to tell you—again—that I love you, I always will, and you’ve been sorry enough, I think.”

She squeezed him, even as her eyes were filled with pain and sadness. She knew exactly the dream he was speaking of, and she was still in the midst of her reaction to it. The dream haunted both of them every day, because of the one particular day where it wasn’t a dream and had actually occurred. On some level, the events of that day a year ago and their reiteration in his consciousness and imagination since then left her and him with the broken pieces of an unbelievable reality they were still trying to wake up from. She felt her eyes fill as she choked on the words “I’m sorry.” The statements she repeated most often concerned themselves with hope and regret. It seemed as if every conversation she’d had with him since the day of the accident left her telling him how much she loved him, and how sorry she was for hurting him so deeply. She held him tighter and bit her lip to keep from crying.

He twisted in her arms enough to glare reproachfully at the side of her face. He greeted her tears with outrage at her rote apology, heedless of what he’d just said to her. “Stop saying you’re sorry. I just said you have nothing to be sorry for.” She didn’t trust herself to speak, especially when half of a sob broke through her defensive perimeter.

“Please, don’t cry,” he begged. His voice was so sincere and hopeful it made her cry harder.

“I can’t stop. I have to.” She was well on her way to a full breakdown.

He wrestled out of her grasp, laying his hands upon her cheeks. “You have to get me not blaming you. It has to get through. You have to understand. It was an accident; you need to accept that.”

“If you don’t blame me, then I blame me,” she stated emphatically.

"Nobody needs to blame anybody! It was just something that happened, okay? That's it; that's all it was. It was nobody's fault, and I love you, so please stop crying."

"No!" She wailed, sobbing severely now. "It was not just something that happened, Will. I ruined your life. And don't say I didn't, because I know I did."

He looked at her, utterly serious. "You didn't ruin my life." He wiped the tears from her cheeks and swept the hair from her forehead, then fixed her with a hard stare. "Hey, you did not ruin my life, Mom. I promise you, I'm okay."

She pressed guttural gibberish out of her chest as she gazed up at him. His eyes were narrow pinpoints. Hers were impossibly wide and seemed to have no beginning or end to them. "You're not okay," she hissed through a suddenly raspy throat.

"Are you me all of a sudden? How in the world would you know?" He was starting to chuckle dryly.

She looked him up and down, nodded to herself in secret affirmation, and said, "I can tell you aren't satisfied with yourself, with how your life is."

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "I've got my share of problems. None of them are coming from you, though, except for this fight right now." She stared at him, unmoving and unconvinced. "I'm serious, Mom, if I'm unsatisfied with my life, believe me, it isn't because of you."

"Something tells me you're lying." She studied his face, his eyes, and gave another nod.

He laughed, since he was completely baffled. "How?" he asked simply.

She made a stealthy shrug. "It's an intuitive thing, basically. There's no other way to say it. What you should be doing instead of laughing at me is talking to me about it; I'm here, you're here, and we're laying our cards on the table. Now's better than never."

He sighed, pressed a hand to his forehead, and rubbed agitatedly. "Okay, I'm not satisfied with my life all the time. Who is, really? Having a hundred percent satisfaction is just as weird as having none. I mean, how satisfactory do you find your life?"

She let the question hang between them for a beat before glancing in all directions around her and spreading her arms to indicate their home, this conversation, and the general situation confronting the pair.

He sighed again and defiantly stated, "I find enough satisfaction, Mom. I could do with more, I guess, like anybody else, but I have enough to keep going."

She reeled her arms back in, folded her hands on her stomach, and fixed him with a look. She seemed alarmingly fortified from her end of the couch. "Who do you have, besides me? Who do you talk to, Will, or spend time with?"

"Dad," he said in immediate reflex. "He's better than nothing."

"Yeah, and how's that working out for you? Just now, you came home from talking to your dad, letting him in on your problems, giving him your time, your life, and you came home in tears."

He closed his eyes and lifted his head towards the ceiling, trying to hoist himself out of this conversation. "Please, please, *please* don't make me pick sides between you two. It's so unfair."

"I'm not asking you to play favorites," she stated plainly. "I'm just trying to get you to see how your life is. You have just two people right now who are intimately close to you, who end up making you feel more stressed out and hopeless than if you didn't have anybody." The silence greeting the end of her statement was leaden, but she didn't show it in her face or her posture; she simply looked directly at her son, clear-eyed.

He, on the other hand, cast about for what to say or do. First he wasn't sure he heard her correctly, so he leaned towards her in a questioning gesture, testing her seriousness. She affirmed her words with a nod, and he rolled his eyes before gathering himself up in her defense. "Mom, you guys aren't so bad." He laughed nervously, but she just kept staring at him. He frowned back. "I love you. And I'd like to think it's better to have Dad, than not. You don't have to say these things."

She lifted one eyebrow. "Am I lying?"

He ducked his head and stared at her hands folded on her belly. "Well, I dunno. I mean, it's hard sometimes, yeah, but—"

"We make your life worse. Speaking for myself, I can see why; you're in the terrible spot you're in because of me." He raised his eyes in challenge, yet she held him off by extending a hand to his cheek. "And I don't do much to help, being moody and sad all the time. I'm hesitant in making a judgment call on your father, but the way you came home tonight doesn't tell me things are going well."

He leaned into her touch. "I go to you and Dad because, most of the time, I feel better afterwards. It's true enough with you, at least."

She gently caressed the side of his face. "I'm glad for the small good moments, honey, but I'm worried about what happens now."

He caught her fingers in his, and responded firmly, saying, "I'm glad we're talking about this and being honest about it."

She smiled and her eyes began tearing up again. She leaned down and pressed a kiss to the middle of his forehead. "I still say there has to be someone else for you."

“I’m either here, at therapy, or at school. That’s it.” He shrugged before guiltily adding, “Or at Dad’s place.”

“Well, what about your friends at school? What about girls?” She had narrowed her eyes a bit and was watching him closely enough to see his Adam’s apple gulp at her question. She smiled in such a way as to appear reassuring to him, yet was anxious to either confirm or deny what his father hinted to her earlier.

“Speaking of therapy, I couldn’t help noticing therapists are pretty flexible. Maybe something could pan out there.” His guffaw was forced.

She laughed lightly to humor him and then said, “Yeah, but there have to be cute girls at school.”

“Every school has cute girls,” he proclaimed vaguely, starting to fidget.

“Well, have any of them talked to you, or have you talked to them?” She propped a finger under his chin and hoisted his gaze up until it met hers and stayed there.

He scowled. “Mom, come on!”

“What? I’m just asking a reasonable question.” She tossed her head and smirked defiantly at him.

“You’re my mom, which makes these kinds of questions unreasonable.” He crossed his arms and glared at her.

She mockingly echoed his expression and posture before asking, “Did you talk to your dad about this, too?”

“No,” he mumbled. “The conversation was a train wreck before I managed to get this far.” Both of them paused for a second of awkward silence before laughing simultaneously.

“Look, I appreciate your concern, Mom. Yes, there’s a cute girl at school I talk to. No, things

haven't been going so well with us. I don't like where this conversation's going, so can we please just drop it now?"

"We can't," she said simply.

"Why not?" he hollered, sounding increasingly young and petulant.

"Because it's out there now: My baby boy is sixteen, and talking to other girls who're the same age, and it's bugging him, and it's worrying me, so we have to talk about something so important." She spread her arms out as she unfolded the reality of the situation, seeming entirely too casual about the whole thing.

He wasn't buying it, particularly when he noticed a hitch in her voice when she referenced him as her baby. After studying her closely, he put on a smirk that matched the one she wore earlier and said, "I have a feeling, all of a sudden, about how our talk has changed from being about me and how I'm doing. It's true I'm close with a girl, Mom. Are you sure you're cool with this?"

No. I'm not cool with it." She shrugged at him and creased her brow line. "It's happening, though; the adult thing to do would be to make sure you're cool with it."

He toned his smirk down to a smile and swept aside a few loose tails of hair wagging in front of her eyes. "She's a beautiful girl who's honest with me, Mom. I'm cool with it. But you're my mom, who I love and always will; if you were completely down with this, I'd be more than a little weirded out."

Her smile gave away how charmed she was, but she still made every effort to be cross with him. "There's a lot more substance to a relationship than you know right now."

He groaned and scrubbed his eyes with his knuckles. "I know, Mom. Can we talk about something else, please? We're not even in a relationship, anyway."

“Do you want to be?”

“I don’t know.”

She poked him in the side. “Does she think you’re handsome?”

He laughed, and only partly because she was tickling him. “She thinks I’m gorgeous, Mom.”

“Well, what other choice did she have, anyway?” She was beaming at him, he was grinning back, and the pair of them sent a true, deep, lasting bout of laughter ringing through the normally quiet house.

They cackled until he realized they had inadvertently hit the nail on the head; at the core of his trouble with Sarah were their differing views on attractiveness, mainly having to do with his being totally smitten with her and not having the feelings reciprocated. When he spoke again, his voice was soft and afraid. “Actually, Mom, I think she can’t stand to look at me. I might’ve pressed her too hard on being, you know, in a relationship.”

His mother’s laughter faded to a grin as he spoke, finally dissolving into a frown when she read his expression. “What do you mean? Did you do something to upset her?”

“Maybe I did do something. I’m not completely sure.” He was addressing the front of his shirt. “She upset me first, anyway, so I guess one good turn deserves another.”

She waited for him to elaborate, stroking the back of his hand with the pad of her thumb. When she became aware of a distantly ticking clock before he continued, she asked, in her gentlest voice, “Do you think you could tell me what happened?”

He puffed out some air, inhaled shakily, felt his shoulders and chest bunch up with tension, and confessed, “I let her know how I felt about her, how it made me feel to be around

her, or be touched by her. How important it was for me to just be with her, just as a part of my routine life, and she acted like I was insulting her.”

She was already sighing in heavy commiseration and had something conciliatory on the tip of her tongue when he went on. “It was something more, actually. It wasn’t her being bland about it, or acting completely unaffected. She was very passionate in how she responded, if I’m honest with myself. She was actively hostile towards me, Mom. Her passion was, like, this huge, heavy ball of outrage she fired at me since I dared to tell her I thought she was this great, beautiful person. She flattened me. All because I had the balls—guts to be honest with her.” He exhaled raggedly and looked up at his mother.

She had a scowl on her face. “I doubt she thought it was so bad, Will.”

He rolled his eyes. “I was there, Mom, and she was definitely not feeling me.”

Her scowl deepened. “If I had a boy pour his heart out to me when I was her age, I’d be anything but outraged with him.”

“Well, she was, and I think the reason—” he cut himself off and ducked his head again.

“What? Come on, what is it?” There was more anger in her voice than she meant there to be.

When he looked at her again, his eyes were still dry, yet they were bright, hard, and unblinking. “I barely got her to admit to being friends with me,” he said. “I don’t know what I was thinking, trying to push things beyond that point.”

She hastily wrapped him in her arms. “Forget her, then. She’s not worth it.” She shelved her chin on top of his head and rocked both of them back and forth in her embrace.

"No," he said, shaking his head against her shoulder before breaking out of her hold. "I can't, Mom." He looked up at her with an odd mixture of need and hesitation in his eyes, not saying anything else because he was too young to speak what he was feeling.

She studied his eyes carefully before catching his chin and pressing their foreheads together. "You really like this girl, even after she left you hanging?"

He nodded slowly and deliberately. "I was honest with her. I can't say I've been absolutely honest with anybody lately, let alone a girl."

She laughed mirthlessly. "Yeah, well, she was certainly honest with you."

"I never thought about it like that. It's weird: she respected me enough to tell me the truth, and when she told me the truth, it made me feel like shit, but at least she didn't bullshit me. I'm sorry, Mom." He was suddenly abashed at his choice of words. She pressed her mouth into a thin line, but the cursing went by unaddressed except for her expression. "So, is it a good thing we were honest with each other, or not, since we aren't talking now?"

His mother smirked again. "I guess you'll have to talk to her and find out."

He frowned. "I don't know what to say, though."

She shook her head at him. "If you did, you wouldn't be having any problems with her."

"I guess," he said, sounding unconvinced. "I think I'll go call her." He had pushed up on his elbows with a raised arm reaching halfway between the couch and the distant frame of his chair when she rested a hand on his shoulder. He stopped and looked back at her.

"Will, are you okay with how you are?"

He paused and considered for a moment, before shaking his head.

Her eyes filled, immediately, but she kept the tears off of her cheeks as she asked, "Is there anything I can do, to help?"

He favored her with a gentle smile and said, "No one my age is okay with themselves. I have more to deal with, and it pisses me off because it sucks and is completely unfair, but being able to have talks, like now, helps a ton, Mom." She nodded, keeping her mouth shut because if she didn't she'd start crying again. He sensed she needed something more from him. He lay there, silent and stretched, before admitting to himself he didn't know what it was. He continued getting into his chair, and she got off the couch to spot him from behind.

Chapter Eight

Pulling himself out of the memory of sitting on his dad's shoulders as a young boy, he took a few long, deep breaths. He let his eyes adjust to his room, taking in the desk with its disturbed pictures, his twin-sized bed wedged into the corner as far as it would go to allow as much available space for him to wheel around in, and finally settling his eyes on the closed door of his bedroom. He sighed at the sight of it, doing the best he could to suppress a shiver running over him and making the hairs on his arms stand up. He pushed towards the door with a purpose and pulled it open with enough strength to make the handle put a divot into the wall adjacent to the door. He barely noticed the bang of the collision or the damage it caused as he cruised out of his room and down the hall leading to his mother's bedroom.

He wasn't delicate or cautious in his approach. He slapped the face of her door with an open palm. "Mom, please come out of there." He leaned his head closer to the door, listening for movement. When he didn't hear anything, he drummed on the door again. "Come on!" he yelled, "I need to talk with you. It's really important." It suddenly occurred to him that the door was most likely unlocked. In fact, he wasn't even sure if it had a lock. He stared at the golden knob with his hand hovering over it. He spared a moment to listen for her again as he debated barging in on her. It was strangely quiet; he wondered if she was in the bathroom. He frowned, seeing his dissatisfaction reflected on the shiny face of the knob as a fun-house parody. "If you don't come out, I'm coming in," he warned to the other side of the door. His hand awkwardly clutched the doorknob as he wrestled with his grip on the smooth, round surface. He had just managed to gain enough leverage to begin turning the knob and crack the door open when he was rebuffed. His mom had pushed back from the other side of the door, blocking him out.

“What’s going on? Tell me just what you think you’re doing!” Her demand sounded heavy and solid, only just barely garbled by the obstructing door to her room.

He shrugged, even though no one was free to see him do it. “I’ve been out here forever,” he exaggerated. “I came *this* close to knocking the damn door down! How come you didn’t say anything?”

“I was sleeping! Are you all right? Why are you making so much noise?”

“Can you please just open the door? I’m getting sick of yelling through a gigantic slab of wood.” He backed up until he felt the handle bars sticking out of the seatback of his wheelchair bump into the opposite wall.

There was a definitive click, and the door unlatched. She pulled it open just enough to show her face. Her hair was a mess. It looked as though she didn’t bother washing out whatever she used earlier to style it so exactly. Half of it was sticking up and out in every direction and the other half was a weak disfiguration of whatever chic arrangement she had originally whipped it into. There were spots of pink standing out on her cheeks just below her eyes, and the tip of her nose was red and crusty. She looked him up and down, gave a wet sniff, then pushed the door open the rest of the way. Her hands went to her midsection, tightening the knot securing a battered pink robe on her person. She crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe, keeping herself mostly within the confines of her bedroom. “What’s all this about?” she asked, sounding thoroughly worn out.

He swallowed with trepidation at the desperate state of her. “Well, I had something on my mind, but I feel like I should be the one making sure *you’re* all right.” He nodded at her choice of attire. “Is it even seven-thirty yet? Why’re you sleeping already?”

She groaned and rolled her eyes, before emphatically stating, "I told you, I had a hard day, so I'm just tired. Don't worry about me."

He skeptically raised an eyebrow and clucked his tongue, clearly showing how concerned he was, despite her feeble assurances. "You're saying you're okay, then? Because I wanted to talk to you, but if you're as beat as you say, we could just talk tomorrow or something."

She gave a lazy roll of her shoulders. "I'm up now. What did you wanna talk about?"

He stared at her for another minute, testing her composure and her honesty. When she did nothing but stare back, he yielded. He dipped his head and rubbed the back of his neck, struggling with sorting through what he was feeling. "I was, uh, looking at some stuff I got in my room. It was nothing at first, just some old pictures of us." He dropped his hand and looked up at her again. "There was one of you, me, and dad together. It seemed like it was—" the word staged was on the tip of his tongue, but he caught it in time and corrected himself. "The picture was really professional. You looked nice in it."

She was looking over his head, lost in thought, clearly trying to recall what he was talking about. There was a sudden spark in her eyes, and she nodded. "Yeah, I remember," she said. "Your hair looked so cute in that picture. You should think about spiking it up again." The pair of them shared slight smiles before she asked, "So, what about it?"

"Well, you and I are really close in the picture, and we're both smiling. But Dad was, I dunno; he was kinda lost in the background, and had this really weird look on his face, like he was double-parked and he couldn't wait to get out."

"He was the tallest one, so they put him in the back." She sounded matter-of-fact. "If he was in the front, you wouldn't even be able to tell anybody else was in the picture."

“I mean, yeah, I know he’s tall, so he goes in the back, but I’m talking about something else. He just seemed off. How should I say it?” He rubbed the back of his neck again, and when nothing else came to mind, he simply shrugged at her.

She shrugged back, unhelpful. “You said you were looking at pictures. What was the other one?”

“The second picture was just Dad and me. I was really little in that one.” He bent at the waist and extended a hand down to about the level of his shin, indicating his smallness.

