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Cedar & Riley

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
English

by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Abstract

Cedar & Riley is an LGBTQ-themed young adult novel. My novel blends the structure of the Oscar-winning film *Boyhood* with themes from David Levithan's young adult novel, *Boy Meets Boy*. At the beginning, Cedar meets Riley, on their first day of first grade. They become instant friends, but neither one knows at the time the love that will grow between them. Over twelve years, glimpses of their relationship are shown on the first day of school. Cedar and Riley face bullies and homophobes, joy and tears, time apart and long nights together, and eventually the power of young love is revealed.

The First Day of **First Grade**

August 28, 2006

The first time I met Riley Alvarez, he stood at the edge of a sidewalk, his tiny hands clasped together, his bright green backpack nestled over his left shoulder. He pursed his lips and rocked his body back and forth, like he had invisible headphones blasting music into his ears. He didn't see me at first. He had no idea I was there. He had no idea he was going to change my life forever.

I peered back at the end of the cul-de-sac to see my mom waving at me. She was far enough away to look the size of a ladybug, but I could tell she was wiping her tears away. She had walked me to the bus stop every day of kindergarten, but on that morning, I insisted I go alone. I wasn't a kid anymore. I was six years old. Practically a teenager.

I tried to be courageous and strong during those few hundred steps I took from my house driveway to the end of the street, but the sight of this stranger at the bus stop filled me with dread. For all of last year it'd just been Mom and me, and I hadn't planned on any company. What was I supposed to say to this person?

I stopped a few feet behind him and shoved my thumbs against my backpack straps. I chewed on my tongue, for at least thirty seconds, before I said, "Uhh, hi."

The boy turned around and waved at me, like we already knew each other, like he had the ability to look into a crystal ball and see in detail what the next twelve years would bring.

As I sit here trying to remember that first encounter, I'm not reminded of anything extraordinary. The clouds didn't open up and shine a bright light down on us. The neighbors didn't kick open their doors and burst into song.

All he did was smile and say three little words: "My name's Riley."

He stuck his hand out, and when I didn't extend mine right away, he stepped toward me, only to lose his grip on his backpack. He reached for it, but it was too late: the backpack landed a foot from the gutter, which wouldn't have been a big deal if he hadn't left the front pouch zipped open. Crayons sputtered out onto the sidewalk.

He pushed his hands against his cheeks. "Oh no!" he cried.

"Don't worry, I got them," I said, even though there looked to be far too many for any one person to grab.

I fell to my knees, ignored the pain from the harsh scrapes, and reached for the crayons, a bright burst of colors that put me in a momentary dizzying spell. I tossed the backpack to Riley and grabbed everything I could fit in my hands. I threw them toward the bark that lined the sidewalk, then reached back down. I snatched a dark green, a light blue, a yellow with the shade of spicy mustard. I grabbed all I could, then peered back down. The last crayon rolled toward the gutter.

I looked up at Riley, and Riley looked down at me, with pained eyes, like I was trying to diffuse a bomb and failing.

I reached past the sidewalk. My fingers only touched the muddy water rushing into the gutter. Did I miss it? Was it a goner?

But then something collided against my left pinky.

"Got it!" I shouted.

“What? It didn’t fall in?”

I lifted up the crayon and glanced at it, briefly, before handing it over. It was the color pink: Tickle Me Pink, to be exact.

“Here,” I said, trying to jump to my feet in a way that was remotely graceful. Instead, the heavy weight of my backpack pulled me right back down to the sidewalk.

Riley showed no remorse—he laughed, and hard. He stumbled toward me so fast I thought he’d lose his balance too, but then he helped me up, and even brushed some of the dirt off my backpack.

“Sorry about that.”

He shook his head. “Sorry? I’m the one who should be thanking *you*.”

Riley extended his hand toward me once again, this time with the pink crayon.

“For me?”

He nodded. I was more of an orange kind of guy, but I took the crayon anyway. I looked at the funny label again, and dropped it into my backpack. I steadied my feet, as not to fall to the ground a third time, and finally shook Riley’s hand. It was sweaty, seemingly drenched in the rushing water his backpack had narrowly avoided.

“Cedar.”

“What?”

I pulled my hand away. “My name. It’s Cedar.”

“You mean, like the tree?”

Even at age six, I’d heard it all, the stupid jokes, the snide comments. It didn’t even faze me. “Yeah,” I said.

I expected more mocking, but all he said was, “It’s nice to meet you, Cedar.”

When Riley smiled at me, seemingly the hundredth time since I first approached him, I felt a tingling sensation in my chest, something that both comforted my soul and stung my insides like sharp kitchen knives.

His hair was short, black, and spiky, and his cheeks were chubby, with light shades of red in their centers. He wore a dark blue shirt with a flamingo logo on it, and tan shorts that looked one size too small. Everything about Riley has changed in the years since—except those eyes. Those sharp green eyes that have haunted me forever.

I cleared my throat. “So. Do you live on this street?”

The roar from the dinosaur-sized vehicle up ahead kept Riley from answering me. We took two steps back, and I watched in part excitement, part terror, as the yellow bus turned onto Country Park Road and barreled toward us like a cheetah on wheels.

I had tried to feel like such a man that morning, but as that bus careened toward us, with seemingly no stopping in sight, I reached my hand toward the person next to me. I expected my mom’s hand, the one I had tugged on each morning before kindergarten. But the hand this time belonged to Riley.

The bus stopped beside the sidewalk with a clamorous clang, its front door opening with the vigor of a cork being shot off a champagne bottle.

Our hands didn’t depart; they rubbed up against each other like two colliding sponges. We stared forward, neither one of us budging.

“*Gross!*” a voice shouted behind me. “Two boys are holding hands! Two boys are holding hands!”

The boy pushed right through us like he was a Red Rover champion, then spun around and slapped us on the top of our heads. It was Glen. A year ahead of me. The demon of my universe.

“Cedar Weiner, is that you?” he asked, his feet already touching the bottom step of the bus. “You and that fat *cholo* better hurry. Don’t want the bus to leave without you.”

At the time I thought he said *churro*, and I didn’t think anything of it. I stood up straight, nodded like a gentleman the gangly Glen most certainly wasn’t, and walked onto the bus. I looked back toward my house one last time. I didn’t see my mom. I couldn’t even see my house. For the first time, I was alone.

Well, almost. As I found the back of the bus, I noticed Riley right behind me.

“Oh. Hi.”

“Hi,” he repeated. “Is it okay if I sit with you?”

“Yeah, okay.”

I took a seat in the back corner, and Riley sat next to me. He tapped his fingers against his sides, just stayed quiet for a moment. Then he nodded toward the front of the bus and asked, “Who was that guy?”

I followed Riley’s gaze and looked at Glen, who was turned around and laughing with a couple of boys behind him.

“That’s Glen, he’s in second grade,” I said, slumping down in my seat. “He’s so mean. He pushed me off the swings once and I got a cut above my eye. Six stitches.”

“Really?” Riley examined my eyes right away, like he wanted to be sure they were both in tact.

“It was a long time ago. Like before Christmas.”

“Oh, okay.” He laughed. “I thought this was yesterday or something.”

“No way. I haven’t seen Glen all summer. It was *great*.”

As the bus made a sharp turn onto Twin Schools Road, I pushed my shoulder against Riley’s and focused on the large yellow building up ahead. Oakview Elementary housed students from kindergarten through third grade, and it sat adjacent to Ridgecrest Elementary, which had grades four through six. While Ridgecrest was about twenty years newer, Oakview had more character, with student-painted roadrunners on the sidewalks and blacktop, and a boy’s bathroom so well hidden that it acted as the perfect hiding spot for hide-and-go-seek.

“Are you in second grade too?” Riley asked.

“Nope. First.”

“Really? Me too.”

“Cool. I haven’t seen you at this school before. Did you just move here?”

“Uhh... yeah,” he said, but he wasn’t looking at me any longer. His eyes focused on something ahead of us, like he was under a powerful spell.

I followed his gaze to the front of the bus, where Glen and his two friends had gone quiet. They were turned around, all staring intently at me and Riley. They looked like wolves waiting for the perfect time to attack.

Finally, they turned away from us and starting chatting again, like no unusual staring contest had taken place.

“Cedar?” Riley wiped a few beads of sweat off his upper lip. “Should I be scared of him? Of that Glen guy?”

I shook my head. “No. Don’t be.” I faked a smile and tapped my hand against his side. “I’ll protect you.”

He smiled back, and scooted closer to me.

The bus turned into the parking lot and stopped behind a line of cars that were supposed to be in a different lane. Glen was the first to jump to his feet, and as soon as the door opened, thirty kids raced to the front and starting pouring out onto the blacktop. I was the last to get up, mostly because I didn’t want to start my school year getting trampled.

“Which way are you going?” Riley asked, as our feet hit the pavement and the bus door slammed shut behind us. He pointed to the left of the school. “I’m that way.”

I nodded. “Me too.”

When the bell rang a minute later, I stepped in front of Riley and started to run. “Well, it was nice to meet you!”

“You too!” he shouted behind me.

I sped around the corner, past rooms A4 and A5, all the way to A8. My teacher had her back to the open door, as she watched the last of her students pile into her classroom.

“Well, it’s about time,” she said, in a way I wasn’t sure was playful. The colorful sun dress she wore suggested she wasn’t some crotchety old witch, but she wasn’t exactly young, either; the myriad of wrinkles on her face guaranteed she was at least fifty. She motioned for me to walk faster, so I sprinted the last few steps.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Brink,” I said. “My bus was late.”

“Excuses, excuses,” she said. “Get inside, both of you. We need to get started.”

I didn't budge. "Both of us?"

I turned around, as Riley ran up behind me, a giant smile on his face.

"Hurry up," the teacher said, waving us forward as she disappeared inside the classroom.

My brain told me to follow the authority figure, but I stayed put for a moment, and stared at my new friend. "Riley?"

"What?" He started to remove his backpack.

"We're in the same class!"

"I know. Can you believe it?"

The teacher re-emerged before us, her arms crossed, her left foot tapping against her carpet. "What are you boys doing? Let's go! Final warning!"

Riley's eyes went outrageously wide. He shoved his backpack in his slot and followed after her. He didn't look back at me.

I pulled off my backpack too, and stepped inside.

I knew five of the students from my kindergarten class, but I still felt most comfortable sitting next to Riley. He found a desk in the back right corner and I gladly followed him, never wanting to be the one up close and center. I had no interest in seeing the little specks of lettuce in my teacher's teeth, and I hated to be called on. Thirty-two students, and I was the hardest one to see.

I glanced at the kids I knew. Maggie Timbers scratched her butt with her left thumb and picked her nose with her right. Beside her was Josh Sweet, writing frantically on a piece of paper even though Mrs. Brink hadn't assigned anything yet. At the front of the room were Beatrice and Sam and Kyle. I thought I recognized Glen for a scary

second, but the overweight boy three seats over turned his head to reveal a nose much too small to be Glen's.

"Hi, Cedar," Maggie said, with a flirtatious wave. A loose booger dangled from her finger.

"Hello," I said, shifting my desk closer to Riley's.

The teacher stepped in front of us, drilling holes in our foreheads with her intensive stare. It only took a few seconds for the class to quiet down.

"Hello, everyone. My name is Mrs. Brink. I'm thrilled I get to have you for the 2006-2007 school year." She stepped to her right and grabbed a clipboard beside her computer. "Before we get started with your first assignment," she said, "we need to give you all your assigned seats for the year. Joey Altman? Are you here?"

An African American boy raised his hand. "Yes, Mrs. Brink."

"Stand up, sweetie, and please take a seat at the front of the room."

The boy did as he was asked, shuffling forward in a manner that suggested he wasn't happy to have so many eyes on him.

"Okay, great. Riley Alvarez, where are—?"

"Here!" he shouted, standing up before she could finish her sentence.

Allman, Alvarez. Alphabetical order. When I remembered my last name started with an S, my heart sank to the soles of my feet.

I reached out for him. I didn't want to him to go. Not yet.

But mere seconds later, he was gone, across the room, so far away I could only see the top of his spiky hair.

She went on and on, calling some names I recognized, and most I didn't. I tuned her out, and when I saw a painted tree in the center of Mrs. Brink's giant podium, the new tree house in my backyard entered my mind. My dad had built it over the summer, with some help from my brother. I'd only been inside of it twice, mostly because it was boring to spend time in it all by myself. I didn't want to climb that ladder again until I had someone to share it with.

"Cedar Swinton?" a voice asked.

I turned not to any person in the room, but to the ceiling, where it felt like a spirit from above had called my name.

"Cedar?" the voice said again.

I glanced to my left to see not Maggie and her boogers anymore, but Josh. He was staring at me. "She said your name."

"What? Oh!" I jerked my body forward and waved my arm in the air. "Here! I'm right here, Mrs. Brink!"

She darted her eyes toward me, then put a check mark on her clipboard. "Well, well. Aren't *you* the special one."

I lowered my head, and asked, with growing fear, "Special?"

"Yes." A smile, thankfully, lit up her weathered face. "You can stay put. You're already in the correct seat!"

I looked over at Riley, still clear across the room, then back at Mrs. Brink. "Oh. Uhh, good."

She tapped her pencil against her chin and said, "And... last one. Lena Walters?"

A girl raised her hand. "Here!"

“Excellent. Please take a seat to the right of Cedar.”

The last student alphabetically in the class was the prettiest girl I’d ever seen. Her blonde hair flowed down to her ankles, and she wore a pretty purple dress that seemed more suitable for a Hollywood premiere instead of the first day of school. She skipped down the aisle and sat next to me.

“I’m Lena,” the girl said. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” I said, and shook her hand.

“Okay, up first this morning is a very important task,” Mrs. Brink said, taking the stage at the front of the room. “As of right now, I know nothing about any of you. I could ask you the typical questions, like what your hobbies are, what you did over the summer, but that doesn’t interest me as much as this: you’re first graders now, on your way to middle school, and high school, to college and beyond. I want you to take a few minutes to write about your *future*.”

“The future?” a girl asked in front of me.

“How far into the future?” another student whispered.

Josh put his hand up, but before she even looked in his direction, he blurted out, “Can we make it up?”

Mrs. Brink shook her head. “No, no. I want you, for real, to think about where you want to be in twelve years. If everything goes to plan, *all* of you will be graduating from high school in the year 2018. Seems far away, doesn’t it? But trust me, it’ll be here faster than you think.” She started pacing at the front of the room, as she continued: “Starting today, and for the rest of the week, we’re going to work on creating a time capsule, one that will be put away, never to be seen again until your senior year of high

school, when you'll open the box for the first time and discover if anything you predicted came true."

"I'm gonna say I'll be a millionaire," Lena whispered into my ear.

"What? She said to be real, not fake."

She clucked her tongue, annoyingly. "I *am* being real. Just you wait."

"We'll start by having you answer a very simple question," Mrs. Brink continued.

"If you could have one thing twelve years from now—one thing at all—what would it be, and why? Please take out a pencil and get started. You have fifteen minutes."

I took out a piece of paper, wrote my name down, then glanced at the board, where Mrs. Brink had written today's date: August 28, 2006. I brought my hands to my cheeks and closed my eyes. 2018 seemed so crazy far away, I figured by then we'd all be morphed into half humans, half robots. I glanced at Lena's and Josh's papers. She was writing about her dog, and he was writing about his mom.

I glanced back toward the front of the room. I thought about all the dreams and wishes I had at that moment, and narrowed it down to one. I let out a hopeful sigh.

And started to write.

The First Day of **Second Grade**

August 27, 2007

The sentences poured out of me so fast that by the end of the second minute, I had to flip the page over and continue on the back. Every time I have to write about a specific topic, I struggle. But when a teacher asks us to free-write, I allow my brain to shut down and my imagination to soar. As Mrs. Ullman instilled in us time and time again, it didn't matter what we put down—as long as we didn't stop.

“All right, pencils down!” my teacher shouted. She jumped to her stubby feet and rang her little bell. “Josh, I said, pencils down!”

Most of the students complied, but not Josh, never Josh. He was on his fourth page, scribbling his words faster than I could type.

Mrs. Ullman cleared her throat. “Did you hear me, Josh? Or do I have to repeat myself again?”

“Hold on,” he said. “I'm sorry, Mrs. Ullman. It's just that I'm in the zone.”

She squinted her beady eyes and leaned over his desk. “I don't care if you're in *The Twilight Zone*. Put your pencil *down!*”

She smacked her hand against his desk, and his pencil launched to the carpet. He pulled his papers close to his chest, like he was scared she'd take them away.

“*Next*,” she screeched, “I want everyone to take out your math journals and turn to page 7. We're going to start the year off with some fractions.” Mrs. Ullman turned on the overhead project, then pushed some pennies to its center. “All right. Who can tell me how many pennies we have here?”

“Four!” the students shouted in unison.

“Good. And when I take away three pennies, how many do we have left?”

“One!”

“Good job. Now watch this...”

I kept listening to the teacher, reluctantly, as I shifted my gaze to the window. My first day of second grade was similar to the first day of school the year before, except for two things. One, a sunny day had been replaced by chocolate-black thunderclouds pelting the ground with the thickest of rain.

And two, my best friend Riley was nowhere to be found.

Well, that’s not exactly true. I saw him that morning. We walked to the end of the street together, sat side by side on the bus together, avoided the eyes of Glen together. But this time, when I walked to the left of Oakview Elementary, he walked to the right. No matter how hard our moms had tried to make it happen, we didn’t get the same teacher. We had been inseparable during first grade, so much so that the powers that be decided to separate us—at least for class time. Riley’s second grade teacher was Mrs. Murrow, a woman with large glasses and buckteeth who had clearly never purchased a mirror in her life. I tried not to let his absence get to me, though, since Riley still lived five doors down and wasn’t going anywhere.

I looked up at the clock. Forty-five minutes until lunch.

“Mr. Swinton?” a scary voice said from the front of the classroom. “What are you doing?”

I averted my eyes from the window, from all those fat globs of rain sending me into a daze. Mrs. Ullman started dropping pennies on the overhead, three at a time.

“Pay attention,” she said.

I smiled, even though on the inside I wanted to scream. “Yes, Mrs. Ullman.”

#

When I got to the lunchroom, I didn’t mind that I was soaked. I was just happy to not have my new teacher fixated on my every move.

I headed toward the hot lunch counter and stopped behind at least fifty other students, all of us standing like cattle waiting to have our heads chopped off. One of the lunch ladies had a cleaver in her hand, so I kept my hands close to my neck—just to be safe. The meal for the day consisted of a wet taco, tater tots, and carrots, and a choice between low fat milk and low fat chocolate milk. I didn’t think chocolate would go well with ground beef, but I picked the latter anyway. I would’ve picked a chocolate taco if it had been available.

I picked up my tray at the end of the line and headed toward the mile-long lunch tables. I was one of the last to get my food, so only a few seats remained. I saw a group from my class at the nearest table, and also Josh sitting by himself in a corner. I walked up and down the aisles, nodding to some familiar faces, like Lena’s, and avoiding some faces, like Glen’s.

I reached the back table, where there were still a few spots available, and turned back around. My food was getting cold, especially the tater tots, but I didn’t care. The one person I wanted to sit next to wasn’t anywhere in sight.

Where was Riley?

#

It was still raining after I finished my lunch, so instead of going outside I headed over to the library, which turned out to be the plan of everyone else: the place was so packed it had to be risking a dozen fire hazard regulations. The librarian Miss Whitely, with her peach-toned cheeks and her big, lavender eyes and her nose shaped like a Hershey's kiss, appeared young enough to be right out of high school. She had the voice of a chipmunk, the kind that was hard to hear even in the most deathly of silences, but she was super sweet, the kind of person who could get kids who didn't even like books to come into the library. She had her fill at the moment, with five kids huddling around her, so I was shocked when she said hello to me, and even remembered my name.

"Hi, Cedar. How's your first day going so far?" she asked, as she checked out a pile of *Goosebumps* books to a fourth grader. I glanced at the countertop to see if she had a list of names next to students' pictures, but I didn't see one.

"Hello," I said. I almost turned to search for Riley, but I stopped; if she knew my name, then she probably knew his too. "Miss Whitely?"

"Yes?"

"Has Riley Alvarez come into the library today? He's my friend, and I can't find him."

I expected her to shake her head, and go back to tending to the other students vying for her attention. Instead, she pointed to the aisle on the right. "I think he went to the non-fiction section. That was a while ago, though."

I had to push past three people to get to the small, cluttered non-fiction area in the back of the library. I passed by Elliot Martinez, who was reading about great white sharks, and Sally Treehouse, who had her nose buried in a slim paperback called *The Culture of Shopping Malls*. Riley was in the back corner, seated Indian-style on the gray carpet, a tome in his lap that appeared the size of a high school yearbook. He didn't hear me approach. He had his face pressed close to the page, one that had no text but four large photos of Michael Jordan.

"Excuse me," I whispered, "do you know where I can find the biggest book about basketball ever written?" I smiled. "Oh wait. You're holding it."

He tilted up his head and flashed that sweet smile that always made my day ten times better. "Hey, Cedar. How was lunch?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing. Where were *you*?"

He shrugged. "I ate in the classroom. I didn't want to get wet." He scooted his back against the wall and pointed to the shelves. "You gonna get a book?"

I perused the titles in front of me. They were all about sports. I would've preferred books about math, and all those stupid fractions.

I sighed, and glanced down the left side of the library. Three copies of *The BFG* caught my eye. "Riley, have you read any books by Roald Dahl?"

"No," he said, a slice trace of anger in his voice.

"You still haven't? I've been telling you to read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* since forever. It's the best." I pulled a very used copy from the nearby shelf and dangled it from my fingers, showing off the cover.

He didn't look up. He flipped to another page of his basketball almanac, and then another, doing his best to ignore me.

I put the book back, then pulled out another one by Dahl. "What about *Mathilda*? It's about this girl who's got these horrible parents, and she goes to this school with a real witch of a—"

I stopped talking, and quickly set the book on the shelf. Riley had brought his head up a little, just enough so I could see he was crying. He rocked his body back and forth, trying to hide his tears.

"Riley?" I got down on my knees and scooted up to him. I'd seen him cry before, but never in a public place. "What's wrong?"

He muttered something under his breath.

"What did you say? I couldn't hear you—"

"I said I can't read!" he shouted, loud and clear. He slammed his book shut and tossed it on the carpet.

"Shh!" a girl shouted from the center aisle.

I glared at her. "Shh, yourself!" I waved her away, then started patting Riley on the back, awkwardly. "Are you for real? Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I didn't want..." He struggled to talk through his dramatic sobbing. "I didn't want you to think I was *stupid*..."

"So when we read books over the summer..." I tried to think. As much as I loved reading, I realized Riley always wanted to play outdoors, and the few times we read together, he chose picture books.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" he asked.

“No. I want to help you, Riley. I’ll help you learn how to read.”

“You will?”

He sniffled, then wiped his tears away, fast. I thought he was cheering up because of my tutoring offer, but I realized he was staring past me. I turned around to see the prettiest girl in school coming toward us. She too pulled a Roald Dahl book from the shelf: *James and the Giant Peach*.

“Hi, Lena,” Riley said. He immediately wiped his tears away, and then he waved at her, in a trance, his eyes the size of tennis balls, his smile suddenly reserved for someone else. I was still on my knees, still in front of him, and it was like I was invisible.

“Oh. Hey, Riley,” she said, showing him her book choice. “Have you read this one? It’s really good.”

His grin widened. “Yeah, it’s one of my favorites.”

I nearly flicked my index finger against his forehead. He’d never shown this side of himself before. In the year I’d known Riley, we never talked about girls, and whenever they were mentioned, usually when my brother was nearby, we ran the other way, sticking our fingers in our ears and making loud noises so we didn’t have to hear about his latest obsession. For a year, it had just been the two of us, Cedar and Riley, best of friends, and no one else. I didn’t want that to change.

When she walked away, he set his massive book back on the shelf, and followed after her.

“Hey!” I said. “Where are you going?”

Riley turned back to me, almost as a courtesy. “Where do you think? Lunch is almost over.”

“Wait up,” I said, but he kept walking, and so I charged after him. I had never departed the Oakview Library without at least five books shoved against my chest, but this time I started to walk out empty handed.

“Nothing for you today, Cedar?” Miss Whitely asked, as my hand found the doorknob.

I didn’t want to hurt her feelings, so I turned around and said, “I just... couldn’t decide. You have so many new books!” That wasn’t a lie. I had passed her New Fiction section, which had at least twenty titles I’d never heard of.

“Oh. All right, but only this once.”

“Have a good day,” I said, and headed into the pouring rain before she could make me feel worse than I already did. Miss Whitely clearly saw something in me. I wasn’t sure if she thought I could be the next literary sensation, or merely a competent reader, but she always paid attention to what books, if any, I left with.

I turned the corner. I had to get to class. I didn’t see Riley anywhere, so I figured I’d talk to him after school. I almost made a run for it in the rain that was crashing against the ground harder than Mrs. Ullman’s high heels, when I heard a familiar voice to my left. It was the awful and terrible Glen—and he had Riley trapped.

“Out of my *way!*” Riley screamed. He tried to step around him but Glen was too tall, too round.

“Make me,” Glen said, as he pushed against Riley’s chest. When Riley tried to run the other way, Glen grabbed him by his sweater and pulled him close. “Are you scared of the rain, Riley? You scared of a little water?”

“You do what he says!” I shouted. I was no hero, and I typically marched away from scenes like this one, but as soon as I saw Riley in trouble, I didn’t hesitate. I rushed forward and slammed my fists against the bully’s right side.

Of course, it did nothing. He twisted his head toward me and decked me in the gut, sending me down to the wet cement ground. As I tried to catch my breath, I gazed up at the black sky, the drops of rain pelting my face like miniature bullets.

“Hey! What’s going on over there?” a voice rang out from across the way. It was a male teacher, wearing slacks and a lime-green tie. “Get to your class right now, or it’s detention for all three of you!”

Glen let go of Riley and said to me, “This isn’t over, Cedar Weiner.”

I leaned forward, with difficulty, and watched Glen run fast into the distance. He looked back once, raised his giant fist in the air, then stepped into his classroom.

Riley pulled me up to my feet and out of the rain. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“I know. But that guy... he’s a jerk! What did we ever do to him?”

“We lived, that’s what we did.” Riley shook his head and took a step away from me. “We should probably get to class.”

“Yeah. Do you still want to come over for dinner tonight? I think my mom said she’s making—s”

“Hey!” the teacher screamed again, taking his first step into the rain. “What did I say? You two have *ten seconds* to get to your class or I’m coming over there!”

Riley’s classroom was two doors over, but mine was across the school. I needed to start running, and fast.

“Sounds like fun,” Riley said, and he started to run. “I’ll see you later!”

“Yep! See you at the bus!”

I darted my eyes toward my destination, and bolted.

I hated that I didn’t have Mrs. Brink anymore. And I hated that I didn’t have Riley in the same class. And I hated Glen Gummer, and my new teacher, and this stupid rain.

But as my feet reached the inside of Ms. Ullman’s classroom, and as the loud, grating sound of the bell echoed throughout the school, I didn’t scream with anger or punch the wall next to me.

I placed my wet hands against my freezing cold cheeks, and smiled.

#

My mom served dinner early that night, around 5:30. From the moment Riley and I sat down I sensed a sadness in her eyes, even when she flashed her thin smile my way.

I picked one of the meatballs out of my spaghetti and tossed it toward Riley’s plate. It seemed a good idea, but when it hit the edge of the table and rolled off, my mom shot a death glare at me.

“Cedar, what are you doing?” she asked.

“Oops,” I said. I dropped to my knees and searched for the missing meatball. I thought I heard it smack against the hardwood—but then I saw it in Riley’s lap.

“Nice going,” he said.

“Sorry. Let me get that.” I grabbed the meatball and tossed it back on the table.

My dad set his fork down and leaned forward, trying to inspect the situation.

“Cedar, what are you doing down there?”

“Looks like Seed’s playing with his friend’s goodies, that’s what,” my brother said, entering the kitchen. I always knew it was him, first based on his sarcasm, second for how he pronounced my name like I came out of the soil. “Even though there’s probably not much to play with yet.” He grabbed a soda from the refrigerator and let out an obnoxious laugh.

At the time I didn’t know what he was talking about, so I just hopped back in my chair and took another bite of the spaghetti. Riley tried to wipe the stain on his pants away with a napkin, but he gave up and continued eating too.

“Eric, I called you five minutes ago,” my mom said.

“Yeah,” my dad added, before taking a sip of his white wine. “Why do you find it necessary to be late for everything lately?”

“Hey, I’m here, aren’t I?” My brother sat down, picked up one of the noodles, dangled it above his face, then let it drop. He chewed with his mouth open, as he looked across the table at me, and said, “So, did you like going down on your friend there, Seed?”

“Hey! That’s enough!” my dad said. “Do you need to be excused from the table? How old are you?”

“Uhh, let’s see.” Eric pretended to count for a moment. “Thirty-seven, last time I checked.”

“Don’t be smart with me. Apologize to your brother.”

“Apologize? For what?”

“You know what,” my mom said, giving Eric the same cold stare she gave me a minute ago. “There’s no talk like that at this table.”

My brother set his chin against his plate. “I am so, so sorry, Seed. Will you...” He sniffled, then wiped his fingers under his eyes, all dramatic. “Will you *ever* forgive me?”

I was only seven years old, but I was still able to sense when people were being authentic in their words and when they weren’t. At the same time, I hadn’t a clue what he was apologizing for. “It’s okay, Eric. I forgive you.”

He dangled another noodle above his head, but my dad slapped it away. “And stop playing with your goddamned food!” my dad shouted. “I swear, sometimes I think Cedar is more of a grown-up than you.”

He laughed. “Well at least that would mean I look young for my age. Unlike everyone else at the table.”

My dad grabbed Eric’s jacket and pulled him closer. “Listen. You keep talking like this, and you’re going to your room without any dinner. No food at all.”

“*Fine.*” Eric leaped to his feet and started marching out of the room. “I wasn’t that hungry anyway.”

My dad shouted, “Hey, come back here! You weren’t excused yet!”

“*Jesus,*” my mom said, with a loud sigh. She looked about ready to explode. I figured enduring those awful drill noises working as a dental hygienist year after year had taken its toll on her, but Eric’s behavior lately seemed to make her even crazier. “Let me go talk to him,” she said. She gave my dad a knowing glance, then stood up and followed after my brother.

The tension at the table left everyone in silence for a minute. My dad finished chewing his last meatball, and asked, almost like it was mandatory, “So... how was your first day of school?”

I didn't say anything right away, and neither did Riley. Finally, I shrugged, and said, "It was... fine, I guess."

That answer seemed to appease him, as he continued to eat his pasta. He grabbed a second roll from the breadbasket and smeared it with extra garlic. I marveled at the way my dad ate because unlike a lot of men his age, he ate anything he wanted and yet always stayed super thin. He jogged once in awhile, but it's not like he was at the gym for ten hours a day.

"What's your teacher's name again?" he asked.

"Mrs. Ullman," I said. "She's like a hundred years older than Mrs. Brink. She got mad at me today just for looking out the—"

My dad's cell phone vibrated, and he immediately jammed the phone against his ear. "Scott! Hey. No, no, it's fine. Thanks for getting back to me."

I sat back in my chair and sighed. He talked to Scott a lot. I'd never met the guy but my dad yakked on the phone with him more than he ever talked to me. They worked together in downtown Sacramento at a place called Tamanara, which sounded more like the meat sauce on our spaghetti than a real estate company.

I waited for him to ask Scott to call back, but he didn't. Riley and I were suddenly two ghosts at the table, the voice on the other end of my dad's phone conversation the lone person maintaining his interest. He rambled on about commercial properties in Roseville for a few minutes, then excused himself from the table and headed toward his office.

I pushed my plate forward, my appetite now gone. I turned toward Riley. I thought he'd roll his eyes, and tell me he never wanted to come over for dinner again. Instead, he had a big grin on his face.

"Can you believe it?" he asked.

"What?"

"It's *still* raining outside." He twisted around in his chair and pointed out the window, at the wet trees and drenched plants and overflowing swimming pool. "Man, that's gotta be some kind of record."

I didn't disagree. It had been raining non-stop since I woke up. "When it stops, it's gonna be so nice outside."

"Do you think it'll rain all night?"

"I hope not." I really didn't. The rain was thwarting my plan.

My mom entered the kitchen a few minutes later, her eyes red with tears. I never thought I'd see my best friend and my mom crying in the same day, but there it was. And nobody had even died.

"Where's your father?" she asked.

"He went to his office," I said. "Is Eric okay?"

"He's fine," she said, calmly running her hands through her poofy blonde hair, but when my brother re-appeared and started filling a large glass with tap water, she turned around and shouted, "What did I just tell you about staying in your room!"

"What? I'm thirsty," he said, all innocent. Even across the room I could see the giant pimples bursting out of his forehead. My brother had shot up about a foot during seventh grade and was starting to resemble a prickly beanstalk.

“Go back to your room. I’ll bring you water.”

“No, I got it,” he said, and then he, accidentally or on purpose I couldn’t tell, dropped his glass on the tiled floor. It shattered, making a sound so freakishly loud Riley’s parents from down the street probably could’ve heard it.

My mom jumped to her feet. “What... the hell... are you *doing!*”

“Sorry,” he said. “It was an accident.” I detected sarcasm in his voice, guaranteeing it had been on purpose.

I wasn’t sure if Eric needed a brother a little closer to his age, but he needed something; in the last six months he kept getting into trouble. I heard my dad once blame it on puberty, and there was some truth to it. Eric’s attitude turned sour around the time his voice dropped, but it was getting worse. He had a C average in everything except PE and Study Hall. He was caught shoplifting from Circuit City. My mom found a stash of porn magazines in his room, and then he swore at her face when she tossed them in the fireplace. Last Christmas, when we all went to the movies to see that dumb *Night of the Museum* movie, he went to the bathroom halfway through and pulled the fire alarm.