The same foggy look came over her face as she searched her memory. He sat and watched her for a minute until she caught his eye and lightly shook her head, indicating she couldn’t recall the picture. “You were probably the one who took it,” he clarified, in hopes of making the association click for her. She still looked unsure. He sighed and said, “We were outside, and I was sitting on Dad’s shoulders. There were grins all around.” She raised her eyebrows and shook her head in a more emphatic fashion, seeming to indicate he should move on. He roughly scrubbed a hand across his scalp and screwed up his face at her, suddenly feeling acutely disappointed.

She frowned at him. “You saw these pictures, and then what? Why’d you come storming out of your room and wake me up.”

“Seeing the pictures—especially the second one—made me remember when I was younger, and you and Dad used to barricade yourselves in your room and go at each other’s throats all the time.” He wheeled a little closer to her and tracked her eyes with his, careful to study her reaction.

She did nothing except stand a little taller and clear her throat before responding to him. "We tried to keep it between us so you wouldn't see. You were very young, and I wanted to protect you from the fights."

A dark chuckle escaped him before he could clamp down on it. "All your hiding did was make me totally curious about what you guys were doing when you ran upstairs yelling at each other. What did you guys fight about anyway?"

Her mouth pressed into a thin line and she dodged her eyes sideways. "We eventually separated—temporarily at first—and when things." She paused, and he could tell by the look on her face she was casting about for just the right word. "We just decided to make the break official, your Dad and me, after there wasn't really any improvement," she finished diplomatically.

He leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms. "I asked why there was constant fighting between you both, not what the lead up to your divorce was."

"The constant fighting was the lead up!" She raised her voice and fixed him with a hard expression. Her nostrils were flaring a bit.

"Okay, so what was the fighting about then?" He waited for her to answer, and when she spent what felt like a minute simply breathing heavily, he threw up his hands and shouted at her. "Come on, Mom! I'm old enough. I think I deserve to know."

She pushed off the door frame and leaned closer to him. The frayed ends of her robe swished across the floor of the hallway. "And I think what you want to know is something private between your father and me. You don't deserve to know what was said just between us when you were barely out of pre-school."

"It wasn't something just between the two of you; because of whatever caused the two of you to bite each other's heads off, my parents are divorced and I spend the majority of my time not knowing anything about what my dad is up to right now." He jabbed his thumb into his chest. "I deserve to know why my dad had to leave."

She advanced towards him, only there was nowhere for either of them to go because he was wedged against the hallway wall and she was already on top of him. "We fought over what everybody fights over! We argued about what we wanted out of life, what we wanted for you, and the fact that I was never happy because we were fighting all the time. Your dad didn't *have* to leave, but if he wanted to stay, he should have done something besides constantly pick fights with me and make me yell at him. She bent down until she was in his face, gripping his armrests fiercely with white-knuckled hands. "He did what you're doing right now!"

"I never wanted to make you yell. I just wanted to know what happened to the people in those pictures." He didn't sound very convincing in his denial, since he was yelling at her.

"People grow up and they grow apart, Will. It's just an unavoidable part of life." She wasn't yelling anymore, but her voice was still robust. He felt less anger in her voice and more regret.

He followed her cue and quieted down some. "I don't want to believe what you just said," he declared, shaking his head. "It can't happen to everybody."

She heaved a heavy sigh as she swept strands of her hair upset by her behind her ears. "Well, it happened to your dad and me. And we just have to live with it." She straightened up again, looking him in the face. He saw in her expression a mixture of disappointment and defeat.

He kept shaking his head while gulping down a few breaths of air. "It's happening to you and me, too," he quietly admitted. "We either argue about everything, or one of us has to pull the other one out of some sort of depression or something. I hate it."

She shrugged again without saying anything. The look on her face said she didn't know what to say.

He groaned in frustration, since he'd been hoping she would immediately break into what he just said and argue against it until she was hoarse. He cupped his face in his hands and dug his fingertips into his brow line, rubbing vigorously. "When did it get like this for you and me?" His despair was somewhat guarded by the shield of his hands, but the anger and fear cut into every uttered syllable. What he left unsaid was his doubts about their relationship having any hope of improving and progressing.

He had been speaking rhetorically, more as an inner question to himself than as a contribution to their conversation. These facts made it all the more surprising when she answered him. "It's because of the accident, Will. It all goes back to that."

Uncovering his face, he looked at her quizzically and asked, "You think things have been bad going all the way back to last year? I was thinking about just the last week or two."

She forced out a tight smile and shook her head at him. "You can be so young sometimes, Will. Hearing you say stuff like you just said makes me happy."

He tilted his head to the side and gaped at her, clearly not comprehending what she was talking about. "You don't look happy," he stated bluntly.

"I'm not, most of the time, but the times I am happy, I have you to thank." Her smile grew and relaxed, throwing off some of the tension in her cheeks and generally brightening up her demeanor.

He chuckled at her, not knowing what else to do. "You look like you're about two seconds away from crying."

She sniffed and dabbed her cheeks with her palms, even though they were still dry. "Forget it," she said, with a laugh in her throat.

He dropped his current line of thinking and reeled in another. "That's the second time you mentioned the accident to me. You said earlier you thought about it at work all the time."

She nodded. "Yeah, talking to your dad triggered something. I couldn't stop thinking about when you were my great little guy, racing home with your projects from school." She lowered her voice, and picked at the collar of her robe. "And then, I remembered the accident, and how hard things got, for you more than me, obviously. But it was hard for me, too, watching you on your back in your hospital bed."

His reply was as simple as it was honest: "I don't remember," he said.

She smirked at him before playing along. "Ha, ha, because you were unconscious," she replied. Her voice came across as a joking drawl.

"No, I mean I don't remember most of what happened right after the crash. It all, sort of, mashes together. It's hard to make sense out of it." He held to the same plain, serious tone he'd used earlier.

As he went on talking, her smirk fell off her face and her eyes widened remarkably. "Are you saying you suffered amnesia?"

He held up his hands to placate her. "Well, I wouldn't go *that* far." He laughed lightly while she just stood there staring at him. He went on, suddenly awkward. "It was probably because of the drugs and shock. I don't know for sure, but for whatever reason, the specifics from back then are pretty muddled up."

She quickly pressed a palm to his forehead, giving the appearance of checking his temperature. "I can't believe you don't remember." Her voice was rushed, low, and frantic. "How could you forget those things? I can't believe it."

He took hold of her wrist and shooed her hand away. "It was a long time ago, Mom. To be honest, I'm glad I don't remember everything from the aftermath. It's a relief."

Her eyes pulled into tight, disbelieving slits, and her mouth hung slack and senseless as she tested him under her gaze. When he didn't crack a smile and start telling her he was joking, her jaw shut with a resounding click. She took some air and said, "You have to remember something. What happened to you doesn't come and go like a breeze."

"I can remember a lot of stuff from right after the accident, when I was in the hospital and whatever else, but none of it is very normal, or seems convincingly real." He pulled his eyes from hers and focused on the wall behind her. He drove himself back through his mind, falling through the floor of the house, into a dark and unfamiliar place. His surroundings were dim and fuzzy, but he definitely had the impression he was somewhere solid, and not simply floating in space. The feeling of some stiff, scratchy material surrounding him, catching and holding his body in a cocoon of irritation came to him. This sensation of discomfort was compounded by noises sounding off apparently right next to his ears. He heard a sharp, insistent beep, and then the noise fell away only to be replaced by a perpetual hissing, which sounded similar to a leaky tire. After a moment the specifics of the experience crumbled and he was cast into a comprehensive, indistinguishable roar of sensation crowding in all around him. He gasped, shook himself, and found his mother and their hallway again. "There's totally something there," he admitted, sounding a little breathless. "I can't really tell what it is, though. And I don't think

I want to, Mom. It's scary." He paused to catch his breath and fix her with a pleading look, plainly asking her without words to drop the conversation.

A deep furrow dug its way into her forehead as she studied his face with pursed lips. When she responded to him, her voice was quietly apologetic, but also clear and stern. "I wanted to talk to you about the accident, about how it made you feel, before you made tracks to your room. I think we should really talk about it now, Will."

Reflexively, his hands wrapped around the aluminum rims of his wheels and gave an exploratory shove. He was firmly lodged against the hallway wall behind him, and his mother stood in front of him with an upsettingly grave expression on her face. He wasn't going anywhere. He started breathing heavily again. "I just told you I was afraid of remembering what happened back then. Let's talk about something else, please." There was a hitch in his voice, and the fingers curled around his tires suddenly clenched.

She firmly shook her head. "I want to talk about this," she said. She wet her lips and took a deep breath as she reached out and rested a hand atop his shoulder. "When you brought up the fights your dad and I used to have, you told me you deserved to know what happened. You said you had been through enough, were mature enough, to understand what I did my best to keep from you when you were little. Well, now I'm the one telling you; I think I'm ready for you to tell me what you remember and how it makes you feel. We went through it together, honey. I'll understand the pain, believe me. All you have to do is tell me, and I deserve to be told about whatever it is; I don't care how vague your memories or feelings about it are. I need to know."

She gave his shoulder a firm squeeze as the last word she spoke fell from her lips. He frowned at her and shrugged her hand from its perch. "You think you'll understand it?" His

tone dripped with heavy bitterness. "I don't even understand it. And I completely don't get why I'm stuck in this." His knuckles wrapped the rim of his wheel and the aluminum hummed. He scoffed at her. "I'm going back to my room now." He wheeled forward. She stood her ground until the edges of his footplates bit her ankles, then she yielded and he retreated back to his room.

Chapter Nine

He was on his way to therapy the day after their confrontation in the hallway outside of his room. He had lately gotten out of school and she had taken off from work early for the second successive day in order to be able to take him to and from the session. The atmosphere inside the vehicle was moody, heavy with expectant silence. The tension inside the car ride wasn't helped by the rapidly approaching darkness of evening. With Fall eroding to Winter, the nights fell quicker than ever these days. With the sunshine rapidly draining out of the horizon, the dark crescents under his eyes stood out in bold relief. He stared at himself, reflected in the side mirror, above the words of warning stating objects contained therein were closer than they appeared. His hair was sticking out, especially in the back, and his cheeks looked tighter around his jaw line, as well as a bit paler than usual. He looked like he might be coming down with something. He gave a disgruntled groan and peered out the windshield. "Ah!" he yelled, momentarily blinded by the slicing rays of the setting sun. He twisted sideways and jammed his knuckles into his eyes to scrub the spots away.

"Are you all right? You look tired."

"I'm fine," he said, blinking furiously. "Just got the sun in my eyes is all." He felt the car markedly slow down. One of his mother's hands flew from where it had been clenching the wheel to flip his visor down. She carefully readjusted her grip on the wheel, keeping her hands evenly spaced apart. He saw her eyes stir in a set rotation to each of the car's many mirrors before he finally felt the car lurch forward and begin to very faintly pick up speed again. He incredulously raised his eyebrows at her meticulous choreography, yet said nothing. She kept her eyes, saddled with purple bags as heavy as the ones he was lugging around, firmly ahead of

her and didn't notice his bewildered expression. Pressing a shoulder into the seat, he abandoned her for the passenger-side window again, this time careful to avoid the mirror. There were no cars beside them, only the rough shoulder of the road and some weak-looking tufts of grass.

The silence was starting to annoy him, but he preferred being irritated over being outraged. If he tried to strike up a conversation, he was sure she would find a way to direct it towards the topic he had retreated from the night before, and he didn't want to deal with what she wanted right now. He didn't know what else to tell her, and if he told her as much, she would only keep picking at him like he was a scab. Sooner or later, her persistence would tear away his patience and he would snap at her. Besides, he was huddled less than three feet away from her and there was nowhere he could go if she decided to navigate into that minefield of a discussion.

His realizing he had nowhere to go made him slightly panicked. The nape of his neck prickled uncomfortably, spurring the feeling he got when he was sure she was staring into the back of his head. He was almost positive she would do no such thing while they were driving somewhere, especially given their history with distractions. Still, he couldn't stop himself from executing a very slow, careful adjustment of posture, edging his perspective towards the front once again and using his peripheral vision to try and pick up what she was about.

"Something on your mind?" she asked loudly, making him jump. "You're fidgeting over there.

"I'm just trying to get comfortable." He made his voice go stern and punched the headrest of the passenger seat, both to make his statement seem convincing and to dispel some of his nervousness. "Are we almost there?"

"Almost," she said. "You're sure you're all right?"

"I'm sure," he declared, and neither said anything more for the rest of the ride.

Samantha was securing a bear hug around his hips, hoisting him out of his wheelchair, and depositing him onto his belly in the middle of the biggest therapy mat in the exercise room before he felt chatty again. "Stay on my stomach or flip over?"

"Flip over," she ordered, stepping over him to retrieve the clipboard containing the charts detailing his stretching and workout routines. "I need to check how tight your legs are today."

He heard a rustling of paper as he situated himself on his back. She was momentarily lost in a fluorescent flare as he was bathed in very bright light, emanating from two recessed rectangles in the ceiling. She loomed over him after he flipped, and the shadow she cast across his face helped his eyes adjust. He squinted, getting his first good look at her. The majority of her curls were bound in a scrunchy, with only one or two bouncing against her cheeks. She kneeled down on his right side, dropping her clipboard next to his head. As she sank down, she had a cranky look about her. Her eyes were pinched, the corners of her mouth were downturned, and she seemed pastier than normal, although he couldn't be entirely sure with her complexion since she was naturally pale. He gave a grunt of commiseration before telling her, "Everybody looks worn out today."

She had snatched up his shoeless right heel and propped it on the shoulder of her knit sweater, which was either dark blue or purple; he couldn't tell precisely because of the harshness of the light. She loosely wrapped an arm around his leg at knee level and gradually leaned towards him, straightening the leg out and extending it up towards the ceiling. He felt none of what she was doing through either his white gym sock or his khaki pant leg. She clicked her tongue and hunted around the mat for her pen. He caught both the pen and the clipboard and passed them up to her. "Thanks," she said. She sounded like she was running on fumes. "I'm

not gonna lie; today was a hard one. Sometimes the little guys just feel like crying, no matter how many toys you break out.” She balanced the clipboard on top of his prone thigh and hastily jotted something down on the top sheet. “You’re tight today.”

He frowned up at her. “Yeah, well, there isn’t much I can do about my tight legs, is there?”

The beginnings of a smile broke through the wear and tear written across her face. “No, there’s not much physical stuff you can do about it, but unless my eyes deceive me, I have to say you looked at least as stressed out as I did when you came in here today.”

He folded his hands across his stomach and let out a deep breath. “Mom has been asking me about the accident. She says she wants to know how it makes me feel.”

Samantha put down her clipboard and fixed him with a serious look, though she still kept working his legs. “It isn’t even close to the anniversary of the accident, right? I remember when you first started coming here for rehab. It was in the summertime, I think.”

“The accident happened closer to March. I was in the hospital for about two months, maybe a little more. She’s just had what I would call a Mom day, the other day. I was all she could think about, I guess, and so naturally, the accident came up. Anyway, I can’t remember the little stuff, the details of what happened, too good at all.”

“Then just tell her what you do remember. Ooh, sorry.” She winced and relaxed her extension of his leg.

Puzzled, his eyebrows knit together as he studied her face, unsure of why she was apologizing to him. “What is it? I didn’t feel anything.”

“I heard your knee pop. I think it’s okay, though; the leg seems to be bending without any real resistance. It’s probably just creaky joints. I’ll be more careful with the other leg.” She

gently lowered the limb she'd been tending to the mat, then took up the one beside it and laid it atop her alternate shoulder.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, deeply annoyed by not being able to know if his leg was fine or in agony. After a moment he pulled his hand away and looked at her, trying to keep his face and voice free of as much anger as possible. "You're sure the leg's working fine?" he asked in as neutral a voice as possible.

Her eyes had a touch of fear in them at his question, but she nodded vigorously. "It felt completely normal." She abandoned the second leg, taking up the first once more, rolling up the pant leg above his knee, and skimming along the top and bottom of his flesh with practiced hands. She nodded again, firmer this time. "The tendons and joints feel just like they always do."

After taking some time to study her face and ensure her eyes had calmed down, he flashed a small smile. "I'll take your word for it. I try to tell my mom what I remember about everything. She never seems convinced."

Samantha breathed a little easier as she smoothed the material of his khakis back down over the pasty skin of the first leg and perched the second one on her alternate shoulder. She sought out her clipboard and pen and moved them to within reaching distance before resuming her stretching routine again. "Maybe it all depends on who's asking you what question. Since your mom was the one who asked you, it might have become too much of a pressure thing and you just locked up."

"Maybe," he said, sounding unconvinced.

"So, what do you remember about the accident, or what happened afterwards?" She was watching him intently and taking it easy on the new leg she had in her clutches.

"I remember I was afraid and uncomfortable. This was after the accident, since I can't remember the accident." He clamped his mouth shut when he'd finished speaking, not liking where she was going.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Understandable, but what were you afraid of? Specifically, what do you remember scaring you?"

"There were scary noises." He hissed the words out between clenched teeth. "It was a beeping, almost like a microwave going off, and something sounding like an air leak. Can we drop it now?"

She had her pen caught between her teeth and was flipping through the pages attached to her clipboard. "What did you see that scared you?"

He barely understood her as she mumbled around her pen. "I couldn't see anything," he said, loud and clear. "Everything was fuzzy and out of focus. It must've been the drugs. Now can we please stop talking about this?" He was on the verge of yelling.

She put her paperwork on pause, fished her pen out of her mouth, and pointed it at him. The spit coating the teal plastic glowed in the fluorescence burning through the room. "You have two choices; first, you could spend the next twenty minutes auditioning what you're going to say to your mother to me, or you could sulk your way through the rest of the therapy hour, leave here, and still have nothing to say to her. We both know she's gonna keep on you about this. I'm just trying to help you out."

He thumped the back of his head against the mat a few times and loosed a growl of frustration. He looked steadily at her after venting and conceded to her interrogation. "Fine," he said. "Just point your drooly pen somewhere else before it drips on me."

“Oops, sorry!” She apologized casually before wiping the utensil on the front of her sweater and putting it to use on her clipped pages. “So, all you remember are sounds?” She popped the cap back on the pen and tossed it and the papers to the mat. Then she spoke again before he could confirm her suspicion. “I don’t believe you. Now turn on your belly. I gotta take a look at the alignment of your back.”

Making up his mind to stay right where he was, he inclined his head up off the mat and fixed her with a cold stare. “Whose memories are we digging through here? I think they’re mine, and I also think I’m telling you exactly what I remember.”

She leaned back, put her hands on her hips, and formed a peak with her eyebrows. “You’re gonna lie there and tell me—”

“I’m telling you what I can remember, which is what you asked me to do. Jeez, why is everybody giving me a hard time over this?” His hands balled up at his side as his jaw clenched again.

“I’m giving you a hard time because of how you acted when you first came here for therapy, Will, when your mom sat in the room here with us, and you did nothing but yell at her and shut her out.”

The hard edge of his anger dulled, his jaw slackened, and he looked at her with thoroughly bewildered eyes. “What do you mean? I don’t remember ever yelling at her. Why would I yell at her?”

“What do I mean? I mean she sat on that bench, over there in the corner.” She pointed to an empty space nearby. A wooden bench, painted fire-engine red with a clear finish shining under the lights, sat against the solid white wall closest to the one and only door leading into and

out of the therapy room. "For every minute of your first full month of therapy, she sat there encouraging you, telling you to keep working."

"She was in here during therapy? I don't remember that at all." He was panting, looking up into a very skeptical face, desperate to be believed. "I mean it! I can't remember anything about what you just said. I must've been really deep into the drugs from the hospital when I first came here, that's probably why."

"Those drugs didn't give you amnesia, Will. You just don't wanna remember what you said to her."

"Stop talking like you know what it felt like! I'm the one who almost died in the crash, and was stuck in the hospital, mostly unconscious, for months. I was the one who was on whatever drug cocktail they decided to put me on." He slapped his chest. "Only I went through those things, and nobody else did, so I'm not gonna listen to what other people think they know about what happened to me, because they don't."

Her eyes narrowed, and anger was tied through every word she spoke. "Your mom was with you, every step of the way. She knows what it felt like, for her to be with you through it all. She wants to know what it felt like for you to go through what you did. And I think you know more than you say you know. Otherwise you wouldn't be acting so defensive when people ask you simple questions."

"If I seem defensive, it's only because you're basically calling me a liar. I am *not* lying to you. I don't remember. Whether it was the drugs or not, who gives a shit? I'm telling you, and I'm telling Mom, what immediately springs to mind about what happened to me back then. I guess it's just not good enough. Apparently, I'm missing the part where I ripped my mother to shreds." He viciously dug his elbows into the sticky blue covering of the mat and flopped

unceremoniously onto his belly. He folded his arms and pillowed his cheek on his wrists without saying another word to her.

In like silence, she grabbed the hem of his dark-green t-shirt and flipped it upwards, exposing the skin of his lower back. When she drew her hand away from the cloth of his shirt, her fingers grazed the bulk of his shoulders. She heard him hiss at the coldness of her touch. When she dipped her hands lower, prodding around the small of his back, he didn't flinch or voice any protest. Making a quick reference of one of the charts she kept on her clipboard, she saw that his ability to differentiate sensation became less acute the closer the stimulus got to his waistline. Noting that the deficiency of feeling persisted through this checkup, she sighed and clarified herself to him. "You didn't rip into your mom. Well, I don't know what her standards about insults are, but judging by mine I don't think you ripped her."

He spoke into the mat. "My mom's kind of sensitive. She's really sensitive, actually, so whatever I said—if it was negative in the least—probably sent her off the rails." He put a significant pause before his next question, trying to appear detached and nonchalant in his manner of speaking. "So, what did I say to her, exactly?"

"You should ask your mother as soon as we're done." Samantha suggested, in no way fooled by his put-upon, sulky attitude. She ran a fingertip down the canal of his spine, observing the straightness of the length of his back while careful to feel out any curvature.

"You're not being fair." He hoisted his head from the mat and twisted around to glare at her over his shoulder. "Bringing this topic up and then pulling the rug out from under it, when we finally get to something I feel like talking about, is as cheap a move as you can make."

She fixed him with a no-nonsense look and rapped the face of her paperwork with her pen. "Lie flat so we can finish this up. We're almost out of time."

He continued to stare daggers at her. "Answer me first, and then you can scribble down whatever you feel like."

Slowly shaking her head from side-to-side, she pursed her lips and made to reach up between his shoulder blades and make him lie back down. "If you want to talk over what happened when you first came here, talk to your mom about it," she ordered. "It's private," she insisted.

"Weren't you right here when I first said or did whatever I said or did? How can you say it's private?" Holding himself in his awkwardly bent position was beginning to put a crick in his neck.

"Just because I was here when it first happened doesn't mean I wanted to be, or should have been. You were in a crucial rehab stage way back when, so I had to stay there and make sure you went through your routine no matter what. Believe me when I say I didn't think it was pleasant or appropriate for me to sit in on what went on between you and your mom." She nudged him firmly in the middle of his upper back. "Lie down, please."

He gave a grunt of pure frustration before flopping down face-first into the mat. It smelled like socks mixed with disinfectant. He stewed on his belly while she finished making her notes. They finished with two minutes left in the hour, and he said nothing to her as he left, leaving her looking worse for wear than when he first came in for therapy.

Chapter Ten

The world was a million shouts paired with two million steps, a surging herd marching toward doors faced with the impossible task of admitting this focused mass through shrinking exits. A heinous crash of thunder marked the first of this rank moving from the dark inside to the light without, and it didn't take Will long to pick Sarah out from the rushing crowd streaming out of the school towards a rumbling caravan of school buses. He sat at the edge of the sidewalk, mainly hidden in shade, with a gravely serious look on his face. "Sarah," he called out to her. She gave a jerk of recognition at her name being hollered in the din and spun her head every which way in open curiosity. "Sarah! Over here. It's Will." He waved, even though he was quite hard to pick out. "Come on, Sarah; I just want to talk." With every word, she edged her face towards his voice, squinting first in consideration, then perhaps in distaste, according to how he saw her. She found him on the fringe and weaved her way through the mob towards him with plainly reluctant steps.

She tilted her head to one side and openly scrutinized him, her every word dripping with suspicion. "How did you get out here so quick? Did you plan this or something? It seems very odd."

He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. "No, I didn't *plan* this—whatever that means. I leave my last class early to avoid getting stuck in the middle of them." He waved absently at the chugging lines of pushing, shoving, tripping, and yelling students.

She crossed her arms over her loose and open, black waist-length winter coat and propped one shoulder against the cool metal of the rattling flagpole planted adjacent to the main entrance and exit of the school. "Lucky you," she spat, glaring over his head.

He sighed in a hot mixture of irritation and resignation. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She fanned the fingers of her right hand out and studied her nails, gently tilting her hand to the left and right to watch the sun wink alternately across the glaze of her polished fingertips. "I have a ride," she declared in a bored, haughty drawl, "and they're most likely already waiting for me."

"We can walk home, talk on the way." There was a brave insistence in his tone, making him sound surprisingly adult.

"It's far," she stated obviously, raising her eyebrows and fixing a wide-eyed, patronizing stare between his eyes. "Are you sure you're up for it?"

He rolled his eyes and bit the inside of his cheek, which helped him make the following request in a normal tone instead of screaming it at her. "All right, can you stop it, please?"

The frown she turned on him was so deep-set it could have been carved from marble. "Stop what, Will? I'm making sure you're okay."

He frowned right back at her. "What you're doing is acting fake-concerned. It's incredibly annoying."

She pushed off from the flagpole, smoothed down her coat, and spun on a heel to show her back to him in a choreography meant to demonstrate the finality of her decisions and sentiments. "Whatever. I have friends to see, and you have a bus to catch." She shoved her hands in her pockets before she clenched them into fists and started walking heel-toe away from the conversation.

He stayed where he was. "Call them, tell them something came up you forgot about, and walk home with me. We have to talk, and I'm not gonna take no for an answer."

She laughed at him over her shoulder without slowing down at all. "And just what do you plan on doing to stop me?"

He drummed his fingers on his thighs in a nervous gesture he was completely numb to, and then fisted handfuls of his knees before nodding to himself in reassurance. Finally, he said, "Sarah, if you ever cared about me, at all, as a friend...if you generally gave a shit about me at anytime whatsoever, you'll stop and talk to me this one time." He stared straight ahead, not necessarily looking at her, even considering she was directly in front of him. His eyes were wide, but they saw nothing, and his face was sturdy and still, but it was a mask.

There was a hitch in her step at first, followed by her slowing down and bouncing from one black-booted foot to the other in consideration. All at once, she gave a growl of frustration and stomped back to him. She refused to look at him, however, and occupied herself by slinging her purse around her left side and anchoring it on top of a lifted thigh covered by dark blue jeans. She furiously ploughed through the clutter burying her cell phone before finally digging it out, snapping it open, and sighing as she jabbed at her speed dial.

He felt a smirk overtake his face and wisely aimed it at the ground. He studied the backs of his hands as he gradually mastered his expression, released the breath he'd been holding, and barely acknowledged whatever fiction she was conjuring up in order to abandon her ride home. His head was swimming, and his momentary elation at having snared her—however briefly—nearly led to his drowning everything he'd endlessly rehearsed and desperately wanted to say to her. He started in his seat, coughed, and scratched his head. This prevented his carefully memorized lifelines from slipping beyond his recognition. He glanced up at her as he heaved a deep, relieved breath, saw she was staring at him in bewilderment, and ducked his head back down so fast his neck popped. "Thanks for agreeing to do this," he said in a mouse's voice. He

cleared his throat and spoke properly to her. "Really, thank you, Sarah. It means a lot to me."

He swept a hand through his hair and took a chance at finding her eyes before smiling at her.

She scoffed, looked skyward, and said, "Yes, well, you know how to make a girl feel guilty, which I'm pretty sure I should *not* be the one feeling guilty, here."

"This isn't about guilt. I don't care who's guilty or not guilty here—but I think we both overreacted." He was speaking through gritted teeth while trying not to seem angry. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "All right, start walking, so we can talk, since it seems like it'll snow any day now. Fall's on its last legs."

"Hey, if this is so annoying, I can go." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder.

"Sarah, I'm trying to find out why my complimenting you sent you running for the hills! This is hard enough without you being uber-bitch."

"You coulda just called me, Will." She was spitting her words at him, and by the way she planted her feet and leveled her shoulders, he could tell she was circling the wagons. He had to stop where he was because she stopped.

"Are you crazy? This conversation can't be had over the phone!" He squinted in disbelief at her and shook his head. "What would we say? How would we say it? I couldn't do this over the phone; it just would *not* work at all."

"Yeah, and it's going so good now." She snorted at him.

"Shut up! God, you are the *opposite* of helpful." He covered his face with his hands and laughed at himself.

She stung his chest with one of her pointy, polished nails, squatted so their eyes were level, and screamed, "You ambushed me, buddy! It was *completely* unfair. What was I supposed to do? I didn't know what to say, or how to act. You totally put me on the spot with

absolutely no warning, and having no reason to do so, you suddenly expected a love fest from me. What you did was classless and shitty, and I should HATE you for it.”

Her breath was hot on his knuckles, and when he dropped his hands to his lap, she was panting nearly into his nostrils. Fiery splotches stood out on her cheeks and he could see tears standing on the edges of her eyes. “Stop crying,” he said through dry lips. He swished some spit around and tried again. “I mean it; stop crying or I won’t be able to take you seriously.”

First she roundly slapped him, and then she angrily swiped at her eyes with the same hand. “I shouldn’t be crying,” she half-sobbed. “You aren’t worth it.”

He sat still, letting his cheek sting without touching it, keeping his face carefully blank. When speaking next, his voice came out in a monotone, deserted of emotion. “You’re right. You shouldn’t be crying, because there’s no reason to. When someone tells you how awesome a person you are, and how good it feels to be around you, it shouldn’t make you sad.”

“I’m not sad, asshole. I’m pissed off!” She sniffed to keep her nose from dripping, and narrowed her eyes to slits.

“All right, take everything I just said and replace sad with pissed off, or upset, or defensive, or any other stupid, senselessly negative term coming to mind. When someone says what I said to you, the way I said it, it should make you happy and excited. You should feel positive about it, goddamn it.” His voice was now coming out as a hissing whisper, and he could feel his mask cracking. Heat flooded to his forehead and surrounded his eyes. His jaw clenched, and his hands trembled on top of his jeans. Even though they hadn’t moved from the school’s main exit walkway, he grabbed the aluminum rims of his wheels, to give them something to hold onto.

Her eyes slowly widened as she inhaled a huge, shaky breath, stood straight, and took two big steps back, the crack of her heavy boots echoed off the pavement. She pulled her coat tighter around her and crossed her arms over her front again, digging her fingers into the heavy, warm material of the coat sleeves. "I don't know what you want me to say, Will," she spoke to the ground, through a chestnut curtain of hair suddenly hiding her face.

He breathed through his nostrils and kept from shouting at her only by keeping his lips as closed as he could possibly make them. "I want you to tell me, Sarah, why you said what you said to me, when I obviously showed how I felt about you. I want you to tell me what about it made you so angry and upset with me." His hands were clamped so tightly on the tubes of his wheels he felt like he was crushing them. His eyes shakily moved from her shins, to wrapped abdomen, to the crown of her head, the light catching and pooling where she parted her hair, and back again. He saw everything about her except her face, which was a blessing in disguise since he wouldn't know what he'd do if he allowed himself to hold onto her eyes right now.

"I was scared." She made a desperate shrug. "I wasn't expecting you to feel those things, let alone say them to me. You surprised me, and I don't like surprises. They make me feel nervous and out of control."

"From where I'm sitting, it seems like you can't believe I'm actually a guy." He finally settled his eyes on her throat and watched her pulse thud in her neck, the vein standing out on her pale skin and fenced in by her coat collar at the same time.

"Come on, Will." A half-hearted giggle got stuck in her throat from the phlegm. "Be serious right now."

"Sarah, I promise you, right now, I'm being as serious as I've ever been in my life." Where her voice was thin and shaky, his was solidly clear and formidable. He breathed in

deeply through his mouth, starved for air. The gesture automatically hoisted his eyes slightly and he saw her chin trembling.

“I don’t—I’ve never known anybody like you.” She toed the ground and shifted from foot to foot, looking alarmingly cold all of a sudden. “When we’re together, and we talk, I sometimes feel lost at sea. I say everything in my head before I really say it, just to make sure it sounds okay first.”

“So, you don’t see me as a regular guy, then?” He was closely watching her mouth, waiting on the words, leaning over the edge of his seat for some form of confirmation.

Her mouth was a still, thick line, but she was wagging her head left and right. “You confuse me. I don’t know how to say it, really, but I don’t find you sick or anything.” The corners of her mouth twitched upwards slightly. “Yes, I can tell you’re a guy.”

He breathed out deeply, shut his eyes, and drew in a long, indulgent inhalation before opening them again, and looking her steadily in the eyes. He licked his lips. “It’s good news, I guess, hearing I don’t totally freak you out.”

“Oh, you do, sometimes,” she corrected him, “just not all the time.”

“Okay, what does that mean, exactly?” He scratched the end of his nose to cover the wave of confusion seizing his face, and to get some feeling back into his hands, which had gone numb with tension.

“It means when you do things like full-on coming on to me just after we finish telling each other how *friendly* we are, I get upset and generally feel taken advantage of.”

“What do you mean? Going off of how you reacted after I said those things to you, the look on your face, and what you said after all was said and done, I’d say *I* had plenty of reason to be upset.”

“I was thrown. After what we agreed on before what you said, who wouldn’t be?” Her arms flared out on either side of her, openly inviting him to challenge her tone and her question. “You were being completely the opposite of friendly, and it was obvious to me how you didn’t care about being friends; you just wanted me to touch you.”

“I’m willing to bet you didn’t really hear one word of what I was actually saying to you. As soon as you caught on to where I was going, you were completely focused on *who* was saying those things to you, and not what was being said.” He scratched his chin and looked at her with shrewd eyes. “Tell me, word for word, a single sentence you one-hundred-percent remember from our conversation.”

She shrugged defiantly. “I couldn’t completely recall an exact sentence from a conversation I had at lunch two hours ago. It doesn’t mean I wasn’t paying attention. I heard you, Will.”

He thumped back in his seat, wiggled against the cushions to dispel a portion of his nervous energy, and chose not to believe her. “If you truthfully heard me, you wouldn’t have waited so long to have this conversation.”

“Since I did hear you, I was hoping this conversation would never happen, because I still don’t know what to say.”

“Oh, come on. Please stop treating me like the caveman exhibit in a museum and just talk to me, already!” He thrashed in his seat, once again occupied with mangling the pads of his armrests.

She heard his nail scraping against the vinyl covering, bit her lip and said, “Will, you don’t want to hear what you’re making me say.”

“Let me be the judge of that, please.” He was propped rigidly in his chair, all bundled muscles and flayed nerves, alternately appearing to her as a man attempting to avoid being crushed by a weight strapped to his back, or as someone desperately trying not to soil himself. He was a lost and near-manic mixture of nervousness, rage, pride, and insecurity.

She aimed her mouth at the ground, wet her lips, drew in breath, and at the last second lifted her face until it was as level with his as she could get it to be. The two of them were pale, wide-eyed, and out of breath, though the prescribed walking which was supposed to go along with their talking was never undertaken.