As I watched my mom clean the broken glass off the floor, Eric standing to the side completely useless, I tried to think what I could do to help him. We never had a lot in common, with six and a half years between us, with interests that never intersected. The only time we spent together was when our parents forced us to, and even then we said about two words to each other. And now that he was playing the part of disgruntled youth, he didn’t even feel like a family member anymore; he was just some fourteen-year-old stranger living in my house and eating Mom’s food.

“What’s going on in here?” my dad said from the hallway. “I’m on a goddamned call and I hear people yelling and things crashing—”

My mom dumped the broken glass into the trash and said, “Eric dropped his cup. It was an accident, honey.”

“*Was* it?” My dad stomped toward the kitchen and grabbed my brother by his t-shirt. I wasn’t a parental expert by any means, but I didn’t think all this physical harassment would help Eric’s problems. “Answer me, damn it!”

“Stop,” my mom said, slowly approaching the two.

“What if it wasn’t?” Eric stared up at my dad like he yearned for a new challenge. “What are you going to do about it?”

“That’s it!” my dad shouted. “You’re grounded for a week!” He kept a tight grip on my brother’s shirt, then pulled him out of sight.

My mom chased after them. “Honey! Honey, don’t hurt him!”

I brought my palms to my cheeks, then started rubbing the edges of my eyes with my index fingers. As the shouting grew fainter in the distance, my family descending the stairs toward Eric’s bedroom, I said, quietly, “Sorry, Riley. I’m so sorry.”

“It stopped,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes. “What?”

“The rain.” He nodded toward the window.

I turned my chair around and looked out. The giant clouds still towered over the city like evil spaceships but the rain had finally ceased. The whole time I was paying attention to my family drama, Riley had focused on the beauty, the serenity, of a storm finally calming. It couldn’t have happened at a more opportune time.

“Perfect,” I said. I grabbed my backpack and stood up. “Follow me.”

#

When I turned to page 3, I noticed Riley’s foot rubbing against mine. I didn’t rub it back, but I also didn’t kick it away. I liked it there. He was so close I could smell his breath of chocolate chip cookies, weird given that no dessert had been served.

He brought his head down to the book and pointed at the illustration. “Hey, that kind of looks like you.”

“What?” I bumped my shoulder against his. “Does not!” I guided his finger down to the text below. “Come on, follow along.”

“Okay,” he said.

I read three long sentences, then I pointed to the next shorter one. “All right, your turn.”

Riley cleared his throat, and bit down on his tongue. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Just try. You did good on the last one.”

He nodded, and cleared his throat. “He...” Riley read. “He is...” He stopped.

“Sound it out, Riley. Come on.”

The tree house was real cozy that late summer evening. Built halfway up the large, study avocado tree that dangled above the green belt, it was the perfect oasis for Riley and me to be alone together, and not have to answer to anyone. Eric tormented us once in awhile, and my parents ducked their heads in occasionally, but they mostly left us alone. And tonight, Riley was finally going to get some reading done.

“Place...” he said.

“Try again.”

“Plee... please...”

“*Pleased*,” I said. “Good! Now start from the beginning.”

He pushed his palms down, then searched for the first word of the sentence. “He is pleased,” Riley read, “to meet you.”

I clapped my hands together. “Perfect! See, you can do this.”

“Yeah, but it will take us a whole year to get through the book.”

“Then it will take a year. Go on.” I nudged his shoulder with mine again, then placed my hand on top of his. I thought it would feel weird. Instead, it felt right.

Riley smiled at me, then turned his attention back to the book. He struggled with the next two sentences, but I didn’t care. The longer the book, the more time we got to spend together, just the two of us, up high in the tree house. At 155 pages, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was much too slim.

And as Riley turned to page 4, I was already thinking of when we could start the *Harry Potter* series. Seven books. A few thousand pages.

That would keep us busy for awhile.

The First Day of **Third Grade**

August 25, 2008

Riley was already halfway through *Chamber of Secrets*. He was reading the chapter where Harry and the gang pull mandrakes out of the soil, those hideous little creatures whose shrill screams were fatal to all who heard them. My screams probably weren't as deadly, but they were still potent; as five minutes became twenty, I became certain that all the people surrounding me in that tight, claustrophobic space would have preferred the mandrakes.

I clutched the armrest so hard I waited for it to break off, flip into the air, and strike the little girl's cheek two rows up. I had been nervous the minute we boarded, but the half-hour we'd spent stranded on the tarmac wasn't helping matters.

"Cedar, breathe," Riley said, as he shoved his book into the front of his backpack. He had only been able to read about two pages since we sat down.

"I don't..." I blinked about a hundred times. Was I hyperventilating? Dying? "I don't think I can..."

"Yes you can. Just breathe! In and out, in and out." He was doing his best to calm me down, but he also wasn't stupid; he made sure I sat in the window seat so I wouldn't draw extra attention to myself.

"I'm trying. I just... why is it taking so long?"

"Is Cedar being a wimp again?" Riley's sister asked, her giant headphones blasting music in her ears. Two years younger than Riley, Alondra acted like she was already a teenager.

I wanted to slap her on the back of the head, but I didn't want any scorn from Riley's parents. They were sitting on Alondra's left side. "I'm not being a wimp," I said, even though her music had to be too loud for her to hear me.

But then: "You totally are."

I glared at her. Alondra had been such a sweet girl the first few times I went over to Riley's house, but lately she had turned into the devil reincarnated.

"Don't listen to her," Riley said, as he handed me a tissue. "You're sweating, by the way."

"Really? Thanks for noticing." I patted the tissue against my forehead. The sweat seeped into the tissue so fast I had to ask one of the flight attendants for a paper towel.

"Eww, gross!" Alondra shouted, for most of the passengers to hear. She pointed at my face. "You look like you just got out of a *pool*!"

I tried my best to ignore her. "When are we taking off? Are we just gonna sit here all day?"

"Should be soon," Riley said. "It will just—"

"I mean, we aren't even supposed to be here right now! We should be on the ground, in a classroom, meeting our new *teacher*."

"What are you talking about? We already met our teacher."

I pursed my lips, not about to dispute him. We had met our third grade teacher Mrs. Lankershim two weeks ago, when Riley's mother asked her permission for us to miss the first day of class. The teacher chastised Mrs. Alvarez—a teacher herself—for making vacation plans so late in the summer, but she agreed, and even gave us a reading worksheet that was to be due the second day.

“She seems nice, right?”

“I don’t know,” Riley said. “She was kind of mean to my mom.”

“She wasn’t that mean.”

“Remember when she yelled? Plus she’s old.”

“She’s not *that* old. She’s younger than Mrs. Ullman. At least Mrs. Lankershim still has all of her teeth.” I smiled, for the first time since we boarded the plane.

“I’m just happy we’re in the same class again. Aren’t you?”

I stayed quiet, and let his words sink in. My nerves had vanished. A great joy washed over me. “Of course I am,” I said.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a booming voice announced over the intercom, “this is your captain speaking. We apologize for the delay. We have just been cleared for takeoff. Please enjoy your—”

“Oh *crap!*” I shouted, remembering where I was, remembering how high in the air I was going to be in a matter of seconds.

Riley grabbed hold of my arm. “Shh. Cedar, it’s going to be okay.”

“How do you know? You can’t know for sure!”

“Wimp!” Alonda said again. But then she pressed her palms against her headphones, closed her eyes, and sang, “Ella, ella, eh, eh, eh...”

Riley turned to her, a scowl on his face, like he was finally going to stand up for me—but instead, he stopped. “Wait a second. That’s a great idea!”

“What is?”

He bent over and unzipped his backpack. He had enough Disney memorabilia stuffed inside it to wallpaper his entire bedroom. He rummaged through park maps, stickers, candy, then pulled out his ear-buds and iPod Nano.

“Put these on,” he said, dropping the blue ear-buds on my lap.

The engines roared. The plane started moving.

“Oh *God*,” I said. I gripped the sides of my seat and braced for an excruciating death.

“Put them on,” Riley said, as he flipped through his playlist. “I’ll find a good song for you.”

“Okay.” I shoved the ear-buds in real deep, like they were the thinnest of cotton swabs. A slow, hypnotic song I’d never heard before began to play.

He set the iPod on my leg, and whispered, before any singing started, “Close your eyes, Cedar.”

I did as he said. I breathed deeply in and out, pressed my lips together, rubbed my sweaty palms together; anything to alleviate the panic. I ignored the outside world and let the dream-like song invade my senses.

I hated airplanes, hated flying. Still do. Ever since I was little I despised anything to do with traveling, period. Before my trip to Disneyworld with Riley’s family I had been on a plane once, to visit my aunt and uncle in L.A. That flight lasted barely an hour, and I still alternated between screaming and sobbing the entire way. The terrifying idea of a six-hour flight across the country—on two separate planes, no less—almost kept me from committing to Disneyworld, but Riley begged me to go, and I couldn’t say no. That horrible day getting to Florida was the closest I’d ever come to actual Hell, but the next

six days were so magical, so packed with fun and excitement from morning to night, that the scary trip had been worth it. I had started to enjoy myself so much I'd almost forgotten we had to fly *back*.

But as the song continued, I forgot where I was, or that I was afraid. I didn't know what the artist was singing about—something about balls and chains—but it was something peaceful.

“Riley,” I whispered. “It’s working. It’s actually—”

The one-minute mark hit, and my eyes blasted open again. I was sedated no more.

“*Crash?*” I said. “Crash... into *me?*” I dropped the ear buds and shouted, “Oh my God, we’re going to crash, aren’t we!”

“No, we won’t,” he said, glancing at the passengers behind us. He smiled at them, like there was nothing to worry about. “Cedar, calm down.”

“We are!” I shouted, as the plane touched off the ground and started climbing into the air. “We’re going to—”

Riley slammed his hand over my mouth and pulled me close. Only his hand separated my lips from his. A small voice in my head said to yank myself away, that others around us might have thought our heads this close together looked a little odd, but I didn’t move. I let him guide me, let him hold me.

“You’re going to get us thrown off the plane,” he said, his eyes pierced into mine. “You need to calm down. I’m right here, okay? I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He waited about ten more seconds, then he slowly brought his hand down from my mouth, hovering it below my chin for a few seconds to make sure I wouldn’t scream. But I had no desire to scream any longer. I was at a loss for words.

He grabbed the ear-buds and set them in my hands. “Put these back on. I’ll find something better.” He scrolled through his playlist again and picked a new song.

“Okay,” I said. I leaned my head back and put the ear-buds back in. “Two Worlds” from *Tarzan* started to play. A much better choice.

As I started to relax, I realized I had nothing to be afraid of. Riley was right. He was never going to let anything happen to me.

#

I stepped onto the runway, exhausted and lethargic. Riley asked if I needed help walking, but I wasn’t going to have him baby me again. With every step I took, I woke up more and more. I was happy to be home.

It wasn’t until we reached the interior of the airport that I realized we were in Phoenix, and still had *another* plane ride to look forward to.

“You guys want something to eat?” Riley’s father asked, in front of the departures screen. “We have a while before the next flight, right?”

“About an hour,” Riley’s mother said, digging through her purse. “Maybe longer. Hold on, let me check.”

Riley was holding Alondra’s hand, as she looked around the wing of the airport, her face revealing the same amount of wonder she had radiated when she first stepped into Animal Kingdom.

I expected her to ask about the hallway’s architecture, the color of the carpet, the design of the ceiling. Instead she said, “I’m starving.”

“Yeah, I’m hungry too,” Riley said. He patted me on the back with pride, like I’d just completed a triathlon. “You excited, Cedar? We’re almost home!”

I dipped my head toward the carpet. “I’ll be excited when I’m off the plane. For *good*.”

Mr. Alvarez waved us forward, and shouted, “Hurry up, guys! I see a Subway!”

“Subway? *Again*?” Riley moved past me, shaking his head in protest, and Alondra followed close behind him.

Riley and Alondra walked on to the moving walkway and happily let the machine below them do all the work. They had been yelled at a few hours ago for doing the same thing in Florida, so I stayed on the carpet and followed behind Riley’s parents.

“Come on, Dad, it’s fun!” Riley shouted.

“It’s lazy, is what it is,” he said, not amused in the slightest. “You’ve been sitting on your butt all day. You’re setting a bad example for your sister.”

Riley seemed to get along fine with his parents, but he was always challenging them on anything to do with food and fitness. Riley’s father Miguel was a fitness instructor who had his own center, Alvarez Athletics, in Roseville. In his early thirties, he was ten years younger than my dad, and about half the weight. He wasn’t stacked with muscles by any means, but he took his appearance seriously; never did I see a hair out of place, his fingernails not perfectly trimmed.

Riley’s mother Eva took everything she learned from her husband and applied it in the classroom, as an instructor in health and sports medicine at Sacramento State. While I respected my elementary school teachers, I was in awe of Mrs. Alvarez, her lecturing not in tiny rooms big enough for twenty but giant lecture halls that could fit two

hundred students. Riley showed me where she taught once, and the room was seriously as big as the Phoenix airport. She was thin, like Mr. Alvarez, but not in an annoying way, not like some other kids' mothers who defined themselves by their leanness. And she also wasn't as much of a fitness dictator like Mr. Alvarez; she let Riley eat Lunchables sometimes, and she once even took us to Baskin Robbins.

So of course he turned to *her* when he asked, in the sweetest voice possible, "Can I get a cookie with my sandwich, Mom?"

Mrs. Alvarez looked on the verge of saying yes, and she might have, if her husband wasn't staring down the back of her head. "Not today, Riley," she said.

"Not *ever*," Mr. Alvarez insisted.

We all headed toward the food court up ahead, which had at least a dozen options, including pizza, burritos, a gelato station. But we passed by all those and headed toward the sad, empty Subway at the back, where a lone employee who looked no older than twelve took Mr. Alvarez's order.

"I want a foot-long roast beef, but only on six inches of bread," he said, then he pointed at Riley. "My son will have the six-inch turkey on whole wheat. No mayo, no mustard. What do you want, Cedar?"

I almost ordered the foot-long chicken bacon ranch, with everything on it.

Instead I said, like the good friend I was, "I'll have what Riley's having."

#

It took Riley ten seconds to polish off half of his pathetic sandwich, while Mr. Alvarez had only taken one bite of his meat-piled masterpiece. That was another annoying thing he did: tell Riley to slow down in his eating. He said it at every meal.

“Riley, come *on*,” he said. “You need to give your body time to digest.”

“I know, Dad,” Riley said, the typical annoyed response.

As I ate my dry, tasteless sandwich, Mr. Alvarez veered his attention toward something behind me. I didn’t turn around to see what he kept staring at, until he whispered a few angry words into Mrs. Alvarez’s ear. Two men were seated next to each other at a small table nearby, one eating a salad and the other eating a wrap.

“*Disgusting*,” he said.

“Honey, please. Let it go.”

He closed his eyes and grimaced. “I’m here with my kids, for Christ’s sake.”

“*Stop*. Eat your food.”

The tension was rising. And I didn’t like being in the crossfire, my head right there between Mr. Alvarez and the two strangers behind me. I needed to say something.

I looked at my watch. 3:07. “Hey, look! Our first day of school got out seven minutes ago.” I smiled. Waited for a response. When Riley’s parents ignored me, I added, “I wonder what happened in our class today.”

Mrs. Alvarez shrugged and said, “I’m sure you didn’t miss much, Cedar. Probably just played games or something.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. First days were usually easy, but they didn’t consist of Tic-Tac-Toe for six hours.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I said, even though I disagreed. I waited for a response from Mr. Alvarez, but he was still fuming over the two guys behind me, for what reason, I had no idea.

Mr. Alvarez played with his food for a moment, then pinched his upper lip. When he leaned back in his chair, I thought he might return to the conversation.

But then he slammed his fist down, so hard Riley dropped his Game Boy.

“Hey!” he shouted at the two men, loud enough to make me slink down in my seat. “Do you *mind*?”

I glanced behind me, in time to see the men break their hands away. The one on the right, wearing a green tank top, said, “Excuse me?”

“I am here with my family!” Mr. Alvarez shouted, a rage in his voice I’d only heard when he once caught Riley eating a Snickers bar. “You are making all of us extremely uncomfortable!”

The one on the left, with spiked hair and thin eyebrows, said, in a testy voice, “I’m sorry, sir. What about us makes you uncomfortable?”

Mr. Alvarez leaped to his feet. I stayed put, scared for my safety. Their safety. All of our safety. “Come on,” he said. “Don’t make this any worse than it already is.”

Riley stared at his father, as did Alondra. I couldn’t help thinking it: had Mr. Alvarez acted this way in public before?

“Last time I checked, this was a free country,” the one on the right said, adding, a second later, “*sir*.” He didn’t move away from his friend; he scooted a few inches closer and clasped the other guy’s hand.

“Are you two stupid or something?”

“Miguel!” Mrs. Alvarez shouted. “Let’s just go—”

“No. Not before these two faggots learn some goddamn respect.”

“*What* did you call us?” The one on the left jumped to his feet. He was about six inches smaller than Mr. Alvarez, but had lots of muscle in his upper arms. It would have been an unpredictable fight, for sure.

Mr. Alvarez said, “You heard me,” then marched two steps closer. He stopped in front of their table. “Now I want the two of you to apologize, and then I want you to leave. *Comprende?*”

The other one stood up, and pushed his plate across the table. “No, we don’t *comprende*. What are we supposed to be sorry for?”

“For bringing your perversions outside of closed doors and parading them around my family!”

The one with the tank top took the other one’s hand, again. “But mister, that’s the thing. We *are* a family.”

They smiled, and kissed each other—on the lips.

I’d never seen two men kiss before. I blocked the Alvarez family out for a moment, as everything slowed down in my mind. I watched the two men swap saliva with each other, and it didn’t repulse me, like Mr. Alvarez seemed to think it would.

But the positive feeling that washed over me only lasted a second. Mr. Alvarez stomped forward and pulled the men away from each other. He grabbed them by their wrists, and started pushing them out of the food court, like a ticked-off policeman.

“Miguel, let go of them!” Mrs. Alvarez screamed.

“I asked you nicely,” he said, tightening his grip on their wrists, one seemingly more effective than handcuffs. He pushed them all the way to the ORDER HERE sign at the front of the Subway. “I asked you to leave like a gentleman,” Mr. Alvarez said, then added, “But you had to be *smart* with me, didn’t you—”

The one in the tank top wiggled his hands out of Mr. Alvarez’s grasp, turned around, and swung a punch. Mr. Alvarez ducked just in time and popped the guy in the nose.

“Oww!” the guy shouted, colliding against a sign behind him that promoted a free cookie with the purchase of two foot-long.

“Shit,” Mr. Alvarez said. “Sorry. I was just trying to defend myself. You made me do that!”

“Honey, what is the matter with you?” Mrs. Alvarez stepped around her husband and approached the injured man. He stood up, his palm shoved against his nose. A small trickle of blood leaked out of the right nostril. “Sir, are you all right? Do you need a Kleenex? I’ll get you a Kleenex.”

Mrs. Alvarez turned around to look for a wiping instrument, but the man just shook his head and stormed away. He didn’t say a word, didn’t make a big speech or scream nasty words at Mr. Alvarez. The other guy followed, and before Mrs. Alvarez was able to snatch a Kleenex from her purse, the men were gone.

Silence ensued. Everybody just stared at each other. Then Riley, who up until that point has kept his gaze away from the commotion, looked at me and said, “You want the rest of my sandwich? I’m not really hungry.”

#

We boarded the plane. Found our seats. Buckled the belts. Took out the drink menu. Decided on Sprite. I didn't cry. I didn't complain. And when the plane took off, I didn't scream.

I was too numb to scream. Too numb to feel anything. I was only eight years old, but I was old enough to know that Mr. Alvarez had acted out of line, that he had assaulted two people who weren't bothering us at all and were merely minding their own business. I didn't get why they held hands, why they kissed. Could two men love each other, the same way a man and a woman did? It was news to me at the time, this revelation, this feeling. But what was so bad about it to make Mr. Alvarez so upset?

I had a hundred questions, with no one to answer them. The whole Alvarez clan started acting like the incident never happened. Riley and I sat by ourselves on this second flight, with his parents and sister across the aisle three rows back. I glanced back every couple of minutes to see Mr. Alvarez laughing with his little girl, as they played a computer card game on his laptop. Even Mrs. Alvarez was leaning over and pointing with big, exaggerated smiles at the computer screen. They were seemingly unaffected by his violent strike against an innocent man barely half an hour ago.

I turned to Riley. His face was buried in *Chamber of Secrets*. Now he was reading the scene where Harry helps Gilderoy Lockhart sign the author's headshots. First I wondered if Gilderoy would have punched that man too, and second, I wondered what Riley felt about his father's actions. Was he as disgusted as I was?

"How's that going?" I asked.

“It’s good,” he said, not taking his eyes off the text.

“Did you get to the part with the pixies yet?”

“Yeah, that was so funny.” He quieted down again, then glanced at my face.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“You’re so... you know... *calm*.”

I breathed out, slowly, and waited for the panic to set in. Waited some more. Still nothing. “I guess I am,” I said. “Maybe I’m not scared of planes after all.”

“That’s good,” he said. “I mean... I’m glad. Did you bring a book?”

“Yeah.” I made sure to pack it before I left but I had yet to crack a single page. I pulled the book out of my backpack and hoisted it up high, like I wanted to show it to everyone on the plane.

“What’s that?” He grabbed it from me and examined the cover. “*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. Oh, I’ve seen this.” He started flipping through the pages, then stopped at the middle of the book and pointed to the center.

“What?” I asked, looking over his shoulder.

“Umm... you’re the one who helped me to read, and *I’m* the one who reads the book with no pictures?”

“Hey,” I said, and pointed to the page he was on. “*Harry Potter* has pictures.”

He lifted his eyebrows and leaned over in my seat, a playful glare on his face.

“That’s not the same as having pictures on *every page*, Cedar.”

He tossed my book toward my lap, but it missed and hit the floor. I pointed down.

“You gonna pick that up?”

“Nope,” he said, returning to *Chamber of Secrets*. “I’m busy.”

“Pick the book up *now*.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” His smile seeped through. He was staring at the text but obviously not reading it.

“All right, fine.” I reached down and grabbed *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. He must have seen it coming; he leaned over me and latched onto it at the same time.

“Hey!” I said. “I told you, I got it!”

“No. I want it!”

“But you already have a book!”

“*So*. I can have two books! Or three or four or five!”

Anyone a row over might have assumed our argument was for real, but it was anything but. We were both on the verge of laughter, as I pulled hard against the book, failing to snatch it from Riley’s death grip.

Then he said, almost in a whisper, “Fine.” And he let go.

Not that I expected him to. I tumbled back, and the book launched out of my hands and smacked the face of an old lady on the other side of the aisle.

“Oh!” I said, my eyes widening. “Oh, I’m so sorry!”

The lady rubbed her shoulder with her left hand, as she picked up the book with her right. “Get a hold of yourself, you *brats*!” She flung the book down at my feet.

I meant to apologize again, but instead I burst out laughing. I turned my head to Riley, and he was smiling back at me, softly chuckling.

I leaned down, and as I brought the book back to my lap, I heard overhead, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We’re about to make our descent toward Sacramento. At this point I’m going to be turning the seatbelt sign back on.”

I looked at the sign and pointed as it lit up.

“Wow,” Riley said. “It’s like magic.”

“I know, right? It’s like I was able to turn it on with my—”

I didn’t finish my sentence. I didn’t know if I’d ever finish a sentence. Riley grabbed my arm when the plane, out of nowhere, started dropping, faster and faster, with no reason or warning. All I heard around me was loud screaming.

“Oh my God oh my God!” a passenger shouted.

“We’re going to *die!*” another one screamed.

The plane started bouncing up and down, my body feeling like a puppet being dangled every which way. When a loud, scary buzzing sound emanated from the cockpit, Riley wrapped his arms around me. I put my right arm around his back and pulled his head toward my chest.

“Cedar, what’s going on!”

“I don’t know!” It was all I could say.

The plane dropped again, so long and fast my whole body tensed up, but my panic from before, oddly enough, didn’t return.

I saw a passenger slam his head against his armrest, and a woman fall into the aisle.

“I’m scared,” Riley said.

“Don’t be scared. We’re going to be fine.”

“Riley!” a high-pitched voice shouted from behind me. It was Mrs. Alvarez. “I love you! Just hang on, honey!”

Riley glanced back at his family, then looked into my eyes. Despite the screaming all around us, everything went quiet. “Cedar... are we going to die...”

I didn't say a word; I just pulled him toward me. We stared at each other, neither of us breaking his concentration, as the plane kept plummeting down, down, down. The screams intensified. The panic grew. Two overhead bins clicked open, and a suitcase struck the old lady's head.

“Oh my God,” I whispered, and glanced at the passengers around me. Some were praying. Most were crying. Two women behind me held each other tight.

The oxygen masks dropped down. Was I supposed to help him put his mask on before I put on mine? Was I supposed to do it first? I didn't know. As the seconds passed, we didn't put on anything. We just stared at each other, like we knew this was it, that this was the end.

So I pulled him close and kissed him.

It wasn't long, it wasn't passionate; it wasn't even romantic. It was a kiss for my best friend, the person I couldn't imagine living without. Riley didn't kiss me back. But he didn't pull away either. One of his tears slid down to my chin.

I pulled my lips away and fastened the mask over his mouth. I didn't care about my own.

“It's going to be okay,” I said. “You hear me? I promise.” I pulled his head close to my chest again, as I grabbed for my mask. I brought it toward my mouth, my lips. The ticklish instrument brushed against my skin. I closed my eyes tight.

And then—the screams stopped. The loud buzzing noise disappeared.

All I heard after that was weeping.

The plane leveled out. It stopped dropping, stopped heading toward a fiery explosion. It happened so fast. One second I thought I was about to die, and the next, the intercom turned on.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is... uhh, your captain,” the shaky voice said from above. “The plane has been stabilized. Please remain in your seats.”

I sat up straight, as Riley took off the mask. He stared at me, more in confusion than anything else. I looked around. The old lady across from me was rubbing her head and talking to the person next to her, and the injured man down the aisle was getting assistance from a flight attendant.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned over the empty seat, to see Alondra and Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez huddled together. They were fine.

“Thank God,” I said.

“What?” Riley’s face was wet with tears. “Are they okay?”

“Yes. I think everybody is.”

Riley pressed his palms against his forehead. “You know something, Cedar?” he asked, his voice ten times shakier than the captain’s.

“What?”

“I’m never going on another plane again.”

I smiled. I actually smiled. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

He cracked open his window, and I looked over his shoulder. The plane was about to touch down on the runway. We were back in Sacramento—safe and sound.

Riley leaned in close, his mouth hovering just above my right ear. I thought he was going to hug me, or grab my arm again, I didn't know what.

Instead, he said, "You *kissed* me."

The First Day of **Fourth Grade**

August 24, 2009

“Damn it. I did.”

“You did what?”

“I left the camera inside, I *knew* it,” my mom said. She ran back toward the house.

“I’ll be right back. I want to get a picture of you two. You look so stinkin’ cute!”

“I’m not sure we have time—” Riley started, but it was no use. When my mom set her mind on something, there was no stopping her.

I gripped my backpack straps and said, “We’ve got a few minutes, right? The bus is usually late, anyway.”

“Not on the first day. On the first day it’s early. Remember last year?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Uhh... we didn’t take a bus the first day last year.”

“We didn’t?”

I didn’t say a word. I just stared at him. Waited for it to register.

Riley tilted his head back. “*Oh*. Right.”

When he closed his eyes, I knew his mind was going back to that scary day on the plane, when for a brief moment we both thought death had us in its grip. I wondered if when he flashed back on that day he remembered the part I had the most trouble forgetting, the part that had nothing to do with impending doom.

“Yeah, I’m fine with a bus for today,” Riley said.

“I’m fine with a bus *forever*,” I added, and we both laughed.

My mom reappeared at the front entrance, and she waved us toward her. She apparently didn't want to make the twenty-foot trek to the sidewalk. "Sorry I took forever. Your dad had the camera in his *golf* bag, can you believe that?"

I put on my best smiling face, as we both approached her. "Mom, do we really have to do this? I mean, we *are* in fourth grade."

"So?"

"So? We're not kids anymore."

"Well, you're still *my* kid. Enough excuses. Show me a smile!"

I sighed, and smiled as big as I possibly could. I tried not to squint since the sun was shining in my eyes.

"Good," she said. "Now Cedar, put your arm around Riley. Get closer together."

"*What?*" we said, at the same time.

"Just do it."

I pursed my lips, as I scooted closer to Riley and wrapped my arm around his back. He had on a white polo shirt, with black shorts and sandals. His hair was longer than ever, so thick in the back that little curls formed above his shoulders. He was growing fast—over the summer he'd gained an inch on me—and he was thinner too, especially in the face.

"Perfect," she said.

"Are we done?" I asked.

"You're done." She pointed at me, as she shoved the camera into her jeans pocket. "Cedar, you look so dang cute with your new glasses."

“Uhh... thanks, Mom.” I immediately took them off, and pretended to wipe the lenses with my t-shirt, even though there wasn’t a spot on them.

“Come on, we need to go,” Riley said, heading toward the street.

My mom waved. “Bye you two! Have a good first day!”

I walked at a normal pace, while Riley was moving a little faster, doing a weird blend of skipping and leaping. I was halfway to the bus stop when I tripped on the curb.

“What are you doing?” He walked back toward me and helped me to my feet. The glasses were still in my hand, and not on my face. “Dude, you’re gonna kill yourself. You need to wear your glasses.”

“I don’t want to. I look *dumb*.” And I did. My mom had picked for me the biggest, roundest pair in the store.

“You look cool. Come on.” He put the glasses back on my face.

“But...”

“But what?”

I pressed my finger against the flimsy bridge. “He’s gonna make fun of me.”

“Nobody’ll make fun of you.” He stopped, and pointed across the way. “Look, there’s the bus!”

We still had a hundred yards to go, so Riley took off running, and I did my best to keep up. The bus appeared at the end of the road, heading right toward us. So little had changed about it. It was still loud, still beat-up, still with the same kooky driver.

And my mortal enemy was still alive and well.

“*There* they are! I was waiting for you dweebs to get here!” Standing by himself at the sidewalk corner, Glen gave us a friendly wave, even though he’d never said a nice

word to us in his life. He had on a black shirt, black pants, black flip-flops, black hat. There was a red stripe on the top of his t-shirt, the only other color present.

“Shut up, Glen,” Riley said. “At least we weren’t standing here waiting for the bus for an hour like some old lady.”

My eyebrows shot up. I forgot how much Riley’s confidence had grown in the past year.

Glen didn’t have a comeback. Instead, he looked straight at me, smiling and showing off his crooked baby teeth. “Wow, is that Cedar Weiner? Is that *four eyes*?”

“Leave him alone,” Riley said. “The bus is pulling up, come on—”

Glen pushed past Riley and shoved his chest against mine. If Glen hadn’t been so damn tall he wouldn’t have been so damn terrifying. He was like the giant from *Jack and the Beanstalk*, except with a gangster hat and pits that smelled like sulfur.

“Nice glasses. You changing your name to Cedar Geek-ton?”

“Shut up.” I tried to step past him. He pushed me back.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“The bus. Duh.”

“But are you sure you can even see it? If you’re not careful you might get on some kid’s *tricycle* instead.”

“Leave him alone!” Riley shouted, pushing Glen in the back.

He turned around. “Aww, are you jealous you couldn’t get glasses too?”

Riley could barely look at Glen three years ago, but now he didn’t back down, didn’t show one ounce of fear as he stared into Glen’s beady eyes. “At least Cedar’s smart enough for glasses. You’re so stupid you wouldn’t even know how to wear them.”

Glen stood still for a moment, with a slight hint of a smile—then he slugged Riley in the chest. Riley keeled over and started coughing, and Glen said, after a few seconds of snickering, “Next time, I’ll make you bleed.”

The bus pulled up to the stop. The door opened, and Glen charged inside, without uttering another word.

“Oh my God! Riley!” I rushed forward and put my arms around my friend. “Are you okay?”

He stood up straight, took a deep breath, then quickly nodded. Riley might have cried if he was back in first grade, but he was a new man now. “I’m fine,” he said, and turned toward the bus. “Can you believe we have the same *class* with that creep? How unfair is that?”

I saw Glen in the window. He was staring right at us. “Tell me about it,” I said.

#

Mrs. Frobe towered over us like a European cathedral. She was six feet tall, and thin like the world’s longest spaghetti noodle. She had unkempt gray hair that dipped all the way to her waist, but in her sweet oval-shaped face, she looked as young as forty.

“You ready to come in now?” she asked. “I mean, really ready?”

“Yes, uh-huh.” Glen’s voice sounded weak and defeated, in the empty hallway behind the classroom.

“All right, find your seat.”

Glen kept his head down as he re-entered the room, but he noticeably rolled his eyes as soon as he passed her. He sat down at the front, across from me and Riley.

“How are we all doing with our social studies packets?” she asked.

Two girls in the back said, “Fine,” but most of the students stayed focused on getting their work done. If everyone finished by 2:15, Mrs. Frobe said the class was to get a special prize.

“Mrs. Frobe? I’m confused on page four,” Josh Sweet said, two rows up. I shook my head in amazement. I’d had Josh in every class since kindergarten.

“Sure, let’s take a look.” She bent over his desk in such a way that all I saw was her bony legs. “Okay, so you’re supposed to color in each country that matches up with the list. Blue for Germany. Orange for Canada.”