Finally, she squinted her eyes shut and simply blurted out, “I can’t feel the same way about you, like how you said you feel about me. I just can’t, and I’m sorry, but I’m never going to feel that way about you.” She was talking so quickly the air practically whistled out of her mouth. Her face flooded red.

He was sitting still, staring out, hands splayed, fingers jutting out as far as they could. His legs and feet dangled, and the slight tug of the seatbelt around his waist was the only force working to keep him in place and upright. His face was as plain and ordinary as it ever got, with his mouth in a simple, straight line with just a touch of natural downturn at the corners. His cheeks were slack, his brow line was even, and his breathing was mechanically clinical, in through the nose and out through the mouth. His eyes were neither wide with shock nor crumpled in pain. He stared straight ahead, at her perhaps, or through her, but not seeing anything. What she said didn’t set off a bomb in his chest, or feel like cold steel sliding precisely between his shoulder blades. When he repeated her words to himself, they held the same matter-of-factness in themselves as when she’d spoken them. “I think I expected you to say what you just said.” He didn’t scream at her, or whisper to her, but only just talked.

She returned the mild favor, but she couldn't keep a touch of shakiness out of her voice. "And are you okay with it?" He deliberately shook his head. "All right," she said, clearing her voice, "then what can I do?"

"Am I really so—is it so unthinkable to be, you know, *with* me?" He sounded sleepy, and he struggled with his words as they came falling slow and heavy out of his mouth, like a baby's set of alphabet blocks.

"Not in general. You can be cute sometimes, to be honest. I just don't see it working with us in particular." She rubbed her upper arms vigorously, uncomfortable at being so cold.

"Yes, in general. You're the only girl here who even talks to me, Sarah, and now it's been confirmed—to my face—I have no shot."

"This is high school. We aren't in the real world, yet. And I mean everybody here, not just you and me."

He laughed to himself. It ended up sounding more like a cough. "High school's all I got right now, and what I got is someone who I want to be anything but just friends with, and because I want what I want, I'm not even gonna be able to be friends with her."

"We can still be friends, I swear." She sounded like she was telling the truth.

He wheeled closer to her, grabbed her hands, and said, "I would never do something so mean, Sarah. Staying your friend after this would be bad for you and worse for me." He lifted their coupled hands up and kissed her hard across the knuckles, tasting the light salt tang of her skin, smelling the fruitiness of her lotion, feeling the heat of her blood. He kept his eyes closed in this instant because he had both mercy and cowardice in him. Her hands were dropped and he had turned himself around before declaring, "I have to get home. I'm sorry I kept you so late." As he wheeled ahead of her, he imagined himself giving voice to one hundred reasons and hopes

to make him turn back. Then he imagined her saying a dozen of these to do the same. All around them, stragglers, or those forced into detention, were boarding the last bus. The world around them kept living and breathing as they parted, going in opposite directions. Neither of them said anything more as he rolled himself away from the school.

Chapter Eleven

Will sat with his father in the donut shop stationed kitty-corner from the latter's apartment. It was colder than when they spoke last, so staying outside wasn't an option. There was a bitter, more insistent wind and skies deciding to get darker quicker as the seasons charged on by. The pair of them were situated in a booth. He had parked on the open end of the table, extending out into foot traffic, continuously bumped by people who were sitting down to food or getting up from it. Once or twice, women snagged their down-filled winter coattails on the jutting handlebars extending from his seatback. They awkwardly untangled themselves while averting their eyes. He'd numbly apologize for being in the way, even though it was more the restaurant's fault than his; the only alternative offered in place of the booths were high-seated tables rooted to the floor, with the chairs rigidly connected to them to prevent theft, he supposed, but it felt more to him as if his father's world and the people and places it supplied to him were all conspiring against his having a good time.

He glanced at the man, wedged into the booth a table's length away from him with his eyes spotlighting a box of sugar-frosted donut holes. His dad didn't notice when people bumped into him or how annoyed he was since the older man was preoccupied with selecting the most pristine, tastiest ball of dough in the batch. His hand hovered over the lot of them discriminately, swinging to the left and right in the air above the dessert like a pudgy pink flying saucer warming up its tractor beam. He couldn't stand to watch his father's ritual anymore, deciding to contemplate his own greasy treat. He looked down at the donut centered on the wax-paper placemat in front of him. It looked hard and stale, and the spots not covered with chocolate frosting had deep creases in them, warning of the food's lack of freshness. He dug at the shell of

donut frosting with his thumb, chipping off crumbly bits of it and getting these grains caught under his fingernail. He sighed and said, "What am I doing here?"

His father postponed his hunt, glanced up at him, and said, "You're wasting a perfectly good donut, is what you're doin'. Come on, already; dig in! They aren't very stale, for once."

"You know, suddenly, I'm not hungry." He sniffed with disdain, and looked at his father in squinty distaste.

"If you're not hungry, why'd you wanna go to the donut place?" His dad dunked the tip of his thumb past his lips and sucked some residual sugar off of it. The choosy hand would dip sometimes, here and there, in its scouring, and tease some of the powdered sugar from the edifice of a random blob.

He rubbed his face and answered through his hands. "Because it's cold out," he said, "and when I come see you, and it's too cold like this, it's the only place close enough to go to because your place—since I can't get to your place." He slapped his hands down on the table, rattling the napkin holder as he vented some of the frustration he wanted to express by insulting the shit-hole apartment his dad lived in, but he thought better of it at the last second.

His dad peered around his hat-flattened bangs at him. The older man was wearing a navy-blue woolen cap because of the weather, and it squashed his hair down and sent it sprawling out in annoying spikes, making him hard to look at because he looked boyish and ridiculous. His dad lived with the hat hair because he liked being warm more than he liked to care about what other people thought about how he looked. His old man sat there, looking at him through a curtain of itchy hair, popped his thumb out of his mouth, and impressed upon his son a matter that was very important to him. "Leave it there if you don't want it. I'll take it." His dad squinted, shook his head, and laughed through his nose once he caught on to what Will

was doing to the donut. "Stop playing with your food, all right? You ain't five years old anymore."

Will gave a growl of annoyance and clumsily rolled the donut he'd been tormenting into the wax paper, wrapping it up snugly. "I didn't come here for the donuts, Dad. I came here to talk to you."

"Yeah, and we'll get to it." A pinching thumb and forefinger snapped shut around a frosted ball with an abrupt lack of ceremony. He tossed it into his mouth, wadded it whole against the side of his cheek, and spoke around it, looking like a hamster. "We can talk right now, as a matter of fact." He wagged his eyebrows jauntily, mulled his donut to mush while flashing a sugar-coated smile, dusted his hands off, plucked his hat from his head, left his messy hair to be messy, and sat, still and contented, looking to his son in quiet expectation, patient as an altar boy.

Will's stomach did a little queasy flip as he watched the odd spectacle in front of him. He pushed himself up and back in his wheelchair, in an effort to settle himself and the voluminous folds of his heavy, evergreen-shaded coat hissed, scraping against the seat coverings in the process of shifting. "How did you deal with things when they went bad with Mom? I mean, what'd you do, to keep everything sort of steady, I guess, is what I'm really trying to say?" He'd studied the backs of his hands for most of the time he'd been speaking, noticing how strangely red with cold they were even though he'd been indoors long enough after pushing his way here on a chilly Wednesday evening to have food ordered and put in front of him. As he was wrapping up, he chanced a glance at his dad, and what he saw made him uncomfortable, so he started drumming his fingertips on the tabletop.

His dad was sitting still, with a furrow of confusion dug into the middle of his forehead. He was leaning back slightly, seemingly caught off guard by the question and the asker. He cleared his throat, even though it was empty and decided only to give a slow, deliberate shrug of his shoulders without saying anything in particular. His unzipped coat slid from the shelf of his shoulders with the gesture, but he did nothing to correct this. He kept his seat, with his eyes facing front, watching the boy carefully.

"Come on, Dad," he hissed through his teeth and gave a dissatisfied shake of his head. "I'm old enough now. We can talk about this."

"You want to talk about it here, now? Why now? Why not just eat your donut?" His dad made a shooping motion, flicking his fingers at him. "Go ahead, stop playing with your food and eat."

He deliberately moved his donut aside, folded his hands one atop the other, laid them in the spot where the food had been, and fixed his dad with an implacable stare. "I didn't come here for the donuts, and you know it. Just talk to me, please."

"What do you wanna know? What do you want me to say?" He shrugged exaggeratedly and snorted a laugh through his nose. "It didn't work out, Will. There's no magic or mystery to the thing." He plucked distractedly at the lining of the coat, the sleeves of which were now halfway off of his body and tangled in the length of his arms because of all the shrugging.

"Yeah, okay, but why exactly didn't it work out, Dad? What did you guys fight about, or what kinds of problems did you run into? Like, did you get bored with her? Did she get bored with you?"

His dad shed his coat, having gotten nowhere with his fussing, and slapped it down on the table beside him in a mashed mass of bulges and folds. "Where is this coming from?" He

laughed again, and addressed the ceiling, "My god, I come out with my boy to get a bite to eat, and out of nowhere I have to sit here and get the third degree. You want me to say I'm sorry to you, is that what this is about?" He aimed his eyes lower and fired a scolding stare into the face of his son. "I wasn't a bad guy to your mom, and I'm doin' my best with you, kid. If you want somebody to start playing violin music for you, you came to the wrong place."

He stared back, locked his jaw, and breathed hotly through his nose. "I ask you a simple question, and you act like I'm coming at you with a loaded gun. Relax, Dad. If I wanted an apology from you, I'd point out how you couldn't have been the greatest guy to Mom, seeing as you two aren't with each other anymore—and the fact that she can't talk to you for five seconds without screaming—and I'd also have to question what exactly you mean when you say you're doing your best." He swept an arm around their surroundings like he was a hostess displaying a grand showcase on *The Price is Right*. "This crappy donut shop is the best you can do, considering how much we see each other? And, while we're on the topic, how come when we get together I always have to come to you? In case you were wondering, long trips aren't exactly easy for me." He raised his eyebrows and looked questioningly into his father's eyes.

The elder man cast about for something to say, flicking his eyes to a wet ring made on the tabletop by a damp cup to a pile of greasy donut crumbs on some wax paper. He sighed, hesitantly looked back at his boy, and said "I—"

Will pointed at him and cut him off. "And another thing," he boomed out in a falsely upbeat tone of voice, "I know money's tight and everything, but is it too much to ask for you to find a place—maybe just a bit closer to home, even, if I have to keep coming to see you? Is it too much for you to find somewhere to live I can actually get into? It's strange, to me, knowing you have an apartment, but never actually having seen the place, since I can't get through the

front door.” His hands had separated from their neat pile, and now sat clenched tight as boulders on either side of him. They would’ve been shaking like mad if he weren’t so aware of them. It took everything in him to affect a mocking veneer of calm, and his gritted teeth, hidden under zipped lips, suffered deeply for it.

His dad sighed again, sounding like a balloon with a hole in it. His face had gone from hard-edged to round with pudginess that seeped over his collar and dragged his chin closer to his chest. The brief sharpness his eyes held during their stare down became blunted, dull, and doused with moistness. He looked desperately out at his son with bright eyes. Finally, he stilled his gaze and his thudding heart, breathed in with deep purpose, and forced himself to say what he had to say, and mean it when he said it. He opened his mouth and got halfway there when he declared, “I’m—”

The younger man raised his hands up to halt and placate his dad. “I didn’t come here to hear that from you,” he stated quietly. “I just want to know what happened with you and Mom is all. If you don’t want to tell me, then don’t, but I want you to know how much it means to me to talk about this.”

His dad compulsively licked the roof of his mouth, clicked his back teeth together, and sucked in his cheeks like a fish. When he opened his mouth and rearranged his face to a man’s specifications, he asked, “Is your mom all right?” Will nodded without saying anything. He squinted in suspicion. “Are you sure? I’m getting a whiff of her meddling from where I’m sitting. This sounds like something she’d ask you to bring up. Will blinked, and then shook his head. He slapped the table. “Did yer tongue fall out?” he yelled. “I don’t think it’s too much to ask for you to push some words out when I ask you something.”

Will sighed before admitting, "I talked to the girl I liked. I told you about her, remember? I really liked her, actually, and she did *not* feel the same way for me. I took your advice when she started crying, and it didn't work out so well." He hunched down and leaned forward expectantly in his seat, hoping to get by with the clarification he had just offered. The puzzled wrinkles etched into his dad's high forehead and the annoyingly shrewd glint in his eye made him sigh again in distress. "This is new for me, okay? The whole dealing with girls thing's got me completely weirded out. The first time I put myself out there, I get crushed, and it makes me—I don't know what it makes me, if you want me to be completely honest." He squinted, rubbed his face while air whooshed through the gaps between his fingers, and glared at his father. "You've been here." He tapped on the table with an extended index finger and saw how overdue he was trimming his nails. "You've felt this, with Mom, and I just thought I could get a little perspective from you, or maybe some *workable* advice." The last of his breath hissed out. He pursed his lips and waited for his dad to say something, which he didn't. "Now would be a good time, Dad. You ask me to talk, now I'm asking you. Can you please just tell me what to do in this situation?"

His dad laughed in a dry rasp, with his chin pressed to his chest. It came out mostly quiet, just a wet whistle of air pouring out of a smirk. For the most part, it rattled around phlegmatically in his chest and ended with him cupping a hand over his mouth, attempting to suppress a coughing fit. After finally managing to swallow some new air, he blurted out, "You get into a tiff with some cheerleader and compare it to a divorce? You compare what you're going through in high school to the ending of mine and your mom's marriage?" He shook his head, incredulous. "Are you being serious right now?"

Will's cheeks burned, bunched up in tight bulges of skin as his face and body tensed, matching the color and shape of ripe apples. He gulped, wished he hadn't, and gave a defiant, stiff shrug of his shoulders. "Relationships are relationships, no? And I don't exactly have much else to go on. Hey!" His dad had roughly hauled himself out of the booth, knocking over the napkin holder with a loud clang. "Come on, Dad! Sit down and talk with me. Come on. He heard the whining in his voice as he fumbled with the locked brakes of his wheelchair, and hated it. Free at last, his tires crunched over a trail of spilled crumbs and napkins as he hastened to follow.

His dad was steadfastly marching in the opposite direction, and surprised the boy when he spun on his heel, pointed at Will, and shouted, "I'm not sorry, if you wanna know the truth, because I am trying hard, no matter what you think. No matter how much you belittle where I live, or what I say and do, I don't have to apologize for it to anybody." His voice hitched on the last word, and he rudely snorted a bunch of snot to cover it. He started moving away again, this time at a jog.

Will lifted his hands from the rims of his wheels, and the tires made a crunching sound as they rolled slower and slower across the sticky floor, coming to a gentle stop when the points of his shoes bumped into the back legs of a chair somebody was sitting in. The occupants at the table, and others all around the restaurant, tried to look very invested in their pastries, and wouldn't meet his eye. He did his best to ignore them. "Stop, Dad." His voice sounded nearly bored, since it was monotonous, but there was a heaviness to it, an unmovable certainty to his feeling carrying through precisely because of the lack of hysterical passion. His dad heard it and caught the weight of the words, but he only slowed his steps. He kept going without stopping.

Will crossed his arms across his chest, pressing a fist into each bicep, and said, "If you don't stop, turn around, and talk to me this time, I'm never going to ask for your help again."

"You aren't asking me to do anything; you're making me do whatever you want me to do. You're giving me orders." His dad spoke to the empty air in front of his face so he could get away with talking to Will without really talking to him.

"I shouldn't have to make you talk to me." Will kept his voice leveled as though he were speaking to someone right next to him instead of across the room. He could be heard without shouting, because he knew he was right and his dad was wrong, and the certainty of this knowledge gave him a comfortable, secure kind of power. There was giddiness in him, too, a voice at the back of his brain telling him it didn't matter if he was young or if his dad was old. There were some things he could do which his dad could not, and one of those things was recognizing when he was right, and then being suave and sincere enough to enjoy it. Perhaps it was this recognition hoisting his mouth into a smirk, or it could've been because he was his father's son, and one of the facts of life he learned from his father was how good it felt to rub it in someone's face when he felt for sure they were in the wrong. He learned this by seeing the contrasting look on his parent's faces after fights they had when he was little; invariably, his mom's face would be pinched tight with sadness, while his dad had a gleam of power and victory in the corner of his eye.

He looked remarkably like his dad, right now, pulling the same face as back when the elder man had been laughing at him, although he himself couldn't see it because he was busy looking the way he was looking, and his dad couldn't see it because his back was to him. Either way, it went largely unnoticed by anybody. "If I come to you asking for help, I shouldn't be insulted, or laughed at, or left in the dust. Whatever we have between us as family, it shouldn't

be like that. I'm saying this right here, without anymore delays or blow-offs because I'm so sick of people walking out on me like I'm nothing, like what I want doesn't matter. To have my own dad do it just twists the knife."

His dad stumbled, rolled his shoulders, and barked a laugh to the ceiling. "You're right. I'm bad. You don't deserve me."

"I said nothing even close to what you just put in my mouth, Dad." There was a little rumble in the back of his throat, sending a crack through his feeling of implacable superiority.

"You're saying what I think you're saying. You just don't know it. You want to make me feel bad." He went to the table nearest to him. It was circular, freshly wiped down, sparkling in the fluorescent buzz of the rectangular ceiling lights, and mercifully empty. He leaned on it heavily, keeping his palms flat, cracked his back, and groaned. "You want to make me feel bad. You don't care what I have to say. I mean, why would you ask for relationship advice from a guy who's divorced?" He forced out a dry chuckle and muttered, "Talk about twisting the knife."

Will laughed, striking humor from his tone, expression, and posture. He sat high in his seat, straight-backed, and desperately inquired, "Who else have I got?" He slapped his knees, looked at the floor, and shook his head. "You're the only guy I got in my life, Dad. I like to think I have a close relationship with Mom, but asking her for relationship advice comes across as just a little too weird." He looked his dad in the face and shrugged, feeling suddenly and altogether helpless.

His dad shrugged back. "No guys at school? What I mean is, isn't there anybody there you can talk to about this?"

He frowned. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say it sounds like you'd rather I go to anybody else except you for help."

"I didn't mean it to come out like how it sounded." He fanned his arms out from his sides, holding them stretched there, becoming the embodiment of a man being pulled in separate, conflicting directions. His face wrinkled and his eyes bulged, making him look like a puppet made out of paper. "Come on, Will. You know I like being there for you."

He just sat there and breathed, letting his dad sweat. "I don't know what I know," he finally stated truthfully. "But if you want me to just come out and admit it, I will. I don't have any friends, not at school, since I was held back a year after missing so much class because of the accident. And I don't really go anywhere else; you and Mom both work, and it isn't very cool to be driven places by your parents when you're in the middle of high school. What it boils down to—and I'm just guessing here, since nobody there'll ever come tell me—is they aren't really sure how to approach me, and ditto for me with them." He sniffed, smacked his lips, and nodded to himself, letting the weight and the honesty of those circumstances sit between them, almost tangible enough to stand in for one of the donut shop's brick walls.

His dad's eyes flitted back and forth like they would if he were intensely watching a ping-pong match. He cast about for something to say. "I don't—I mean—what's really." The engine of his train of thought sputtered and coughed, petering out several times before finally turning over and catching on with a decidedly unenthusiastic, grating whine. "You're a really great kid, Will. I mean it, no BS."

Will sucked his tongue between his teeth and considered what was said, and what was left unsaid. "Maybe I am. Like I said, I don't know anything for sure. I can say, though, that it doesn't feel great for me right now. Look at all the problems with you, and Mom, and Sarah."

He sighed, and felt too old for his age. "Not to mention all the extra stuff *this* brings with it."

He demonstratively rapped his knuckles on the aluminum rim of one of the two big wheels on his chair, and it clanged like a bell, sending a short, shivering burst through the flesh and mechanical bodies bound together.

His dad picked this precise moment to rise to the occasion, as usual. "I can't remember, is Sarah the name of this girl you were interested in?" he asked dumbly.

Will pinched and massaged the bridge of his nose before squeezing his eyes shut. "Okay, I think I'm gonna get goin'. Between you switching between weirdly accusing me of blaming you for everything bad happening, going back from now until the mid-nineties, and just plain not listening to me, I think I'm done. Besides, I already used your advice before, remember? You said something along the lines of, don't worry if she cries, because it's just an act! And look where that got me. What possible good could more terrible advice do? I'm gone." He rolled past his dad, eyes aimed stoically to the front, and smacked against a good number of full and empty tables and chairs because he wasn't looking where he was going.

His dad said the one thing he could have said to make him stop. "At least let me give you a ride back to your mom's."

As soon as the offer was made, a switch clicked in his inner self. He stopped on a dime, nearly leaving skid marks on the floor, and sagged in his seat, shoulders bowed and feeling generally bone-weary. He looked like a balloon, suddenly deflated. "All right," he conceded quietly. "If you don't mind lifting me into the front seat, let's go."

The body of the car rattled, the suspension creaked, and the wheels sizzled along the cold asphalt line of the road, sounding like eggs being fried up. He burrowed his cheek into the tan upholstery of the seatback and felt his eyelids starting to flutter. Breathing deep and feeling

relaxed, he caught a whiff of stale grease and sweat. The stench shocked him into disgusted wakefulness. "How often do you get fast food in here?" His voice was hoarse from the constriction of the cold and the dryness of the heat blasting out of the dashboard vents.

"Most times," his dad said, completely nonplussed, keeping his eyes on the road. "It's easier. You wanna listen to anything?" His hand hovered in proximity of the radio's tuner knob, only to be denied when Will waved him off.

Despite the smell, the dizziness of the heat, and the pressure of the cold, he nodded off to sleep and jerked himself awake intermittently on the journey, which always seemed much more insurmountable when he was working his other set of wheels. He was especially disturbed when his dad braked heavily or hit a rough patch in the road. His mind inevitably centered on another car trip where he'd been drifting off. He shuddered and decided sleep wasn't an option. Twisting in his seat with some difficulty, he watched his dad watching the road. The older man was oddly tensed where he sat, with the wheel clenched tightly and his eyes squinting severely, either due to darkness or the stark, intruding jags of another car's oncoming headlamps. His right leg was rigid, keeping vigil over the array of pedals stashed in invisibility down by the floorboard. The left leg was bent and bouncy, humming with the annoying scrape of cloth on fake leather upholstery as he disturbed the seat covering with his pant leg. Will was left with the distinct impression of the same resultant paranoia surrounding the accident seizing his dad as it had lately seized him. His wheelchair bumped and shimmied where his dad had stashed it in the trunk, keeping the beat to the tune of tension and fear that made him stay awake in the midst of exhaustion and induced his dad to do the little dance of anxiety he was performing in the driver's seat. He closed his eyes against the overwhelming persistence of worry and regret encircling himself and his family. Each time he sat in a car, whether it was with his mom or dad driving, he

felt so stifled by his memories, left helpless in the passenger seat. He opened his eyes again, looked at his dad and decided he couldn't stand to see his father looking so awkwardly boyish and terrified. He licked his lips and said, "I don't think you'll ever need to apologize to me, you or Mom."

His dad's gaze tilted toward him for one second, then became glued to the foggy windshield again. "Okay," he said.

He knew his dad hadn't actually heard him, and was just attempting to curb the distractions in the face of his driving, but he went on anyway. "What I mean is, I know you've done some things, like the fights with Mom, for instance. You've made mistakes, is what I'm saying." He paused for breath, and the pair of them bounced down the road in silence. The lines around his dad's mouth got tighter, but he didn't say anything, so he barreled ahead. "When I was younger, you guys fought so much that the apologies you gave were forgotten too soon for anything good to come out of it." He frowned at the statue sitting across from him, and blurted out, exasperated, "Look, don't apologize for any mistakes you've made—or think you made—when it comes to me. I want to stop having to hear you apologize. We really need to stop fighting all the time." He paused, reached out, and tugged his dad's nearest shirt sleeve as gently as he was able to do. "Okay?"

His dad started when he touched his arm, and the car pulled ever so slightly to the right. This was corrected immediately. His dad gulped, let up on the gas, and turned to face him. "Okay, Will, let's try it." There was a tremor in his voice.

He squinted at the head made featureless in the dark, wondering if his dad heard a word of what he'd said. Just then, a pair of headlights poured in through the windshield and drowned the shadows in a flood of brightness. Immediately, his dad's eyes were back on the road with an

intense gleam in them. He shook his head at his dad, sighed, curled into the passenger's seat, and turned to stare out the window.

His dad gave a gentle sniff and fleetingly sacrificed half of the steering wheel. He quickly and clumsily thumbed the tears from his eyes he didn't allow to fall. His son had never seen them. He sniffed again before stating, "Man, it's getting colder out. I think I'm catching something. He throttled the wheel even tighter than usual and stole a glance at Will. He saw the boy's back turned to him, let out a deeply relieved breath, and resettled in the driver's seat.

The rest of the cautious drive to take him back to his mother went much faster than he was used to—completed in half of the usual length—but was still careful, and completed in silence. He had fallen asleep despite his best efforts. The wheelchair kept bumping in the back, but, for once, it didn't break into his dreams.

Chapter Twelve

When the car ride with his father was over, he was suddenly alive with anger. As soon as he got into the house, he sped toward the sanctuary of his room. With his emotions at a fever-pitch, he lost control of his momentum and jammed his footplates against the partition separating the back hallway from the rest of the house and jackknifed sideways. He tried to back up, but there was a wall there, sturdy as ever. He made to turn, but turning would involve going forward and his mother was suddenly standing next to him. He fixed her with a meaningful glare, then drew his eyes from his wheels back to her without asking her to move since he was now too upset to say anything further. She understood what he was implicating and gingerly stepped aside. He spun towards his room in a wide enough arc to hit the wall across from him. The thud was loud enough to glance at her apologetically in spite of the fire in his eyes. She verbalized nothing, but the tight, tortured picture of her face almost brought him up short. Her eyes were bigger and brighter than usual, her lips tightly pursed, and she seemed to be breathing heavily through exceptionally flared nostrils. She plainly broadcast a mournful disposition by the state of her, and he briefly puzzled over her desperate demeanor before rolling down the hall and back into his own room. He slammed the door behind him without meaning to do so.

Glancing quickly at his bed, he quickly determined he was too on edge to sleep. Despite the light blue sheets looking crisply tucked in and the navy-blue comforter lying over the bedspread with one corner pulled down and beckoning invitingly, thoughts of settling down evaporated the second they entered his mind, if they entered at all. There was homework he could do now instead of saving it for tomorrow's study-hall period, but he was energized enough only to concentrate on what he wanted to work on and not what he was assigned to do. His

green, battered book bag stayed where it was with one black nylon strap looped over the top of his footboard.

He linked his hands behind his head and tilted back in his wheelchair until it was balancing on the wheelie bars jutting out from the lowest, most rearward part of the aluminum frame. The tiny black wheels knocked and scraped against the floor of his room as he listed forwards and backwards in a precarious balancing act, trying to remember anything specific or important about anything except his dad. Unbidden, his therapy sessions with Samantha bubbled to the surface. He grunted and scratched his scalp as flickering repetitions of stretching, balancing, and strengthening routines rose to the front of his mind. One minute he was lying on his belly, fanning his arms out to make a T shape. The next he was straddling a wooden bench with Samantha seated behind him, holding him in place as he curled five-pound weights from hip-level up to chest-level. His mother didn't picture in any of his therapeutic associations. Neither did any in-depth conversations, for that matter. It suddenly occurred to him how often he tuned Samantha out.

In recollecting his experiences with physical therapy, whether recent or original, there was a basic chord of dislike running throughout the duration of his connection to rehabilitation, sounding the depths of his hostility for the practice. Focusing on his distaste for therapy made the ugliness of the feeling filter throughout his body. His jaw tensed, his eyebrows angled downward, and he lashed his tongue against the backs of his teeth and the roof of his mouth to get the sudden bitter taste out of his mouth.

He obstinately crossed his arms, stopped balancing on his wheelies, and put all four wheels back on firm ground with a resounding thump, feeling even more angry and upset than when he left his mother in the hallway for the haven of his room. Maybe what he felt was more

than basic dislike. Maybe he despised therapy. Simply thinking about it made him madder than hell and he already was well on the way to losing a good night's sleep. A chill ran through him, and he sighed heavily, considering the strength of his implication; hate was powerful, and not just because it was a loaded word.

"Why do you make me come here?" The words flashed in his mind so suddenly, and startling him so completely, he popped backwards onto his wheelies again and then slammed down against the floor hard enough to make the shade of his desk-lamp dip and rattle the nearby family photos in their glass frames.

His eyes popped wide open and he glanced over both shoulders, seeking out some other occupant in the room, even though he was quite sure it was his own voice he heard asking the question in his head. Confirming his solitude, he debated where the question came from and what it meant. He tucked his chin into his chest and stared down at his legs and the wheels below. He didn't allow himself to really see them as he sank into his memory.

"You know why we're here; therapy is designed to help you. How many times do I have to tell you?" His mom's voice came from somewhere far away and behind him.

He couldn't look at her as she talked to him because he was staring at a thick, wooly pair of beige socks covering his feet, which were dangling halfway off the edge of a pair of shiny silver footrests. He recalled where he was and what he was doing within this memory purely because of the unfamiliar chair he was then uncomfortably crammed into.

The wheelchair from this memory was on loan to him from the hospital. The seat was scooped too deep for him, the back of the chair extended too high, and neither had any sort of cushioning. They instead consisted of one seemingly continuous piece of originally dark-brown leather upholstery made even darker by the sweat stains of the people forced to sit and stew in it (at

least, he hoped the dark spots were caused by sweating). The armrests were mismatched—one was blue and the other grey—and both had tears at the edges of whatever scant padding remained inside of them. The tires were bald and made squeaking noises whenever he rolled them, and the aluminum-rimmed hand holds were sticky no matter how many times he wiped them down. The seat and the frame of the wheelchair were obviously too big, and the footplates were too short; they were situated too high off the ground, perpetually wedging his knees against his chest. Right now, he was bending over and doing his best to reach down and touch his toes, despite the constant obstruction of his own legs, which he had no way of moving to a more convenient position. His face was clammy with sweat and he was breathing hard even though he was barely moving at all. Feeling nearly overwhelmed with curious fatigue, he clenched his jaw and said, “I hate this and I hate you for making me do it, Mom.”

Will’s eyes widened in shock as he turned his eyes away from his skinny thighs and knobby knees, wondering if he ever really told his mom that he hated her. He blinked rapidly, totally confused and disoriented. Immediately another memory fell over him. This time he was sitting at a chocolate-brown rectangular conference table. His mother sat immediately to his right and across from him sat a woman wearing a red long-sleeved sweater with a black blazer on top. A lion’s head pin was fixed to her lapel. He couldn’t help noticing it because the light glinted off the face of the wildcat and beamed directly into his eyes. He remembered being hunched forward, sagging in his seat with his belly wedged against the black plastic strip rimming the perimeter of the conference-room table. He was doing a poor job bracing himself with his forearms against the table. This memory came later in his rehabilitation; his stamina and physical ability were improved, but not by much.

The woman with the shiny pin was Mrs. Blake, his high-school principal. He recalled her very round, thickly skinned face. She was on the heavy side, and her skin always held a slightly orange tint, no matter the season. He couldn't take a good measure of her facial expression because he was staring hard at the empty space between his rigid wrists where harsh white light collected in a disc on the waxy table surface. He remembered the woman's voice, though, and watching the drooping skin of her double chin jiggle whenever she spoke. Her face was voluminous enough to be noticed even when he was looking in another direction. "I'm here today, Mr. Jameson, as the head administrator of this school, and also as someone who cares about you," she said. He was taken by the quality of her voice. It had a measured, hypnotic tone to it. She spoke softly and soothingly to him, but she took care to modulate herself so her words came out sharp and clear, lending them a consummate authority and import. This lady was a pro at what she did. "This is why we're all here, today. Yes, we want to make sure you enjoy a full, meaningful education for the rest of your time with us, but we also want to make sure you understand how every decision made here in this room reflects your best interest, fully supported by myself and the rest of the administration here at the school." He heard rather than saw her fan her arms out. The crisp fabric of her blazer stretched as she extended, making a series of noises suggesting some very uncomfortable chafing would be going on if she hadn't had the foresight to layer her outfits. When she fanned her arms out, he guessed she was indicating the school's head guidance counselor, sitting at her left arm, and an older man situated on her right whom he had never seen before.

This man either never spoke in the meeting, or was inconsequential enough to be logged as a near non-entity in his memory. He remembered gulping and glancing up at the people sitting across from him when the principal made her inclusive gesture. The guidance counselor

gave him an encouraging smile, baring her teeth. She was thin-lipped with a fair complexion and an imposing set of pearly whites. She had big blue eyes and blond hair pulled back into a ponytail. Wearing a light-blue, button-down blouse with pronounced creases running down the lengths of both sleeves, having her shoulders artificially puffed out with the aid of padding, and the cuffs of the top tightly fastened at the wrist, she gave off an air of mixed messages. Her open face and warm demeanor made her seem girlish, but the stiffness of her outfit from the waist up gave her the appearance of a militant. She made him feel uneasy and exposed.

He remembered briefly flicking his eyes over to the mystery man. The only details he could presently dredge up were a bright orange tie, black square-framed glasses, and a head with tufts of light and dark grey hair sprouting from the sides but completely bare on top. He shifted his focus to the principal and started breathing hotly through his nose, jealous of her poise. The president of the meeting wore a benign half-smile, her lips painted a shade darker than the red top she wore. She had long, straight, dark-brown hair she let fall just below her shoulders. Her gaze was a similar shade of brown and was maybe just a touch lighter in color than her hair. The look in her eyes was relaxed and inviting, and while watching her chunky face wobble with each breath she took, he couldn't help but notice each inhale was deep and every exhale that followed was calm and leisurely. She seemed too in control. He didn't trust her for a second.

When he responded to her, his voice was raw and thin. If she as the principal was in her comfort zone with these discussions, he was the opposite. "I don't understand how it's in my best interest to be left back a year. I mean, yeah, I know I missed a lot of class and tests and all the other stuff, but it's not like I wanted to do it. I didn't have a choice; I had to be out of school to get better after, you know, what happened."

Suddenly there was a hand on top of his right wrist, giving his arm a gentle squeeze. "Rehabilitation was the right thing to do, honey. It was the only thing to do." His mother's voice was soothing and confident.

He flicked his eyes to her hand gripping his forearm. The skin looked tight and pasty, and the tendons lining the back stood out obviously even though she was barely applying any pressure. He looked back up at the principal and nodded his agreement. "Right," he echoed, "I had to do the whole rehab thing. And now I'm being punished for it? I don't get it."

The guidance counselor piped up from where she flanked the principal. "Will, in high school, junior year is one of the most important years." He drew a blank on her name, although he was pretty sure it started with a C. "If you went into your junior year as unprepared as you are now, we feel it would be unfair and overwhelming, with the ACT test, applying to colleges, and everything else. Sophomore year is when teachers introduce ACT-level preparations and discussions into their curriculum, and you haven't benefited from those introductory-level instructions, since you've missed so much of the academic year recuperating."

"How is missing the prep-courses my fault, though? Explain it to me!" He remembered this is where he started yelling.

Mrs. C held up her hands in a placating manner. "No one is at fault. Blaming isn't what we're setting out to do here."

"Then why am I being punished? What good could possibly come from me being held back?" He started curling his fingers against his palms. He felt his mother squeeze his arm again, trying to calm him down. She achieved the opposite effect; he wrenched his arm out of her grasp and smacked the table. "This sucks! It makes no sense, holding me back for

something I totally had no control over. This—God, it's bullshit!" He was screaming in earnest now.