I looked down at our packets. Riley and I were on the same page: the *last* page, thank God. “Wait, what are you doing?” I grabbed the orange crayon and colored in Canada. “You made Mexico orange.”

“What? No, I didn’t.”

“It’s right there.” I pointed at the bottom of the page. If Riley hadn’t screwed up, we would have been done with the packet. “You should know where Mexico is. Isn’t that where you were born?”

Riley’s purple crayon he was using to color in Russia slipped out of his fingers and fell to the carpet. “What did you say?”

“Shh.” Mrs. Frobe turned to us and touched her index finger to her pale lips.

“Remember, quiet voices.”

“Sorry,” Riley whispered, but as soon as she turned back around, he loudly said, “I’m not from Mexico!”

I tried to push him away, but he wouldn’t budge. “What are you doing? I’m trying to color France.”

“My dad’s from Spain, my mom’s from Puerto Rico,” Riley said. “I’ve told you that before.”

“Jeez, sorry. I forgot.”

I should have kept my mouth shut. I’d known Riley for three years and the whole time I’d made an assumption.

“Well, now you know,” Riley said. He picked the crayon off the floor and continued coloring Russia. “Do you know where *you’re* from?”

I grabbed the green crayon and started filling in the last country, the easiest one.

“The United States, duh.”

“No, I mean, like, your grandparents—”

“Cedar! Riley!” Mrs. Frobe faced us again, her eyes big and crazed. The top of her head nearly touched the ceiling. “That’s your second warning! Do I need to split the two of you up?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Riley beat me to it, like he always did. “No, no. We’re sorry. It won’t happen again.” He put his hands in his lap and smiled; by fourth grade Riley had learned how to put on a performance for his teachers, especially when he was in trouble.

“It better not,” she said, and she stomped toward the front of the classroom. “All right, it’s... let’s see... 2:13. Who’s finished?”

I had a few more seconds of coloring left, but I stuck my hand in the air, anyway. I thought Riley and I would have been the only ones done, but almost every hand in the classroom shot up, even Glen's, despite his twenty-minute time-out for pushing his partner Tommy to the ground.

Lena and Megan to the left of me were the only ones who shook their heads. "Almost, Mrs. Frobe," Lena said, grabbing another crayon from her cup. Lena was another familiar face. She hadn't been in my third grade class, but she'd sat close to me in first and second. She became prettier each year, with her long blonde hair and big, sparkly teeth.

No wonder Riley had spent most of the day gawking at her.

"Okay, done!" Lena said, a minute later. "Can we get our special prize?"

Mrs. Frobe put her hands against her hips and glanced back at the clock. It was 2:15, on the dot.

She smiled. "Yes you may."

Everyone in the class started clapping, even Glen. He bit down on his bottom lip, in obvious excitement. I figured he thought she was going to give everyone hundred-dollar bills.

When Mrs. Frobe ducked her head under her desk, I said to Riley, "What do you think it's gonna be?"

"I don't know. Candy?"

"Maybe Oreos."

"Double Stuf?"

"Heck yeah!"

Mrs. Frobe returned to her feet, moved away from the desk, and bounced a red rubber ball against the ground. “You guys have been cooped up in here all day,” she said. “I know PE isn’t on the calendar until Friday, but who wants to go outside and play some *kickball?*”

At least half of the boys in the room jumped to their feet and cheered, while most of the girls remained seated and dipped their heads in disappointment. Except for Lena. She joined Riley at the classroom door barely five seconds later, as a line quickly formed behind them.

I didn’t get up, though. I slumped down in my seat.

In that moment, I was, reluctantly, one of the girls.

#

I was so bad at sports. Pathetic, really. I don’t know if it was eye coordination or massive disinterest or just plain stupidity, but my foot never connected with the damn ball. I played golf here and there with my dad, but sports were never my thing.

“Strike one!” Glen shouted, from first base. Of course it was Glen.

“That’s okay, Cedar, you got this!” Riley yelled from behind the backstop. He had just scored a home run for us. The two teams were tied.

“I got this,” I whispered. I kept my eye on the ball, tried to guess which way Glen would toss it. I guessed he’d throw it a little to the left, like the first time.

Of course, he rolled it right down the middle. I launched my foot at the center of the ball, but it only made contact with air. The ball bounced against home plate and stopped in the patch of mud before the fence.

Glen erupted in laughter. “Strike two! Just one more try, Cedar Weiner!”

Riley clapped and said, “That’s all right. This is the one, I can feel it!”

“Yeah, Cedar!” another student said, a new ginger-haired boy at school whose name I couldn’t place. “Knock his stupid head off!”

“Hey, be nice,” Mrs. Frobe said. She put on her over-sized sunglasses and shouted, “Okay, five more minutes! The next team who scores, wins!”

“Crap,” I said, as I returned to my position. I was to be the third out, if I didn’t get to first base. If that happened, we’d have to switch to the other team, and then Glen would likely score a home run and win the game and then gloat to us for the next year about how much greater he was than me and Riley. I couldn’t let that happen.

Glen grabbed the ball and bounced it against the dirt. He looked back at his teammates. Nodded with nauseating confidence.

Then he turned to me. “Ready, four eyes?”

I glanced at Mrs. Frobe. She hadn’t heard his little comment. I turned back to him, tried not to break concentration. “Bring it on, Glen *Dumber*.”

Had it really taken me three years to come up with that?

His jaw dropped, just enough for drool to trickle out and blow into the wind. “Oh, you are going down,” he said, and before I could mentally prepare myself for the best kick of my life, he rolled the ball toward me.

I took a step back, quietly sighed, then rushed forward. I kicked the ball in the dead center, and it went sailing over Glen's head. He jumped in the air and tried to grab it, but to no avail.

I didn't move right away. I was too stunned to move, to do anything.

"Go!" Riley shouted. "Cedar, run! *Run!*"

I sprinted so fast that for a moment I forgot to breathe. I glanced to my left to see Lena running after the ball. She almost had it in her grasp.

My foot touched first base, and I stopped. I didn't want to risk going farther.

But Riley insisted: "Keep going! Go to second, go to second!"

Lena was way out in left field. Far away, but she had the ball.

I kept running. Aaron, a boy who still hadn't hit any kind of growth spurt, blocked second base. I was going to have to run around him, or slam right into him.

"Out of the way!" I screamed.

"No!" He put his arms out. A courageous one, that little sucker.

Lena raced toward us, and tossed the ball to Aaron. The ball seemed to launch all the way up to the clouds before it came back down toward me and Aaron.

"Move it!" I said.

"No!"

"*Fine.*"

I jumped around him and tagged second base with my left foot, just as the ball struck Aaron's head. It bounced up, catching him off guard, but he caught it on his second try. He tried to tag me, but he was too late.

"Yes!" I heard Riley shout from far away. "Stay there!"

I bent my knees, kept one foot on the plate. I stared at third base. When Glen glared at me from afar, my hope for a victory momentarily shrunk, but it returned when Riley stepped toward home plate.

“Yeah, come on!” I shouted, loudly clapping. Another home run would seal it: we’d win the whole thing. And maybe Glen would lay off us, at least for a week or two.

Glen bounced the ball for what seemed like a full minute. Mrs. Frobe stared at her wristwatch. We were almost out of time.

“Come on, Riley,” I whispered. “You can do it.”

Glen leaned his head down, took a step forward, and not so much rolled the ball at Riley, but rushed it at him.

But Riley didn’t flinch. He rushed toward the ball even faster, and kicked it so high and long that even members on our opposing team started applauding.

“Wow!” a student screamed.

“Holy cow!” another one shouted.

I didn’t run right away; my eyes were glued to the kickball soaring over the baseball field. It finally landed against the far-off fence, as Lena, again, raced after it.

“What are you *doing*?” Riley said. He was already at first base. “Cedar, run!”

Even though there was time—lots of it—I took off sprinting. I made sure to touch third base, then home plate. I stopped before the backstop, let out a deep breath, and looked at Glen. He stood miserably on the pitcher’s mound, his head dipped in defeat.

Riley passed second base, and headed toward third. He had slowed down considerably, as soon as he saw me make it to home plate. Lena had grabbed the ball by then, but she was too far away. We had won.

There was just one thing left for Riley to do—show off.

When he touched third base, he slowed to a walking pace, and started doing a lame, lovable dance. He bounced his hands in the air, even though there was no music playing. He turned around and skipped backward toward home plate. He swung his arms up and down, then started shaking his butt for everyone, including Mrs. Frobe, to see.

When Riley finally jumped back around, mere feet away from home plate, I averted my gaze to first base, to an annoyed Megan stomping angrily on the dirt.

I grinned, but then I looked toward the pitcher's mound. My smile faded fast. "Umm... where's Glen?"

Josh approached me on the right. He'd struck out at the beginning of the game, and I hadn't seen him since. He jumped up and down, and pointed.

"Oh my God!" Josh shouted. "Riley! Look out!"

I turned back around. Glen was running toward Riley from behind, like a giant semi-truck looking to mow down a Smart Car. Riley tried to pick up speed, but Glen was too fast; he leaned down and pushed Riley in the back, like a bull. Like a *bully*.

Riley struck the dirt ground, hard. A loud cracking sound echoed across the entire stadium.

"OWWWWWW!" he screamed, and then he screamed it again, louder and louder, over and over.

"What the hell was that?" Mrs. Frobe asked. I'd never heard one of my teachers swear before.

I approached Riley. He was sprawled out on his side, tears streaming down his cheeks. He had his hands wrapped around his left leg, not a good sign.

Mrs. Frobe hadn't seen the accident, but she was smart enough to know who caused it. "*Glen!*" she shouted. She approached him and grabbed him by his XXL t-shirt.

"Glen, what did you do?"

"Nothing," he said. "He tripped, Mrs. Frobe—"

"Out of my sight!" she said, thankfully not buying his crap. "You just got yourself detention for a *month!*"

I could barely hear either of them over Riley's loud, pained screaming. I dropped to my knees, and scooted forward. I reached out to him.

"*Riley,*" I said. "Riley, it's okay."

He batted my hand away. Didn't look at me, didn't acknowledge me.

Mrs. Frobe kneeled beside him. When Aaron approached the scene, the kickball wedged in his hands, she said, "Run to the office. Tell them we need an ambulance."

He nodded, dropped the ball, and started sprinting toward the school.

"Let me see," she said, bringing her hands to his leg.

"Oh *God!*" Riley screamed. "It hurts, it hurts!"

She leaned in closer to inspect his wound. I kept thinking an ambulance seemed too much for a sprained ankle—but then I saw it: a piece of bone sticking out the back of his shin.

"Oh, whoa," I said, but I didn't turn away. I moved even closer to him, and placed my hand on his arm. "You're going to be okay, Riley. I promise you'll be okay."

He didn't respond. He just kept crying. He rested his head against my side, his tears staining the front of my shirt.

I held him there. For five minutes, ten minutes. However long it took for the paramedics to arrive.

#

My mom floored her suburban to Sutter Medical Center faster than if I had been injured.

“That kid needs to go,” she kept saying. “His parents are the same way. You know his mom is the only one on the block who refuses year after year to come to my ornament party?”

“Mom, who cares about your ornament party? Riley’s hurt bad!”

She pulled into the parking lot and found the closest spot. I was pretty sure it said handicapped only, but my mom didn’t seem to care.

“What are we doing here? This place looks gross,” Eric said from the back, his eyes fixated on his cell phone. My mom had told him three times that Riley had been injured, that we were going to check on him, but, as usual, he never listened.

I stepped out of the car and headed toward the main entrance. I had to stop, twice, to wait for my mom and brother to catch up.

“Come on, guys,” I said, and rushed through the sliding doors.

My mom talked to the receptionist, then we went up to the sixth floor.

“What room is it?” I asked.

“628,” my mom said, and she pointed to the door at the end of the hallway. Eric followed behind us, but he wasn’t interested in the fate of my friend; he just kept on texting, or browsing Facebook, whatever nonsense he was up to.

I knocked on the door and stepped inside. I didn’t know what to expect. Thankfully Riley’s parents weren’t sprawled out on the floor sobbing their eyes out. They were seated in tiny wooden chairs next to Riley’s bed, looking more stoic than emotional, while Alondra was reading a picture book on the other side of the room.

I approached the bed. Riley was out cold. The covers were pulled up to his neck, but I could see the cast over his right leg poking through the side.

My mom nodded to Riley’s parents, as Eric took a seat in the corner. “Hello Eva. Miguel.”

“Hi, Kathy, nice to see you,” Mrs. Alvarez said. Mr. Alvarez only acknowledged my mom with a quick nod of the head.

“I hope we’re not intruding? Cedar insisted we—”

“No, come in,” Mrs. Alvarez said.

“Is he all right?” My mom sat next to Riley’s parents. It was a little crowded on that side, so I headed over to Alondra.

“He was in a lot of pain, but he’s better now,” Mrs. Alvarez said. “He just fell asleep.”

I pulled a chair up to the side of the bed and put my hand on Riley’s shoulder. He was stiff, too stiff. “What did he break?” I asked.

Mrs. Alvarez sighed. “His tibia. Doctor said he got lucky. Said the way he twisted his leg when he fell was about one inch off of breaking the fibula, which would have been worse. *A lot* worse.”

She smiled at her husband, but Mr. Alvarez didn’t smile back. He’d had a mean scowl on his face since the moment we walked in.

He stood up a minute later and headed toward the door. “Anybody want something to eat? Alondra? You hungry?”

“I’m fine, Dad,” she said, still immersed in her book.

“*Honey?*” Mrs. Alvarez pointed my way. “Are you going to offer food to our guests?”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t think so.”

Her eyes doubled in size. She kept her eyes focused on him, as she nodded in my mom’s direction. “*Honey*, don’t be rude.”

Mr. Alvarez turned, not toward the exit door, but to me. “What were you doing out there, huh? What the hell were you two doing?”

“*Miguel*,” she said. She stood up and walking toward him. “Miguel, stop it—”

“You’re his best friend, Cedar,” he said. “You’re supposed to take care of each other. You should have been watching him!”

My mom started rising to her feet, as she said, “We should probably go...”

“No, no, please,” Mrs. Alvarez said.

I focused on Mr. Alvarez. “I *was* watching him,” I said, trying to fight back tears. Riley’s dad was scary when he wanted to be. “It all happened so fast. It wasn’t my—”

“No, Cedar, stop.” Mrs. Alvarez glared at her husband. “You’re blaming *him* for this? What’s the matter with you? They’re just kids! These things happen!”

“I know they do,” he said, then he cracked his neck in two places. “I’m just... I’m pissed off, all right? A year ago we thought we were gonna die on that plane and now Riley’s scared of flying. After today... who knows... he probably won’t want to play sports for the rest of his life.”

“Honey, come on, you don’t know that—”

“What’s gonna happen to him next year, huh? A car crash? Shark attack?” He stepped back and slammed his fist against the wall. “How many *goddamn* things have to happen to my boy?”

“*Te quiero te que salir de aqui,*” Mrs. Alvarez said. “Out. Cool off.” She pushed him into the adjacent hallway, as Eric stood up, and approached Riley.

“Cool!” he said. “Seed, is that a cast?”

He pulled up the bed sheets. Riley’s cast went from his foot up past his knee.

“Totally awesome,” Eric said, and he put his hand out to touch it.

I rushed to my brother, before he could touch him. I let Glen hurt Riley hours before and I wasn’t going to let my brother mess with him too.

I pulled him away. “Get away from him!” I shouted.

Eric pushed me back, against my chest. “Get away from *me*, you ass!”

“Stop it!” My mom grabbed my brother by his arm. “What are you doing? You know better,” she said, and pushed him out of the room.

“What’d I do? What’d I do?” Eric asked.

My mom bumped into Mrs. Alvarez in the hallway. I heard multiple apologies, from both sides. I let their voices fade away. Someone else needed me.

“Cedar?” Riley whispered. He blinked a few times, glanced all around the room.

“Cedar, where is everyone?”

“Shh, it’s okay.” I grabbed his left hand. It was ice cold. “They’re here. They’re in the hallway.”

“It’s so good to see you,” he said.

“You too. How are you feeling?”

“Like I had the worst fall of my life.” He looked down at the end of the bed. “Can I see it? The cast?”

I didn’t want to be the first to show him his bandaged leg, but he was insistent. I pulled up the sheets. At first, he showed no emotion; he was totally blank. He touched the top of the cast with his fingers. He moved his good leg up in the air a few times, then tried to lift the bad one. Nothing.

His breathing intensified. He gripped my hand harder.

Then the tears came.

“Shh. Riley, I’m here.” I didn’t know what else to say.

He leaned his head back against the pillow. “Why?” he didn’t so much say as breathe through the sobs.

“Why what?”

“Why does Glen hate us so much?”

I had to look away. “I don’t know.”

“The first day of school, and he’s already sent me to the hospital.” His hand worked its way up to my arm, as he said, “Cedar, I’m scared. I’m really scared.”

“Don’t be. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“But you said that to me before!” His voice jumped an octave. “You promised me... on the plane last year...”

“I know.”

“I wanted to believe you.”

“I don’t know what happened. I wasn’t paying attention. When I saw him coming toward you, it was too late.” I leaned in closer to his face. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there, but I’ll make this right. I promise.”

He studied my face, every inch of it. His crying had finally stopped. “You’re not... you know...”

“What?”

His eyes widened. “You’re not gonna *kiss* me again, are you?”

I realized I kind of wanted to, and I had no idea why. “Of course not,” I said, with a phony laugh. “Don’t worry.”

“Okay, good.”

I sat back in the chair. Neither of us said anything. He closed his eyes again, as I listened to the sound of my heartbeat. The sound of my inner rage.

“Cedar?” My mom stepped back into the room. “We should get going. Riley needs his rest.”

I stood up from my chair. “No, Mom, he’s awake—” I stopped. Looked back at him. He was sound asleep.

“We have to go,” she said, then she turned to Mrs. Alvarez, who had also returned to the room. “I’m glad he’s okay.”

“Yes,” she said. She smiled at me. “I’ll be sure to tell Riley you stopped by.”

I stopped next to my mom. Peered at Riley again. We *had* talked, right? I hadn’t just imagined that whole conversation?

“Bye, Cedar,” Riley whispered. He opened his eyes, just a little, and waved at me.

Nope—it happened, all right. “Bye, Riley. I…” The word *love* came to mind. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

He nodded.

I walked out of the room. Took one last look at Riley in his tiny, sad hospital bed, so lonely, so vulnerable.

I knew what I had to do.

#

My mom made a vegetable pasta dish for dinner. It tasted fine, although the bits of zucchini went down like mowed grass. My dad left the table early to make a business call, then Eric left the room yelling about his homework. The usual for a Monday night.

As soon as I heard my mom run her bath upstairs around eight o’clock—again, the usual—I scurried across the house and went downstairs into the garage. I grabbed what I needed from Dad’s bag and went out the side exit.

The sun was still out, but barely. I always missed the sun in the winter, when it disappeared around 4:30 and Riley had to go home. The first few weeks of school were always more exciting because Riley and I could play together until late.

But not that night. Riley wasn't going to be able to play or do much of anything for a long, long time.

I walked down the center of the cul-de-sac. My blood boiled. My whole body was on fire. I was like Riley had been earlier in the day—fearless.

I found the house. I'd only gone inside once, when my mom forced me to make nice with the neighborhood bully two summers ago. We had shared an awkward handshake, and the truce lasted about a day.

I knocked on the door.

"Yes?" Glen's mother Mrs. Gummer opened the door and looked down at me with a sneer. Her face was round and untamed, and she wore baggy PJs that looked more suited for her husband.

"Hi, Mrs. Gummer. Is Glen here?"

"Do you have *any* idea what time it is?" she said, venom in her scratchy voice.

"Sorry, but it's important. It's about something that happened at school today." I sighed, loudly, and added, "I want to tell Glen how sorry I am."

She smacked her lips together. "Is this about that Riley kid? Because my boy would never hurt—"

"No, no. The whole thing was my fault. That's what I wanted to tell him."

She smiled, clearly unused to hearing that her son wasn't the cause of the latest trouble. She leaned back and yelled, "Glen! Someone here to see you!"

He stumbled into the entrance hallway a few seconds later. The slight trace of fear on his face told me he thought he'd expected a white car with flashing red and blue lights.

"What do *you* want?" he asked, after his mother disappeared into the kitchen.

"I just..."

"I'm not gonna say I'm sorry. It wasn't my fault he fell over, that he messed up his leg. That was just him being stupid."

He was making this so easy. I took a step back. "Glen... I..."

He followed me out to the grass. "You... you what, Cedar Weiner? You gonna be as stupid as your friend too? I thought you were the smart one."

"I *am* the smart one, Glen."

I pulled my dad's three-iron out from behind my back and struck Glen in the chest. I hit him so hard the club almost broke in two.

"OHH OWWWWW!" he screamed, and fell back against the grass. "MOM!" he shouted. "HELLLLLP!"

I had no idea what came over me. I hit him again in the chest, then once against his legs. When his mom ran out the front door, I aimed the club for head.

"What are you *doing*! What in the... oh my God!" She pulled me back before the iron touched his face, and she tore the golf club from my grasp. "Joe! Get out here!"

Glen curled up into a ball and started crying. I wanted someone to take a picture. I wanted him to remember this moment for the rest of his life.

"Stay away from us!" I screamed at Glen. "Stay away from *Riley*! You hear me?"

"Joe, for God's sake, hurry!"

I tried to get away from his mother. I kicked at her, screamed at her, but she was stronger than she let on; I couldn't escape her grip.

I wanted to run, all the way to the hospital. I wanted to wrap my arms around Riley, tell him I did the right thing, that I always keep my promises—no matter what.

“You touch Riley again, and I'll kill you!” I screamed. “You hear me Glen? I'll kill you!”

I wanted to shout at him for another hour, but Glen's mother shoved me into her front hallway before I could say another word. She slammed the door, spit in my face, and kicked me to her grimy yellow carpet.

The First Day of **Fifth Grade**

August 30, 2010

When my back struck the ground, all the wind got knocked out of me. For a second I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Had I really fallen that far?

I gripped the side of my mattress and pulled myself up. My bedroom appeared lopsided, like one of my eyes had momentarily crawled to my left dimple. I shivered and pushed against my aching belly. I pressed my fingers against my forehead and they soaked up my pellets of sweat like spilled milk to Kleenex tissues.

"Oh, no," I said.

"Cedar?" My mom knocked loud on the door. "Are you up? You don't want to be late for your first day!"

"Mom, I don't... I don't feel so good..."

"What was that, honey? I have your breakfast in the kitchen." Her footsteps echoed down the hall.

I slipped under the covers. I was surprised she hadn't come in to serve me breakfast in bed, or give me a hug, or kiss me on the cheek. She didn't do any of those things anymore, not since I lashed out at Glen and sent him to urgent care. I didn't hurt him *that* bad—Riley had been injured three times worse with his little stumble on the baseball field—but my mom and dad grounded me anyway for two months straight, only letting me go back and forth to school. I didn't get to start playing with Riley on a frequent basis until winter break, and my mom told me she only allowed it because my

dad insisted I start having a life again. By January, she finally became her normal self around me, but she still never looked at me the same way.

I pushed myself to my feet and tried to find my balance. My head pounded. My throat was dry. I grabbed a glass of water on my nightstand and chugged it, then opened the door. The hallway was quiet, but the kitchen was chaotic with activity. My parents were chatting obnoxiously loud on telephones, my mom on the house phone, my dad on his cell. Eric was browsing through a swimsuit magazine as he shoveled in his milk-soaked Frosted Flakes.

“I don’t *care* what he said,” my dad said, “he’s gonna change his mind after I have a chat with him today, you can count on it!” He started pouring coffee into a mug. “It’s not right, Stan. He can’t negate on the contract and then just—”

The coffee spilled on the floor, as well as his shiny new shoes.

“Goddammit!” he shouted. “Kathy, can you help me out here?”

My mom handed him a napkin and continued talking on the phone to her sister, or one of her friends, I couldn’t tell. She sat down at the table and kept her head turned toward the pantry.

I walked up to my dad. He threw the napkin away after she scrubbed away the worst of the stains, and grabbed his briefcase.

“Uhh, Dad?”

“Yeah, buddy?” He didn’t even look at me. He picked his phone back up and started scrolling through his contact list.

“I’m not feeling very good.”

“Really? What’s wrong?” Still didn’t look at me.

“I think I have the flu or something.”

“It’s probably just nerves. Have Mom give you some Pepto—hey, Stan, yeah, I lost you...”

He patted me on the head, like I was three years old, and headed toward the garage.

I sighed and walked over to my mom. I knew she’d understand, even though she too was yapping away on a phone, her left hand making dumb little gestures as if the person on the other end could see her. She looked a bit of a mess, wearing her faded blue-and-pink bathrobe that looked like something out of the ’80s, her stringy blonde hair covering most of her face. I stopped in front of her.

“Mom?”

She put her finger up. Tapped it against my chest. “One second, Cedar.”

“But it’s *important*.”

“Hold on, Tina.” She lowered the phone. “What is it?”

“I just... I fell out of my bed...”

“You fell out of bed? Why?”

“The thing is... I don’t feel very—”

“*Cedar*.” She looked me up and down. “What are you still doing in your PJs? Go take a shower.”

“But Mom, I feel—”

“*Now*, mister! The bus will be here in twenty minutes!” She crossed her left leg over her right and continued on with her conversation. I opened my mouth to get her

attention again, but shut it tight when I realized it was no use. I guess I was going to school after all.

I faced Eric. He took the last bite of his cereal and wiped his mouth with his wrist. He stared up at me, with bloodshot morning eyes. “Seed.”

“What?”

“You look like shit.”

My parents never allowed swearing in the house, but I figured Eric would get away with that one.

I’d never said a cuss word out loud, at least not at home, but I took a step closer to my brother and said, “*You* look like shit!”

His jaw dropped, revealing yellow teeth that looked like they hadn’t been brushed in months, and shouted, “*Mom!*”

I ran out of the room before Eric could successfully rat me out. My mom used to believe me over Eric, especially when he was getting into all that trouble in middle school, but recently every mother from Sacramento to the Nevada border had labeled me a psychopath. I was certain she’d go with Eric this morning.

I reached the end of the hallway and almost dropped to the floor, I was so lightheaded. I rested my forehead against the bathroom door and kept myself steady. I hurt all over. A hot shower sounded perfect.

The bathroom marble floor was so cold to the touch all my feet needed were ice skates. I blasted the showerhead and turned the knob to its hottest level. I threw my pajamas off, leaving only my baggy underwear on, and stepped in front of the mirror. My reflection was not my friend; I looked like the horror movie version of myself. My cheeks

were pale, my lips were chapped, and my arms slunk down against my sides like heavy water pipes. The frown on my face completed the dour package.

I pulled my undies down and stepped into the shower. The hot water immediately soaked my newly cut hair. I didn't grab for the soap or the shampoo; I just stood up straight and let the water wash the sick away.

I stood in the shower for five more minutes, then stepped out when my mom called for me from the hallway. As soon as I turned off the knob and stepped back in front of the mirror, the misery of my head cold, and my stomach pain, and my intensifying nausea, returned. I wanted the warm water to be my healer, but it was merely a momentary distraction.

I wrapped the towel around my waist and walked out of the bathroom.

"Mom?" I shouted.

"In the kitchen! You ready, Cedar?"

With every step I took, the longer the hallway became, like it was stretching on for miles, all the way to a bright white light. When I swallowed, my throat ached. When I blinked, my eyes throbbed. Even my neck was sore. What did I have to do to make my mom believe I was sick? Faint?

I approached her in the kitchen. She was dropping green apple slices into a little sandwich baggie. Just the sight of them made me want to retch.

"That should do it," she said.

She zipped the baggie tight, then shoved it down with the chips, turkey sandwich, and milk carton, into the brown bag. She handed it to me, a triumphant smile on her face.

The smile quickly vanished. "What's the matter? Why aren't you dressed?"

“I... I told you...” I started shivering. “I don’t... feel... very...”

I opened the bag and threw up all over my lunch.

#

My mom treated me like a king for the rest of the morning and afternoon. She doted on me to an almost absurd extent, after she called me in sick for my first day of fifth grade. I had Mrs. Corry that year, a young redhead who couldn’t say her R’s the right way; she was one of my more forgettable teachers, and one I didn’t need to suffer the first day with.

I preferred suffering that first day of school instead with my mom out on the family room couch, doing no schoolwork whatsoever and instead watching *Regis and Kelly* and *The Price is Right*, and her favorite soap, *Days of Our Lives*. She stuffed me full of flu medicine, then forced me to drink flavorless hot teas on the hour, every hour. I didn’t throw up again, and my headache dissipated by noon. By 3, just when school was getting out, most of the pain relocated to my legs, which were stiff from so much sitting.

She ran her hands through my hair, as *Days of Our Lives* cut to commercial. “So you didn’t feel any symptoms last night?”

“None.”

“Were you nervous about school? Maybe that brought it on.”

“I don’t think so. I was excited for today. Even though Riley isn’t in my class.”

Her voice lowered a little when she said, “Was it Glen? Were you scared to see him again?”

I wiggled out of my mom's grasp, reluctantly, and sat down Indian-style. "How many times do I have to tell you? You don't have to worry about Glen. He doesn't bother me anymore."

"It's not so much *him* I'm worried about." She grabbed some Vicks wipes from the table and nodded to the edge of the couch. "Here, lay down. Pull your shirt up."

"Again?"

"Yes. Get on your back."

I did as my mom said, and she started rubbing my upper chest with the wipes. I tried to pretend like it was irritating by rolling my eyes and heavily sighing, but deep down I loved the attention I was getting.

"Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"You really think I'm gonna hurt Glen again? I promise I won't. It was just because he—"

"I know. He hurt Riley. You only did it to protect Riley."

"Exactly."

"Okay, done. You can sit up now." She tossed the wipes in the trash and pulled me back to her side. The soap opera had resumed, but she didn't pay any attention to it. "Riley's been a great friend to you, hasn't he?"

"Uh huh. I hope he's not worried about me." I glanced out the nearest window. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. "Do you think I can go play with him when he gets home from school? I don't feel that sick anymore."

She pressed her hand against my forehead. "Absolutely not. You're still warm."

“But I feel a lot better.”

“You could be contagious, Cedar. Plus you want to be all rested for tomorrow. I don’t want you to have to miss your *second* day of school.”

“But Mom—”

“Don’t ask me again, all right? I’ll be back with your tea.” She pushed herself up to her feet. She was still in the bathrobe.

“The tea? Again?”

“Yes.”

“But it’s made me have to go pee like ten thousand times.”

She didn’t respond; she just turned the corner and headed toward the kitchen. I lay back against the couch, watched *Days of Our Lives* for a few minutes. I figured I would have been more invested if I’d seen the program before, since I didn’t know who any of the characters were. Two men were talking to each other in front of a bedroom. The acting was poor, and the dramatic pauses were over-the-top, but before the show cut again to commercial, they shared a tender kiss.

My mom returned a moment later and set the mug on the table. Two green tea bags were steeped in the steaming hot water.

“So?” she said, turning toward the television. “Did I miss anything?”

I didn’t reach for the mug. I just sat there in a daze, like I’d been stunned into stillness. “Not much,” I said.

#

At five o'clock, my mom started making dinner, and I retired to my bedroom for some unneeded shut-eye. She wanted me to take a short nap, but I just lay on my bed, my arms at my sides, my eyes fixated on my windows, and the outside world. Had I ever spent an entire day indoors? Even when I had Hepatitis a few years back, I at least went to and from the doctor's office.

I pushed myself off the bed and shoved the window open. I rested my elbows against the sill. Took in the warm summer air. My bedroom suddenly took on the role of a prison cell.

Especially when I saw Riley riding his bike to the end of the cul-de-sac. He stopped at the other end of the driveway and dropped the bike on the grass.

"Riley, hey," I said quietly, waving him toward me.

He didn't hear me. He pulled a few pages out of his pocket and walked to the front door. He had on a yellow shirt and black-and-white checkered shorts, and his hair was slicked back with enough gel to fill a sink.

He reached his hand for the doorbell. I leaned out the open window. "*Riley!*"

He jerked his head toward me. "Cedar?" He hurried over to me, not sure if he was supposed to be ducking or running or what. "What's going on?"

"Everything's fine. It's just... if my mom sees you, she'll make you go home."

"Why?" He pulled the papers up to his chest. "Where were you today?"

"I threw up this morning. I feel better now, but my mom won't let me see you."

"Why not? If you're better, I mean."

"Because. She thinks I'm contagious."

He crossed his arms and leaned against the side of the house. “My whole family got sick last month, and I was fine. I don’t get sick, Cedar. You know that.”

“That’s right. You’re a superhero, aren’t you?”

“It took you four years to figure that out?” He flashed me his trademark grin, and his new shiny silver braces nearly blinded me.

“Hey, your teeth aren’t straight. So you’re not *perfect*.”

“I didn’t say I was perfect. You’re putting words in my mouth!”

I laughed, and turned away for a second. I thought I heard footsteps.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. What’s that?” I pointed to the papers in his hands.

“Oh.” He handed them to me. “I checked in with Mrs. Corry after school. I got your homework.”

“There’s homework? On the first *day*?” I took them, reluctantly, and set them on my computer desk. “Thanks, Riley. You didn’t have to do that.”

“It wasn’t a problem.” He stepped back from the window and said, “Are you coming? Grab your bike!”

“I can’t. My mom will kill me.”

He brought his hands to his pockets. “Come on. We’ll do one loop.”

“One loop takes twenty minutes, Riley.”

“I’m not taking no for an answer.” He took another step back, leaving just enough room for me to jump out.

I glanced back at my bedroom door. “Jesus,” I said. “I’m gonna get in so much trouble for this.”

I lifted one leg over the sill, then the other one. I pushed my palms against the peeling wood, and prepared for the three-foot jump onto the dead plants below.

“Cedar?” My mom knocked on the door.

I lost my balance and fell down to the dirt, inches away from Riley’s feet. “Crap,” I said.

“*Shit*,” Riley added.

“Get down,” I whispered.

I shook the dirt away from my hands and pulled myself back into the bedroom.

She knocked a second time. “Are you sleeping?”

I leaped from one side of the room to the other, and landed on my bed, just as she cracked the door open.

I pulled the covers over me, dropped my jaw, pretended to be asleep. I cracked an eye open as she darted her head in.

“Did I wake you?” she whispered.

“No, no.” I pretended to yawn. “I was just resting.”

“Oh, good.” She stepped into the room but stayed close to the door. “I just had a quick question for you, then I’ll let you sleep. Do you think your tummy would be up for some spaghetti and garlic bread, or do you just want me to make chicken noodle soup?”

I peered to my right. Riley was super obvious on the right edge of the window. “Uhh... just the soup is fine. And could I have it later? I think I’m gonna sleep for a while.”

“That sounds perfect,” she said. “I’ll check on you a little later, okay?”

“You can... you know... take your time.”

She glanced to her left. Scratched the nape of her neck. “Cedar?”

“Yeah?”

“Why is the window open?”

I sat all the way up, without even thinking. “I, uhh... it was stuffy in here so I thought I’d let some air in.”

She took a step toward the window. Then another. One more, and she’d see Riley.

“That’s a good idea,” she said. “Just don’t keep it open too long. You don’t wanna get a bunch of flies in here.”

I nodded, then looked down at my hands. Still brown with dirt. I hid them under the covers, as she turned her back to me.

“I’ll let you get some rest. Let me know if you need anything.” She stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her.

I sighed in relief. “Oh my God,” I said.

“Oh my God is right,” Riley said. He leaned his arms against the sill and dipped his head into the room. “That was a close one.”

“It really was.”

“So are you coming?” He pulled a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on, then opened his mouth and smiled for me—again, with that mouth full of metal.

I looked down at my hands. Still brown.

But I liked them brown.

“Of course I’m coming,” I said.

I took the big dip, then shot into the air, over the puddle of mud. I glanced back. Riley was gaining.

“You’re not gonna win, Cedar,” he said. “You started strong, but you’re not gonna win!”

“Yeah? We’ll see about that!”

I ducked my head and swung my bike to the left, into the dark forest of trees. This slimmer route was harder to navigate, but it worked as the perfect shortcut.

“You aren’t gonna catch me!” Riley shouted from the main trail. He sped ahead of me and veered to the right. I stayed on the same track.

I kept my eyes focused on the route in front of me and despite how thin it was, I could make out every detail, every crevice. I’d only had my contact lenses since July but they’d already made biking with Riley a hundred times better, not just because I looked like such a dweeb with glasses, but because I could finally *see*.

I pedaled even faster. I ducked under a branch, and hopped my bike over a giant log on the dirt ground. I glanced to my right. Riley was coming around the corner.

“Ha-ha! I win!” he said.

“Oh no you don’t!”

I took a sharp right and slammed my bike against his. His jaw dropped.

“What? How did you...”

“You haven’t lived here as long as I have! You don’t know all the secrets!”

He pulled in front of me, but I peddled faster and raced past him. We reached the final stretch, toward the edge of the parking lot on the other side of the lake.

“Here we go! Ten seconds!” I said.

I moved my legs and lowered my head and gritted my teeth. I heard Riley’s wheels behind me. I made the final turn.

“I’ve got it...” The parking lot was three seconds away. Two seconds.

I glanced back. Riley wasn’t as close as I thought. He had no chance.

“This one’s for you,” I said. I rolled my bike off the pavement, skidded into the dirt, and tumbled over, bike and all.

Riley zoomed past me, and touched his front tire against the parking lot. “Woo hoo!” he shouted. “I win, I win!”

I pushed myself off the ground. Here I was in dirt—*again*.

“Yes, you did,” I said, and dunked my hands into the lake. “I was close, though! I almost had you.”

He rested his bike against its kickstand and marched up to me. “What happened? I thought for sure you were gonna beat me.”

“I don’t know. I think when the bike hit the dirt, I turned it the wrong way.”

“Oh.” He helped me to my feet. “Well, sucks for you!”

“Yeah. Sucks for me.”

“I take it you’re feeling better?”

“Yeah. Way better.” I pulled my bike up and gripped the handlebars. “I’m a little tired, though, and my head still hurts. We should get back.”

“We’ve only been gone for like fifteen minutes.”

“*Riley*.” I pointed to his bike. “After what I did to Glen last year, I have to be careful. If my mom and dad got mad at me again...”

“We’re just riding bikes. It’s exercise. What’s the big—”

“I told my mom I wouldn’t leave my room! I don’t want to piss her off, okay?”

“Okay, fine,” he said, and walked to the parking lot.

I followed behind him. “Riley?”

“Yeah?”

“Was Glen at school today?”

He nodded.

“How did he look?”

“Ehh, a little thinner, actually.” He let go of the kickstand. “Cedar, I’m telling you. I watched him at recess, and at lunch. He’s better. He didn’t pick on a single person. Not even the first graders.” He paused, then nudged his elbow against my shoulder. “You might’ve changed him.”

“It doesn’t make it right, though. I could have killed him.”

“No you couldn’t. With a golf club? Come on.” His left palm rubbed against my right handlebar, then lightly touched my hand. “*He* could have killed someone. He was getting out of control, and you put a stop to it.”

I shook my head, and jumped back onto my bike. “Yeah. Maybe.”

#

A few minutes later we pulled up to the driveway and headed toward the garage. My dad wasn’t home yet. I set my bike against the wall as Riley waited outside.

“All clear?” I asked.

He pointed to his right. “Uh oh.”

“Uh oh?”

“Your dad! He’s coming!”

“Are you *serious*?” I nodded toward the entrance door. “Well, what are you doing? Get in here!”

Riley rushed inside the garage, threw his bike against mine, and followed me into the house.

We stopped in the hallway. “Do you see your mom?” he asked.

“No.” I looked toward her bedroom, the dining room. Nowhere in sight.

Riley bit on his bottom lip for a moment, then said, “Let’s hurry.”

“Good idea.” We took about three steps, when I put my arm out, and stopped him.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Listen.”

A pair of pans clanged against the kitchen island, and an oven buzzer went off.

“She’s in the kitchen.” I pulled him down to the carpet. “Get on your knees.”

He dropped next to me. “All right. What now?”

“What do you think? We crawl.”

I moved out in front of Riley, and edged up to the kitchen. I peered inside. My mom was pan-broiling three chicken breasts, while Eric sat at the kitchen table doing his homework, a pair of giant headphones over his head. I looked back at my mom. She was turned away from me. It was now or never.

I glanced back at Riley. Waved him forward. He pressed his body even closer to the carpet and crept toward me.

I moved past the kitchen entrance and reached the end of the hallway. I turned around. Riley was barely moving. I waved him on again, just as my dad entered from the garage, his face buried in his phone.

“Oh *crap*,” I whispered. I waved faster.

“What?” Riley mouthed. He jerked his head around, then suppressed a scream and jumped to his feet. He ran around me, into the adjacent hallway.

We were both feet away from my bedroom door, when I heard, “Cedar? Is that you?” My mom’s voice sounded close, too close. “Are you ready for dinner yet?”

I pushed Riley into my room and closed the door behind me. I jumped into my bed, pulled the covers up to my neck.

“Where should I hide?” Riley looked left, right—even up.

My mom knocked on the door. “Cedar? Can I come in?”

Riley shot me a look of terror, then dove across me, on the left side of my bed, and pulled the covers over him.

My mom didn’t wait for me to answer. She walked right in, a bowl brimming with hot soup in her left hand, a tall glass of water in her right. She set both down on my desk. When she looked into my eyes, I closed them, and pretended to be sleeping.

She leaned down and kissed me on my cheek. “I know you’re awake.”

“Yeah, because you can probably hear how fast my heart is beating,” I wanted to say, but didn’t. I opened one eye, yawned, and prayed she didn’t see any of Riley. Did he have a foot sticking out at the end of the bed?

“Feeling better?” she asked.

“Uhh, a little.”

“I brought you some soup. It’s on your desk if you get hungry.”

I shifted in the bed a little. When I moved my left hand, it rubbed up against Riley’s butt.

“*Oh,*” I said.

My mom was almost to the door. She stopped. “Oh?”

“I mean... oh, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie. Let me know if you need anything.”

I listened to her footsteps as she headed back toward the kitchen.

When she was gone for good, Riley pulled the covers down a little. “Did she see me?” he asked.

“No. At least, I don’t think she did.”

“Phew.” He pushed his chin against one of my two fluffy pillows and sprawled out. “I haven’t been on your bed in awhile. I forgot how comfy it is.”

I sat up, and dangled my legs over the side. I rubbed my fingers against my temples. Kept blinking over and over.

“Is everything okay?” Riley asked.

“I shouldn’t have gone on that bike ride. I feel sick again.”

“Really? Well, come on then. Lay down.” He grabbed my arm, and pulled me back to the bed. My leg touched his, my elbow brushed up against his.

When I think back on it now, I'm surprised Riley hadn't just hid in my closet instead of jumping on the bed. It's almost as if he *wanted* to be close to me, like even in fifth grade he had the slightest notion that something profound could happen between us.

"Here," he said, and pulled the covers over our bodies. He yawned, and rolled over on his chest. "I'm telling you, this bed is *amazing*."

"I know." I closed my eyes, for a minute or so.

I opened them when Riley started breathing a little heavier, at a slower pace.

"Riley?" I whispered. No response. "Are you asleep?"

I leaned over and saw his lips slightly parted, his eyes shut tight. He was out cold.

I gripped the covers, and stared at the ceiling. I didn't, couldn't, fall asleep. I enjoyed the sound of his breathing too much. It sounded like he was trying to whistle but failing, with a slight, high-pitched musical noise emitted in the last second of each breath.

I turned away from him, rested the right side of my head against my pillow, peered over at the chicken noodle soup that was already getting cold. I moved my left hand toward the top of the covers—and, slowly, brushed it against his butt again. I stared at the bowl on the desk, but didn't see the bowl. I didn't see the window or the closet or the desk, either. I just saw Riley. Riley on my bed.

The breathing grew louder, to the point where I knew he was out cold. I shifted to my back again. My left hand stayed settled on the mattress. I moved it an inch over. Then another inch. My palm touched Riley's back. I kept it there for a few seconds.

I closed my eyes, and tried to appear asleep just in case he woke up. If he thought I was sleeping, I figured, my hands could be anywhere.

I started sliding my hand farther down. My skin only touched his sunflower-colored t-shirt for a while, but then, they struck skin. The bottom of his back was warm to the touch, hairless, just the slightest bit sweaty.

What was I doing? I remember thinking. Wasn't this wrong?

And why do I like it?

My fingers started trembling. I pulled them out of the covers and flexed my hand a few times. I breathed only out of my nose, but it might have been as loud as Riley's breathing. I swallowed. Licked my dry lips.

I hovered my hand above his back, again, and slid my pinky down just a little bit more. It touched the top crease of his underwear.

Riley shifted.

I swung my hands away from him and fell to the carpet below, slamming the back of my head against the corner of the nightstand.

I looked up, waited for Riley to peer over the edge and see what I was up to. He didn't. He stayed quiet for a few seconds, then began his heavy breathing again. Still asleep.

I stood up, and stumbled to my computer chair. I buried my forehead against my arms, on the verge of crying. I hated these feelings I was having, that were starting to take hold of me. I had to suppress them. If I had any hope of staying friends with Riley, I *had* to suppress them.

The sweet smell of the soup called to me. I pushed the bowl up to my face and grabbed the spoon. The soup was lukewarm, but still okay. The garlic bread next to it had already gone stale.

I took a few more bites, but stopped when I heard a rustle behind me.

“Whoa,” Riley said, followed by a loud yawn. “Did I just fall *asleep*?”

I didn’t look at him. I kept my eyes concentrated outside my bedroom window.

“Yeah, you did.”

“Sorry. I guess that bike riding did me in.”

“It’s fine,” I said, with a grin he couldn’t see. I pushed my bowl away and turned to him. His hair stood straight up toward the ceiling. “I didn’t mind at all.”

The First Day of **Sixth Grade**

August 29, 2011

“Honey, your hair is standing up,” my mom said. She started patting it down with her hands, which were still wet from the tap water.

I jumped back. “*Mom!* What are you doing?”

“What? I just want you to look good on your first day of school.”

“But you're embarrassing me.”

“In front of who? I'm the only one here.”

“I look fine. I have to go.” I grabbed my backpack off the kitchen counter and glanced at the nearest mirror. She was right; a couple hairs on the back of my head had little lives of their own. I tried to press them down, then back. Nothing worked.

My mom re-emerged behind me. “Here. Stay still.”

“But Mom...” I tried to pull away from her.

“Cedar, I don't care how old you are. I don't care if you're about to be the big kid on campus. I'm not letting you walk out of the house like this.”

She massaged a glob of thick cream into her hands and started running her fingers through my hair, which I had allowed to grow out over the summer. Unlike Eric, whose hair always turned into a massive fro if he avoided a monthly trimming, my hair was thin and straight like my mom's, and took on a nice bowl shape that didn't cover my ears and thankfully didn't turn the nape of my neck into a mullet.

I stood there, my lips pursed, my arms crossed, my eyes telling her in clear detail I wasn't happy. I was turning twelve soon, and my mom was still combing my hair.

“Okay,” she said, and stepped back. “Much better.”

“All right.” I grabbed my backpack, which seemed to weigh about a thousand pounds, and slung it over my shoulder. “Can I go now?”

“Yes, you may.”

I headed to the entrance door. “I’m going to Riley’s after school, so I won’t be home until later, okay?”

“Just be home in time for dinner. 6:30.”

“Can Riley come?”

“Of course! What kind of a question is that?”

“Thanks, Mom.” I opened the door.

She cleared her throat. Set her hands against her widening hips. “Anything else you want to say to me?”

I pressed my lips together. Just stood there for a moment. Of course there was. “Love you,” I said.

“Love you too.”

I closed the door behind me, and stepped into the blazing hot August sun. Granite Bay had seen endless warm days more than any other summer I could recall, but two minutes outside and I was already sweating. When my feet touched the end of the driveway, I started moving faster. I had about five minutes to catch my bus, and I wanted to see Riley.

We were supposed to hang out over the weekend, but he called me on Friday morning, out of the blue, and told me he was going to be out of town until last night. He didn’t tell me where he was going, or what for. He just left, making me spend my last

weekend of summer devouring my favorite new book, *The Hunger Games*. Two days never flew by so fast.

I approached the end of the street. No bus. No Riley.

“What the...”

I glanced toward the bushes. Waited for Riley to pounce on me. He did it so often before our bus rides last year, sometimes I screamed just in the anticipation.

“Riley?” I pushed my hand through the closest bush. “You in here?”

“Nope,” a voice said, from afar.

Riley appeared around the corner, his hands in his pockets, looking like he'd just rolled out of bed. While my hair was parted and styled, his was a big, tousled mess.

“Oh hey!” I brought my hands to my side. “You didn't try to scare me, I'm surprised.”

He shrugged, and stopped a few feet away from me. “Nah. Why would I want to do that?”

“What do you mean? You do it all the time.”

“No I don't.” He kept his head turned toward the street, noticeably avoiding eye contact with me.

I put a smile on my face, hoping it might be infectious. “Whatever. Nevermind. How was your weekend?” I took a seat on the sidewalk. He stayed standing.

“It was fine.”

“Just fine? Where'd you go?”

“I don't want to talk about it right now.”

Awkward silence ensued, and my smile quickly faded. I scratched the bottom of my knee. Tried to think of something to say. “Okay... are you excited to have Mrs. Whitely? *Finally*, right?”

“Oh. Yeah, sure.”

He finally sat down, but paid more attention to his backpack than to our conversation. He unzipped and re-zipped every pocket, then took out one of his binders and flipped through it, for no discernible reason.

“Riley?”

“Yeah?”

“Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You're acting funny.”

He pushed the binder into his backpack, which looked a lot lighter than mine.

“How was your weekend?”

“Fine. I read *The Hunger Games*.”

“How was it? My sister wants to read it, but my mom says she's not old enough.”

“It's freaking amazing. I'll let you borrow it if you want.”

He sighed, and stared down at the concrete. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

“What do you mean?”

He stood back up. “There's the bus.”

I let Riley board it first, and he shuffled down the aisle in no apparent rush. He was acting so somber that I expected him to sit next to a stranger, so that he wouldn't have to put up with my attempts to cheer him up.

He sat in the third row closest to the back, and thankfully made space for me. I took a seat and set my backpack on my knees.

“Can you believe it?” I asked.

“What?” He tapped his fingers against the seat in front of him.

“Do you hear that? The quiet?”

“It *is* a little quiet in here, isn't it?”

“Yep.” I grinned. “No Glen.”

Riley finally perked up a little. He sat up straight and shot me a slight grin.

“You're right. I totally forgot.”

“Can you believe he actually graduated sixth grade? His parents must've paid someone off.”

“He's going to Cavitt, right?”

“Yeah, unfortunately.” I thought back on the last year. The bad, and the worse, days with Glen. “Remember when we thought he might actually be a better person? But... then his voice breaks, he gets his first zit, and he starts back into his old ways.”

“When he started making fun of Alondra's dress at recess that one day, I swear to God...” Riley formed his hand into a fist, like he was going to strike the head of the kid in front of him.

“I know. I almost snapped again.”

“Thank God you didn't.”

“Thank God nobody had a golf bag with them.” I laughed, quickly, before Riley gave me a look of gloom. “Only kidding,” I said.

“Whatever. It's fine. It's not like he'll hurt us again.”

“At least not until we get to seventh grade.” I looked around the bus, as the driver made his last stop in the neighborhood. “Can you believe we’re the heads of the school this year. For the very first time!”

“Yeah,” Riley said. “I guess.”

He brought his hands to his knees and focused on the dirty window, clearly not in the mood to talk anymore. I almost asked him what was wrong, again. We were best friends, and never kept secrets from each other. But I stayed quiet.

The bus ride lasted ten more minutes. We didn’t say a word to each other the rest of the way.

#

So many of the sixth graders ran to the playground in the little time we had before the 9 AM bell, including Riley, who grabbed one of the basketballs and started shooting hoops—but I sat next to our classroom door and took *Catching Fire* out of my backpack. Jose and Trenton, two latino boys from Riley’s soccer team that he had become close with, joined him on the court, with Riley defending, the other two working together to sink the ball. Jose made the first shot, then missed the second. Riley tried to block a shot, but missed.

I was about halfway down the second page of my book, when I heard the grumblings from the black pavement.

“We need one more,” little Jose said.

“Yeah, Riley, ask him,” Trenton's deep voice bellowed.

I looked up. Riley stepped off the basketball court and waved to me when he saw me glance his way. “Come on, Cedar!” he shouted. “We need a fourth!”

I may have appeared super lame with my book, but I wanted a whole lot more to read about Katniss’s adventures rather than throw a stupid ball around. Riley knew how I felt about sports. I liked to ride my bike, and play golf with my dad, but I hated anything to do with competition. Riley was the polar opposite. He would try any sport, and the minute he took it up, he excelled at it. Soccer was his favorite, but he also loved basketball and football. He even told me over the summer that he wanted to try hockey.

“I’m good,” I said. “But thanks!”

“Cedar, come on! Get out here!”

My eyebrows rose. “Now who’s the bully,” I wanted to say, but didn’t. I shoved the book in my backpack and stepped onto the basketball court.

“Wow, he actually came over,” Jose said, as Trenton dribbled the ball behind him.

“Give me that thing.” I snatched the ball from Trenton and threw it over my head. Caught it. Threw it again.

“What are you *doing*?” Trenton asked. “This isn’t volleyball, you idiot.”

I caught the ball a third time, and held it close to my chest. “No, duh, I’m not stupid. I’m just warming up.”

“You’re not. You’re wasting our time. Let’s go.”

I held up the ball. It would have been so easy to throw it at Trenton’s face, but I didn’t want to be sent home on my first day of school. I started to dribble the ball.

“All right, let’s see what you got,” Jose said, his attitude way more welcoming than Trenton’s.

Jose was closer to my height, so he got up in my face, while Trenton paced back and forth beside me blocking Riley. I bent my knees, kept an eye on the net, dribbled the ball faster and faster.

I glanced at Riley. His mood had improved greatly, but he had a sad glaze in his eye that knocked all the fun out of the game. He put his arms up in the air, but didn't appear like he even cared to catch the ball. What was wrong? Was it something his parents said or did?

I whirled around Jose and dribbled the ball down the left side of the court. I stopped and tried to take a shot. I almost went for it but then I threw the ball to Riley, who cut past Trenton and made himself available. He grabbed the ball, almost tossed it at the net, but ducked when Trenton blocked his shot.

“Come on, Riley!” I shouted. “You got this!”

He shifted to his right and aimed again, but the second he let go of the ball, Trenton jumped and slapped it back to the ground.

“No!” I pushed past Jose and ran toward the ball. Trenton reached for it, his fingers almost making contact, when I dove for the ground and snatched it away.

I leaped to my feet. Peered up at the net. Trenton and Jose ran right at me, hoping to mow me down like a lawnmower. I had one measly second—so I took my shot. The ball struck the backboard.

And swish.

I jumped up and down and threw my hands into the air, like I'd just won the NBA playoffs. Jose and Trenton lowered their heads and shoved their fists against their sides, while Riley picked up the ball.

“I won! I won! It's my birthday! It's my birthday!” Even though no music echoed from any of the Ridgecrest Elementary loudspeakers, I bit down on my bottom lip and started bouncing my hands out in front of me.

“You made one shot,” Trenton said. “I wouldn't exactly call that winning.”

I didn't pay any attention to him. All my life I looked like an incompetent doofus whenever I stepped onto a basketball court—but not today.

When I broke into the robot dance, Jose said, “Can the bell ring now? Please?” They only had to wait five more seconds.

Jose and Trenton didn't say good-bye as they trampled down the blacktop toward their classrooms. Riley sidled up to me and snickered. “Sorry about them,” he said. “They don't like to lose.”

“Oh yeah? I thought Trenton said we didn't win.”

Riley tossed the ball at my hands. “No, we did. I don't care if it was just one point. You won us the game, Cedar.”

We headed toward the big double doors, and I tossed the basketball into its bin.

“You know, you're pretty good with that thing,” Riley said. “You should try out for basketball when you get to Cavitt.”

“Shut up,” I said. “You know I'm not good at sports.”

“Because you never practice. If you just picked one and worked at it every day, you could be amazing.”

“Nah,” I said. “I don't think so.” I pulled the door open and let Riley walk in first. Our classroom this year was in D hall, near the back of the building.

“You could always play soccer with me too, you know—”

“*Wait.*” I stopped in the center of the hall, my right arm blocking Riley from taking another step. “You said when *I* get to middle school. You mean when *we* get to middle school.”

“Oh.” He stared at me for what seemed like an eternity. He coughed, started walking ahead of me, and said, “Yeah, that’s what I meant.”

#

I’m not going to lie: it was weird seeing Mrs. Whitely as our teacher.

As the librarian at Oakview Elementary, she was a sweet, loving person we could go to when we wanted to get *away* from our maniacal teachers. Now the situation was flipped, with Mrs. Whitely as the kind teacher, and my former enemy Mrs. Ullman as the Ridgecrest librarian.

Mrs. Whitely sat us all alphabetically, for the first time since Mrs. Brink, and I got stuck in the back again. I figured with a last name that started with S, I’d be closer to the middle, but it seemed everyone at Ridgecrest had a last name that started with A or B.

Nobody sat in the desk to the left of me, but Lena Walters sat to the right, also like in Mrs. Brink’s class. I stared at her up and down. She had grown more than anyone in our sixth grade class. It wasn’t so much her height that had grown, though; those mosquito bites on her chest in fifth grade were noticeably rounder.

“Haven’t I had, like, every class with you?” she said to me, even though she didn’t bother making eye contact.

“I don’t think *every* year. Didn’t you have Mrs. Moore for third grade?”

“Whatever,” she said. “Just... don’t sit so close to me. And don’t be annoying.”

I squinted. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Duh. I know you have a crush on me. I’m not stupid.”

“What? I do not.”

“Do too. I saw the way you were looking at my boobs.”

My eyes widened. I leaned forward, ready to defend myself, when the classroom door flung open behind me, and everyone turned to look, except me. I stayed focused on Lena, on her unexpected accusation—but then I finally turned my head. For a second the young man walking in stayed in the shadows, and I almost had a heart attack imagining Glen stepping toward me, a form in his hand confirming he had been held back.

Thankfully, it wasn’t him; it was the young writer extraordinaire.

“Sorry I’m late,” Josh said, out of breath. He dumped his backpack in one of the empty stalls and stepped toward the front of the room. He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. “I have a note.”

“That’s quite all right, Josh,” Mrs. Whitely said. “I was worried you’d been transferred to another teacher!” She walked up to him and gave him a hug. Any other teacher would’ve likely given the tardy Josh a condescending lecture, but Mrs. Whitely practically praised him for his late arrival.

Josh took a seat to the left of me. I glanced to Lena, then to Josh. Here we were, five years later, in the exact same seating arrangement. I had sprouted a few much-needed inches, Lena had actual breasts (and apparently had eyes in the side of her head), and Josh looked like a brand new person. I couldn’t deny it that first day back: he still had the wide glasses, the big ears, but something had changed about him over the summer. His

voice was a touch deeper; that might have been it. Or maybe I had just never paid enough attention to him before.

“All right, everyone,” Mrs. Whitely said, “welcome to your last year of elementary school!”

The room erupted in applause, like everyone momentarily forgot we still had a long twelve months to get through before we officially reached before middle school.

“I recognize most of your faces. I know it might be weird for you to have me as your teacher now, but I promise I'll try to make this transition for you as smooth as possible.” She tapped her fingers against her black jeans and started pacing at the front of the room. “On the other hand, if you hate reading, and if you hate writing, and just adore... say... math, I might not be the best fit for you. Because this year, unlike any other year, you'll be reading and writing until your *heads* explode!”

Josh appeared to be on the verge of tears he was so excited, while Lena rolled her eyes and sneaked a piece of gum in her mouth. I tried to catch a glimpse of Riley, but he was hidden in the front. I bet he wasn't happy. While he didn't hate reading—he read a biography about Kobe Bryant twice over the summer—he certainly didn't care about it as much as he used to.

“And when I say explode, I mean it,” Mrs. Whitely said. “I'm going to start by handing out your first three books. We'll be reading these throughout September.”

“*Three* books?” Lena said super loud. “In one month?”

“Yes, Lena, we're not going to be reading very much out of that boring textbook. I want you to read *real* books. Who can help me hand out copies to everyone?”

Josh didn't so much raise his hands as leap over the desks and join Mrs. Whitely at the front of the room. He took a big stack of her books and started distributing them, starting with me and Lena. I looked down at the lot, at the unfamiliar author names, and the intriguing covers. *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen. *Holes*, by Louis Sachar. *The Graveyard Book*, by Neil Gaiman.

When Josh took his seat, Mrs. Whitely leaned against her stool. "Now, has anyone read these before?"

A boy named Chester raised his hand. "I have, I have!"

"Which one?"

"*Holes*. It's amazing. I don't know what *The Graveyard Book* is, though."

"Oh, it'll knock your socks off, that's all I have to say about it. We're going to begin with *Hatchet* shortly, but before we get to that, I'd like to start with a writing exercise."

A few of the kids groaned, but most sat up in their chairs eagerly.

"Here's the assignment," she said. "I want you to pair up with someone sitting near you, pick one of the books I just handed out, and write a short scene of something you think *might* be in the book, simply based on the cover. Make sense?"

Lena looked my way, but my gaze immediately shifted to Josh. About ten sets of eyes settled on him too, but I pulled on his arm first. "Be my partner?"

He grinned. "Yeah, sure."

I shifted my chair and desk closer to his, and started perusing the covers.

Lena cleared her throat to the right of me. "Uhh, Mrs. Whitely?"

"Yes?"

“I don't have a partner.”

“Oh.” She tapped her finger against her chin and surveyed the room. “We have an odd number of students, don't we? Well, I guess you can just—”

“She can be in *our* group,” someone suggested, from the front. Riley.

He didn't peer back at me; he settled his gaze on Lena, and waved at her. She waved right back, with an obnoxious grin, grabbed her books, and headed to Riley and his partner, a freckle-faced kid I didn't recognize.

“All right, so take about fifteen minutes,” Mrs. Whitely said, walking to her desk, “and then I'll call on some volunteers.”

I leaned in close to Josh. “Which cover do you want to do?”

“Is it even a question?” He pushed *Hatchet* and *Holes* off the desk. “I love me some good horror, but I haven't heard of this one. You know I read five Stephen King books over the summer? My favorite was *It*.”

“Your favorite was what?”

“*It*.”

“It what?”

“Nevermind.” He took out a piece of paper and twirled a pencil around his fingers. “So what do you make of this cover, Cedar? What do you think that thing is on top of the gravestone?”

“I don't know.” I stared at it for a moment. “A bird's wing?”

“I think it's a boy's face.” He pushed his finger against different places. “See, here's the hair, the nose, the eyes.”

“Oh, wow! You're right.”

He started to write at the top of the page. “This book looks amazing,” he said.

“I’m gonna read it tonight.”

“You mean... *start* it tonight?”

“No. I mean, read the whole thing.”

He started writing a second paragraph, and just kept going; he clearly didn’t need my help. In other circumstances I might have tried to intervene and do some of the work myself, but Josh hypnotized me. With his writing, his talent, his passion for books. His lips curled, as he continued to write. When he reached the end of the page, he flipped it over. A minute went by and he didn't even blink. *I* didn’t blink; I just kept staring, not at any of the words he was putting down on paper, but on him.

He finally put his pencil down. He let out a happy sigh, pushed the piece of paper to me, and said, “Wanna see what I wrote?”

I looked down at the paper. I read over his first few sentences, which told of a boy who preferred going to the local graveyard every weekend rather than playing basketball with his friends.

I looked at Riley. His partner seemed to be doing most of the work too, while he listened to Lena go on and on about something to do with her dog, Butters. I kept waiting for him to glance at me, but he didn't.

A hand grazed my back. I jumped in my chair.

“Oh. Sorry,” Josh said. “Just grabbing my backpack.” He pulled it closer, then took out a red pen. He handed it to me. “Here. Make marks on it if you see any grammatical errors.”

“Oh. I don't think Mrs. Whitely needs us to do that.”

“It's fine. I want it to be perfect.”

He smiled at me, for the first time in a way that seemed to go beyond just a friendly gesture. I smiled back, then turned away.

I continued reading his paper, and kept a lookout for these so-called errors. I didn't see a single one. I read the last sentence. And made one mark with my red pen.

A tiny heart.

#

When we rode the bus home, Riley didn't say much, again. We went over to his house, ate tasteless nutrition bars from the pantry, and started on homework. After a few awkward minutes of silence, I booted up his computer.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Just putting on some music. Is that okay?”

“Uhh, yeah. I guess.” He went back to his math homework, as I pulled up his Justin Timberlake playlist.

I almost asked him what was going on. Was he going to be quiet and weird like this forever? I decided to take out *Hatchet*. I read to the end of the third page, but realized my eyes were glazing over the words and that my mind was elsewhere. I set the book down and pulled out the math worksheet.

“Can you help me with this?” I asked, even though I understood it completely.

He glanced at the sheet, then waved me over. “Sure. Let's do it together.”

We worked until 5:30, finishing everything but the first chapter of *Hatchet*, then headed to my house for dinner. When we walked in, my dad was already at the table and my mom was in the kitchen. Riley and I sat down, as my mom served plates piled high with spaghetti.

“This looks great,” I said, then noticed the empty chair. “Wait, is Eric coming?”

“He's at Gretchen's,” my mom said. “*Again*. I swear, it's like he's embarrassed to be around us these days.”

“He's not, honey,” my dad said, his mouth noticeably full. “He's in love. I think it's great he finally found someone.”

“You're saying I don't?”

“Honestly?” He took a sip of his white wine. “After all the problems, all the crap we've put up with, I figured you'd be thrilled.”

“What? No, you're missing the point.” My mom let out a loud, pained sigh. “I'm happy for him too. I just don't understand why he feels the need to go to *her* place and never bring her to ours.”

“Her house is closer to school, right, Cedar? Didn't you tell me that?”

I nodded. “She's like a block away from it.”

My mom set her fork down, and tapped her long fingernails against her plate.

“Yeah, I don't think he's doing *homework* right now.” She took a deep breath, and added,

“I don't like this. I don't like feeling like my son is up to no good—”

“Just relax. You need to start trusting him. He's better. He's finally growing up.”

She glared at my dad. “Oh really? Just a couple years ago you were the one grounding him every other week. Now you think he's perfect?”

“No. For Christ’s sake, that’s not what I’m saying!”

I shoved my palms to my ears to try to drown out the bickering. My mom and dad had gone at least a week without an argument so I’d felt safe in bringing Riley over.

Turned out I was wrong again.

“I’m sorry about this, Riley…” I started, but I didn’t say another word when I caught a glimpse of his face. A tear was rolling down his left cheek.

“When he gets home tonight, I want to have a little chat with him,” my mom said, and dug her fork into one of the turkey meatballs. She averted her eyes from my dad to me. “So, Cedar, how was your new teach—”

“*Riley?*” I said. “What’s the matter?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he leaned his head down, and started to cry.