"Will!" His mom was whisper-yelling at him. Her breath hissed in his ear. "Please don't act like this. I know you're upset, but yelling is not the way to do this."

He flinched away from his mother's words, refusing to look at her, denying her the satisfaction of seeing how obviously upset he was. Instead he glared at the principal. Mrs. Blake's considerable bulk suddenly swam in front of him, becoming a blur of shapes and colors. He pawed at his eyes with one hand, embarrassed to find them damp. "What's the right way to act here, Mom? Do you get what this means for me? All my friends'll be bumped a year ahead of me, and they'll be driving around to start looking for colleges and whatever else. When word gets out I'm gonna be a sophomore again, that's when everybody starts whispering about how retarded I must be now. For real retarded, not just, like, 'oh my God, what a retarded hair cut he has,' but full-on Forrest Gump retarded." He folded his arms in front of him on the table and dropped his head into the nest they made, sniffing conspicuously.

"None of your friends will think you're mentally challenged, and if they do, then they aren't very good friends in the first place." It was the principal who spoke up now, her voice sounding stern and implacable.

"They won't be my friends anymore. How many juniors do you know who hang out with sophomores? And I'm not even talking about this!" He rocked violently in his seat, making the cramped frame of his wheelchair rattle and creak. "I won't have any friends. You can't go through with this. It isn't fair, and it definitely ain't what's best for me." His voice was thick with tears at this point, and he was doing all he could to keep a lid on the building pressure he felt in his chest and throat.

“You’ll find new friends, I promise,” his mother declared emphatically. He remembered the soft pressure of her hand on his shoulder. She rubbed his back affectionately.

He hoisted his head out of the barricade of his arms and fumbled around with frantic fingers underneath the table for his brake levers. He skinned his knuckles on the unfinished underside of the table and rubbed against what felt like a fossilized lump of leftover chewing gum before he managed to release his brakes. He locked his hands around the rims of his rear wheels and backed away from the meeting still in progress. Angling himself towards the slightly open door of the windowless conference room and barreling through it, he addressed his mother without looking at her as he left her behind sitting at the meeting table. “I don’t want to hang out with sophomores, either. Not when I deserve to be a junior with the rest of everybody. You’re the reason why I have to deal with this bullshit, Mom. What happened was your fault, and I’m the one who has to pay for it. I don’t want to deal with you or your promises anymore. I’m done with you.” He rolled down the hall, crying openly now since he was in an empty space. He remembered side-swiping some lockers when he took a corner at full speed. Their sturdy combination locks harshly scraped against the surface of the lime-green grated metal doors as they swayed back and forth.

Shaking himself out of this most recent memory, he wheeled over to his desk across the room and leaned heavily on it, feeling overwhelmed with doubt in himself and how he had reacted to his mother in the first initial stages of recovery from his accident. He pushed against the desk, rolling his chair backwards until he was able to extend his body forwards enough to rest his forehead on the edge of the flat, polished surface. The wood was cool and slippery. He tightened his hand holds on either side of him so his chair wouldn’t roll any farther backwards from the front of the desk and send him flailing. His right hand lifted out of its grip and gave a

cautious tug of the seatbelt striping across his midsection. Once his fingers met with resistance, he let himself relax, but only a little bit.

He was reeling. It was almost impossible for him to understand how he could hate his mother, how he could doubt her support of him, or her ability to take into consideration his feelings and what he thought was best for him. His tantrum during the meeting with the school administration was prescient; those he counted among his friends before the accident fled from him when he was reintroduced to school life. Despite his objections, the ruling he opposed went through and he was made to repeat sophomore year. The faces familiar to him had different classes and different social circles, and they summarily left him behind. Life around him was conspiring to promote his mother to the person he relied most heavily on. This evening, sitting in this room, she unquestionably occupied that position of prominence for him. He went to her with his problems and did the best he could to be there to help her through her problems.

Sitting there, bowed at the waist with his head propped against the edge of his desk and staring at the floor below him, he remembered how obstinately he was against the now-routine and commonplace give-and-take between himself and his mother, once his newfound isolation at school and the rigors of therapy were respectively wearing him down and making him feel essentially weak and helpless, he had reached out to his father. He'd confronted his dad while the two of them were driving somewhere. They were on their way to the movies one Saturday, and he remembered it was a windy, cold afternoon with a persistent drizzle hanging in the air and making everything soggy. What they were going to see in the first place fled his mind with the passage of time. The important part of this meeting with his father was less the entertaining distraction at the movie house and more concerned with being informed on his harsh living situation, and how he hoped to change it.

He had opened the discussion casually. Doing his best impression of a lazy lounge in the grey front-passenger seat, he hooked one hand around the back of his head to act as a pillow and used the other to distractedly drum an inconsistent beat on his thigh. He guessed he was wearing thick blue jeans for the duration of this past father-son excursion due to the rain and the wind, but perhaps, since he was in the presence of his father, he had chanced wrapping his upper body in only the flimsy cover of a dark-colored t-shirt in order to appear tough and manly in the face of Mother Nature's brisk assault. "Hey, Dad," he began innocently enough, "what would you say, or how would you feel about me coming to stay with you, more long-term?" He had been doing his best to peek inconspicuously around his bent, jutting elbow to gauge the reactions of the man.

His dad drove differently than his mom. The driver's seat was reclined back, meaning he had to reach for the wheel instead of having it sitting directly in front of him, and most of the time his dad drove with one hand grasping the wheel, instead of two. He remembered his dad was wearing a tan windbreaker with the sleeves rolled up above the elbow. The hair on his forearms and knuckles was sticking up and out some because of the persistent chill in the air, but the sleeves stayed bunched where they were. Beneath his father's light jacket was a bright red shirt he could barely glimpse the front of behind the lined teeth of an unzipped zipper. He couldn't remember what else his father was sporting, fashion-wise, although he remembered his dad was badly in need of a haircut.

His bangs were nearly in line with his eyebrows and the ends of his hair in the back were curling towards the collar of his coat. A few jagged cowlicks were peaking on the back of his head as well. The details of his father's hairdo stood out in his memory because when his dad turned to look at him, the elder man had to blow some hair out of his eyes with a gusting breath

in order to see at him at all. His father's eyes volleyed from where he sat casually lounging, over to the road, and back to him again before the man sighed and said, "Okay, why're you fighting with your mother?"

"This isn't just about her, Dad. You know I like hanging out with you. To be honest, it's more relaxing than spending time with her." Lying after openly declaring his honesty put a very compromising hitch in his voice.

"I'm still waiting for an answer. And sit up straight, Will. It can't be good to slouch like you're doin'." He managed to sound annoyed and concerned at once.

He rolled his eyes even as he scooted back in his seat and gave up the soft approach, trading it for anger instead. "Well, how would you feel if you were kept back a year in *high school*? Shit like that doesn't fly when you're as old as I am. I'll never live it down."

"Your mother didn't make the decision to hold you back." His dad had pulled the car off the through street and angled into a Shell gas station. He stopped in front of the main entrance and shifted into park as he released his seat belt. "What kinda candy you want? I won't pay five bucks for a box of candy at the theater."

"Okay, she didn't make the decision, but she supported it." He crossed his arms and shot a glare up at his dad as the driver's side door popped open.

Chuckling his way after swinging two feet out the door, his dad asked, "What did you expect her to do? The decision was made by the school before the two of you ever sat down for the meeting with the brass."

"I'm gonna be the special-ed. kid because of this, don't you get it? She's ruining my life!" He was getting desperate enough his voice cracked, which happened much more frequently close to a year ago.

His dad gave a curious tilt of his head before simply stating, "No, you're not gonna be the weird kid in school." Then he was out of the car and shoving the door closed behind him.

Back then, left alone in the car, he remembered wondering how his dad was so sure he was right, and whether or not the man truly remembered what roaming the halls of high school was like. He was also stung when his father had not lagged behind to give him a chance to tell what goodies he wanted. When his dad ducked back into the car a few minutes later, a package of Reese's peanut butter cups suddenly landed in his lap. He'd favored his dad with a grin, which was immediately returned. The pair spent the rest of the trip to the movies in silence, and once they'd pulled into a handicapped spot, neither had any candy left, only torn, crinkling plastic wrappers. His dad had been right when it came to his sweet-tooth, but had whiffed when qualifying his present-day school life, if his current difficulties with Sarah were any indication.

Coming back from sitting shotgun next to his dad, he had a smile on his face. The small, shared moments between the two of them had a significance often overlooked. So to did the small, shared moments of disagreement have hidden depth in them. He hadn't realized at the time how his dad had brushed off any discussion of him staying with his father in place of his mother. He had no idea how realistic a possibility it was legally, physically, emotionally, or psychologically, but having the matter be avoided out of hand still rubbed him the wrong way, and the smile faded as quickly as it bloomed. He was faced with the reality of his mother's proven, primary importance to him, and it did not sit well with him to let her spend a restless night contending with recurring memories of him hating and resenting her. Resolving to stitch the freshly opened wounds before they got out of hand, he left his desk behind, pushed back in his chair, and had exited his room before any second thoughts crowded his decision out of his brain.

He zoomed down the hall. The knock on the door to his mother's room was restrained this time. He waited for a moment with perked up ears, and when he didn't hear anything from her side, he leaned into the door and said, "Mom, I'm sorry. I remember what I said, how I acted, and I didn't really mean any of it. Come on and open the door."

There was another moment of silence, and then the door creaked open and she filled the expanded space, propping herself up against the frame. "What?" She demanded, full of impatience.

He leaned back, suddenly angry at himself, and winced. "I figured you'd be pacing back and forth in your room." He paused. She didn't say anything, instead simply standing there in simmering anger. He ploughed on. "Anyway, I said I remember what I said way back, about me not really liking you very much, and feeling like you weren't there for me. Look, whatever I said, it's not true. I don't feel like I said I felt. I was just upset at the time." He smiled warmly at her.

She didn't smile back. "You said you hated me. You said you blamed me for what happened to you, and you didn't want to live with me anymore." He visibly flinched when she said the last part, and she nodded in confirmation. "You're father told me what you said to him. I knew you remembered all of this, too. You just wanted me to think you didn't remember to make me feel better."

He was vigorously shaking his head in denial. "I didn't remember right away. I buried this stuff deep down, because all of it sucks, and it took a while for me to stop wussing out and actually want to focus on it. The important thing about all this is, I love you, I don't hate you, and I want to stay here with you." He gave a tiny shrug. "You're all I got, Mom."

She looked him up and down with a grave look etched into her pale, drawn face. "You're only saying what you're saying because you have no choice. There's no alternative for you to fall back on." She started closing the door. "You keep saying you can't believe I'm still sorry for what I did to you. Well, I can't believe you've stopped blaming me for it. Goodnight, Will." She had disappeared behind the door even before it closed completely, and when it firmly did snap shut, he clenched his fists and was an inch away from bashing in the wooden face. Instead, he lightly bumped his forehead against the grain and shut his eyes. He felt a deeply frustrating mixture of sadness and relief, all while wondering if she was right. Perhaps he was settling for her because he had no options. The love and forgiveness he professed could be masking tape for how he really felt, and what he desperately wanted or needed to do was escape from his mother and leave her behind.

Chapter Thirteen

Whatever fleeting dreams gripped him late in that restless night flew away as soon as he gasped and frantically looked around himself in the darkness, finding nothing except shadows. He tossed, turned, and did his best to avoid the burning neon numbers racing across the face of the clock parked on the corner of his nightstand. Inevitably, his eyes dragged over to it, and the simple act of seeing made the time crawl by even slower. When he woke up in the brightness of a cold mid-morning mercifully dulled by his shaded bedroom windows, he felt even more tired than he had when he went to sleep the night before.

His clothes clung to him, crushed, creased, and musky because they comprised the same outfit he wore the day before. Peeling out of them took even longer than usual since he was still drowsy, and there were two separate times he had to flail for and snag his chair's armrests to prevent himself from toppling over. He scooped a pair of black sweats and a grey long-sleeved thermal shirt from a dresser drawer. He wrestled the shirt on, draped the pants across his naked lap for modesty, and bumped his way out of the room, down the hall, and into the kitchen, following the scent of breakfast being made.

He scrubbed a hand across an itchy scalp and mumbled, "Mom, can you help me get dressed?"

She turned from the toaster where she'd been waiting for the bread to pop up, looked at him, then quickly shot her eyes to the side when she saw his state of undress, even though he was haphazardly covered. "I thought I told you how much I hated it when you came out of your room without clothes on."

“What’s this, then?” He plucked at his shirt collar and smirked, then kept talking to override her nagging him for his sarcasm. “Yeah, I know what you mean, Mom. Why do you think I brought these?” He patted the wadded sweats.

She scoffed, bent on her haunches, and hooked his feet through the pants. She pulled them past his knees, put him in a bear hug, and hoisted him up so he could catch and tug the waistband up. Finally, she dropped him back into his seat none too gently and fixed him with a severely maternal frown, just as the toast jumped up with a springy clack, slightly burnt on both sides. He pushed past her without another word, going for the bread. “You look tired,” she said as she leaned against the countertop in her pale pink pajama bottoms and crossed her arms over the plain white t-shirt she was wearing. “Did you get into another fight with your dad last night?” She shivered involuntarily, briskly rubbing her shoulders. Suddenly, there was toast on a yellow plastic plate under her nose. She plucked it up and smiled at him, taking a small bite from one of the corners.

He chewed a much larger bit of his own and swallowed before answering, since he didn’t know what to say. “Sort of, I guess,” is what he settled on before frowning at her. “Aren’t you cold?”

“My bed has too many blankets,” she blurted before getting on with what she really wanted to talk about. “So, what was the fight about this time?”

Her tone held a note of mocking, satisfied expectation, and he squinted at her. “I don’t know. It wasn’t really a fight. I just called him on being so defensive with me all the time, is all. Although, he still didn’t end up listening to what I had to say to him. It seemed like it, at least.” He shrugged. “It was weird, like anything and everything these days.”

“What did you guys talk about? What’s weird?” The words were streaming thick and fast from her mouth, which was grinning lopsidedly. In fact, she seemed on the verge of panting. Catching a whiff of gossip had set her off, and she’d be embarrassed at her mouth watering if she didn’t have the ready-made excuse of being on the verge of breakfast. The gurgling, hissing coffee pot sang to her from across the way. She positively glided to it, skating in her socks across the cold kitchen floor while never taking her eyes off of her son.

“Well,” he began with not a little reluctance, “I went to him to get advice about a girl—”

She’d stopped in her tracks, spun on her toe, and fixed him with a look consisting of equal parts enthusiasm and anxiety. “You got advice about a girl?” She yelped, “From *him*?”

He looked back at her with a face twisted with hesitation and embarrassment. His mouth had buttoned up, his forehead wore more wrinkles than an old newspaper, and he’d squinted his eyes so tightly together his eyelashes were making his bunched-up cheeks itch. Overall, his expression seemed to indicate he’d popped an aspirin in his mouth and let it gradually dissolve to powder on his tongue. Rarely had he seemed so uncomfortable and grossed out at once. “Mo-om,” he whined, stretching the single-syllable word to its aural limit. He said nothing else, having no reasonable argument against her natural interest in his goings on, but that didn’t mean he’d not loaded the brief utterance with as much annoyance and accusation as he could pack into it.

She was having none of his theatrics, settling instead for a simple frown in his direction. She craned her neck towards him and made a get-on-with-it motion with one hand as she blindly groped for the nearby coffee pot with the remaining one. “What’s the problem? What did your dad say to you? How did you meet—”

“Mom!” he yelled, short and sharp, effectively cutting her off. She zipped it and poured herself a cup of coffee while he sighed and palmed his face, then spoke through his fingers.

“You can ask, I guess, but if you want any answers they’re gonna have to come one at a time.”

She cautiously watched him drop his hands to his lap and look intensely uncomfortable. Neither of them spoke as she spooned and stirred sugar into her cup. The high tinkling sound of metal on ceramic seemed unnaturally loud in the silence. She cleared her throat, wrapped both hands around her cup to warm them, and lifted the cup to her lips. Small wisps of steam tickled her nose and she seemed to him to be indulging herself, loudly inhaling the heady, enlivening scent most naturally privy to the morning’s first cup of coffee. When she opened her eyes again, his impatience was growing by the second. He watched the gears turn in her head and listened to her lead with the safe question, given the thorny subject. “What advice did your dad have for you about her, then?” He noticed her doing her best to keep the sharp, knowing edge of sarcasm out of her voice. Her slightly wry expression was hidden from him when she allowed herself a small, exploratory sip that was only just hot enough to hint at a burn rather than put one on her tongue.

He scratched his head vigorously, more to give him time to compose his thoughts than because of any bothersome itch. “None, really,” he finally admitted, although he didn’t want to. “We didn’t get around to it—ended up talking about other things.”

“Like what?” The question came innocently enough.

He smirked at her, easily seeing through the veneer. “Him, obviously,” he deadpanned.

She began nodding immediately. “Right,” she crowed, “like, if there’s something really important you need to talk with him about, it has to be about him! I mean, what else could there possibly be to talk about?”

His nod mirrored hers at this point, and before long the two were laughing the shared laugh enjoyed by people on the inside of the same joke. They gradually tapered off after a minute as it collectively dawned on the pair how unfunny what they were howling at actually was. A somber pall fell over the kitchen like a weighted net, stealing away any appetite he had. He drummed his fingers on his knees and said, quietly, speaking into his chest, "Yeah, Dad wasn't too big a help in the whole relationship department."

"I'm here, if you want to talk about it." She tilted her head to the side in an effort to catch his down-turned eye and gave him an encouraging smile.

He rubbed the back of his neck, which suddenly became hot and itchy. "Talking about—man, I dunno, you want specifics on this stuff? It seems a bit weird. I dunno."

She contemplated him, running her finger across the rim of her cup, and saw, for all his awkwardness, he needed somebody to talk to. "I'll listen, Will, to whatever you want to say to me."

"You're my mom," he blurted out, shrugging.

She frowned, eyes narrowing. "So? I'm you're mom. This means we can't talk anymore?"

He looked at her in abject disbelief. "Show me another kid my age who talks to his mom about girls he likes."

She took a big gulp of coffee in lieu of biting her tongue and slammed the mug back on the table with a louder thud than she meant to make. "Show me a mom who wouldn't give anything to keep being an important part of their son's life when they hit your age."

He raised his eyebrows. "It makes me feel very weird, Mom."

She pursed her lips, fixed an arch, sympathetic stare on him, and simply said, "I've been on Earth three times longer than you have, and been in plenty more relationships. I still find them very weird, no matter who I talked to about them."

He refused to stop being adamant, saying, "Okay, but did you talk to your *mom* about boys and all the other stuff?"

Her reply was immediate. "Of course I did!"

He hung his head and slapped the table in frustration. "Let's talk about something else, now, please."

She interlaced her fingers on the table in front of her, scooted deeper into her seat, sat perfectly still watching him, and in the blink of an eye became the picture of indomitableness. "You will tell me what went on between you and this girl, and why she seems to mean so much to you."

He squirmed under her severe scrutiny, playing the desperate card. "What about breakfast?"

"Breakfast will get cold and you'll go hungry until you open your mouth with something to say I'm waiting to hear. You're making me nervous." She tossed her head, whipping her hair out of her face, all the better to stare him down.

He wrung his hands and began unimpressively. "She was—she is—well, I already told you she's pretty, right?" His mother raised her eyebrows, clearly expecting something more meaningful. "What do you want me to say, Mom?" He laughed through his nose, and it sounded like a ball of guts being thrown at and sticking to the far wall in the kitchen.

"We've established you have good taste, Will," she admitted, sounding tired, "but there has to be more to your problems than you acting uncool in front of a good-looking girl."

“Why do you think I was uncool about it?” He was absolutely indignant.

She gave him a knowing smile he didn’t understand and wasn’t sure he liked. “All boys your age are varying degrees of uncool. It’s human nature at work.”

“Yeah, well, she was pretty damn uncool to me, too, so I think the door swings both ways there.” He folded his arms on the table and nested his chin atop them, managing to look at his mom without engaging through eye contact.

“What did she do, then?” She didn’t begrudge having to repeat herself again, since she sensed an honest reply was forthcoming, just over this last hill. She barely restrained herself from leaning forward anticipatorily in her chair.

“She carved my heart into little pieces and chucked ‘em away, right after I finished pouring the thing out to her.” He sighed, despite himself.

“I’m sure it wasn’t so bad, honey.” She clucked her tongue at the misery stitched into his words, staring out of a pair of eyes which pointedly avoided hers. She almost reached out to him, but didn’t.

“I told her how beautiful she was, Mom, and how much I liked her and wanted her and wanted to be with her. You—” he swallowed so hard now in containing himself he nearly choked on his own spit. “You should’ve seen the way she looked at me, afterwards.”

“You just surprised her, is all. You were right when you said girls don’t really know how to act at this age, either.” With each successive word forming the statement she had just spoken, anger and disbelief cracked through the shell of sadness previously molded onto her son’s face. His expression became hard and angular.

"You're defending *her*! Why would you do that? The person sitting here, across the table from you, is your son, in case you hadn't noticed. Man, do I have a shitty record when it comes to wearing my heart on my sleeve."

"I'm not defending her, Will. I'm not. I just want you to try and see things from a different perspective, one having some more experience than yours, maybe." As his face, body, and voice tightened up and lashed out, she did her best to be soft and open, speaking gently to him, looking plainly at him, and finally reaching out for him.

"Everywhere I turn, it just seems like people are ganging up against me, shooting me down, or something."

She firmly squeezed his hand. "I'd never do that to you, never, ever, Will. You know I wouldn't."

He flashed a warm smile at her, but his eyes stayed dim and dodgy. "One of the many reasons why I love you, Mom, is because you say and mean those things. It just gets hard, though, since no one else shows me the same amount of trust and respect you do."

She had smiled back at him the moment she spied his grin opening across his face. Hers became a bit shaky as she listened to him, however, at having to face his admitting her presence and support in his life were no longer enough to make him completely happy and satisfied. "I'm always here for you," she said, and apparently she wasn't a very good actress, because as soon as she spoke her hand was engulfed in both of her son's, and he was speaking hard and fast with a concerning wide-eyed mania gripping his features.

"Mom, you know I love you more than anybody, anywhere, right?" He was practically shouting at her in desperation. "Without you, what do I have, where do I go, who do I come to with my problems? I mean, let's be real here, you're all I—"

She'd shushed him by wiggling one of her captive index fingers free and pressing the pad to his lips when he'd paused to gulp some air. "I love you too, baby." He looked unconvinced at the success of his attempt to clarify himself to her, so she aimed some of the warmth that was suddenly twisting her heart at him in the form of the brightest smile she had worn in recent memory. "I know you love me. Believe me, I know." Her eyes started filling, and she sniffed back the tears and swallowed around the lump to prevent herself from breaking down. "Knowing how much I'm loved, and how much I love you." She trailed off, closed her eyes, and drew a calming breath. "Will, if I didn't see and understand the love we have," she paused to fix her eyes on him and make sure he saw her open heart, "I'd have nothing to hold onto, nothing to get me through the day to keep on living. Trust me when I say I know you love me, because nothing else matters more to me in the entire universe." Her tears pushed over the edges of her eyes and spilled upon her cheeks. She kept her hands wrapped around his and let them fall uninhibited.

She was blurred before him because his eyes were wet, and he felt foolish and self-conscious for crying in front of his mother and for making her cry. He grunted in manful reproach at his childishness and did his best to bat his tears away. He was foiled, however, when she seized him by the shoulders and pulled him into a storm of kisses peppered all around his damp cheeks, eyes, forehead. He made protesting noises in the back of his throat she immediately recognized from when he was trying very hard to dodge the feeding spoon as a baby. After finally managing to wriggle away, he questioned her in low, mature tones. "Mom, will you please knock it off, already? I'm a sophomore; I think we're past this stage by now."

She fanned her leaking eyes with her hands in a curiously quintessential feminine gesture and laughed at him outright. "Yeah, you keep trying to convince yourself how old you are. I'll

just be sitting by the phone, waiting for the panicked call from your first night away at college.”

She smirked at him with equal measures of arrogance and affection.

He fixed her with a frown and hoisted a skeptical eyebrow. “Who says I’m gonna be going to college?”

Her expression now mirrored his, but was more effective since she had more time to practice it. “I’m saying you’re going to college,” she stated finally, crossing her arms and tilting her head as if daring him to override her.

He gritted his teeth. “Can you give me any inkling as to how I would do it?”

“You’d be fine, eventually, once you got used to being there.” She made a mocking snort and tapped the top of her wrist as if it were a watch. “It’s about time for you to find another excuse, kid.”

He shook his head adamantly. “You’re not getting what I’m saying. I think I’d be able to adjust, or I hope I would, at any rate, but where’s the money for it gonna come from? And I’m not just talking about actual school stuff—books, supplies, however much for classes and dorms and food, the normal things. I’m asking who would or could we pay to help me out, Mom? I’m guessing I’d get by in college, but not without some sorta extra help.”

She glanced over his shoulder for a second to repeat her thoughts to herself internally before once again meeting his eyes with untarnished conviction. “Stuff like what you’re talking about can’t just all happen by magic.” She snapped her fingers. “You don’t just tug someone on the sleeve as they’re walking down the street, flash a wad of cash, and ask them to help you out at school. There *have* to be programs, organizations, or departments in place to help us find somebody. They’d probably help pay for them, too, I guess. Getting somebody to do the things you need to be done won’t come out of our pocket, so don’t worry about it.”

"It sounds good when you say it. I just hope things really turn out that way." He crossed his arms over his chest defensively and turned to look at the wall above her head, his eyes clouding with a sudden worry. "Anyway, if we find somebody, or we use some service to find somebody, it better be a guy. I don't think I could take being dressed and undressed by a girl every day and not, I dunno, do something stupid about it, I guess."

Her eyebrows peaked on her forehead with his words and she had to briefly sit on her hands to stop herself from wringing them when she saw the color fill his cheeks. Here, she finally saw an opening to ask the question she had been wanting and dreading to ask ever since the full toll of the car crash had finally hit home and become a part of his day-to-day life. She worried her lower lip between her teeth, considering, and finally just decided to blurt it out when she felt her own face getting uncomfortably warm. "Do you get—ah, what I mean is, do you find girls *exciting*?"

He whipped his head around to look at her when he'd fully absorbed her question. Fear was kindled behind his eyes when he admitted to himself she was asking what he thought she was asking. He narrowed his eyes and chose to play dumb, hoping he'd misheard her since he'd been lost in thoughts he was embarrassed to think of in the presence of his mother, doubly so since he'd snapped back to reality to be faced down by a mother who was suddenly interrogating him about his sexuality. "What do you mean, exactly?" He spoke slowly, careful to enunciate every word, imbuing the statement with an overbearing tone that accused her of skirting dangerous territory by invading his privacy. He sounded very much like the teenager he was in this precise moment, informing himself and his attitude with a defiance that carried a heaping helping of doubt and insecurity, undercutting the bold face he was desperately trying to hide behind.

She looked at him with a calm, shrewd evenness, plainly demonstrating she was no fool and had not, in fact, been born yesterday. "I mean exactly what you think I mean, if I'm reading your face right."

"I can't talk about this, here, now. I mean, come on, you're my mother." He leaned forward with some urgency. "And I don't *care* if you're the only one I can talk to about this," he stated emphatically, effectively cutting off the retort he could see by way of the gears spinning behind her eyes she was busy forming on the tip of her tongue. "Just because I can do somethin' doesn't mean I'm gonna break my neck getting it done."

She pulled her lips inside her mouth and lightly gnawed on them with the flats of her teeth. Her hands tightened, her neck went stiff, and she sat straight up, unwilling to be denied in this. She, curiously, was prepping herself physically even though the real battle was a mental and emotional one. "I just want you to be happy." She spoke with cutting honesty and heavy feeling, and made sure her eyes were as big as they could get when she fixed them directly on his across the table. "Don't you wanna get married some day, settle down with some kids?"

"I don't know," he said immediately. "How can I know, now? Did you, realistically, have *any* idea about those things when you were my age?"

"Yes, I did." Her certainty came as quick as his confusion had, and she nodded vigorously to reinforce herself.

He sighed heavily, dropped his eyes from her disconcertingly huge stare and shook his head. "Maybe girls are just different when it comes to thinking about the big picture. Or I could be weird, I guess, in not knowing." He looked up at her again. "I do know you and everybody else I know around here didn't have to deal with what I'm dealing with, at my age. It could have an influence, you know. I'm not even sure I could *have* kids, because—" he choked around what

he was saying, swallowed hard, and gave it another try. "I just don't think I can, physically, is what I'm getting at. I wouldn't know how to take care of them, anyway." He could hear his blood pound heavily between his ears, then he could feel it flood into his cheeks so fast he imagined his head transforming into a giant strawberry. Completely embarrassed, he looked anywhere except where his mother sat listening to every word he was saying.

An excruciating piece of time passed where nobody spoke. Ice cubes juggled themselves in their freezer-door compartment, the clock ticked sharply, shedding seconds, and the coffee pot wheezed with age on the corner of the far countertop. She saw him chance a nervous glance at her, and made an effort to shake off enough of the sadness and guilt twisting the knife lodged in her heart. She gamely sucked back in her tears. Looking at him with viciously dry eyes, she simply told him, "I think you'd be a wonderful father, Will." Her voice was clear, and she surprised him by smiling his way, even big enough to be toothsome.

He smiled back at her, since he'd been happy to hear her say something of the sort, even if he wasn't so sure of it himself. "What makes you say that? I'm a kid at the moment, and everywhere I turn, I got tons of problems I have no idea how to talk about—let alone solve—without the pressure getting so bad my head explodes." He had to pinch his throat around the deprecating laugh inflating in his chest. He saw how on-the-edge she was, and he was sure if he'd started laughing, she'd start crying.

She swiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands, even though they were dry, and gave another heavy sniff to force it all back in. Shaking her head repeatedly while massaging her forehead with shaking fingers, she stared at the tabletop. Her eyes saw the scratches, the scabs of food dotting the surface, and the filmy rings left by the ghosts of wet-bottomed cups and mugs. "I don't know how you do it, Will." She budged her hands down and rubbed vigorously over her

eyes. “I *remember* being your age, how young you are. Give me a second to think about it and the confusion and fear drops onto my chest and presses me flat.” She sniffed again, made a noise between a groan and a sob, and said in a hoarse voice, “I didn’t have to deal with even half of what you’re going through.” She dropped her hands abruptly and stared at the light in the ceiling. The sudden glare drained all the color out of her. She sat in frozen, bloodless anguish, appearing to hang in her seat in the yellow circle surrounding her. She was a fish in a net, paralyzed in wonder at her predicament, her lack of understanding given her context, and from the looks of her, she didn’t have the will to swim away.

Her moment of stillness passed, and all parts of her which were remarkably loose and dangling reeled themselves in. She’d have flopped to the floor if her elbows didn’t slam against and dig against the edge of the table. Having a point of leverage, she bent in to herself and cried so hard and deep, no sound came out at first, only an undeniable wave of compressed air crested out of her as every body part focused on shoving her frustration, disappointment, and guilt out of her eyeballs in thick and endless streams finally released. It was not long before she gave herself over to ancient sounds of grief, wordless and yet still a language, weighted equally in desperate measures of deeply desired absolution or damnation. Between the moans, wails, grunts, and shouts, what little breath she caught was used to promote her most familiar refrain. “I’m so sorry, Will,” she gasped. “I’m sorry I made things harder for you.”

He wheeled himself around the table. Hastily parking next to her, seated parallel, it was hard to get a hold of her. After she edged away from him once, he flung an arm around her shoulders and anchored her in a hug no less solid and sure because it was only with one arm. He leaned into her, pressing his forehead into her now totally askew hair. He made a shelf of her shoulder, lodging his chin there, and spoke directly into her right ear. He didn’t whisper or

shout, but when he addressed her it was with a layer of ferocity that demanded he be understood. With the hand not tightly embracing her, he pried one of hers from covering half of her soggy face and planted it firmly on his chest. "You are my mother," he said, "and there is no one else on this entire planet, in this life, I love more." He held her hand over his heart tightly enough where there was nowhere else she could put it. "*You* are here with me. *I'm* here with you, day in, day out, with no let up." She shook in his grasp, whether it was because he made her or because she simply had to, neither of them could tell. "We're each other, Mom; we're all the other person has to depend on. But no matter what, you have made me who I am." She made a noise of fear and sadness and started shaking again. He held her tighter. "It's the truth, and I mean it in the best way possible. You know I mean it in the best way. Every good thing I am or I have is because of you. The bits and pieces of myself I can stand come from what you've given me." He hitched on his own sob and pressed the rawest kiss he could give high on her cheek, just under her ear. He could feel how tightly clenched her jaw was with just the barest of touches.

He breathed again, and forced his eyes open, so he could make a picture of her in his mind to keep with him. If this image he kept of her showed his mother coated in a plaster of sticky tears, blotchy cheeks, and a quivering chin, so much the better. Her heart could be plainly seen on her face in all of its passion and damage. Yes, she was sad, which was plain to see. What he saw within the broad strokes of her crying jag, though, were subtle spots of hope and love. In fact, her entire portrait was tinted with a lurking happiness at the center, existing as more of an impression than a signpost. In the rare moments where the cracks in her emotional dam went too deep and she unleashed herself, he saw his mother more completely than at any other time. The grief was a single shade of her, perhaps the loudest one, but in these flashes of

exposure her full range shone through, making her into a strangely beautiful picture of unchecked humanity. "I love you, Mom." He tightened his grip on her. "I love you! But if you do not stop blaming yourself for what brought *this*—" he swayed in his seat and every little mechanism on his wheelchair, down to the last rusty washer, squeaked, and thumped, "—into our lives, there'll be a day where I just won't take it anymore. I'm sorry, but I can't keep telling you not to be sorry forever. I guess I can't love you unconditionally; a billion drivers change a billion radio stations every day, and I can not keep telling you there's no reason to apologize for being one of those billion people. What happened, happened, but at least I'm living with it. What matters is my not blaming you." He released her hand, used both of his to bracket her face, and turned her head until they were eye-to-eye. He paused, searching her, and all they did was breathe until he nodded to himself and said, "You're blaming yourself. If you keep doing that, no matter what I say or do to make you stop, or however many times I re-say or re-do those things, I'll love you forever, but I can't live like that." He pulled her face down as gently as he could before letting her go, and pushed himself toward the door. "I gotta get outta here," he called loudly before she could say anything. He paused, halfway out the door, looked at her over his shoulder and added, quietly, almost as an afterthought, "I hope you heard me. Really think about what I said, please, and maybe we'll talk later."

He went on, spinning efficiently to bump the door closed behind him with one of his rear wheels, and she was left there, in the silence, alone. She barely breathed, and when she did, it was shaky. She almost started pushing to her feet to dash after him, rip the door off its hinges and scream for him to stop, but ultimately stayed behind.

Chapter Fourteen

Will was in the teeth of the cold. Winter was knocking on the door. He coasted along the sidewalk for a bit, letting his wheels hiss across the chilled cement, and mashed his hands under his arms to warm them. He'd left his mom fast, which left him unprepared for the weather. His exposed face felt like it was being scraped with sandpaper. He sucked in a deep breath and shook himself to dispel the chill running up his body. He'd have to go back soon. He knew he was going to, anyway. Leaving the way he had was more to illustrate the point of his ability to leave, instead of making his absence permanent. He quit squashing his hands to blow on them, hoping to drive back the numbness seeping into his fingers.