I started rubbing his back, as I turned a cold eye to my parents. They both stared at us, their forks in mid-air. I couldn’t take it anymore. “What the hell’s the matter with you!” I shouted. “Riley’s here for five seconds and you just start yelling at each other. Arguing over *nothing*. Can’t we just have one dinner where you two pretend to actually like each other?”

My dad’s jaw dropped. “Whoa, mister. You’re out of line—”

“Andy, quiet,” my mom said. My dad was pissed as all hell, but my mom stayed calm. She leaned toward Riley. “What’s wrong, honey?”

He sniffled, and kept his eyes focused on the edge of the table. He shook his head. “I’m fine, Mrs. Swinton, thank you. I’m not crying because of the arguing.” He shot his bloodshot eyes at me. “I’m crying because I’m going to miss this.”

“*Miss this?*” I asked, perplexed. “Miss what?”

He attempted a smile, as he gazed at all three of us. “I’m moving. My mom got a new teaching job.”

“She did?” my dad asked. “Well, that’s fantastic. Good for her.”

“Wait... what?” My heart dropped, seemingly all the way to the soles of my feet. “How long have you known this?”

“Since Saturday.”

“Since *Saturday*? You’ve known about this all day today?”

“I didn’t...” His lips started quivering. “I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“So that’s why you’ve been acting all weird. I knew something was up.” I pushed my plate to the center of the table and set my chin against my shoulder. “So what neighborhood are you moving to?”

He wiped a tear away, and brought his gaze back down toward his feet.

“You’re still gonna be at Ridgecrest, right?” More silence. I dipped my head toward him. “*Right?*”

One of his tears hesitated on his upper lip. “My mom says it’s a good opportunity for her. My dad thinks so too. The job’s in Ann Arbor.”

“Ann Arbor?” I asked. “Where’s that?” I looked at my mom, whose face shifted from one of concern to harsh realization.

“Michigan,” Riley said. “She’s starting in January, but we’re gonna move before Thanksgiving. My dad said he wants to start building his client list there.”

“Michigan?” I was still trying to catch on. “Like, across the country, Michigan?”

He hesitated, like he wanted to let me down easy. “Uhh, yeah.”

All I had to do was blink. The tears came pouring out of my eyes like a torrential rainfall. I stood up from the table and marched out of the room.

“Cedar!” I heard my mom shout. “Oh, honey!”

I wrapped my arms around my stomach, which started tightening with a fierce, sharp pain. I opened the living room door and stumbled into the backyard. I stomped through my mom's poinsettias, leaped over the diving board, and climbed up into the tree house. I fell inside, belly first, and crawled to the back corner. When I couldn't move another inch, I shoved my arm in front of my face and continued to weep.

He found me just seconds later. “Cedar? Are you up there?” Riley started climbing. I didn't hear him reach the top. One second I heard his voice from below, and the next, his hand was on my shoulder. He turned me around. “Cedar, don't cry.”

I rested the side of my head against the plywood. “I'm not crying.”

He laughed. He looked a touch happier, even though his eyes were still watery like mine. “Liar.”

“I always worried something like this would happen. I just... really, really hoped it never would.”

“I know,” Riley said.

“You said you're moving in November?”

“Yeah. I'm not leaving tomorrow. I'm still here for a while.”

“That's good, I guess.”

“And this doesn't mean we have to stop being friends. I mean, we can call each other. E-mail. I'm sure my mom will let me come visit you too.”

“But...” I shook my head. “Michigan's so *far*.”

“It's not that far. I'm not going to Europe or something.”

I sat up, with difficulty, and scooted closer to him. He didn't budge, not when I bumped my legs against his, or when I brought my hand to his side. “It's just too hard to think. What's it gonna be like without you around?”

“You'll be fine,” Riley said. “I'm the one who's gonna have to start all over. I won't know anybody.”

“You can call me every day.”

“I will. Of course I will.”

“I don't want to live without you, Riley.” I brought my head down to his chest, and Riley wrapped his arms around my back. I always thought of myself as the one who was supposed to protect him, as the parental figure in this friendship. But at that moment, he was the one who needed to keep me from crumbling.

“I don't either,” he said.

“Maybe you'll move back?”

He hesitated. But then: “Yeah, who knows. Maybe.”

I looked up. Gazed into his eyes. I wanted to kiss him. More than when he was in the hospital, more than when he fell asleep in my bed last year, more than when that plane was going down and I thought we were about to die.

But I didn't.

I just said, “I love you.”

He smiled, and punched me on the shoulder. “I love you too, weirdo. Let's go back inside. Are you hungry? I'm starving.”

I wiped the tears away, and followed him out of the tree house. When I reached the ladder, I stopped, and took one last look inside.

Nothing would ever be the same.

The First Day of **Seventh Grade**

August 27, 2012

“It's not the same,” my mom said from the kitchen.

I crept up to the fireplace in the adjacent family room and listened as she talked on the phone. She sobbed as she tried to get through her words. She'd been crying for days, ever since we returned from University of Oregon, where we had dropped off Eric for his first year of college.

The worst was the first five minutes of the car ride, when her whole face puffed up into a red balloon. She didn't even bother wearing a seat belt as my dad pulled out of the parking lot, the shrillness of her weighty sobs making it sound like an ambulance was riding alongside us. I tried to comfort her by resting my head on her shoulder. She tapped my hand with affection, but didn't look back at me.

It had been nearly four days since we said good-bye to Eric, but I hadn't cried once. We never really spent that much time together, especially after he got his driver's license, so everything back home seemed exactly the same. We had always gotten along fine the last few years, but there was never anything to talk about, with his being so much older than me. It was like a little cub trying to befriend an older lion: not much for the older one to do but roar and walk away.

“I don't know, Sheryl,” my mom said. “I feel like I've done everything I can. I swear, I've got nothing left—”

A sneeze took hold of me, and I couldn't hold it back. I unleashed it all over the magazine rack.

My mom whirled around in her chair. “Cedar? Is that you?”

“Uhh, yeah. Hi.” I stood up.

“What are you doing?” She picked the phone back up and said, “Sheryl? Let me call you back.”

She clicked off the phone as I approached the kitchen island. I leaned over, and sneezed again, on her slippers.

“Oh, honey,” she said. “You're not getting sick, are you?”

“No, I'm fine.”

“Good. Wouldn't want you missing your first day.” She glanced at the clock, then said, “Go take your shower. I'll make you a lunch.”

“Okay.” I stepped back toward the hallway, but then stopped. I looked all around. There *was* something different about the house. “Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Where's Dad?”

“Your dad? He, uhh...” She hesitated. “He left for work early today.”

She opened the fridge and took out the turkey meat, and I headed down the hall. I showered real fast and put on my loose, green t-shirt and tan Corduroy pants. In the many times Riley called me over the summer, he begged me to stop wearing the Corduroy pants because he thought they made me look too nerdy, preferring my black sweatpants or my lone pair of blue Levi's.

I loved my little phone chats with Riley. I missed them. We hadn't talked in about a week, and I was starting to go through withdrawals. He visited me in June, right after school let out for summer break, but I never got a chance to visit him, especially with

everything we had to do to get Eric off to college. So we agreed I'd see him at winter break, which seemed centuries away. I didn't want to wait that long. I wanted Christmas in September.

When I returned to the kitchen, my mom was gone. Then I heard a door slam shut on the other side of the house.

I looked at the phone sitting patiently on the counter, just begging me to grab it. Riley didn't start school until after Labor Day, so he was probably just waking up. He probably wanted someone to talk to.

I snatched the phone and hopped on the family room couch. I dialed his number, and slammed the phone to my ear. Two rings. Four rings.

“You've reached the Alvarez residence, please leave your name and number, and we'll call you back,” Riley's mom said in a droll voice over the answering machine.

When it beeped, I hesitated. Riley probably had a hundred messages from me so far this year. Did I really need to add another one?

I opened my mouth. Tried to think of something to say. “Hey, Riley, it's Cedar. Just wanted to say hi before I start my first day. Call me later?” Another hesitation. Then: “I miss you.”

I hung up the phone before I could make a bigger fool of myself.

I grabbed my sack lunch and met my mom at the front door. When she gave me a kiss on the cheek—the kind of informal kiss that seemed to get more awkward every year—I noticed a tear forming in her eye.

“What's wrong, Mom?”

“Nothing. I'm just sad.”

“Because of Eric? You miss Eric?”

She nodded, and started walking past me. “You don't want to be late for the bus. I'll see you after school, okay?”

“Okay. See you later.”

I headed to the bus stop, the same bus stop. It was the same walk I had taken every year since kindergarten, but the big difference this time was that the sun was barely out. Cavitt Middle School started early—7:30 AM versus 9 AM at Ridgecrest—and I was surprised at how much energy I had. It was gorgeous outside, not a cloud in the sky, with that strong, seductive whiff of change in the air. It wasn't only the first day of school, but the first day of *middle* school. Even though Eric told me, in one of our few meaningful chats together, that middle school was the time of your life you just had to survive, I was stoked. My days as a kid were over, and I was on to bigger and better things.

I stopped at the edge of the sidewalk and turned around. There was no one behind me. No Mom. No Glen. And no Riley.

All that was missing that morning was my best friend calling my name.

#

I knew as soon as I entered Cavitt that I would look back at this building one day as being tiny and archaic and poorly designed, but at that moment, on that first day of seventh grade, as I gazed at the high ceilings and large gym and sharply dressed teachers, I was in awe.

My first class of the day was French, and when the five-minute bell ignited through the school, I started picking up the pace. I bumped into some familiar faces, like Jose and Trenton, and saw new ones as well, including a few giants who looked more like high school seniors than eighth graders. I promptly avoided them.

I was three doors away from my classroom when Glen slammed me against the nearest locker and said, “Out of my way, shithead.” He high-fived two of his friends and continued walking down the hallway. He was about six feet tall now, with a large pair of baggy jeans and a head the size of a bowling ball. He shot me a grin as he turned a corner, and then he disappeared out of sight.

I kept on moving in the other direction. I didn't cry or hang my head in shame. If I showed any semblance of a frown, it was for my disappointment in Glen. I wanted him to be better than this. After I hurt him with the golf club, he avoided me for a while, didn't try to stir up any trouble, and it appeared like he was going to change his ways. But he was an eighth grader now, and he needed to be the man on campus. I hoped I wasn't going to be his prime target again. I may not have had access to my dad's golf clubs any longer, but I knew where my next-door neighbor Mr. Stephens kept his.

My French teacher Mr. Mataran, a goofy looking guy with long gray hair and black caterpillars for eyebrows, waved me in as I took my first step into the classroom. He didn't specify a seat so I found an open one near the back. A few more stragglers headed in after me, but I was surprised, when the bell rang at 7:30, how close I had been to being tardy.

“I would've blamed it on Glen,” I said, under my breath.

“*Bonjour!*” Mr. Mataran said. “*Comment t'appelles-tu?*”

We all stared at him like he was an alien from planet Huh. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and sat on the edge of his desk. Just stared at us, waiting for someone to respond.

“*Je m'appelle Emily,*” a girl said from behind me.

“Ahh, *bien,*” Mr. Mataran said, and slapped his left knee. “I’m glad somebody’s paying attention. Nice to meet you, Emily.”

He stood up and pointed at the board, which showed in big letters the directions on how to respond to the question he asked.

“Welcome to French 1,” Mr. Mataran said, with a thick accent. He grabbed a big stack of papers on his desk and started handing them out to the students. “And I really mean it when I say, *merci,* for being here. That word means, *thank you.* Over the summer we were very close to having this class canceled, in favor of more Spanish classes. It’s what the district wants. Spanish, Spanish, *Spanish!*” He slammed the stapled document on my desk. “Because of all of you, I get to keep doing what I love, and teach the language I adore.”

He headed back to the front of the room and clicked on the overhead projector. “We have a very short syllabus to go over this morning, only seven pages.” He peered out at us, and set his eyes on me. “*You,*” he said, pointing at my face. “What’s your name?”

I cowered in my seat. “Umm... Cedar?”

“Cedar, good. Could you read out loud the first paragraph on page one?”

Just the first paragraph. That didn’t seem too bad. Until I looked down and saw that it made up the entire first page.

“Sure thing,” I said, with a sigh. I started to read aloud, hoping my voice wouldn’t break. That’d been happening way too much lately.

Towards the end of class, Mr. Mataran asked us to pair up with someone to practice our “Hello’s” and “How are you’s” in French. I turned to the girl beside me, but she was already chatting up a blond guy behind her. She even shifted her desk away from me before I could ask to join the group. I looked at the two girls in front of me, plus the older-looking guy on the other side of the room.

Then someone tapped on my shoulder. I looked back, at the girl who had spoken at the beginning. She had curly brown hair, plump lips, a mole on her left cheek. She set her elbows down on the desk and said, “You still need a partner?”

“Yes!” I said, relieved. “Are you free?”

Her smile told me she was, so I turned my desk around and faced her. “I’m Emily,” she said, and put her hand out. “It’s nice to meet you.”

I shook it, and then my laugh broke up the awkward formality between us. “Umm, shouldn’t you be addressing me in *French*?”

“Oh, that’s right!” She laughed, too, and ran both her hands through her hair, in embarrassment. “Okay, let me try that again.”

“No, it’s fine. You already know French, right?”

She shrugged. “A few basic expressions. I’m not fluent or anything.” She cleared her throat, and said, super slow, “*Comment t’appelles-tu?*”

I sat up real tall and straight. “Right. Okay. *Bonjour...*”

“No, try to roll your R’s a little.”

One word and she was also criticizing. “*Hey*. Let me finish. I can do this.”

“Okay, okay. Sorry.”

I leaned forward, trying to remember the words without glancing at the whiteboard. “*Bonjour, Emily. Je m'appelle Cedar. Comment itzy-vous?*”

She burst out laughing, and brought her hand to her mouth.

“What? What'd I do?” I asked, but she just kept on laughing, with two loud snorts for good measure. “Oh, come on. It wasn't that bad, was it?”

“No, I'm sorry. It's just... you said *itzy-vous*. It's *allez-vous*.”

I looked back at the board. “Oh. Oops.”

“That's all right. You're learning, you're getting better.”

“Yeah, with you laughing in my face. Thanks a lot!”

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I'm not a good partner. I won't laugh again.”

She kept her eyes on the desk for a few seconds, then looked back at me. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. She looked at me like she had a crush on me, and at the same time, like she felt sorry for me. I pretended, for the moment, it was the former.

“You're a *great* partner,” I said. “Are you going to answer my question?”

“Yes, here goes.” She cleared her throat again, so loud I thought she was going to cough up her morning's breakfast. “*Je suis bien, un peu fatigüe.*” She sighed, and stared at me. “*Je t'aime.*”

I lowered my head. “*Je* what?”

“Nothing.”

“No, what'd you say?”

The bell rang, as she said, “You'll find out soon enough.”

#

My other five classes of the day went by smoothly, except for Honors English, which dragged on forever and introduced me to a teacher in her sixties who looked and talked like the Wicked Witch of the West. The skin on her face was pressed so far back that she couldn't smile or frown, and the obvious black wig on her head looked ready to blow right out the window. She called on me at the end of the period, and when I didn't know the answer to her question—something to do with iambic pentameter—she swatted a long ruler toward my desk and nearly struck my right hand.

“Is that legal?” I asked Josh, when we stepped into the locker room after P.E.

“You should talk to your parents,” he said. “You know, press charges.”

“That’s probably not the best idea, especially not on my first day.” I opened my locker and started taking off my shirt. “If Mrs. Kraufson hates me for the whole year, though, I'm gonna get an F for sure.”

“Then sue her *again!*”

We both laughed, as Josh opened his locker and took off his shirt with much more grace than I did. His body was lean, and, unlike my back, devoid of acne. He had a small pool of sweat dripping down the center of his chest that he quickly wiped away, then he pulled his blue t-shirt over his head. Josh had grown a few more inches over the summer, and his voice had dropped even more than mine. I tried hard not to stare at him, but I couldn't help myself.

“What's been your favorite class today?” he asked.

“Probably History. Mrs. McGregor is so cool. She said that on Fridays we just play games.”

His jaw dropped. “Are you serious? How did I not get in that class? I want that class!” Josh removed his shorts, to reveal a black pair of boxer-briefs. Again, I couldn't look away. It was like I had some kind of demon in my brain telling me to stay focused on his body no matter what.

“Is this your boyfriend, Cedar Weiner?” a harsh voice said to my left.

Glen stomped toward me, at least three other eighth graders behind him smiling and egging him on. My first instinct was to close my locker, so I did; the second was to run, but there wasn't time. He put his arm out to block me, then slammed his fist against the locker next to mine.

“What's the matter?” he asked, his eyes big and tired, enough hair coming in on his upper lip to form a mini-moustache. “You scared?”

I could've started crying, could've called for the gym teacher. Instead, I grinned, and said, “You know... I'm not, actually.”

He crossed his arms. “What was that?”

I decided to take a play from Riley's handbook, and laugh in the face of fear. “I said I'm not afraid of you, Glen *Dumber*.”

Josh obviously wanted to duck under Glen's henchmen and leave, but one of them waved his finger at him.

Glen said, “Wrong choice of words, bud.”

I didn't blink, didn't show him how tied up in knots my insides were. "Who'd you bully when you were in seventh grade, and I wasn't here? You must've been so bored without me around."

He cracked both his knuckles, like he was some deranged serial killer ready to strike his first victim. "You still haven't answered my question."

"What was that?"

"Is that your boyfriend?" He pointed at Josh.

"What? Josh is my *friend*." I glanced at the three guys standing behind him; all had snarky little grins on their faces, like they'd been waiting all day for my pummeling. "What about them? Are those *your* boyfriends? Or do you just date one of them and use the two others for kissing practice?"

"*Wow*." He pursed his lips for a moment. "You really grew a pair, didn't you? Even if you still sound like Mickey Mouse." He chuckled. "And even if you couldn't make the basketball team." Glen and the others tugged on their awkwardly fitted black-and-red jerseys.

Riley had insisted I try out for basketball, so I did, more for him than for me. I didn't put a lot of heart into the try-outs, though, and I figured after I wasn't chosen that the coaches must've seen that. Still, I was better at the stupid sport than Glen.

"You guys are on the B team, right?" I asked. Glen had definitely set himself up for this one. "I wouldn't call that a huge achievement."

He took a step closer to me, kicked his foot against the bench between us, and grabbed my t-shirt. "Faggot," he said.

He said the word so nonchalantly, like it meant nothing. I shook my head. “Is this all you’re ever gonna be, Glen? Aren’t you tired of this? I thought you would’ve grown up by now.”

He let me go. For a moment, he looked like he might even apologize. But then he grinned, showcasing his black monster braces. “It must be so sad for you, now that your other boyfriend’s gone. Do you miss him, Cedar? Do you miss Riley?”

“Every day,” I said, without hesitation.

“Figured as much.” He stared into my eyes so intensely my contact lenses started to fog up. “That must have been painful for you. When I heard he moved away, I got this image of you, standing in your shower, just crying your eyes out, saying, ‘Oh, Riley, why’d you have to go, why’d you leave me here? Wahhhhh.’”

“Really?” I asked. “You pictured me in the shower?”

He studied me, no expression. His face was an inch away from mine.

I hated that word, but I had to do it just this once: “Who’s the faggot now, Glen?”

He backed away, brought his fist toward his mouth. He glanced at his buddies, then looked back at me.

Glen swung his fist toward my face. I jerked my head back and missed it. He nearly topped over the bench that separated us, but he found his footing, then tried to hit me again, this time with his hand outfaced. When he missed again, I grabbed his arm.

“Stop this,” I said. “You’re better than this!”

He tugged his arm away, and brought his hand up a third time.

I pointed right at his face. “You try to hit me again, next time I’ll bring two golf clubs. *And* a three wood.”

He stopped his hand, before it touched me, and instead slammed it against my locker. "I'm gonna get you, Cedar Weiner. When you're least expecting it."

I nodded. "Nice seeing you too, Glen."

He stepped toward the stairs, and headed to the gym for afternoon practice. His henchmen followed him, none of them bothering to look back at me.

"Whoa. That was nuts," Josh said, after we went upstairs a different way. We started walking toward the side exit of the school through a large auditorium. "What the hell's the matter with you? He could've *killed* you, Cedar."

"Nah. He's a lot of talk, trust me."

"That was just so... you know. *Brave*."

"You would've done the same thing."

He shook his head and pulled tighter on his backpack straps. "You forget we've been going to the same school together since, what, kindergarten? I know Glen Gummer. He's beaten up enough kids to fill this auditorium. And whenever he came close to me, I just ran the other way. You're one of the only people who actually stand up to him."

I shrugged. "Part of it is, I think he's still scared of me."

"Because of that golf club thing?"

"Yeah." I stopped a few yards from the exit doors. "You know about that?"

He slowed down too. The auditorium, used for school assemblies and basketball games, was completely empty. "Cedar, everyone knows about that. None of us saw it, but we heard about it. Aren't you scared he might one day try to take revenge or something?"

"I'm not worried about it," I said. "We've both moved on. My parents are happy I haven't tried to kill anyone since, so that's something." I looked down for a moment. Saw

a crayon nestled underneath the bottom bleachers. It was the color pink. “But, you know... I don't regret what I did. He hurt Riley. He hurt him bad.”

Josh looked down too, and kicked his shoes together. “Riley, yeah. You really care about him, don't you?”

I nodded. Opened my mouth to answer, but then closed it, when I heard noises to the left of me, in the back corner of the auditorium. It started as giggling, then turned into frantic whispers.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Josh said, and pointed. “Over there.”

I pushed my right ear against the nearest door. Heard more whispering. Two people were talking, but I couldn't make out the words. I grabbed the knob and pulled the door open.

It was a storage closet of some kind. Lena and Trenton were slammed up against each other, her lipstick covering his cheeks and lips.

“Eww, gross!” Josh shouted over my shoulder.

“What are you...” I started. “*Lena?*”

Lena leaped backward, banging her head against a giant locker. For a second I thought she might be hurt but she quickly bounced back, pushed Trenton out of her way, and shouted, “*Perverts!*”

Trenton collected his shirt on the floor, as she stormed toward me and Josh. Her hair was as long as it had ever been, reaching past her waist, and she was noticeably thinner, especially in her cheekbones. “Well, well, if it isn't Cedar Swinton, and Josh

Sweet. My old *pals*. Figures you two would be the ones to open the door. You've both had crushes on me since the beginning of time."

"I've never had a crush on you," I said.

"Me neither," Josh added.

"Oh really?" She crossed her arms. "You must be gay then. Not to say I'm surprised."

I looked at Josh, to see if he'd react. Instead, he took a step toward her and asked, "What were you doing in there?"

"Why don't you mind your own business?" She looked him up and down, like she momentarily considered him to be next week's boyfriend. In sixth grade I had seen her with five different guys, including a high school sophomore.

I'd just said it to Glen, and the words came out of me, whether I wanted them to or not: "You're better than this, Lena."

She moved toward me, the same way Glen did when he readied his first punch. "Better than what?"

"You don't need to make out with every guy at school to make people think you're popular."

She put her hand out, but instead of striking me, she set it on my chin. "That's where you're wrong, mister. I *am* popular. I'm the most popular girl here."

"I guess what I'm trying to say..." Looking back, my words were slightly ominous. "Don't be someone you're not, just to impress other people."

"Thanks for the advice, Dr. Phil." She forced a weird smile, looked back into the storage room, and said, "Come on, Trenton. This is boring." She waved him forward, and

he followed her, like a little puppy dog, and they stormed out through the exit doors, possibly to go their separate ways, more likely to play some more tonsil hockey.

“Wow, can you believe that?” Josh asked.

“I know,” I said, nodding toward the storage closet “*This* is apparently where you go to make out.”

I probably shouldn't have darted my eyes at Josh at that moment, but I did—and he stared right back. He even smiled for a second, before he spun around.

“I should get going,” he said. “My mom's probably waiting for me.”

I glanced at my watch. 2:15. My bus always left at 2:10.

“Uhh, yeah,” I said, as I followed him out the building. “She wouldn't be able to give me a ride, would she?”

#

I arrived to an empty house. My dad was at work, but my mom was gone, too, having laid out a plate of Rice Krispie treats on the kitchen table with a note that said she'd be home in a bit. I took three: one for now, and two for my backpack. Then I pushed the answering machine button. “You have one new message,” it said.

I waited patiently for Riley's voice at the other end, but it was just the gardener talking, something to do with a schedule change. I tuned out the rest of the message and headed for my room.

I worked on homework for the next three hours—an essay about Robert Frost for English and twenty exponents problems for Algebra—and didn't stop until the garage

door opened and closed, twice. I heard my mom rattling the pans in the kitchen, my dad's voice echoing down the corridor. I liked listening to my parents talk as I did my homework. It put me at ease, and kept me focused. At 6:30, my mom called me into the kitchen.

Dinner looked amazing—teriyaki chicken with rice pilaf and polenta, not bad for a Monday night. My dad wasn't blabbering away on his phone for once either, and my mom looked rested and calm.

But still—something was off.

My dad wasn't touching his food, for one, and my mom had a glass of red wine in her hand, even though I only saw her drink alcohol on the weekends.

“Cedar, there you are,” my dad said, with a fake grin. “I've been dying to know, how was your first day of middle school?”

“It was...” I stayed standing, in front of my chair. “...okay, I guess.”

“Think you'll have more homework this year?”

“Probably.” I glanced at my mom. “Did Riley call me today?”

“No, uh-uh,” she said. “Sorry, honey.”

I looked back and forth between them, for ten seconds, at least. I still wouldn't sit down. “What's going on?” I finally asked. “You two are acting weird.”

“We're not acting weird,” my dad said, right away.

“Why would you say that, Cedar?” my mom added.

“I don't know. You guys are just so...” I searched for the right word. “Quiet.”

“Why don't you have a seat,” my dad said, pointing to my plate. “Your dinner's getting cold.”

I sat down, reluctantly, and stared at the food. As delicious as my mom's Rice Krispie Treats were, I was officially starving. I cut two bites of the chicken and dunked them in the gooey sauce, then took a bite of the rice. I looked up as I chewed. My parents weren't even touching their food.

My mom leaned in toward me. "Honey, there's something your dad and I need to talk to you about."

"What?" I said, my mouth full.

"Well..."

"Oh my God," I said, in mid-swallow. "Are we moving to Michigan too?"

I'm not sure looking back if I posed that question genuinely, or if I already knew the fate of my family and was just trying to prolong the inevitable. I always tried to be optimistic, even when I knew the trouble I was about to face.

"No, we're not moving," my dad said. "Well... not all of us."

"Cedar." My mom grabbed my hand, in more of a rough way than an affectionate one. "Your father and I have decided to spend a little time apart. We... uhh..." She looked at my dad. "We want you to know that this has nothing to do with you."

My whole chest heaved upward, painfully, unexpectedly. "You mean... you're getting a divorce?"

"No, no," my dad said. "It's a separation. Just for a little while."

"Are you moving out?" I asked him.

"Just for the time being. And I can come right back if I want to. I'll see you every weekend, Cedar. We'll make this work—"

“You're lying. You're getting *divorced*, aren't you?” I studied my mom's face. Her features told me the truth.

“Nothing is certain,” she said.

Nothing is certain. The worst sentence in the English language.

My eyes welled up with tears, and I excused myself from the table. My mom called after me, but I didn't stop. I ran through the kitchen and grabbed the phone.

I plopped down on my bed and screamed into my pillows. The mix of screaming and crying wore me out after a long minute, so I flipped onto my back and stared at the ceiling. I wiped the tears away, pulled the phone up to my chest, and started dialing.

One ring. Two. I closed my eyes.

“Come on. Pick up the phone.”

I bit down on my bottom lip. More tears streamed into my mouth. I tasted the warm salt on my tongue.

Three rings. Four.

“Please... Riley, I need you.”

Five rings. Six. Then voice-mail. I listened to his mom's voice, then the beep. I didn't say a word. Just listened to the dead air.

“Riley?” I whispered. I waited for him to pick up. “Riley, are you there?”

More silence. I started crying again. I missed him, and I needed him, and I loved him, and he wasn't here with me.

“Pick up. *Please* pick up.”

I waited one more second. I thought I heard breathing on the other end.

“Riley? Are you there?”

The First Day of **Eighth Grade**

August 26, 2013

“Cedar? I'm here. I'm right here.”

“Oh.” I laughed into the phone and fell back against the black leather sofa.

“Sorry, I lost you. I've only got one bar!”

“I've got two. Beat that.”

“Hey, your mom bought you a new iPhone. My dad just gave me his old 4S. This thing's *so* 2011. I'm surprised it turns on.”

A deep breath on the other end informed me I was whining too much. I kicked my feet up on the wooden table and scooted my dad's ashtray to the side.

“I'm sorry, am I bothering you?” I asked.

He laughed. His attitude could be so cryptic on the phone. “Not at all. I'm excited to see you today. I feel like it's been forever.”

“Hey, I'm not the one who takes a month vacation to Hawaii. Who goes for four whole weeks? By day five, aren't you like, hey, look, the ocean, wow, can we go home now?”

“Yeah, I got pretty bored toward the end. But it was still amazing. We did this thing in Maui called the Road to Hana, where you drive along a cliff for two hours. Plus, the banana bread over there tastes like crack.” He paused. “Well... if I knew what crack tasted like.”

“*Do* you know what crack tastes like?”

“Umm... uhh...”

“*Josh.*” I pushed my head back against the wall and stared out at the cloudless sky. “You would tell me if you became a drug addict since I last saw you, right?”

“Yes, Cedar. I promise.”

“And?”

“Well... I didn't really like crack. Meth, now *that's* the good stuff.”

I started laughing, as my dad pulled the screen-door open and stumbled out on the balcony. Dressed in a fancy black suit, his dark hair slicked back in a way that made him look like a New Jersey hit man, he appeared solemn and tired, with large rubber-band-sized circles around his eyes. He kicked the sofa.

“Cedar, there you are. What the hell are you doing out here? You're gonna be late.”

“Hold on,” I said into the phone. I turned to my dad. “I *am* ready to go. I was waiting for you.”

“Who are you talking to?” he asked.

“Josh.”

“Your friend from school, Josh?”

“Uh huh.”

“Aren't you going to see him today? Why'd you have to call him?”

“Oh... well...” He did have a point. “I just called to make sure I had the right number in my phone, that's all.” It was half-true. I'd only had my new phone for a week, and I'd wanted to use it as much as possible. So I called Josh like a weirdo at 6:45 in the morning, both to confirm I had his number, and to hear that sweet Sweet voice again.

My dad didn't question me any further; instead, he moved toward the living room.

“You've got one minute. Hurry up.”

I pressed the phone back against my ear. I expected to hear static. “Josh?”

“Yeah?”

“That was my dad. I have to go.”

“Me too. I'll see you at lunch, I guess?” We didn't have any classes together in the morning, but we had Computers and Weights in the afternoon.

“That sounds perfect,” he said. “The bench under the arch?”

“Yeah, you remembered.”

“Of course I remembered. Don't forget to bring me what you've been working on,” he said, and then I heard his mom scream in the background, something about dirty plates in the sink.

“Okay. See you later.”

I hung up the phone, then looked down at my screen. In the FAVORITES tab, I probably should have had my mom, my dad, maybe Eric. But only Josh had made the cut, at least for now.

I glanced at the other numbers I had in my phone. Emily, of course. My mom's friend, Sheryl, I don't know why. Glen, more as a joke than anything. The number for Ridgecrest Elementary, which went straight to Mrs. Whitely's office. I almost clicked my phone off, when I saw the name at the bottom.

Riley's phone number had been disconnected back in April, but he had never bothered to call and tell me what his new number was, or if he had moved, or if he was

even alive. I signed up for Facebook over the summer, but he wasn't on there. I Googled his school, but there was nothing about him.

I shook my head. I didn't know why I had his contact info in the first place. He was a stranger now. A ghost.

My dad called to me from the front door. I grabbed my loaded backpack and slipped on my comfy green TOMS. My walk from my bedroom to the front door went on forever, and I had to remind myself that I was in a condo, not a house. My dad had chosen a unit barely a mile away from from my mom, one that, on the fourth floor, was three floors higher up than anywhere I'd ever lived. I loved the view of the tranquil Folsom Lake, but it was also odd not being able to roll out of my window and jump on my bike, as I'd been able to do for so many years.

I followed my dad to his car, and he pulled onto Auburn Folsom Road and swerved around a large tractor that was taking up both of the lanes.

"Asshole!" he screamed, and waved his middle finger out his window. He was doing that more and more lately. Ever since he'd moved out of the house, he'd become a different person, swearing a lot, going to bed early, making things like Hot Pockets for dinner, and unleashing his inner rage, which seemed to intensify with every car ride.

"What's that guy doing? I swear, people are idiots. *Morons*, Cedar. They think they own the goddamn road."

"Yeah, you're right," I said, agreeing with him mostly just to keep him calm. I kept my eyes glued to my phone. I had downloaded more than forty apps over the weekend and didn't know which one to try next. Angry Birds Space was fun, but UNO had me borderline obsessed. I picked something new.

My dad tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, humming to a Coldplay song.

“So is it weird me taking you to school? I bet you're not really missing the bus, are you?”

I nodded, although I never really minded the bus. “Yeah, this is way better.”

“Now you've got your dad as a chauffeur. For no extra charge!” He slapped me on the shoulder, but I didn't react. I kept my eyes glued to my phone.

“How was your mom this weekend? Did she seem okay to you?”

I shrugged.

“Cedar?”

I finally looked at him. “What?”

“I asked you a question.” He snatched the phone from me. Quickly powered it down and tossed it in the back seat.

“Dad, what the hell! You just made me die!”

“Cedar, I'll make this very simple for you. You disrespect me like that again, and I'm gonna take the phone back, understand?”

I settled in my seat, crossed my arms tight, and stared out the passenger window.