He realized while he was feebly warming himself the extent of how lost he was. Glancing over the tops of his chapped knuckles, he recognized not a single street sign or storefront. It hadn't seemed like he'd gone so far—then again, maybe he hadn't; it was possible he'd simply gone down a street in town never seen by him or treaded by his tires. When the door had slammed behind him, he had no intention of going to familiar places. His mind was too stuffed, his heart had an odd, tight feeling, and the wind sneaking into the cuffs of his pants chilled him to the point of constantly doing what could've passed for a seated version of an Irish jig. His mom was likely going crazy, on top of everything else. Leaving her in the state she'd been and probably still was in, he wouldn't be surprised if she were occupying herself by shrink-wrapping his room to keep every object in the exact state it had been in the last time he'd been home.

Not knowing where he was, having nowhere to go, and not of a mind to go home just yet, even though the sun wasn't out and the temperature felt like it was dropping steadily, he decided

to simply stop and watch life go by all around him. He maneuvered his way to the end of the block he was on, then braked himself on the corner behind the tall, gray metal pole designating the specific intersection. The attached signs denoting the main and side streets rattled in the wind like snare drums, and he could feel the cold conducting its way down and through the pole, but at least it was a buffer from the wind, however slim.

Of all the things his mother had lately said to him, her confession of his quality as a father stuck to him with the most tenacity. The surprise the sentiment caused him, in concert with his disbelief and the strength of her implication, produced feelings letting him think of almost nothing else ever since he'd been out here. It was nearly impossible, but he allowed himself to be a father, if only in his mind, and the picture of a baby popped into his head. He was a boy, small, pudgy, and wriggling. All four limbs pedaled as he lay squealing on his back, the first indicator of how little of himself he hoped to see in his imaginary child. The figment baby was blond and fair-skinned, with big green eyes and a happy face, open with honesty and tender with innocence. He wondered if he ever looked like that, or if all babies look alike at first, existing originally as a raw bundle of simple purity, only to be chipped and welded into a more severe, harder shape as life came knocking, adding a dent here and a scratch there.

He shook his head and grunted at himself. Babies, for better or worse, were inevitably a mixture of their parents. He wasn't fully picturing the possibilities; there was only a dash of reality in his conception of fatherhood. The rest was a tossed together jumble of what he'd read, seen, and heard from books, movies, and TV shows. These fantasies combined with his regret of his father's absence, giving him a cynical baseline for what he hoped real-world parenting would and would not be. He didn't know anything about babies or children, so he reasoned his mother had said what she did simply to make him feel better without having a realistic foundation to

balance it on, and he was sick in his heart at how oblivious she'd been when she told him what she really thought of him, how tenuous her motivation was for even springing something so huge on him with no warning whatsoever.

A mother was opposite him on the other side of the intersection, standing with her son before the crosswalk, waiting on the blinking red man to change into a solid green. One arm was tied to a bag of groceries. The corner of a box of Lucky Charms cereal stuck out of the overflowing top like a bright-red shark fin. The leprechaun mascot was made into a Cyclops due to how much of him was obscured by the wrinkled brown paper, giving the face an eerie, disturbing quality. He found a second pair of eyes, level with his own, staring at him. Her little boy had fixed him with a heavy stare. He watched, keeping still, wearing a blank face, plainly trying to figure him out. Looking back at the little boy, he saw the eyes droop to drink in the chair. Whatever thin light pressed through the clouds glinted off the matrix of spokes webbed across the inner circle of his rear wheels, forcing the boy to blink and look above the rays. The young eyes finally caught sight of the legs, tight, bent, unusually thin and setting oddly, hanging there with a lifelessness potent enough to be recognized, even curtained as they were by long pants.

He watched the innocent gaze fall from a sight probably never seen before. Guilty-looking at having been caught staring, the boy's face was seized by fear and curiosity, whipping the expression into a contrary mixture of repulsion and attraction. He reeled in more of his mother's navy-blue coat sleeve, and dared his eyes upwards. Will and the boy looked at each other, the street stretched between them. Doing his best to keep stoic in the face of judgment, he nonetheless heard his teeth grind each other as they squeezed together, and the back of his neck pricked and burned as if someone were embroidering something with knitting needles on the

tender skin of the nape. The corners of the boy's eyes were pinched with wonder, and an unasked question flared out from his pupils. The question in him went unvoiced, yet was no less obvious for its silence: *What are you?* The boy was asking with his stare. *I've never seen anything like you before. Should I be afraid of you?*

He breathed heavily in the face of this youngster's question. Instances where his apparent difference from nearly everyone else around him being thrown in his face were always awkward. When they did rear their head up, they were difficult to ignore or defy. The light that had the mother tapping her foot changed appropriately. She rearranged the bag in her embrace, tugged the smaller arm tightly clutching her, and moved into the street without looking at her young charge. The wide, questioning eyes were briefly dragged aside, refocusing when the boy snapped to attention, moved in step with his mother, and once more clapped his eyes on the oddity ahead of him, which was suddenly getting closer. Realizing his nearing proximity, curiosity drained out of the boy's expression, replaced with overriding fear. He made a grunt of panicked protest and started pulling against his mother's lead. With each step onward, the puppy-like yelps got louder and the tugging more insistent, until the mother finally stopped at the lip of the curb. The street was behind the pair and Will was in front of them, a single sidewalk square separating the three of them.

The mother made a noise of protest very similar to her little boy's, wrested herself free from his yanking, balanced the bag of groceries, and stared disapprovingly down at her son. "What's *wrong?*" she hissed, hastily rearranging the coat the boy had twisted and stretched. She mounted the curb and waved the boy ahead of her. "Get out of the street. Come on. Come on. We're already running late today." The boy gave the tiniest step forward in the barest imitation of compliance. With his heels hanging off the curb and his toes bent into the edge of it, he

stooped under his mother's free arm and leaned into her body, making a noise of fear and twitching his head towards where Will sat in his wheelchair, lightly shivering due to the cold and because he could so effectively scare a child without doing anything except being there.

The mother looked puzzled for a second, and then followed the direction the boy was shaking his head in. She saw Will sitting there in his chair, an arm's length away, and gave a gasp. He didn't know whether he startled her because she hadn't realized he was there, or because he was the way he was. The mother efficiently collected herself, swallowed her surprise, and favored him with a mild look. He looked at her, she looked at him, and the boy buried his face in his mother's side, whimpering and close to tears. Nobody knew exactly what to do. He considered apologizing, as well as asking for an apology, but ended up doing nothing except squirm in his seat and fidget with his hands, ostensibly to warm them.

The mother bent, held her boy's chin between her thumb and index finger, and fiercely whispered something into his face. What was said passed only between them. The boy had nowhere else to look or move, captured as he was. He nodded as best he could while his eyes progressively widened, then let his mother latch onto his sleeve and drag him down the sidewalk. The pair passed by out of reach, neither of them looking at him, though the boy seemed to have a considerably tougher time keeping his eyes aimed away. The mother charged on, keeping a tight rein on the day's shopping and her child. Her son chanced one last questioning glance over his shoulder at him, and when his mother caught him, he snapped his head forward and marched away with her.

The boy's fear and confusion were obvious. Will wished he'd said something to make the boy stop looking at him like he was. Whether it was to put the kid at ease or intensify his fright to such a point where he wouldn't dare to show the whites of his eyes, he didn't care very

much. He wanted to stop being seen in such a way. The inhumanity displayed in the boy's open face was chillier than the weather, though he was too young to realize what he was projecting. Children could be as monstrous as they are angelic in their ignorant honesty. Freshly seeing such a look made Will wonder how his son would look at him, if he ever had one. Considering the possibility of terrifying his child simply by being in proximity made him want to cry. He leaned forward to prop himself up against the signpost, crossing his arms above his head, using them as an anchor to keep himself upright. He touched the freezing metal with his naked forehead and hissed at the shock of it. Stark, blinding cold spilled through him as if he'd plunged head first into ice water. He hunched over, shivering violently, and wondered what kind of man he would be—not to mention how he'd fare as a father—if his own children dreaded and feared him because of something he had no control over.

He could teach them, of course, explain the realities of the situation to let them understand and make them more comfortable, but he sensed the feelings would still be there for them. They could lurk in smiling, nodding disguises and yet still be present. He remembered being so young where everything was new and scary, especially something obviously unusual. That which is different is scary, for anyone, but especially children. He wasn't strong enough to endure being a source of fear to his children, even if the only world they existed in right now was in his mind. He straightened up in his seat and swiped at his running nose with his sleeve. He hurriedly looked around to get his bearings, and noticed nothing familiar. Glancing where the mother and son had come from, he saw nothing promising, so he pulled a quick 180 degree turn and headed back where he'd come from. It took two block's worth of doubtful pushes before he recognized the familiarly vandalized corner stop sign, spray-painted to read "STOP eating." He put himself on auto-pilot once he turned into his neighborhood.

His hands and feet were totally numb. His face stung harshly in the wind on top of being caked with snot above his lips and around his nose. Pulling to a stop in front of the familiar garage, he frowned, questioning how many times he'd let himself come back here, and if he even had a real choice of going somewhere besides the house he shared with his mother. His frozen state compelled him inside, overriding what he felt in his gut and heard in his heart; he couldn't live like this anymore, constantly fighting, or worrying about having to fight with his parents. He knew this was the truth, but didn't completely trust himself to address it.

His front wheel had barely broken the plane separating the house from the garage when he heard her bounding footsteps. "You're back!" Her voice was shrill and raspy, a grating noise soaked in emotion and clogged by her stuffy nose. Crushed tissues were tightly balled in her fists and her eyes were webbed with outstanding veins. She'd clearly been crying her eyes out.

He looked at her, unsure of whether he should feel guilty at her tears or mad because it seemed she'd done nothing but cry the entire time he was gone. He settled on being irritated instead of angry, pinching his shirt and plucking at it indicatively. "Of course I'm back," he said, doing all he could to dull the edge of the sarcasm flying out of his mouth. "I'm practically sitting here naked; how far could I go dressed like this?" He skidded to a stop in front of her, nearly catching her shins with the front edge of his footplates. His hands were sluggish since they were still thawing.

She didn't budge, or even seem to notice he nearly crashed into her. Her eyes were glued to his face, so much so they seemed to leap out of her head when she asked with embarrassing hopefulness, "So, you're staying? Wait! Don't answer yet." She nervously waved her hands in front of his face. "I thought about what you said, about how—" she gestured towards the wheelchair. "What I mean is I don't think the accident is anybody's fault either."

He sat, watching her desperation with his hands folded in his lap, pressed between his thighs to absorb body heat, not believing her for a second. "Okay, good, I'm glad," he said. "And I'm staying here for now, but—ack!" She cut him off by throwing her arms around his neck and nearly strangling him in a massive hug. He negotiated a grip on the vice her arms had turned into and uneasily pried himself loose. He defensively kept hold of her wrists and looked her firmly in the eye, saying, "Yes, Mom, I'm staying here for the foreseeable future. Now can I go to my room and pick out some decent clothes, please? I'm kind of freezing."

"I love you," she cried, trying to sneak out of his distancing grasp and cling to him again. "I love you so much."

He fended her off and told her the truth. "And I love you," he said, pointedly eyeing the hallway over her left shoulder.

She followed where he was looking and nodded. "You go pick something out, and I'll help you put it on, okay? Thank God you came back! I was so worried." She gave a watery smile.

He grinned back, dropped her hands, and pushed past her. He could hear her sniffing and blotting at her face with some Kleenex. Bumping his ajar bedroom door open and then shutting it as soon as he rolled through, he shed his shirt and pants, shivering less once they were piled in the corner than when he had been wearing them, since they'd gotten soggy with sweat from pushing himself out and about. He turned around to face his closet, then, eyeing the racked clothes with skepticism. What other life was there besides the one he had here, now? He wasn't even able to get dressed without someone else's help. Who would he reach out to, where would he go, and what would he do once he got there? The possibility of secretly going to live with his dad flashed into his mind, but he nixed the idea as quick as it came about once he realized his

dad's place would be the first one his mom would look for him, not to mention he couldn't even get into his dad's apartment to begin with. There was nowhere else for him to go. There was either here, with his mom, or there with his dad. One place was becoming unbearable and the other was plainly unreachable.

Naked, he spun around and barreled through his bedroom door. Flying down the hallway, he yelled, "I don't believe you!" The words careened across an empty house. His eyes darted, searching for her.

A voice called him from behind. His mother's head, draped in a towel, poked around the doorframe of the master bedroom. She was wrapped up in a fluffy white robe. "Did you say something? I just got out of—" she paused to look at him, tossing the towel into the unseen room behind her. "I thought you were gonna pick out some clothes?"

He switched directions and proceeded into the mouth of the hallway, keeping some distance between them because of his naked state, and because he felt like yelling at her. "I don't believe you when you say you don't blame yourself about the accident. And what hurts more is you don't realize what you're really saying when you keep doing it over and over again."

She wrapped her hands around the doorjamb for leverage. "Will, I'm sorry, but—"

He slapped one of the walls on either side of him as he screamed "STOP IT! All your apologies do is bring up how much I lost and how I'm never gonna get it back. You're apologizing for my life, really, when you talk like that. You can't accept who I am, now, who I'm going to be forever."

She gripped the wall even harder in her clutches before appealing to him. "I apologize because I made you lose what you had." Her voice was quiet but clear.

He started to laugh in short, barking bursts, like a hyena. "I can't take it, Mom. I just can't. I'm not even saying anything anymore, because I'm starting to think you want to be sad, you like being blamed, because you're used to it, somehow."

She flinched as if struck. "How could you say those things? I'd give *anything* to take back what happened, to stop feeling like this."

"So would I, Mom, obviously! But we can't. This," he slapped his bare chest, flailed around at the walls, and finally thrust his arms out toward her—"is our life. You are who you are, I am who I am, and I've accepted it as much as I can right now. You won't. I can't stay with you if you won't." He leaned forward, looking at her very seriously.

It was her turn to mock him with laughter. "You'd go to your father's, yeah? He's such a model of acceptance and responsibility; I can see why you'd choose him."

He slowly nodded. "I can't go to him, because everything bad you're saying about him is true. I was planning on running away."

She scoffed. "Every kid your age thinks about it. How many actually do it? And where would you run away to?"

It hurt his feelings hearing how she attacked him with such gusto. He crossed his arms over his goosebump-covered midsection. "I'll think of something."

She let her hands fall from where they anchored her and stood tall, declaring, "You'll stay here, with me."

He frowned at her, edging forward and backward indecisively. All at once, he raced down the hall, took her by the arms, and pulled her down until the two of them were at eye-level. "You still blame yourself for what happened."

Her eyes zig-zagged across his face as she stared at him, she swallowed hard, tried to look away from him and was denied, and then replied in a resigned whisper. "I'm sorry," she said.

He let her go abruptly and she swayed, unbalanced. "Dad's in no shape to take care of me, I can't take care of myself, and it isn't good for you to have me around here all the time." Quickly, he reached out and squeezed her hand, having noticed her trembling. "I'm just being honest, here, Mom. All we do is fight, and I can't keep fighting with you and Dad all the time. I have nobody else, I'm a complete mess right now. I have no friends, no idea what to do with girls, and I'm tired of being sad, angry, and clueless."

"This is a rough patch, Will. The two of us can get past it." She recited her mantra, fisting her hand in his convulsively.

"I keep telling you, this is our life, Mom. Rough patches don't last this long, and if they do, then there has to be a better way of coping with them. We need to move on. I need you to move on, Mom. I'm as past the accident as I'm going to get, and I need you with me. You're all I got, Mom, and I need you to be with me. "

She searched his face, waiting for him to speak further. Her anxious, lost expression seemed to be asking for him to tell her how to even bear the weight of their past, to say nothing of carrying it forever. His continued silence twisted her face into a mask of pain and defeat. She looked away from him, unable to bear the tangibility of what was suddenly bearing down on her. "I'm supposed to say everything'll be all right, that the bad can't last forever. I should say so, and I want to, but I don't know how. I'm a horrible mother," she muttered under her breath.

He squeezed her hand again. "You don't know how to deal with this any better than I do, is all." She looked at him sharply and he shrugged. "I love you, and I'll be there for you, but I

can't constantly talk about the past anymore, Mom." He looked at her with as much sincerity and openness as he could muster.

His eyes were unavoidable. The conviction and desperation she saw there stifled any attempt at stoicism. Immediately, she began to cry without noticing. "Do you hate me?"

"No," he said, freeing his hand from her grip to sweep away any of her tears he could reach.

She reached up and pressed her palm atop his hand. "I love you. You know I love you, right?"

"Yes," he nodded once, firmly.

She looked away from him, suddenly shameful, and said, "I want you to be happy. I want this more than anything else in the entire world. And I've been doing nothing but upsetting you."

"It's been tons more than just you upsetting me, lately. Hearing you say what you did about me being happy helps a whole lot, though. Happiness sounds like a welcome change." Both of them heard the genuine warmth laced through his voice.

She pushed to her feet without replying, while he helped her up as best he could. She walked past him, heading into his room. "You need to get dressed. What do you wanna wear?"

Being reminded of his nakedness suddenly made the surrounding cold close in around him with a new ferocity, reducing him to a pile of shivers. He hastily followed his mother, picked out the heaviest shirt and pants hanging in his closet, and she dressed him in them, clucking her tongue because the style of each clashed against the other. He'd go out through the dank garage and into the cold on that day and his teeth would clatter despite what warmth his mother had given to him. Eyes leaking in the wind, hands purple with cold, he'd alternatively

lag and skid his way across cracked grey sidewalks and pitted black streets, in danger of tipping over or crashing with every push. But he'd go on.