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“Now... I'll ask you again. How's your mother?”

“She's okay. She does seem a little more sad than usual.”

“Really?” He seemed almost elated by the news, with an unmistakable grin forming on his face. “Why do you think that is?”

“I don't know. I didn't ask.”

My dad picked up speed as he passed another vehicle, this one an actual car. “Is it something to do with that Bob guy? Are they still dating?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

Mere weeks after my mom and dad separated last September, my mom started seeing a lawyer named Bob Billings, who sounded like a character from *The Lord of the Rings*. I was okay with the guy, until he spent more and more time at the house, and started kissing my mom right in front of me. I never told my dad that part. He hadn’t gone on a single date in the last year—any that I knew of—and I didn’t want to upset him.

“How about your brother? Was he doing any better before he left?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t lie to my dad about that one. My dad had been away on business for a week, and Eric and I had spent our final days of summer shacked up with my mom. By Friday I wished I had accompanied my dad on his trip, because watching Eric’s heartache was too hard to take.

“He barely left his room,” I said. “It’s like she was his true love or something.”

“Well, she was his *first* love. He really liked University of Oregon, but let’s not kid ourselves; he picked it because she was going there.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I said, pushing my feet against the glove compartment. I caught a quick flash of my dad’s menacing eyes, so I brought my feet back down to the floor. “I can’t believe what she did. Just up and moves across the country without even telling him, and then calls to break up over the *phone*? You should’ve seen him, Dad. He must’ve spent an entire day crying.”

“He’ll get over it. He’s a big boy. I mean, he went back, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, they left Saturday morning. Mom’s coming back this afternoon, I think.”

“Good.” My dad stopped at the red light at Douglas Boulevard. He gritted his teeth, annoyingly, for a few seconds, then said, “So. What about you?”

I tapped my hands against my knees, then the glove compartment. I was so useless without my phone; I'd already forgotten what I was supposed to do with my hands when it was gone. "What about me?"

"Is there anyone special you're excited to see today?"

I sighed. Was he really going there? "Dad..."

"Your mom told me you were calling some girl named Emily a lot this summer. You haven't told me much about her."

When the light turned green, my dad blew through the intersection, and swerved around another car, this one a Jeep that he seemed to be playing a dangerous game of chicken with. He turned on his left blinker. Cavitt Middle School was up on the left.

"She's a friend, Dad. She's really nice."

"Okay, she's nice," he said. "But is she *cute*?"

"Sure. Yeah."

"What does she look like?"

I rolled my eyes. This was officially the longest drive to school in history. "Why are you asking me all these questions?"

He finally pulled into the front entrance, thank God, and I grabbed my backpack from the back seat. When he glanced at his side mirror, I snatched my phone too.

"I just... I want to know about you, that's all." He stopped in the loading area. My hand was already on the door handle, but he kept rambling on. "I don't get to see you as much anymore."

"Yeah, well whose fault is that?" I didn't know where it came from, why I said it, what the hell I was thinking. My dad's one-night stand with some bartender in L.A. might

have started the whole mess with my parents, but I didn't mean to demonize him. I shook my head almost immediately. "I'm sorry. I didn't..."

"It's okay." I expected him to lash out at me, the same way he did when he took the phone away. But he smiled instead. "You got everything?"

"I do." I needed to make up for that comment, make it less weird when I saw him again on Friday. "I, uhh... I love you, Dad."

It didn't come out all that genuine, but my dad nodded, and said, "I love you, too, son." I went to shut the door, when my dad added, "And Cedar?"

"Yeah?"

"If you ever need to talk about anything... anything at all... I'm always here for you, okay? I won't judge."

I narrowed my eyes. Was he talking about what I *thought* he was talking about? If my dad really wanted me to open up to him, I had a piece of news that would surely throw him for a loop.

"Okay, Dad," I finally said.

"Have a good first day!" he shouted, and he pulled away before I had a chance to properly slam the passenger door.

I walked toward the entrance of Cavitt. The sun beamed its power against my face, and within seconds, I was already sweating. I hoisted my backpack over my shoulders and turned on my phone. When it beeped, I almost dropped it in surprise. I looked down at the screen. A missed call.

UNKNOWN NUMBER, it said.

#

“What do you think?” Emily asked, as she raised the two puppets into the air. They were supposed to be Romeo and Juliet, but she had dressed them up like Romeo and Romeo.

“Uhh, Em?” I pulled them away and brought them over my head. I pointed at the puppet on the right. “Is this supposed to be Juliet? She's wearing jeans.”

“So? Girls can wear jeans. You expect her to be wearing a dress or something? *Typical.*”

“They both have t-shirts. You didn't even give Juliet long hair.”

She shrugged, and pointed to the top of her head. At first I thought she was veering my attention to the large mole on her forehead that I always tried to ignore, but then I realized she wanted me to officially comment on her new shorter haircut. Instead of her black hair pulled back into a ponytail, her locks were chopped off above her shoulders.

“You haven't said a word about it all period, C,” she said. “Does it look bad?”

“No, of course not. It looks great!” And it did. “Sorry, I've been a little off today. Things at home have been a little—”

“*Bonjour*, how's it going over here?” Mr. Mataran interrupted, tapping me three times on the back. “Are these yours?” He pulled the puppets toward his face. “Cedar, these are wonderful. How'd you manage to create all this detail in forty-five minutes?”

“Uhh, actually, Emily made them.”

He tossed the puppets back on my desk. “You mean, you didn't help at all?”

“I’m writing the script, Mr. Mataran.” I hoped he wouldn’t look at what I had so far, but he glanced down anyway.

“That’s barely half a page,” he said. “You and Emily are first up in your presentations on Friday. You’re not going to let me down, are you, Cedar?”

“No, I promise.” I grinned, real big and fake. At the end of French 1 last year I bombed the final test, bringing my grade from an A- to a B. I wanted to do better in French 2. Even if it meant sucking up to Mr. Mataran on a daily basis. “You look thinner, by the way. Did you lose weight over the summer?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, and walked to the other side of the room.

“You *will* finish the script this week, right?” Emily asked. “He told us it was a huge part of our grade.”

I tapped my pen against the desk. “It’s the first day of school, Em. Do you have to make me this jumpy about my grades on the very first day?”

I sighed, and she made a pouty face. Neither of us said anything for a moment.

“You really think I look nice?” she finally asked, with a smile.

“Yes, why? Is there someone you want to look nice *for*?”

She just stared at me, like she was re-playing my question in her head a few times.

“Well... not really.”

“That’s not a no,” I said, fast.

She leaned forward, her lips hovering so close to my face she could have kissed me. “Can you keep a secret, C?”

“Always.”

“My brother made this new friend over the summer. He’s a big guy, so he’s not really my type. But he’s super cute.”

“Oh yeah? Does he go here?”

“No, he's a freshman at Woodbridge Ranch.”

“Oh. Wow. A *freshman*.”

“Yup.” She pulled the Juliet puppet back to her desk and started coloring in the hair with a purple crayon. “So what were you saying about things at home? Is your brother any better?”

“He’s doing okay. He went back to school, so that’s a good thing. I was starting to think he might drop out.” I started to write a sentence for my script, but I quickly erased it. I wished I had been practicing my French more over the summer, since most of the words and phrases had slipped out the back door of my brain. “My dad was acting kind of strange this morning, actually. He told me I can come to him if I ever have any questions. But he said it in a way...” I shrugged. “I don't know, it was just weird.”

“Really?” She hesitated. “Do you think he knows?”

I glanced at the other students in the class, who were all working hard on their puppet presentations and paying no attention to us. I locked eyes with her. “Can *you* keep a secret?”

“Of course.”

“I was thinking about asking my dad to come over to my mom's tonight, after she gets home. It’s time, Em. I want to come out to them.”

“You *what*?” Emily asked, loud and high-pitched. A few eyes turned to us, but not many, thankfully.

“Is that bad? I've been thinking about it a lot.”

“No, that's great, if you're ready for it. But... *C*.” She sounded like she was talking in French, her words were so scattered. “Are you sure? That's a really big step.”

“I know, but... both my mom and my dad have seemed a little down lately. Maybe it'll help cheer them up.”

“To hear that you're...” She looked over her shoulder, then leaned her head down and whispered, “To hear that you're *gay*?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“C, don't do it to make them feel better. Do it for you.”

“No, I know.”

“And don't do it unless you're sure,” Emily said. “I know you talked about Josh, like, *all* last year, but have you guys done anything? Have you even kissed him?”

“Well, no. He doesn't even know I like him, Em.”

“*Still*?” She fidgeted with her giant thumbs. “But you asked him to that dance last spring.”

“Yeah, but he thought I was joking.”

Emily crossed her arms and looked at me with a thoughtful stare. “C, have you ever been in love?”

I stared out the nearest classroom window, letting everything around me go out of focus. “I love Josh. He's amazing. He likes to write, like me. He loves books and movies and... I don't know, just, every time I think about him, I get so happy.” I blinked a few times, and let the world come back into focus. A tiny yellow bird landed on the sill outside. “I mean, I wouldn't say I loved him the way I used to love...” I stopped.

“Used to love what?” she asked.

I grabbed my pencil, dipped my head, and continued writing dialogue for our presentation. “Nothing. Nevermind.”

After the bell rang, I followed Emily down the hallway on the way to my next class. She didn't press me about whom I might have loved more than Josh. In a year of knowing her, I'd never mentioned Riley, mostly because it helped me forget about him. He didn't want to stay in touch? Fine. I didn't care. It's not like I hadn't moved on. Because I had. Josh was my new Riley—and he was here to stay.

“C, if you want to come out to your parents tonight, I totally support you,” she said. “But if you do, you seriously need to call me right after, because I'm not waiting until tomorrow to hear what happens.”

I opened the door to my English classroom and shot Emily a big smile. “It's a deal,” I said.

#

The next three periods were painstakingly boring, as my English, Algebra, and History teachers all droned on and on about class expectations and grading scales and the like that I could have sworn every icecap in the world had melted by the time I reached lunchtime. I took a seat under the arch behind the school and pulled from my backpack the bagged lunch my dad had prepared for me, as well as my short story I'd been revising for the last few weeks. I looked all around me. No Josh.

I opened the bag with one eye open, scared I'd see only an apple and a piece of wonder bread smothered with jelly, but my dad had gone out of his way to impress me. He had prepared for me a huge turkey sandwich, with sweet potato chips, grapes, and a chocolate brownie. I thought it tacky to dive into my food before Josh's arrival, but if the two of us could ever be together, he was going to have to learn one harsh truth: when Cedar Swinton is hungry, he waits for no one.

I started with the brownie, naturally, then scanned page one of my story. Josh and I didn't see each other much over the summer—he had spent most of it with his mom up in Boise—but we corresponded a lot through e-mail, and sent each other our writings back and forth. It started with Josh sending me a lot of his own stuff for me to read, mostly science fiction and fantasy stories set in a world called Zunzfa. When I expressed interest in writing stories of my own, things based more in reality than fiction, he said he'd love to read them, that he'd been dying for what he called a critique partner. So I read his stuff, and he read mine, and by the end of August, I had written three short stories, two of which were lame, and one that I didn't completely hate.

“Where have you been?” I asked when he finally appeared, my food long since devoured. There were only ten more minutes of lunch. “I thought you forgot about me.”

“No, of course not.” He sat on the other side of the table. I knew as soon as he locked eyes with me that he was upset about something.

“Josh? What's wrong?”

“I was just at the Registrar's office,” he said. “Apparently because I already took Computers once last year, they won't let me take it again this semester.”

“What? That's stupid. Can't you take it as an elective?”

He shook his head. “They made me switch my Weights class to fifth period. And now I’m taking Band during sixth, even though I have zero interest. Talk about *boring*.” He shoved his fingers against his temples and let out a loud sigh.

The realization hit me fast. “So... we don't have any classes together.”

“We don't have any classes together,” he repeated. He snatched a sandwich out of his backpack but he didn't eat it.

I tried to keep a solemn expression on my face, but I struggled not to start beaming with a bright smile. He was *really* upset. He wanted to take those classes with me because he cared about me, because he wanted to spend more time with me.

“That sucks,” I said.

“I know.” Josh glanced down at the table. “Is that your story?” He tugged it toward him before I had a chance to answer.

He glanced down at the first page, when I said, “You know, it's not the worst thing that's ever happened. We can still see each other at lunch.”

The wind had picked up a little. He braced his wrists against the sides of my story to keep it from blowing away. “I know. But you're my best friend, and this isn't that big of a school. We can't have *one* class together?”

“I'm your best friend?” That solemn expression on my face officially disappeared. “You've never said that before.”

“Well, now I have.” He stayed quiet, as he read through the first page. Then: “What about me?”

I couldn't see his eyes, so I stared at his dreamy blond hair, which was longer than ever, blowing in the wind like a horse's mane. “Are you *my* best friend? Well, duh.”

He laughed, and said, “Good.” He flipped to page two, then finally locked eyes with me. “You don’t mind if I read this, do you?”

“Course not. You’ve read it before.”

“But this is revised, right?”

“Yeah, but do you have enough time? The bell’s gonna ring soon.”

“I don’t care.”

“You don’t... what?”

He stopped talking, and continued reading. He didn’t look at me at any point in those next few minutes. He stayed glued to the words on the page.

I didn’t have to think of anything to say. All I had to do was study Josh’s face. Nobody at Cavitt would describe the nerdy Josh as hunky, but the more I got to know him the past year, the more I came to fall for him nonetheless. Through fifth grade his face had always been a little round, with varying sets of giant eyeglasses to offset any chance at the nearest boy (or girl) to develop a crush on him. Now his face had thinned out, with more pronounced cheekbones, and a new pair of black-framed glasses that were tiny and unobtrusive.

I glanced at the clock on the side of the gym. 11:44. One minute to go. Josh had just started the last page of my story.

“Do you want to take it home with you?” I asked. I crumpled up my lunch bag and tossed it in the trashcan.

“No, no,” he said. “I’m gonna finish it now.”

The bell blasted, and all the students started pushing and shoving their way back into the halls. But Josh didn't budge. He stayed focused on that last page of my story, like he was able to tune out every sound that surrounded him.

I stood up and grabbed my backpack. "Are you coming?"

He closed the last page, and said, "Awesome."

"Awesome? You like it?"

"You've come a long way, Cedar. I'm telling you, this is the one you're gonna submit to that contest. It still needs some work, and I'll help you with the problem areas. But it obviously makes a difference when you write about something you *care* about. It comes through on the page, it really does."

I wanted to cry. I loved when people gave me positive feedback on something I'd written, but most especially Josh. I ran my hand through my hair, tried to look pretty for him. In a few minutes' time, Josh had told me I was his best friend, and that he loved my writing. He had to feel *something* for me, right? Even just a little bit?

"Well, thanks," I said. "That means a lot coming from you."

He gave me back my story, but when I went to grab it, he brought his hands on top of mine. "I have an idea."

I tried not to shake in excitement. Josh didn't touch me very often. "Yeah? What's that?"

"What do you say we ditch?"

"Ditch what?"

"Fifth period, stupid."

"*What?*" I wanted to pull away, but I didn't budge. "Why would I do that?"

“To protest. We should both be in that computer class.”

“Well, yeah, I know we should. But it's the first day of school, we can't ditch class!” I glanced at the clock. 11:48. “Josh, we have two minutes. Let's go.” I pulled away from him, slow enough that my fingertips could run along his tingly palms.

He let me go, but then he snatched my story away, and pushed it against his chest. “I'm gonna spend my fifth period over there.” He pointed to the soccer field. “I'll be reading your story again, taking notes this time. You're free to join me if you'd like.”

He packed up his things and marched away from me.

“Josh! Wait!” I shouted, but he didn't turn back. I saw him take a seat on the grass, as the last of the students headed inside the building. I wanted to follow him, wanted to be a rebel for once in my life. But, with just thirty seconds to go, I ran into the library and sped toward the computer lab, as the annoying shriek of the bell rang out once again.

#

“Mr. Ligon, can I use the restroom?” I asked, when I finished my keyboard lesson twenty minutes early.

The Computers teacher had a newspaper out in front of him, with his feet up on his desk. He didn't even look at me when he said, “Yeah, go ahead.”

I hurried out of the room before he could register my face. The halls were empty, aside from two twin girls with pigtails walking past me. I approached the boys' bathroom, hovered outside of it for a second, but then kept on going, toward the side entrance of the

school. Most of the teachers' doors were shut tight, so none of them could see me traipsing down the hallway.

My phone buzzed from my right pocket. I went to pick it up, when a noise startled me from behind—a loud tapping on a window.

I whirled around. Josh stood outside the door that faced the gym. He kept my story in one hand, as he waved at me with the other.

I glanced down the hall, made sure nobody was heading toward me. I don't know what I would have said if one of my teachers had caught me standing there.

When I pushed the door open, Josh raced inside, like he had been running from something. “There you are,” he said, out of breath.

“What's going on?” I asked.

He folded my story in two and wiped sweat off the bottom of his chin. “Vice Principal Matthews might have caught me skipping Weights.”

Josh motioned to his left. I looked out the window, just as the vice principal—a skittish little woman with her hair in a bun—walked with purpose toward the door.

“Oh shit,” I said. “She’s coming for *you*?”

“Uh huh.” Josh's eyebrows rose what seemed like a full inch.

“What do we do?”

Josh nudged his forehead against mine, and said, “Simple. *Run.*”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me around the corner, into the auditorium and toward the main set of double doors that would take us outside. But we didn't make it all the way to the doors, not even close.

“Joshua Sweet!” the vice principal shouted from the other side of the auditorium.

“Are you in here?”

Josh opened the hidden door to the storage closet, the one we’d found Lena in more than once last year, and pushed me in. He kept his head out the door a second longer, like he wanted to shout, “If you want me, come and get me!” Instead, he used the kicked inside the doorstopper, before he slammed the door shut and stepped back, all the way against my chest.

“Josh?” the vice principal asked from beyond the door, a few seconds later.

“Where are you? You’re in big trouble, mister!”

Her footsteps seemed to echo louder and louder the closer she came. The room was pitch black, with no windows, not even a keyhole to see into the auditorium.

The footsteps stopped. I heard the old lady breathing. She must have been on the other side of the door.

“Where is he?” she said, soft, defeated.

My phone buzzed again, in my pocket. It was on VIBRATE, but it still made a noise. I reached for it, pulled it up to my chest. It took me a few seconds to click it off.

“Nice timing,” Josh whispered.

“Sorry,” I said. His breathing intensified a little, as he leaned against my back. I pushed myself forward, and brought my chin down to his shoulder.

We just stood there, ten seconds, twenty seconds, waiting for her to rip the door off and sentence us both to a lifetime of detention.

Instead, she said, “Oh, forget it,” and started walking back the way she came.

After the door slammed in the distance, Josh said, “Thank God. That was close.”

“Yeah, it was. Now what do we do?”

“Let's just wait a minute. She could be playing us. *Then* we'll go outside.”

“But... I can't, Josh. I've got my backpack in Computers. I told the teacher I was just going to the bathroom. He's gonna come looking for me.”

He chuckled, softly. “It's all good, Cedar. You know what this is?”

“What?”

He turned around, and nudged his hand against my chest. “This is an experience we can use in our future books.”

“Not if we're in detention, we won't,” I said, with a laugh.

Josh took a step toward me. Didn't move his hand away. “What do you think they do in detention, silly? They write.”

I reached my hand toward him, just to see how far away he was. I touched his shoulder right away.

“Cedar?” he asked.

“What?”

“Don't freak out. *Please* don't freak out.”

I shrugged, even though he couldn't see me shrugging. “Freak out about what?”

He reached his hand to the back of my head and kissed me on the lips.

My phone buzzed a third time, but I ignored it. I ignored everything in the world, except for Josh. I leaned against him and kissed him back. Neither of us really knew what we were doing, so we just kept our lips pushed together, our noses nudged against each other's cheeks. Five seconds passed, and I dipped my head down.

“Whoa,” I said, letting out a deep breath, “what was *that*?”

“I have no idea.” Josh touched me on the chest again. His hands were shaking.

“Do you...” I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. “Do you think she's gone yet?”

“I think she's long gone.”

“Should we leave? Go out the side door?”

“I guess we probably should, huh?”

I breathed through my nose. Kept quiet for a second. “Or we could stay in here.”

I grabbed hold of his shirt, pulled him close to me again. But he stopped when my phone buzzed a fourth time.

“Who *is* that?” he asked. “Shouldn't you check and see?”

“Uhh, yeah. Good idea.”

I took the phone out of my pocket. The bright screen illuminated the storage closet with a white light, showing me the giant smile on Josh's face.

I answered the call. “Hello?”

“Cedar? There you are, it's Dad.” He breathed loud into the phone. “Why weren't you picking up?”

“Dad, I'm at school. Duh. What's going on?”

“I can't explain right now, but you need to take the bus home today, all right? To your mom's house. I'll call you when I land in Eugene. My flight's boarding now.”

“Eugene?” I pushed the door open and stumbled back into the auditorium, with no concern for anyone seeing me. “Why are *you* going to Eugene?”

“Just go on home after school, Cedar. I'll explain later—”

“*Dad!*” My heart started racing. “Tell me right now! What's going on?”

Josh followed behind me. He asked me a question, but I didn't hear any of it. I stayed focused on my dad's voice.

“Cedar...” He hesitated. “Your mother just called. Eric tried to kill himself.”

I looked back at Josh, then quickly peered forward—at the vice principal, and two other teachers, stomping right toward us across the auditorium. .

But I didn't care if they sent me to detention. Or off to prison. Or worse, back to that lame Computers class.

I dropped the phone, buried my head in Josh's chest, and collapsed.

The First Day of **Ninth Grade**

August 25, 2014

I sat up, and crawled through the wet cemetery grass. The sprinklers blasted water at my face, but I didn't care; I kept my focus on the tombstone ahead. The closer I approached, the more light from above shined against its surface, against the carefully etched name, dates, and poetic message at the bottom.

Tears streamed down my face and landed on the small puddles beneath me. I pushed forward, and in a blink, the tombstone was an inch in front of my face. I pressed my palm against the stone surface.

“No,” I whispered. “Please, Eric. Don't go...”

The words on the tombstone glowed with intense fury: Eric Andrew Swinton. June 10, 1994 - August 26, 2013. “Rest in peace, our beloved Eric, until we meet again.”

I pushed my forehead against the tombstone and continued to weep. I punched the ground. I wanted him back. I gripped the grass with my fingers and pulled the roots right out of the ground.

“Cedar, it's okay,” a voice said to the right of me. “I'll be with you always.”

I wiped the tears from my eyes, and gazed up at the tree, at the body hanging from its bottom branch, twenty feet off the ground. It was Eric. His eyes were opened impossibly wide.

“I'm not going *anywhere*,” he said, and shot me an icy grin.

I screamed, as a hand touched my shoulder.

“Cedar!”

“What?”

“Cedar, wake up!”

The grass turned into a mattress, and the muddy water beneath me turned into a small puddle of drool. I sat up and gripped the edge of my nightstand.

“Honey, you were having another bad dream,” my mom said. “Are you all right?”

It took me a few seconds to catch my breath, but then: “I’m okay.”

“Was it a nightmare about Eric again?”

“Yeah. I swear, I’m fine. They just... I can’t seem to stop them.”

“You will,” she said. “They’ll go away in time.”

I rolled over on the bed, and gazed up at her. Wearing a pink bathrobe, no make-up on her face, dark circles under her eyes, she still looked luminous.

My mom slapped the side of my bed. “Now get dressed and come out to the kitchen. I made breakfast.”

She disappeared down the hallway, as I scooted to the edge of my bed. My face was covered in sweat. I grabbed one of the pillow covers and used it like a paper towel.

I had been having that terrible dream one and off for a whole year. Why did I have to dream about the bad stuff? Why couldn't I have one pleasant dream, where I was holding Josh's hand, or dancing the night away with Emily, or, hell, getting an A on a test?

I pulled my baggy t-shirt over me, slipped on some socks, and headed to the kitchen. My mom had a giant pan of scrambled eggs on the stove, with cut-up cantaloupe and a large jug of orange juice on the table. I took my normal seat and poured myself some OJ.

“Just one more minute,” my mom said, dousing the eggs with salt and pepper.

“The bacon needs to get crispier.”

“Wow,” I said. “You made bacon too? What is this, Christmas?”

She shot an angry glare my way; she hated when I played dumb. The truth was my mom made these kinds of breakfasts *every* morning now, not just on Sundays, not just on first days of school.

My dad entered the kitchen and kissed my mom on the cheek. “Morning,” he said. “Wow, this smells great!” He picked up a strip of bacon, and my mom promptly slapped it out of his hand.

“Don't even think about it,” she said, with a grin.

“What? I'm *starving*.”

“You'll survive. Take a seat.”

He smiled, tapped her butt way too noticeably, and kissed her on the cheek. “As you say, honey.”

My dad sat down at the table across from me and pulled open the newspaper.

“Morning, Cedar,” he said.

“Uhh, hi, Dad.

All these months later, it was still strange to see it: my mom and dad kissing and flirting and gazing into each other's eyes like they were newlyweds. So many kids my age had parents who separated, and *stayed* separated. Not only did mine get back together just months after my dad moved out; they were now more in love than ever. In the beginning I thought it was only a performance they were putting on for Eric's sake, but as the weeks went by, I realized my parents were committed to each other, more than ever before.

“Here you go,” my mom said, and set my breakfast plate in front of me. Eggs, bacon, hash browns, buttered toast. Sometimes I wondered if she was trying to keep us all happy by fattening us up.

“Thanks, Mom.”

She gave my dad his plate, then dropped the most loaded plate of all in front of the fourth, empty chair.

My mom sat down and filled a bowl to the brim with the sliced cantaloupe. “So Cedar, if you had to pick one, what class are you looking forward to the most today?”

I poked the eggs with my fork, but didn't take a bite. “Shouldn't we wait?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. For Eric?”

“He's coming,” she said. “I just checked on him—there he is.”

My brother appeared at the end of the hall, his hair sticking up toward the ceiling, his eyes red and swollen. He sat down, scooted his chair forward, and laid his napkin on his lap. He peered at my mom. Shot her a quick smile.

“Does it look okay?” she asked. “I can make you something else, if you want.”

“No, no. This is perfect. Thanks.”

She took my dad's hand, and held it tight. “Oh, I'm so happy. Both of my boys starting a new chapter of their lives today.”

“That's *right*,” my dad said. “Cedar's starting high school, can you believe—” He stopped mid-sentence, when his cell phone started ringing. He pulled it out of his pocket and scanned the touch-screen. Anytime before a year ago he would have taken the call, and stayed on it for the rest of breakfast. But he just slipped it back into his pocket.

“Can you believe you’re almost fifteen?” my mom asked, tapping my arm. “God, I’m getting old.”

I chuckled. “You’re not old, Mom.”

“Yeah, not at all,” Eric added, his voice calm, assured.

Tears started forming in her eyes. She dipped her head, and turned to my dad.

“Can you take Cedar to school? Eric doesn’t have class until 10.”

“Yes, of course.” My dad looked at Eric and said, “You sure about this? You don’t have to go back to school if you’re not ready.”

“No, I’m more than ready,” Eric said. “I’m excited about it, actually. I think this will be good for me.”

“Me too.” He set his fork down, stood up, and wrapped his arms around my brother’s shoulders. “It’s been so nice to have you home, son.”

I finished about a third of my breakfast, then took a shower and got dressed. What was one supposed to wear on his first day of high school? I didn’t want to put on something that screamed I was still a child, but I didn’t want to look too fancy, either. I went casual, with a blue t-shirt over my comfy pair of black-and-white-checkered shorts.

I grabbed my backpack and headed down the hallway. I glanced into the kitchen. My mom and brother were seated next to each other, deep in conversation. I waved to them, but only my mom saw me.

“Have a great first day!” she said.

“Thanks, Mom. Bye, Eric!”

He turned, slowly, and shot me the kind of smile he so rarely gave me growing up. “Bye, Seed! Love you, bud!”

I lowered my hand. Now I was the one who started to cry.

“I love you too,” I said, and moved toward the garage.

I cried because Eric was finally better, finally moving on with his life. I cried because my parents were finally at a great place in their relationship.

And I cried because the time had finally come, the moment of truth.

My first day of high school.

#

My dad dropped me off at 7:40, way earlier than he needed to, so I had a few minutes to spare. I didn't need to see where my classes were; I had stopped by the school on Friday and checked out all the rooms, meeting my French and World History teachers in the process. English, my first class of the day, was right inside the front entrance. What was I going to do for twenty minutes?

“Hello, stranger,” a voice said behind me.

I spun around. “Emily! Hey!” I hugged her, then stepped back. “Oh my God, your *hair!*” She had started eighth grade with shorter locks, but today she'd cut it all off, making for a classic pixie haircut. “Wow, you kind of look like Anne Hathaway now.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“Of course it's a good thing!”

“Thanks. Yeah, it got so long when I was overseas,” she said. “I freaked out when I got back and so I had them just hack it off. It feels *great.*”

She took a seat on the curb, and I followed suit. We both looked out at the students passing us.

“I don't recognize anyone,” I said. “Do you?”

“There's Lena,” she said, pointing. “A new year, a new boyfriend, right?”

I darted my eyes to Lena, as she strutted across the parking lot. Wearing a black jacket, stylish boots, and heavy eyeliner, she held the hand of a boy who looked old enough to be in college. She caught me staring at her and rolled her eyes, before she headed inside.

“When did she go goth?” Emily asked.

“She's not goth. She's just... trying to look older. Like you.”

“You think I look older?”

Was it too late to take it back? It had sounded better in my head than it did coming out of my mouth. “In a good way, I mean. You did just have a birthday, Em. You're, like, the oldest freshman at this school.” Still not any better. I gritted my teeth and said, “You're... mature. You look mature!”

“Nice save, C,” she said. When she smiled, I knew she wasn't going to slap me. “God, I missed you. It was hard not getting to see you this summer.”

“I know, right? Thanks a lot. You just ditched me!”

“I didn't ditch you. I totally invited you to come with me.”

“To France. Right.” I gazed up at the clouds in the sky. “Now that I think about it, maybe a few months in Europe would've done me some good.”

Emily scooted closer to me, and tapped her fingers against my arm. “How's Eric doing? Any better?”

I leaned my head down. “A lot, actually. He's finally getting back to normal. He started classes at Sierra today.”

“The community college?”

“Yeah, we'll see how that goes.” I rested my chin against my thumbs. A few people walked behind me, but I didn't turn to see who they were. “It was a hard year. For all of us.”

Emily rested her head against my shoulder, and rubbed her hand against my back. “I know. You've been so strong, C. And so selfless. You've put your brother first throughout all of this. He wouldn't be where he is today if it weren't for you.”

“Thanks, Em,” I said. “But you don't have to say that.”

“Of course I do. The worst part's over. Your brother's getting better, your parents are back together. Your mom's feeding you very well, as I can see...”

My jaw dropped, as I playfully hit her shoulder. “Excuse me? Are you saying I'm *fat*?”

“No, no.” Now she was the one needing to backtrack. “Just, you know, *healthy*.”

I slapped my belly, and sighed. It was softer to the touch than it had ever been.

“So I want you to do me a favor, okay?” Emily asked, noticeably moving over to a new topic.

“Yeah? What's that?”

“I want you to make this year the best year of your life.”

I snickered, and shook my head. “Em, if I'm able to just get *up* every day and go to school, this will be a better year than the last one.”

“I'm not saying better, C. I'm saying the best.”

She grabbed hold of my chin, pushed my head to the left, and nodded toward a red Jeep in the parking lot. Josh stepped out, and swung his backpack over his shoulder.

“You cut yourself off from everyone but me last year,” she said. “Josh cares about you, and I know you still care about him.” She put her hands on my knees. “You really need to tell him you love him.”

He was coming right toward us. But I looked back at Emily. “What? *Today?*”

“Why not?”

“He's not even out of the closet. *I'm* not out of the closet yet, Em.”

“Why not? You wanted to tell your parents a freakin' year ago.”

“Yeah, I know. That was before my brother went into a closet and tried to hang himself.”

I bowed my head again, and didn't look up to see Josh pass me by. I didn't expect him to even notice me on the side of the curb.

“Hi, Cedar,” he said, and then he kept on walking toward the front steps.

“Oh,” I said, like I hadn't seen him coming. “Hey, Josh.”

Josh smiled at me, before he disappeared around the corner.

“Oh my God,” Emily said, shaking her head. “He still totally digs you.”

“He does not.”

“Does too! You should go talk to him.”

“All right, all right.” I jumped to my feet and grabbed my backpack. The temperature seemed to have tripled since the time I'd arrived. Sweat dripped down my forehead and I had to wipe it off with my arm, twice.

Emily followed me and locked her arm inside mine as we headed toward the main steps of the school. I noticed a few students give us awkward glances.

“Em?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think everyone at school thinks we're a couple now?”

She didn't pull her arm away. “Probably. I bet they think we're in *love*.” She laughed and pulled me close. “Come on, kiss me.”

“Huh?”

“Just once.”

“I'm not gonna kiss you.”

“Come on. It'll be funny.”

“No. It'll be a disaster.” I was five inches taller than Emily. Even if she tried to kiss me, she'd end up locking lips with my collarbone.

We backed up against the side of the stairs. “Have you even kissed a girl before, C? Like *actually* kissed one?”

“Of course I have,” I said. She scoured my face with her eyes, like she knew she could wrangle the truth out of me at any given time. I looked away from her and said, “Okay, no, I haven't.”

She smiled, and wrapped her arms around me. “Figured as much. You should try it. Maybe you'd like it.”

I pushed her away, and threw my hands into the air, like just touching her black dress was toxic to my skin. “You are so *weird*,” I said.

“I know. Isn't that why we became friends in the first place?”

“Probably,” I said, and shot her a knowing grin. “Come on. The bell's gonna ring any min—” I stopped, stared at her for a second. She crossed her arms and smiled at something over my right shoulder. “What? What now?”

I spun around, looked to where she was staring. At least thirty students were heading toward the stairs. Glen Gummer walked past me, giving me a cold, beady-eyed stare. I looked away.

“How many times have you been in love, Cedar?” Emily asked.

I turned back to her. “What?”

“Just the once? With Josh?”

“Uhh, sure.”

“I've only been in love once too.” She finally brought her gaze away from the crowd of students, to the wall beside us.

“Yeah? With who?”

She patted her hand against my chest and said, “I'm not saying. Not until you tell Josh how you feel about him.”

Emily walked past me and headed up the stairs. I tried to follow her, but I got stuck behind a wall of seniors who all looked to be eight feet tall. When I entered Woodbridge Ranch High, I looked every which way. Emily was gone.

But Josh was in plain view, opening his locker in the center hallway.

I could almost feel Emily pushing against my back, as I started walking over to him. He wore a white long-sleeved collared shirt over tan slacks, with a little red bow tie, and his hair parted down the left side. He was so much more stylish than me.

When I approached him, he took a big yellow binder out of his backpack.

“Hi, Josh,” I said.

“Oh, hey. What's up?” he asked, casually. “Did you have a good summer?”

“It was okay. It would be better if I had seen more of you.” Another sentence that came out super awkward. I meant for it to sound charming, and it just came out stalker-ish. I swung around his back and pointed at his binder. “What do you have there?”

He grinned. “My novel. It's 140,000 words.”

“Whoa, really? That's so long!”

“I know. It's gonna need a lot of work, that's for sure.” He set the binder in his locker and pulled out a textbook. “What about you? Did you write anything over the summer?”

I wanted to lie. Wanted to pull a completed manuscript out of my backpack, mine 150,000 words, just to show off. Instead I said, “Not really. But hopefully soon.”

“That's good.” He closed his locker and strapped his backpack on. “I tried calling you this summer, but... you always seemed so busy.”

“Yeah. My mom needed a lot of help with my brother, and I've just... I wasn't in the best place.”

He nodded, didn't ask me for further details. Most everyone in my year knew about what happened to Eric. I stopped coming to class for a couple weeks after it happened, and it hurt both my grades and what I had with Josh. Emily was the only one who truly made the effort to stick with me through the darkest times. Josh had a crush on me, but we had been so *young* a year ago—he wasn't going to drop everything to be my boyfriend and be the support system I needed.

“How is your brother now?” he asked.

“Much better, thanks.”

“I’m glad.” He shot me that classic Sweet smile, the kind that made me want to melt right into his arms. His dimples seemed to have grown over the summer too, and when he stepped closer to me, it took everything in my power not to kiss both of them.

Josh was so freaking cute, the guy I had thought nothing of for so many years, who now, on the first day of high school, was the one I didn’t want to let out of my sights again. Emily was right. Life didn’t go on forever. The last year had been a blur in time, 365 days in a dark hole that I had needed way too much time to climb out of. I didn’t know if Josh was the one for me, but I needed to find out.

I looked up at the clock. The five-minute bell was about to ring.

“Josh, the thing is... I mean, the reason I came over here...”

“Yes?” He wasn’t put off by my ambiguity. He moved even closer to me, like he’d been waiting all summer for me to say these words.

“I care about you. A lot. And I just...” I shoved my hands against my back, and let out a loud sigh.

His dimples grew bigger.

“Josh, I was wondering if you ever wanted to—”

The five-minute bell rang, loud and harsh above our heads. It was the same shrill, annoying shriek of those middle school bells. Josh and I pressed our fingers to our ears, in pain, in annoyance.

The bell stopped, and the loud cacophony of footsteps grew, but Josh stayed put, stayed focused on me. “What were you saying, Cedar?”

“Oh, uhh...” I smiled. Opened my mouth to talk. But then I glanced past Josh—and my mind went blank. I didn't know what I was saying, what I was thinking.

I didn't know who I was talking to.

“Cedar?” I heard Josh's voice, but I didn't see his face. A dozen students had entered the main hall behind him, but my eyes were only glued on one.

“Holy shit,” I said.

“What?” Josh asked. “What's wrong?”

The figure in the distance had grown about a foot. His hair fell past his shoulders, and the stubble on his chin and upper lip was discernable all the way from the center hall. He pushed up his backpack and scratched the top of his chest, not like he had an itch, but like he had a three-year-old heart wound he was still mending.

He stopped. Looked right at me.

“*Riley*,” I said.

I said an awkward good-bye to Josh and sped toward the school entrance, but by the time I reached the front circle, Riley had vanished. I glanced down all three hallways. He was nowhere.

Had it been my imagination?

The halls started to clear, and I needed to get to my English class. I found my locker, grabbed everything I needed, and sped into the classroom with barely ten seconds to spare.

“Welcome, freshmen,” the fifty-something Mrs. Jordan said. “I take it you all have done your homework?”

That's right. Homework. To have been done for the first day.

I pulled out my binder, and my reading packet on *Cold Sassy Tree*. Then I looked up at the board, at the list of three more homework assignments due the next day.

The realization hit me, fast and hard.

My childhood was over.

#

I took the long route to the cafeteria on the other side of the school, going up the stairs, down the stairs—walking pretty much every square inch of the building—in the hopes of seeing Riley. I peered into classrooms, and even tiptoed into the health clinic. There was no sight of him. I wasn't sure where the hot spot was for lunch at this new school, so I finally, after a valiant search effort for my long-lost friend failed, moseyed over to the cafeteria and met up with Emily.

“What's wrong with you?” she asked. “You look pale, C. Like you saw a ghost.” She laughed. “*Did* you see a ghost?”

“Something like that.” I sat down across from her at one of the many empty tables. All summer I had an image in my head of a fancy cafeteria packed with students, but the place was half empty, which made me think Riley had gone out somewhere to eat.

“I saw you talking to Josh. Did you say anything to him?” She leaned forward and set her tray of microwaved goodness to the side. “Did he say anything to *you*?”

“Em.”

Her eyebrows rose. “What?”

“I saw Riley.”

She sat up straight, and took a bite of her taco. “Riley? Who’s that?”

“Riley Alvarez! I’ve told you about him before. He was my best friend in elementary school.”

“Oh. Well, that’s nice.” She leaned toward me, nearly knocking her food off the table in the process. “So what did Josh say? Did he say he misses you? He misses you, right?”

I took a bite of my grilled cheese sandwich, and sighed. She had no interest in a boy from my past, only from my present.

After lunch I headed to biology, a fifty-minute borefest where the teacher handed out the syllabus and played a video about nucleic acids. Afterward I raced across campus to get to Intro to Journalism on time and made it inside a minute before the bell rang. I found a seat in the front of the room, next to Josh.

“There you are,” he said. “I wasn’t sure if you were gonna make it.”

I tried to catch my breath. “I like high school, it’s good exercise. I’ve had to run to three of my classes today.”

“Tell me about it. I was a minute late to geometry, but the teacher didn’t notice, thank God.” He surveyed the room, nodded his head a couple times. “Look behind us. There’s not a single seat left!”

I glanced toward the back of the room. He was right. At least thirty people filled the tight space, including Craig and Jeff, and Tina Liu, from Mrs. Corry’s class. I raised my head a little higher and saw Lena and her new boyfriend sitting in the back too.

Almost every seat was taken, but the teacher was nowhere to be found. He didn’t show up until after the bell rang.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said. “My printer’s an asshole.”

The students all burst into laughter, including me and Josh. Not one of my teachers had made a memorable first impression all day, except for this one. He was stick-thin, tall, middle-aged, with a full head of gray hair and a thick pair of glasses.

He dumped his stack of papers on his desk and addressed the class. “Good afternoon. My name's Daniel Holcomb. Sorry for the crowded room, I had to have everyone in Beginning *and* Advanced Journalism meet in here today, but that will soon change. I’ll take roll first. If I get your name wrong... shut up and deal with it.”

More laughs. I clasped my hands together and smiled.

“All right, let’s see who’s first,” he said, bringing his index finger to the top of his roll sheet. “Riley Alvarez? Are you here?”

Silence. No one said a word.

My eyes shot open, and I twisted my neck a full 180 degrees. I surveyed the room, every aisle, every seat. Where was he?

“I can't believe it,” Mr. Holcomb said. “I've already scared someone away! I'll say it one more time. Riley Alvarez? Are you—”

“I'm here, I'm here!” Riley shouted, from the hallway. He stumbled into the classroom, holding his backpack tight. “Sorry about that. I got lost.” He bent over and shoved his hands against his knees.

“You got *Lost*?” the teacher asked. “The first season or the second season? My personal favorite is season five, just *epic*.” Only one person laughed at that one, a tiny girl to the left of me. When the room stayed quiet, he cleared his throat and said, “I guess

I'm showing my age." He smiled at Riley. "Please, take a seat, Mr. Alvarez. I'll let you off with a warning this time, but if you're late tomorrow, you get a *citation!*"

The teacher was getting lamer and lamer, but I loved that about him. All the teachers today had taken themselves so damn seriously. This guy was going to make the year fun.

I looked back at Riley, as he took the last open seat in the back.

"Brenna Boone?" the teacher said, and he continued to go down the list.

I was in the front center so I had to be careful, but I spent most of the early part of that period looking back, and staring at my old friend. He had changed so much since sixth grade. It'd been more than two years, and he looked so entirely different I was surprised I even recognized him.

His hair was long and the facial hair was shocking and the earring on his right earlobe almost took my breath away—but it was his eyes that drew me in. No matter how much he had changed over the years, I could never forget Riley's green eyes, the way they could call to me from across a room. It was 2014, eight years since we first met, and nothing had changed. The first time he looked at me in the journalism classroom, all the intense heat I'd suppressed for Riley for two years came rushing back up my body, all the way to my aching heart.

I didn't realize how much I'd missed him.

"Cedar Swinton?" the teacher said.

It was an echo in the distance. I recognized that someone called my name, but it took too long to reach my eardrums. The whole room stayed quiet, and I didn't budge, until Josh elbowed me in the shoulder.

“Cedar?” the teacher said, again. “Going once, going twice—”

“Sold!” I said, and slapped my hand against the table.

No one really laughed, but Mr. Holcomb grinned, gazed down at me, and said, “Cedar?”

“Yeah?” I waited for a scolding.

Instead, he said, “I like you already.”

As he finished taking roll, I looked back at Riley, again. He stayed focused on me, and shot me a knowing smile. When Mr. Holcomb started assigning students articles to write for the first issue of the newspaper, his attention veered toward the teacher.

I didn't expect Mr. Holcomb to just let us roam the room and play games the second half of the period, but I wished it, deep in my soul. As the minutes ticked on, all I wanted to do was run to the back of the room, and say hi to the one that got away. What was he doing here? Why was he back? Why hadn't he *told* me he was back? I had a hundred questions to ask him, with another fifty added to the list by the time the bell finally rang at 2:30. It was official: I had survived my first day of high school.

I grabbed my backpack and started walking toward Riley, but I wasn't fast enough. Twenty students rose to their feet in front of me and formed a long, slow-moving train to the classroom exit. I figured Riley would have stayed back and waited for me, but much to my surprise, he didn't; he was the first to leave the classroom.

“Riley!” I shouted. “Wait up!”

“Look who's back, huh?” a familiar voice said.

I turned to my left. “Oh. Lena, hey.” I tried to move faster, but a big football player named Travis was blocking my way out.

"Did you know Riley was coming back?" she asked. "I had no idea. Jesus Christ, he got *hot*."

"I'm sorry, Lena, but I can't talk right now." I brushed past the big guy in front of me, and entered the hallway.

I headed up the stairs, to the top floor of the school. I darted my eyes every which way, but didn't see Riley. Why was he avoiding me?

"Cedar?" Josh asked, as he sped up to me. "What's wrong? Why are you running?"

I didn't even turn to him. I saw Riley, for a split second, at the end of the hallway. He blew through a door, toward the front part of the school.

"Josh, I have to go," I said, still not glancing back. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

I ran faster than I'd run all day, faster than when I had to get from one side of campus to the other in two minutes, faster than when I ran my four laps in PE. I kicked open the door and stepped outside. Riley was making his way across the lawn, toward the parking lot.

I rushed up to him, reached my hand out for him. I really hoped he wasn't a ghost, that my hand wouldn't go through him and make me tumble down to the wet grass.

"Riley!" I said. "*Stop!*"

I touched his shoulder, and spun him around. It was him. After all this time, there he was, standing in front of me.

His expression wasn't one of gratitude, or revulsion. It looked to be more of fear than anything else. "Oh," he said. "Cedar."

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Why are you ignoring me?”

“I’m... I’m not. I have to get to my mom, she’s waiting for me.” He started to turn around, but I grabbed his shoulder a second time.

“What are you *doing* here?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

I put my hands up in the air, in total bewilderment. “Don’t you live in Michigan?”

“We did, yeah. But I’m back now.”

I waited for him to say something. Anything. He had nothing.

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” I asked.

Finally, a smile broke through. “Of course I am. To be honest, I was worried you wouldn’t remember me.”

“You *what*? Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know.” He looked down at the ground, like he was on the verge of crying. “It’s been a long time and I thought... you know... that you’d be mad. I wasn’t a good friend. I was such an asshole for not staying in touch—”

I jumped forward and wrapped my arms around him, gave him the kind of hug shared only between the best of friends. I didn’t care what the other students thought, what even Riley thought. It was something I had to do.

“Are you kidding?” I said. “I’m not mad. It’s in the past, okay? I’ve missed you. I’ve missed you so much.”

I waited for him to push me away, maybe even call me a name I’d care to forget. Instead, he returned the hug, with enough affection to keep me smiling for the rest of the day. “I’ve missed you too, Cedar.”

I leaned my head against his shoulder. I missed his magical touch, the way in just a single second he could make me feel like the safest guy on Earth. So many years had passed. But he hadn't lost it, not one bit.

I looked out toward the parking lot, at all the students walking away from school.

But my focus only veered to one.

Josh stood at the end of the sidewalk, tapping his left foot against the cement. His lips were pursed, and his face looked pale, drained of all its joy.

He was staring at me.

At us.

#

A half-hour later, I arrived at an empty house. My dad was at work, my mom was out running errands, and Eric had classes at Sierra until 4. I skipped through many of the rooms, singing “Back in My Arms Again,” which had played on the oldies station both to and from school. Riley had agreed to eat lunch with me tomorrow, and see *Guardians of the Galaxy* on Friday. He was back—hopefully for good this time.

I ran into my bedroom and slammed my door shut. I danced on top of my bed for a minute, then leaped toward my dresser. I pulled off my jeans, then opened my top drawer. All I saw was a pile of boxers.

“Where’s my gym shorts?” I said.

I pulled out the drawer all the way, took out twenty pairs of underwear, then reached toward the back. My one pair of black gym shorts was shoved into a ball. I took them out and started pulling them up, first with the left leg, then with the right.

But I didn't make it all the way up the right. I stopped. Gazed at the back of the drawer.

It was a little trashcan back there, with unopened gum packages, and birthday cards from my grandparents, and ornaments dating back to 2004. But there was also a little box—a box I hadn't opened in eight years.

I was supposed to wait until the end of senior year. Mrs. Brink had demanded it.

But I grabbed it anyway. I landed on the bed. Slowly removed the tape from the left side of the box. There wasn't much inside. A book containing short stories I wrote the first month of first grade. A long list of my favorite things (apparently I was a fan of the movie, *Big Momma's House 2*). There was a stack of letters, one from my mom, and one from my dad, both dated late August 2006. I decided I'd read them when I was supposed to, at the end of senior year.

I dug my hand to the bottom of the box. There was one more letter. Also dated August 2006. This one written by me, talking about the one thing I'd want to have in my life in June 2018. I read the first sentence. Then I read the next.

"Oh, wow," I said.

I set the letter on my desk, then put everything back in the box and returned it to the back of the drawer. I pulled up my gym shorts, grabbed the letter, and walked out to the backyard.

The sun beamed against me as I climbed up to the tree house, squinting hard so that I wouldn't miss a rung and fall to my death. I reached the top and pushed myself inside. I hadn't stepped foot in the tree house for almost three years. The interior had faded considerably, with dust all over, and a busted piece of wood hanging off the side. A big hole in the ceiling would make for the perfect reading light.

I scooted to the back and pulled up the letter. *My* letter.

A few minutes later, I started to cry.

The First Day of **Tenth Grade**

August 24, 2015

“Are you crying?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“But *how*? How can you not be crying? It’s weird, Seed. It’s not normal!”

“Shut up, Eric. I didn't really know her.” I pulled my backpack up to the bed and zipped it shut. “I know what you're doing, but you don't have to be the thoughtful, older brother right now, okay? Can't you go back to the way you used to be? You know... loud and obnoxious?”

“I can if you really want me to,” he said, with a laugh.

“Wait,” I said. “I take it back. I like this version of you *way* better.”

He smiled. “Good. I do too.”

When I saw a car pull up outside my window, I headed toward the door. “That's Riley. I'll talk to you later, okay?”

“All right,” he said, as I entered the hall. “Don't ignore your feelings, Seed!” he shouted. “If you need to cry, you should cry!”

“What are you, my therapist?” I shouted back.

I grabbed a banana from the kitchen counter and walked toward the front door. My dad had left for work already, but my mom blocked the door, her arms crossed, her robe sporting a dozen tear stains. She wiped her eyes and gave me a hug strong enough to cut off all my oxygen.

“It's horrible,” she said. “It's just so *horrible*.”

“I know it is.”

“Why did they do it? What were they trying to prove?”

“I don't know, Mom.”

She leaned forward, stood on her tippie-toes, and kissed me on the forehead. Just a year ago, all she would have had to do was bend over, but I had sprouted considerably in the last six months.

“You wouldn't do anything like that, would you, Cedar?”

“Of course not.”

“Promise me?”

“I promise.”

The doorbell rang. I beat my mom in opening it.

Riley stood on the porch, his hands behind his back, his head lowered. “Hi, Cedar,” he whispered.

“Hey. Are you all right?” Now I was the concerned one.

“Not really.”

My mom stepped past me, and gave Riley a hug too. “So nice to see you. My God, you've gotten so handsome—”

“*Mom*,” I said, moving away from the door. “Riley and I have to go.”

“Hold on, Cedar,” Riley said, putting his hand out to stop me. The hug continued, for what seemed like a full minute. Then he finally took a step back, and said, “It's nice to see you too, Mrs. Swinton.”

“You gonna hug *everyone* today, Mom?” I said, not really as a question.

She turned to me, with a serious expression. “That could've been *you* in that car, honey. It could've been both of you. Life is so fragile. In a blink, it can all be taken away. We have to appreciate every day that we have, because you never know.”

I put my arm on my mom's shoulder, awkwardly. “Nothing's gonna happen to me, okay? I promise.”

“It better not.” She kissed me on the cheek, and headed back inside.

Riley and I walked to the driveway, to his used Toyota 4Runner. Newly sixteen, Riley was one of the lucky ones to get a car before his sophomore year.

“Do you think it'll be weird today?” he asked, stepping to the driver's side.

“Of course it will. I think everyone at school knew at least one of them. Jonathan was one of the basketball players, right?”

“He was the *star* basketball player, Cedar.”

We both got in the car, and I threw my backpack in the back seat. I put on my seatbelt. Waited for Riley to put the key in the ignition.

But he didn't take out his keys. He put his hand to his mouth, and started to sob.

“Oh, Riley,” I said. I rubbed his back for a few seconds, then took his right hand. I leaned down, kissed it real soft and tender. “I know how much she meant to you.”

“She was one of my best friends, Cedar. I know you never liked her that much, but... we had so much history together. She was in our first grade class for God's sake.”

“It's not that I didn't like her. I just didn't think she was that great of an influence on you, that's all—”

“*No*,” he said, and pushed me away. “Don't give me that. Not today.” He turned on the car and sped down the driveway.

Riley slowed down at the front of the cul-de-sac and waited for the bus to drive by. I leaned against the glove compartment and gazed out the window. It was the exact same bus Riley and I had taken to Oakview all those years ago. Same driver too.

“Wow,” I said.

“What?” Riley's mind was obviously elsewhere.

I sighed, and leaned back. “Nothing.”

Riley drove like a little maniac on the way to school, swerving around three trucks and two mini-vans. I didn't think he was rushing because he wanted to meet all his teachers, though; he probably wanted to see how the students at Woodbridge Ranch High were dealing with their grief.

Was I not crying enough for him? Did he want me to rest my head against his shoulder and weep into his red denim? He seemed to almost be mad at me for not showing any emotion, as if everyone showed his grief in the same way. Of course I felt bad about what happened. Of course it was an awful, unbelievable tragedy, the like of which I had never encountered before

He pulled up to a parking space at the front of the school, and let the car idle for a moment. We both looked out at the people standing on the lawn, hugging each other, crying on each other's shoulders. Most first days of school were filled with excitement and anticipation, not sadness. I always thought of the first day of school as a day to start things over, but this one, I knew already at 7:50 AM, was going to be a day everyone would soon try to forget.

“Look, Riley,” I said, pointing out my window. “Channel 3 News is here.”

He didn't follow my gaze, didn't even turn to me. "Come on, let's go," he said, and stepped outside.

We started passing all the crying students. I saw Kim and Garry holding each other tight, saw little Doyle using his inhaler more times than I could count.

I knew today was going to be unlike any other when I saw Glen—my oldest, dearest enemy—resting his head against Emily's lap at the top of the steps, crying his eyes out.

"Oh my God," I said. "Are you *serious*?" It had been hard enough to watch the slow descent into madness last spring, my friend Emily starting to date my nemesis Glen—of all people—but watching him weep against her seemed like something out of a wacky dream, one brought to life only with heavy stimulants.

"Hi, Emily," I said. "You okay?"

"Hey, Cedar. I'm fine." She stroked her fingers through Glen's hair, like he was her precious cat, Sparkles. For a moment I wished for Glen to literally turn into a cat, but no such magic took place. "Ricky was on the football team with Glen."

"Oh, that's right," I said. "I'm really sorry, Glen."

"Thanks, Cedar," he said, still with his eyes pointed toward the cement ground. He didn't add the Weiner part—since he'd started dating Emily, he was actually nice to me, actually treated me with respect. Lately he was a whole new person, someone I still didn't fully trust, but someone I hoped had finally seen the errors of his ways.

When I entered the front of the school, I reached for Riley's hand, but he stepped away too fast and walked toward some of his friends. I stopped. Pursed my lips. I hoped he was going to be okay.

“Hey, you,” a voice said behind me.

I turned around, and Josh wrapped his arms around me. He kissed me on the neck, then the lips.

“It's sad, isn't it?” he said. “It's so, so sad.”

“I know.”

We hugged for a minute or more, just enjoyed each other's comfort and warmth. I didn't cry, though. My boyfriend had never seen me cry.

“You didn't know any of them well, did you?” Josh asked.

“Not really,” I said. “Just Lena. I've had classes with her my whole life. *Had* classes with her, I mean. We practically grew up together.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Just be with me. That's all I ask.”

“I wouldn't want anything more,” he said.

We walked down the hallway toward our English class. Josh and I had four classes together this year. As soon as we had started officially dating last May, we had made it our mission to have every class together—Honors English, Advanced Journalism, French 5-6, Chemistry—but World History and Weights hadn't worked out.

“Do you think they'll do anything today?” I asked. “Like an assembly or something?”

“Probably. It'd be weird if they didn't.”

“I can't believe this happened just two nights ago. Do you think it had something to do with school starting?”

“I don't know,” Josh said, keeping his hand grasped tight against mine.

A few students gave us awkward glances—and there would always be the one jock to push one or both of us out of his way—but for the most part no one cared that two boys were dating at Woodbridge Ranch High. It's not like Josh and I were the first. Cooper and Dallas had been two of the most popular seniors last year, and they had been a couple, holding hands every day in the hallway with no problems at all; they even attended Prom together. And then there were Tina and Gillian—lesbians, but not together—and Peter—transgender.

And then Riley, of course. Who knew what was ever going to become of that.

Josh and I were going strong after three months, but without a car or even a license between us, we weren't able to spend nearly enough time together, and with each passing week, I was starting to feel more and more like a hypocrite; unlike Josh, who told his family about me at a Fourth of July party I attended, I had yet to officially come out to my parents. I told Eric a few weeks ago, but still hadn't found the proper time to tell Mom and Dad. I had wanted to come out to them since eighth grade. Why did I keep putting it off? What was I waiting for?

Josh and I took our seats at the front of our English class, as the five-minute bell rang. We were the first two inside.

When 7:59 appeared on the clock, I darted my eyes around the room. It was only half-full. The students all had glazed looks in their eyes, like they'd been punched in the face a few times; even our new English teacher Mrs. Tipp appeared dazed at the front of the classroom.

“What a way to start the school year, huh?” she said, and started passing out copies of *A Separate Peace*.

Halfway through third period, the bell rang, and the Principal announced through the intercom a last-minute assembly. I didn't have World History with Josh, so I had to find him in the gymnasium. I walked all the way to the top of the sophomore section, didn't see him anywhere. But as the students kept piling in, I caught sight of Riley, sitting with some friends a few rows down. I took a seat next to him.

“Hey,” I said.

“Oh, hi. Where's Josh?”

“He's...” I looked out at the train of students still rolling in. “He's somewhere.”

I tapped my hands against my knees, waiting anxiously for the next minute for his handsome face to show up. But he wasn't anywhere to be found. I stood up for a moment and looked down at the bottom of the bleachers, to see if he was sitting on the floor. The gymnasium was packed, to the point where it seemed like random strangers were coming in off the streets.

“You guys really are cute together,” Riley said. “You know that, right?”

“Thanks.” I nudged him in the shoulder. “Now we just have to find a boy for *you* to love.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, like that'll ever happen.”

“You don't think it will?”

“You're one of the few people who even know I'm gay, Cedar. I haven't told my parents. I've barely told anyone.”

“So? I haven't told my parents either.”

He rested his chin against his palm and looked like he was going to start tearing up again. He didn't. “That's just stupid. Like, seriously. That makes no sense to me.”

“What doesn’t make sense?”

“My dad's gonna freak when he finds out, but *your* dad? He's cool with things like that. Your parents will be fine. I don't know why you didn't come out to them *years* ago.”

“I've been meaning to tell them—”

“What are you gonna do, Cedar? Wait until Josh proposes to you?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out; my jaw just hung open, like I had lost control of my facial muscles. Finally: “You, uhh...” I started. “You don't think he would really do that, do you?”

He lowered his eyebrows, before he pointed. “I don't know. Why don't you ask him yourself?”

Josh sat next to me on the bleachers with an angry plop, and wrapped his arm around mine. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey. Where have you been?”

“Taking a stupid quiz. Mr. Gilbert didn't let us come down until we finished.”

“Isn't that against the law or something?” Riley asked Josh.

“Probably,” Josh said. He leaned his head back and looked into my eyes. “Hi.”

“Hi.” I almost kissed him, but decided not to. We were pretty open around the other students, but usually not around *this* many students. The whole room was so jammed with people that we must have been breaking some kind of fire code.

As Principal Brooks headed toward the center of the gym, a hush fell over the audience. I peered down at him, then across the way at all the freshmen, and the seniors. Then I turned to my right—and looked at Riley.

The last year had been quite the rollercoaster ride. Not only did some of my former feelings for him come rushing back; who would have thought Riley would have been interested in boys too? His dad had tried so hard in elementary school to make sure he played every sport on the planet, that he be another ordinary jock. Instead, Riley was pretty open to me at the beginning of freshman year; as soon as he found out I was gay, he started spending more time with me, ultimately telling me he was trying to come to terms with his feelings toward Cory, an African-American junior who was one of the few out athletes at Woodbridge Ranch High.

“You need to tell him you love him,” I said, on a wintry day last February.

“I could never,” Riley told me. “What if he laughed and walked the other way?”

Riley was so scared of what others would think of him that he still hadn't told Cory how he felt, and he still hadn't told his other friends that he was gay. They all assumed, of course—Riley was obviously very comfortable around me and Josh—but nobody made a big deal out of it. Riley played on the soccer team in the fall, and the basketball team in the winter; he went to endless parties on the weekend, and took a skiing trip to Mammoth with a group of straight guys last March. Everybody liked Riley. And whether he chose to stay in the closet for the rest of high school or come barging out of a confetti explosion with a large rainbow flag in his hand, none of his friends was going to mind one bit.

But while I supported him with whichever route he chose, there was still that nagging voice in the back of my head, the kind that spoke to me when Riley and I were together, but spoke even louder when we weren't. I cared about Josh, but what I had with Riley had always gone deeper, ever since I saved that pink crayon before our first bus

ride together. Riley and I had made a pretty firm decision after he came back that we were going to be just friends—he never gave me the slightest hint that he was the least bit interested—but as the months ticked on, I kept thinking it, and I hated that I did.

Was I supposed to be with Josh?

Or was I supposed to be with Riley?

Principal Brooks lowered the microphone to his five-foot-five height, and cleared his throat for the entire student body to hear.

“Welcome, everyone, on this tragic day, a very sad day,” he said. “Saturday night, as you all well know, we lost four of our own. They were the best and brightest our school had to offer, and their deaths will leave a huge hole not just in this year, but in the many years to come.”

I listened as the sniffles around me grew in strength and number. Everyone, from the geeks to the jocks, from the stoned-faced teachers to the wildly emotional cheerleaders, had tears on their cheeks.

“As of now, I'd like to say their names, so we can remember them, as they were, and pay tribute to them as we all try to move forward,” Principal Brooks said. “Jonathan Erickson. Anna Gregory. Ricky Strickland.”

He hesitated for a moment, like he had forgotten the last name on the list, the name that meant the most to me, and most everyone I knew.

“And Lena Walters,” he said, with a heavy sigh. “These four students were taken way before their time. And I'd like us all to take a moment to say a quick prayer. Please, if I could everyone close your eyes.”

I did as I was told, and Josh grabbed my hand, as the whole room went dead silent. I didn't pray when I closed my eyes; I tried to picture Lena. The most beautiful girl in first grade, she had transitioned every year into the kind of person I never thought she would become. She started wearing more make-up, and dressing more wildly, and making out with boys in that storage closet not just once like me, but seemingly every other day. By the end of freshman year, it had been hard to even recognize her anymore, like some crazy person had taken over her body. When I learned Sunday morning that she had been the one driving the car during a game of chicken up off Auburn Folsom Road, I can't say I was surprised. It was a tragic end to a life that could have been so much more.

I opened my eyes, even before I was told to. I wanted to cry for her and the others. But my eyes stayed dry; my face stayed stoic. Was I heartless?

"*God*," Riley said, and started weeping, loudly, into his hands. I pulled away from Josh, and put my hands on Riley's left shoulder.

"Are you all right?" I whispered.

He brought his hands down, and said, "Why did this have to happen?"

"I don't know."

"Jesus. It's like your mom said. One minute we can be here, breathing, thinking, living. Then the next, *gone*."

Riley seemed to focus on that thought, as he stared up at me. I nodded, then averted my gaze back toward the gym floor.

"Thank you," Principal Brooks said. "Now we're going to have some of your teachers come up and say a few words."

The assembly went on for another hour, allowing for five teachers and the football coach to give their thoughts. The assembly went on so long that the rest of the school day was cut abruptly short, with lunch lasting about twenty minutes, and the afternoon classes going by so fast both of my teachers couldn't even get through the syllabus.

After the final bell rang, I bumped into Riley at the front of the school. I figured he wasn't going to pick me up and take me home *every* day of the week, but when I asked him for a ride, he accepted without hesitation.

“Do you ever think it, Cedar?” he asked, on the drive home.

“Do I think what?”

“You know... if this was your last day on Earth, what would you do?”

Riley had never posed me such an existential question before, and I didn't know how to answer. I kicked my feet against his glove compartment and stared out the window. “I don't know. I guess I would go to Disneyland?”

“No, think bigger.”

I shrugged. “Disneyworld?”

“Come on, I'm being serious.”

“I *am* being serious. There couldn't be any crowds though. No waiting in line!” I laughed, and hoped Riley would flash me a smile. He didn't.

“I just think we wait to do so many things, because we assume we'll have time to do them, whether it's tomorrow, or ten years from now. It's like all those people who can't wait to see Paris. But then they never go.”

“Who do you know who wants to see Paris? I'm starting another year of French, and I still don't really care—”

“Cedar, come on. You know what I mean.” He pulled up to a stop sign. Waited for the car next to us to go.

I gazed at him, tried to see what was going on in that busy brain of his. “What would you do, Riley? If this was your last day?”

“I know exactly what I'd do.” He put on his blinker and made a left, not a right like he was supposed to.

“What are you...” I said. “Where are we going?”

“You want to come over to my house?”

“Uhh...” I was so surprised I didn't know what to say. “Sure. I guess.”

“Good.”

He sped up, and started descending the large hill toward his new neighborhood off Folsom Lake Crossing.

#

I followed Riley into his bedroom. He took my hand and guided me not toward the bed, but to his computer.

“Here, let me grab an extra chair from Alondra's room,” he said, and he sped into the hallway.

I sat alone in his bedroom, trying to imagine the possibilities. What the hell was he up to?

I touched his computer mouse, but the monitor didn't come to life. Nothing was turned on. I leaned down, to check the cables, when Riley returned with another chair. He pushed it up next to me, then took out his math binder.

“You got a pencil?” he asked.

“Uhh, yeah.” I glanced at Riley, then the bed, then my backpack. I grabbed a pencil from the front pocket. “What are we doing?”

“What do you think, silly? Homework.”

He grabbed a blank sheet of paper and turned to page 9 in his geometry book.

I didn't talk for a moment, didn't move a muscle. I didn't know what to do. Was this some kind of game?

“Riley?”

“Yeah?”

I leaned my head toward his. “If this was your last day on Earth, you'd want to spend it doing *math homework*?”

He laughed. “No, of course not. I'll show you what I'd do. We just have to wait.”

“Wait? For what?”

He didn't answer; he turned back to his book, and started on the first problem.

I expected a punch line, but I never got one, so I took out my English binder and started going over vocabulary terms.

We did homework for the next two hours, until Riley's mom called us into the kitchen for dinner.

“Cedar *Swinton*?” Mrs. Alvarez said. “My God, it *is* you! You're a giant!”

She hugged me real tight, just as Alondra stomped in from the garage. I'd seen Mrs. Alvarez a couple times in the last year, but I hadn't seen Alondra in ages. She was texting on her phone, not bothering to look up and see what all the commotion was about.

"Speaking of a giant," I said, as I took my first glance at Riley's little sister in nearly three years, "Alondra's even taller than Riley!"

She put her phone down, glanced first at her brother, then shifted her eyes to me. She put a piece of gum in her mouth. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Alondra!" Mrs. Alvarez said. "Don't be rude. You know who that is."

She didn't so much apologize to her mom, as stare at my face a little harder. "*Oh*. Cedar? Jeez. It's been forever."

"There's a lot of that going around," I said. "You look great."

Mrs. Alvarez waved us toward her. "Come on, everyone take a seat, food's getting cold." Alondra followed after her mother, but Riley stopped both of them.

"Mom?" he asked.

"Yeah?"

"Is Dad having dinner with us?"

"Sure is. He's almost home. Why?"

He scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. "Nothing. I just wanted him to see Cedar, that's all."

Mrs. Alvarez started setting the food down on the table. It was a real feast for a Monday night, with New York steaks, asparagus, and baked potatoes, plus a huge bowl of honeydew and watermelon. My mom was a good cook, but she was nothing like Mrs.

Alvarez; I had forgotten after all this time the kinds of dinners she could whip up on a moment's notice.

“Sorry I'm late,” Mr. Alvarez said, arriving for dinner just in time. He entered the kitchen, dressed all fancy in a black suit and tie, and set his briefcase down on the counter. I had to remind myself Riley's father didn't work in athletics anymore; he had switched gears completely and become an accountant. “My meeting was only supposed to be an hour, and Clive just wouldn't stop running his mouth off—sorry about that.” He kissed Mrs. Alvarez on the cheek, then sat across from Riley.

“Honey,” Mrs. Alvarez said, “we have a guest.”

“We what?” He set his napkin on his lap and looked my way. “Oh! Hey, Cedar. Good to see you.” He picked up his knife and fork and started digging into his steak. While Alondra and Mrs. Alvarez had been surprised to see me, Mr. Alvarez acted like I was still coming over for dinner all the time.

“Same to you,” I said, and took a bite of the potato.

“So how was your first day of school?” Mrs. Alvarez asked. “Was everyone really sad? It's such a shame what happened.”

Mr. Alvarez wiped his mouth with a napkin and said, “Something happened?”

“Yes, I told you last night, honey,” she said. “Four kids from the high school died, in a car accident. One was a close friend of Riley and Cedar.”

I shook my head. “I wasn't *that* close to L—”

“They've gone to school with her since first grade,” she continued. “Can you believe that?”

“That *is* very sad,” Mr. Alvarez said, with a blank stare. He grabbed the A1 sauce and grinned. “Honey, wow, this steak is incredible—”

“*Dad.*” Riley stared at his father.

He set his fork down. “What?”

When I saw the tears well up in Riley's eyes, I reached out to him, and almost said, “No, don't.” I knew exactly what he was up to. And there was no stopping him.

“I was really close to Lena,” Riley said. “When we moved back here a year ago I was scared it would be hard to make friends again, even with people I had been friends with before. But Cedar welcomed me back right away, and so did Lena. She told me so many things about what she wanted to do, where she wanted to go, who she wanted to be. And she can't have that now. Because she's gone. My friend is dead.”

Mr. Alvarez's mouth hung open for a few seconds, before he said, “I'm sorry for your loss, Riley. That's horrible. Is there anything I can do?”

He stayed quiet for a few seconds. Then: “It just... it made me think about things, you know? It made me think, what if I was gonna die tomorrow? What would I regret?”

Alondra looked at Mrs. Alvarez, and Mrs. Alvarez looked at me, like I had put him up to this little speech, even though I had nothing to do with it. I just sat back and marveled at what was to come.

“I don't understand,” Mr. Alvarez said. “Son, what are you trying—”

“Dad, I'm gay.”

Mr. Alvarez's face turned to stone, as Mrs. Alvarez brought her hand to her mouth, not in sadness or shock, more like she was trying to cover a smile.

Alondra let out a loud chuckle. “I totally knew it.”

“Hey, that's enough from you, young lady!” Mr. Alvarez shouted at Alondra. He looked back toward Riley, but not at him directly—he couldn't look him in the eyes.

“Why would you say something like that to me?”

“Something like what, Dad?”

“You just turned sixteen. You don't know what you want.”

“It's not about what I want, it's about who I am. I'm gay, Dad. And I'm not the only one. Cedar's gay too.”

My eyes practically bulged out of their sockets, as Mr. Alvarez turned his gaze to me, Cedar, the culprit. “Did *you* do this to him?” he asked, and as soon as he did, I shook my head, and looked for the nearest exit.

“I'm not...” I started.

“Well? Did you?”

“Dad, stop—” Riley said.

“I don't want to hear any more of this!” Mr. Alvarez chugged most of his water, then took a bite of the steak.

Mrs. Alvarez took Riley's hand and said, “I'm proud of you. I'm really—”

“*Proud?* Are you kidding me?” Mr. Alvarez threw his fork against the plate and put his arms behind his chair. As soon as he finally sat still for a moment and stopped talking, Riley stood up from his chair, roamed around the table, and stopped beside him.

“Dad?”

“What?”

“I love you.”

Riley wrapped his arms around his father's chest, and buried his head against his shoulder. When Mr. Alvarez started tearing up, the others at the table dipped their heads and began crying too. Even Alondra.

I might have cried the hardest of all.

Because I knew now, more than ever, what I needed to do.

#

My mom, dad, and Eric were sitting on the couch watching a documentary about the gay activist Harvey Milk, of all things, so the timing couldn't have been more appropriate. I didn't overthink it, didn't stress over it. If Riley could do it, so could I.

“There you are, Cedar,” my mom said, my dad's arm wrapped around her. “I got your text, but you didn't say you were going to be at Riley's for very long—”

“Mom, Dad, Eric, I'm gay. There. I said it.”

Eric took a big handful of popcorn and shoved it in his mouth, didn't even look at me. My dad stayed concentrated on the television. My mom was the only one who kept her focus on me.

I put my arms up, waited for some kind of reaction, *any* reaction. “Did you guys hear me?”

“I heard you, Seed,” Eric said, his mouth full. “Loud and clear.”

My dad waved me over to the couch, and said, “Cedar, you need to watch this. They're talking about Harvey Milk. Who was the actor who played him in that movie? It was Tom Hanks, right?”

“Sean Penn,” Eric said. “You’re thinking of *Philadelphia*—”

“*Dad*. Please.” I breathed in deeply. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yeah, I heard what you said. Jesus Christ, Cedar. Took you long enough.” He leaned down and said to Eric, “Can I have some of the popcorn?”

“Sure.” Eric gave him the bowl.

My mom grinned, and patted my dad’s knee. “Cedar, we’ve known you were gay for years. And we know all about Josh Sweet. Isn’t that just the cutest last name? Sweet.”

“You do?” I darted my angry eyes at Eric. “I mean... you *have*?”

“It wasn’t me,” he said. “I swear.”

“We just want you to be happy,” my dad said, and then he finally turned his gaze to me. “Gay, straight, it doesn’t matter to us. We just want what’s best for you. You’re a smart kid. Whatever decision you make will be the right one.”

I took a seat next to my parents. Two tears trickled down my cheeks; I could control them about as much as all the surprises life threw at me every day.

“Really?” I said, through my sobs. “You... really mean that?”

“Of course,” my mom said. She scooted around my father and took me in her arms. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to us.”

Eric cleared his throat, real loud.

My mom smiled at him, embarrassed. “Well, *one* of the best things.”

Eric smiled, and snatched the bowl of popcorn back from my dad.

I rested my head against her shoulder, and said, “How did I get so lucky?”

“I don’t know,” my dad said. “I ask the same thing about the three of you.” He put his hand on mine. “I love you, Cedar.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

My mom wrapped her arm around mine, and kissed me on the forehead. “Now... here's the most important question of all.”

I looked up at her. “What's that, Mom?”

She grinned. “When do we get to meet Mr. Sweet?”

The First Day of **Eleventh Grade**

August 22, 2016

“My mom keeps asking about you, you know.” I slowed down and turned on my windshield wipers. It had been clear outside one second, and pouring rain the next. “She keeps asking when you're gonna come over for dinner.”

“I'm sorry,” Josh said, his head turned away from me. “I've been a little busy.”

“To eat *dinner*?” The light turned green, and I started making my turn. “Josh, will you put on your seatbelt?”

“I'm fine.”

“You're fine? Put your goddamn seatbelt on. I'm getting on the freeway.” As I pulled onto I-80, I grabbed for his seatbelt, but I couldn't reach far enough.

“Cedar, what are you—”

“Put it on *now*! I'm serious!” I sped up to 75 MPH in matter of seconds and maneuvered into the center lane.

“All right, all right. Jesus.” He clicked it in, and pulled real hard on the strap. “There, you happy?”

Silence followed. We didn't say anything to each other for a minute. I slowed down a little, as a number of cars zoomed on past me, going over 80. Josh and I weren't in as much of a rush.

“I know you're disappointed,” I said.

He bit down on his tongue, then shook his head. “Disappointment isn't a strong enough word.”

“But come on, you need to shrug it off. You're an amazing writer. Someone's gonna discover your book, or the next one. You have to keep working at it.”

“It should have happened by now,” Josh said, noticeably breathing heavier, like he wanted to start screaming. “I was *so* close. I got all the way to the top twenty-five, and then... just nothing? How cruel is that!”

“You're sixteen!” I shouted, my face noticeably turning redder in the rearview mirror. “Josh, most sixteen-year-olds can't even write an essay. You're a little genius, and you're pouting because you didn't win a novel contest. It's ridiculous.”

“I don't think of my career as ridiculous, Cedar.”

“Of course you don't, I'm not saying that. But you can't keep stressing out about this, okay? You're gonna give yourself a heart attack.”

He gritted his teeth and gazed out the windshield. “I should have won. I put my heart and soul into that book. For a whole *year*. Why isn't everyone seeing it for the masterpiece it is?”

I rolled my eyes. I didn't know how to respond to that. In December, two days before Christmas, Josh finished revising his first novel, and he'd spent all of spring querying agents, submitting to contests, talking to authors on Twitter. He had told me once in the first grade that he was going to be not just a published author, but an *award-winning* published author, by the time he graduated from high school, and to Josh, time was always ticking. All of the agents turned him down, but his book did get recognized as one of the Top 100 Undiscovered Books in an Amazon contest. He made it through a few rounds, but when he didn't make the top ten, he spent his last week of the summer crying in my arms as if his whole family had perished the same way Lena did.

“Maybe you need to do another draft,” I said. “Have you gotten any constructive feedback from anyone?”

“No. I don’t need any.” Josh sat up in his seat and cracked his neck.

“Maybe you should try to write something else. Maybe a young adult novel? I heard those sell like crazy—”

“Who are *you* to talk, Cedar? You’ve started like two short stories since we started dating, and you haven’t finished a single one!”

I swerved around a truck going about 30 MPH. “Jesus Christ, Josh. Can’t we just have one pleasant night together? I feel like all we do lately is fight.”

He smiled, finally. “We don’t really fight. We just yell at each other a lot.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Uhh, isn’t that fighting?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Hey, I have something we can agree on.”

“What’s that?”

He shifted himself a little closer to me. Was he finally going to act like my boyfriend, and not my mortal enemy? “I think we can agree that having a birthday party on a Monday night is a little absurd.”

“No, I told you,” I said. “Today’s Emily’s *actual* birthday, and she didn’t want to do the thing where she has a party days in advance or the weekend after. And her dad doesn’t come home until—”

“How many people are gonna be there?” Josh interrupted.

“I don’t know. Ten, maybe? All I know is I’m gonna be in the same room with Glen, so... that should be interesting.”

“Is Riley coming?”

I nodded, and sighed, but didn't say anything. I pointed to the sign up ahead. "There's the turn-off." I checked my rearview mirror, and pulled over to the right lane. I couldn't believe that Emily had made us drive way all the way to Loomis, but I didn't want to upset my closest friend and cancel at the last minute. Especially on her birthday.

I pulled off on a one-way street and tried to keep my eyes on the road, as I passed a bunch of posh three-story houses.

"I think we just entered Beverly Hills," Josh said, leaning his forehead against the window.

"I know, right? I've only been out here once. It's pretty wild. Emily's dad owns some health insurance company, I can never remember the name. He has this house in Loomis, a penthouse in New York, a cabin in Tahoe. And then her mom has the house in Granite Bay."

"Did her dad ever re-marry?"

"Nope."

"Amazing. The guy's got all the money in the world, has all these houses, and lives by himself."

I started slowing down, as the house came into view up over the hill, and said, "I can't think of anything more sad. I'd rather live in a cardboard box with the man I love, than live in some mansion all alone."

"Would you live with *me* in a cardboard box?" Josh asked.

Only one word came to mind, and it wasn't the word Josh would have wanted to hear. So I pointed, and shouted, "Look! Here it is."

I pulled into the driveway. Three cars were parked in front of the garage.

“*Whoa.*” Josh grabbed my hand, and stared out the windshield in awe, like a pair of pterodactyls was flying overhead. The house was massive, at least three stories tall, with a front patio about the size of my bedroom and a tall, old-school gate that looked like something stolen from Transylvania.

“Let’s go, we’re late,” I said. I grabbed Emily’s gift from the back seat and stepped out on the concrete. I shut my door, waited for Josh. He stumbled up to me with a cute little grin on his face, like after all our bickering in the last few weeks—the last few months, really—he wanted to finally get us back to where we used to be.

Josh was never going to be the perfect boyfriend; I had known that from the start. While he certainly cared for me, and I for him, he was driven in a way I could never full comprehend. Since the end of sophomore year he had become more distant, canceling dates at the last minute, bailing out of a summer camping trip so he could hole himself up in a room and work out the kinks of his novel. I didn’t see him much in the early part of August, and I had to practically beg him to come to Emily’s tonight.

After I opened the gate, he beat me to the mile-high door and knocked twice, real hard and loud. I pulled him toward me, and his back collided against my chest.

“Gotcha,” I said, and kissed the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

He spun around and wrapped his arms around me. “You know... for being a little shit.”

“You haven’t been a little shit.”

“I totally have. But I want to make it up to you. Today’s a new day. Let's try to think of now, right now, as a brand new start.”

I grinned, although his words sounded a little too written, and not really from the heart. “Okay. Sure.”

I kissed him, for a few hypnotic seconds. But as soon as I pulled away, Josh pushed his hand against the back of my head and kept our lips pressed together, like he wanted the kiss to last forever. He dipped his tongue into my mouth, as the door opened, and Riley, of all people, stepped onto the welcome mat.

I pulled Josh's hand away, and jumped back a step. “Riley! Hey!”

“Oh, sorry.” He put his hands up. “Was I interrupting?”

“No, not at all.” I brushed my wrist against my lips, and attempted a smile. I didn't mind kissing Josh in front of Emily. But it always felt wrong in front of Riley.

“Why are *you* answering the door?” Josh asked, with a noticeable hint of condescension.

“Oh, everyone's out back,” Riley said. “I was just going to pee. Did you know this house has eleven bathrooms? Who the hell needs *eleven* bathrooms?”

“I know, right?” I lifted up Emily's present: some bath products and a new Blu Ray set of Sandra Bullock romantic comedies. “Where do we put the gifts?”

“I can take it.” Riley took it out of my hands, as Josh and I stepped inside.

“Thanks,” I said, with a smile.

“No prob—” A person quickly wrapped his arms around Riley, making him unleash a high-pitched scream. “Goddammit, you *jerk!*” Riley shouted, more love in his voice than hate. “What's the matter with you?”

“I’m sorry, my bad,” Riley’s boyfriend Cory said. He kissed Riley fast and adorably. “I didn’t see you.”

“Yeah, sure you didn’t.” Riley waved me and Josh forward, and suddenly the four of us were standing next to each other in the fanciest of foyers, with two spiral staircases that seemed to climb to the sky.

“So,” I said. “They’re out back, you said?”

“Yeah,” Riley said, as his hunky African-American jock of a boyfriend set his hand on his shoulder. “They were talking about playing hide-and-seek.”

“Hide-and-seek?” Josh asked. “In the house?”

“Yep.”

“That’s a great idea! Gives me a chance to explore. I could write a horror novel about this place...”

Josh wandered to the other side of the room, but I didn’t follow him. I stayed close to Riley, as he set my present down on a table with the other gifts.

“You two seem to be doing well,” I said, with a polite grin.

“Better than ever,” Cory said, and kissed Riley again on the cheek. The guy couldn’t keep his hands off him. “It’s been five months, can you believe it?”

“I certainly can’t.” Riley said, with a laugh. I noticed he was looking anywhere but at me. “So, should we head out back or—”

“*There* you are!” a voice said from one of the four adjacent hallways. “Took you long enough, where the hell have you been?”

Emily appeared and hugged me real tight.

I hugged her back. “Sorry. I thought you said 7:30.”

“I told you 7. Don’t play dumb.”

She had blossomed over the last year, from a young lady to a full-blown woman. Her hair was long again, with all her black curls dancing against her lower back, and her breasts, for years always tiny, had transformed into grapefruit-sized wonders. She wore a cute blue dress that highlighted her eyes.

“Happy birthday, Em,” I said.

“Thanks, C. You’re such a…” Two bear-like arms grabbed her from behind and she spun around. “...gentleman! Ahh!” She lightly slapped the guy’s cheek. “Speaking of someone who is *not* a gentleman! Glen! You scared me!”

“There seems to be a lot of scaring people tonight,” I whispered, but no one heard me.

“I’m sorry, let me make it up to you, baby.” He leaned down and kissed her on the lips. They both made really loud and annoying moans as they kept their lips pressed together for about five agonizing seconds.

“Aww, isn’t that sweet,” I said, with only the heaviest amount of sarcasm. Still no one paid attention to me.

Glen put his arm around her back, and finally acknowledged me. “Oh. Cedar. Didn’t see you there. What’s up?”

What’s up? *That’s* what he had to say to me? After a lifetime of threats and slaps and ridicule, I was supposed to just smile and give this guy a high-five, and forget all those years of torment? The seventeen-year-old Glen was clearly a changed man—his love for Emily proved it—but I still wondered if that bully side of him would ever show its ugly face again. If he ever hurt my best friend...

“Uhh, not much,” I finally said.

Loud footsteps echoed down the hall, and a bunch of Emily's friends stumbled toward us. I recognized most of them, like Edie, Jack, Chester, and Nellie.

“What's going on in here?” the short Edie asked, breathing hard against the frames of her glasses. “Emily, I thought you wanted to go outside.”

“We will, soon enough. But now that everyone's here...” Emily turned to me and winked. “We can finally play.”

“Play?” I asked.

“Hide-and-seek, of course! There's thirty-six rooms in this place, so you better find a good hiding spot. All right... is everybody ready?”

I was hoping I'd get a chance to sit down, maybe grab a beer and talk to Riley for a bit. But no—apparently the games had already begun.

“Ready... set...” Emily pushed her palms over her eyes and said, “*Go!* Twenty... nineteen... eighteen...”

Everybody raced in different directions, but Josh and I just stood there, like for a moment we'd forgotten the rules.

“Twelve... eleven... ten...”

“*Shit,*” I said. I waved Josh in the other direction. “Go! Hide!”

Josh ran toward the living room, while I headed down the center hallway. By the time I reached the back of the house, now fully immersed in the game, I had a gleeful smile on my face. I had assumed we were too old for hide-and-seek. Apparently not.

“Two... one... ready or not, here I come!”

I arrived at a dead end, just a big white wall with a framed Thomas Kincaid painting. I glanced to my left to find a closed wooden door.

“Anyone down here...” I heard Emily say, as she stepped right toward me. I had five seconds. Maybe less.

I opened the door. It led not to a staircase going up, but going down. I closed it quietly and descended the staircase into a basement that appeared big enough to be its own separate guesthouse. I walked to the other side of it, gazed at three more doors. I opened the one on the right and shut it behind me.

It was pitch black inside. I searched for a light switch. Was I alone?

“Is anyone in here?”

“Cedar? Is that you?” Riley.

“Oh, hey. Can you believe this place? It's like an amusement park—”

“Cedar, shut up. She'll hear us.”

“She won't hear us. I bet she won't even come down here.”

I pressed both my hands against the wall, searching everywhere for a light switch.

“I just can't believe this place. It's like a palace—”

“Cedar, *quiet!* And don't turn on the light.”

“Why not?”

“Just, please—”

I flipped up the switch. The whole room burst with a seizure-inducing brightness, and my jaw dropped, as I took in my surroundings. I thought I had stepped into a closet, or maybe a laundry room.

It was a gun room. Shotguns, handguns, and rifles lined the big brown walls, and the cabinets in the back.

“Holy crap,” I said.

“Cedar. *Please.*”

“What? What’s the matter?”

“Shut. Up,” he whispered, and pulled me toward him, all the way against the back wall. My face stopped just an inch away from his.

We stood in agonizing silence. I had forgotten all about the silly game we were playing, or the guns surrounding us. My focus was all on Riley. Was it bad that I enjoyed his fingers gripped against my shirt? That I liked standing so close to him, just the two of us? By the end of eighth grade I had assumed I’d never see him again, let alone be playing hide-and-seek well into our late teens, standing side-by-side in a dark basement. I never thought he would be gay, either—or have a boyfriend of his own.

I heard footsteps behind us. Someone was walking in the outer hall. We just stared at each other for a moment, as the sounds of footsteps grew closer and closer. Riley could have pushed me away, easily, but he didn’t. He let me stand close to him. Let me push myself against him.

“Cedar?” he whispered.

“Yeah?” I put my hands on his chest. Was this really happening?

“It’s gonna fall.”

I shook my head. “What is?”

Riley pushed away from the wall, and a tiny handgun dropped to the floor. It looked like it weighed close to nothing, but it still landed with a loud thud.

“Uh-oh,” I said.

The door shot open, and Emily stomped inside, a victorious smile on her face.

“Well, well. Look who I found here.”

Riley and I shrugged and followed Emily back up the stairs. It took her a never-ending half-hour to find the others, so we kept hide-and-seek to just one game.

Everyone went out to the backyard a few minutes past 8:30, sat on the center of the giant patio, and watched Emily open her presents. She liked the two gifts from me, but preferred the necklace from Glen, which he helped her put on, in front of everyone.

After presents, Emily ran back inside the house.

“What do you think she's doing?” Josh asked, resting his head against my shoulder.

“I have no idea,” I said. “Cake, maybe?”

Emily returned a minute later, not with some fancy three-tiered chocolate cake in her hands, but with an empty Coca-Cola bottle.

“What’s that for?” Glen asked.

“Well, duh,” Emily said. “Who wants to play Spin the Bottle?”

I looked at Glen, and Glen looked at Josh, and Josh looked at Riley. The reaction wasn't unanimously in favor of the silly game, but enough people nodded and clapped for Emily to take a seat on the concrete. She asked all of us to get in a circle, and for no one to sit next to his or her significant other. Josh sat directly across from me, and Riley sat next to me. Emily placed the bottle in the center of the circle.

“Since it's my birthday, I'm gonna pick who goes first.” She eyed each one of us. There were fourteen total. “And that person... is me!”

She laughed, and spun the bottle, real fast. It kept spinning and spinning, until it finally stopped and pointed at Glen.

They both laughed, as many applauded. “How about that,” Glen said, as he got down on all fours.

I looked away, immediately. I didn't want to ever picture Glen on all fours.

I heard, but didn't see, Emily and Glen kiss, before she huddled back down in her spot. “All right, so here's the rule. The person the bottle points to gets to spin the next time, unless they've already gone. If that's the case, it goes to the person on your right.” Emily smiled, and noticeably glanced at me. “Everyone has to go at least once.”

“Okay, then I guess it's my turn. Here goes!” Glen spun the bottle and sat back.

The more I watched the bottle spin, the more my brain registered it in slow motion. It seemed to spin forever, like some kind of invisible force wanted me to anticipate the inevitable not for a second or two, but for the rest of the night.

A few seconds later, the bottle slowed down, and then it landed on me. Of course it landed on me.

I couldn't even look at Glen. I peered up toward the sky, as I reached my foot out and kicked the bottle to the girl next to me.

“Rules are rules,” Emily said, laughing. “Glen and Cedar have to kiss!”

Glen shook his head, didn't even entertain the idea. “I'm not kissing another guy, Emily. I'm out.”

“Oh, don't be a pussy,” she said. She glanced around the circle, and said, “Come on, guys. Chant it with me. Kiss *him!* Kiss *him!*”

They all got in on it, even Riley. Even Josh! I stared at Glen, and he stared right back, as twelve obnoxious voices chanted to the heavens for us to lock lips.

I rolled my eyes at Glen. “Make it quick.”

He sighed, loudly, and crawled across the space. He darted his lips for mine, but I turned at the last second, and his lips touched my cheek.

Thankfully it did the trick. Glen scooted back to his spot, and everyone clapped with approval.

I wiped my cheek, about seventeen times, and scooted a little closer to Riley, to someone who was actually attractive and kissable and *gay*.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Emily asked, and pointed to the bottle.

I leaned forward. “Oh. Right.”

My hand touched the bottle, but I didn't budge, didn't flick my wrist just yet. I glanced at Josh, then at Riley, then back at Josh.

How much power did I have to put into my spin for the bottle to land on Josh? Because I knew that's what I needed it to do.

But as I crouched down and counted to three, the thought entered my head: was it what I *wanted* it to do?

“Spin the bottle, C!” Emily shouted. “For God's sake!”

I did as my friend said, and sat back against the concrete. It went around and around, two times, three times. It wasn't stopping. I figured if it never stopped, I would never have to face the grave consequences. And that would have been a good thing.

I bit down on my tongue, as the bottle came to a halt. I looked up, and sighed in relief.

The bottle pointed at Josh.

“Awww,” both Edie and Emily said in unison.

Josh clapped his hands with glee, like he was about to kiss me for the very first time. I met him in the center, and give him a quick but tender kiss on the lips.

“You guys...” Edie said, pushing her glasses back. “Oh you guys are just the cutest things *ever*.”

“Okay,” Josh said, looking like he wanted to get his turn done sooner rather than later. “Here goes nothing.”

I waited for it to land on me again. I didn't want it to land on Glen, and especially not Riley. The bottle stopped on Edie.

She bent over, jiggled her breasts, and said, “Come and get it, gay boy!”

I watched Josh *really* not enjoy kissing the miniature Edie on the mouth—he even stuck his tongue out after, like he had been forced to share spit with a lizard—and then we all witnessed two more kisses, between Edie and Chester, and Chester and Nellie.

Nellie had to be the prettiest girl at the party, with her long red hair and bright green eyes, and a cute little mole above her upper lip. She grinned when the bottle stopped on Riley.

“Wow, no repeats yet,” Emily said, when the bottle stopped. “Riley, kiss her!”

Riley obviously didn't want to draw out the inevitable, as he raced over to Nellie and gave her a soft peck on the mouth. The lips touched so minimally that I expected an uproar from those who had already gone, but polite applause followed, and Riley returned to his place.

“All right, Riley, you're up!” Emily said.

He scratched the bottom of his chin, and shook his head. “Nah, I think I'm good. Someone else can go.”

Eddie put her legs out and stared Riley down like a hungry tiger. “You spin that bottle, Riley Alvarez, or I'm gonna go over there and kiss you for the next *hour!*”

That did the trick, Emily's little helper Eddie taking charge. Riley nodded and bit down on his tongue. His hand touched the bottle. He hesitated. Looked at his boyfriend Cory, who still hadn't gone yet. Looked at Emily, Eddie. Then at me. He might have stayed looking at me the longest of all.

Riley spun. This time the bottle didn't make more than one full turn. It nicked the side of Riley's leg, and stopped. A noticeable hush fell over the circle.

The bottle pointed at me.

Riley picked up the bottle. I wasn't sure if he had seen where it'd been pointing. “Crap,” he said. “Do I need to do it again?”

“You have to kiss the person the bottle lands on,” Emily said. “Rules are rules!”

When Riley turned his gaze to me, I realized he knew exactly where the bottle had stopped. He stared at me with apprehension, but then he waved me toward him.

“All right,” he said. “Let's do this.”

He was clearly not trying to make a big deal out of it. We might have known each other for ten years, we might have shared feelings for one another. Hell, we even kissed back on that plane back in the day.

So it wasn't a big deal. Not at all.

Right?

I glanced at both Cory and Josh. Cory didn't seem to care, but Josh wasn't happy. He crossed his arms in protest.

I scooted to the center, slowly, like I had lost all feelings in my arms and legs. I had hoped to share a real kiss with Riley one day, but I never thought it would be like this. Not in front of a crowd of people. Not in front of my boyfriend, and his boyfriend.

My knees touched his. We brought our heads up at the same time, and gazed into each other's eyes.

“Ready?” he said, oddly.

I leaned in, closed my eyes, and pressed my lips to his.

About two seconds in, I waited for Riley to pull away, but he didn't. He brought his hand to my knee, and opened his mouth a centimeter more.

I pushed harder against him, tasted his strawberry lips. All sense of time evaporated. The voices of the group dissipated.

And I enjoyed the kiss I had been waiting a decade for.

Riley's hand drew away, and I leaned back, against my feet. I opened my eyes. Riley was staring back at me, trembling. I pushed myself back to my spot.

No applause broke out, no loud cheers. Emily's head was dipped, her eyes seemingly staring right into my soul. Cory had his hand pressed against his chin, as he tried to take in the moment, and Josh was staring at the ground, his cheeks quivering, like he wanted to punch somebody.

How long had we kissed for?

Emily smiled awkwardly at the group and tried to turn the attention back to her.

“Well, wasn't that *something*? All right, who's up next? Cedar's a repeat, so someone new

has to go!” She waited for a response, but when she was met with only silence, she laughed, and said, “Okay, I guess I’ll go again then. It’s my birthday, after all!”

She darted a cold look my way, one that seemed to say, “You owe me.”

“Owe you for what?” I wanted to ask back.

She spun the bottle. I wondered if it would land on Edie or Nellie—we hadn’t had a proper girl-on-girl kiss yet—but it stopped on Cory.

“Get over here, handsome!” Emily shouted, louder than she needed to, and attacked Cory like a grizzly bear before he even made it to the center of the circle. She didn’t just give him a quick smooch; she wrapped her arms around him and shoved her tongue down his throat. It only lasted a second or two, but when she came back up for air, and pushed a surprised and shaken Cory away, the laughter returned, and a roar of applause ensued.

“And that, my friends, is how it’s done,” Emily said, wiping Cory’s spit from her mouth. “All right, who wants to play another game? Who’s up for Truth or Dare?”

Glen shook his head, then picked up the bottle from the center of the circle and threw it toward the giant swimming pool. The bottle shattered, loudly, against a rock.

“Emily, what the hell was that?”

Any sense of joy and fun all but evaporated. “What... was what?” she asked.

“Glen, what’s the matter—”

“Why did you just kiss Cory like that?”

“It was just a joke!”

“No it wasn’t! Do you think I’m *stupid*?”

A tense argument between the birthday girl and her burly boyfriend continued, and then it got worse: Josh looked at me with hateful eyes, jumped up, and raced inside the house.

“Shit,” I said. “Josh? Where are you going?”

He disappeared inside, not once looking back at me.

I shot up to my feet and headed toward one of the five back doors. “Nice game there, Em,” I said, before I entered the house.

I found a living room area. Nobody was around. “Josh? You in here?”

I heard footsteps down the hall, and I followed them. I turned the corner, and there he was, scratching the back of his neck, glancing to his left and right, like he was lost. When he caught sight of me, he ran for the nearest door.

“Stay away from me,” he said.

“Josh! Get back here! Where are you going?”

He grabbed the doorknob. Locked. He pounded his fists against the door. “How the hell do you get *out* of this place?”

I stepped toward him, but he changed direction, and headed down a long staircase. I followed him, as he entered another hallway and opened a door that led to a side patio. Before he stepped outside, I grabbed his arm, and pulled him back inside.

“Stop, just *stop*,” I said.

“Goddammit, this house is like a maze—”

I cut him off, by planting a big wet one right on him. He tried to pry himself away from me, but I kept my hands pressed firmly against the back of his head. He ducked, and finally turned his head away.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Kissing my boyfriend, that's what.”

“Cedar, don't.” He backed up to the door.

“Don't what?”

“It's so obvious. Don't pretend it's not true.” He took a deep breath, and said, “You like Riley.” He didn't even seem angry when he said it. He seemed like he had just been waiting for an excuse to tell the world loud and clear what he apparently had known forever.

“Well... yeah. Of course I like Riley, Josh. He's my friend! I've known him since we were in first grade—”

“Just drop it. Please, Cedar. For once in your life, can you be honest with me?”

I brought my hands to my sides. Stared at him for a good ten seconds, as neither of us said a word. “Josh, I love you.”

He looked away from me. I brought my hands to his cheeks. Waited for him to lock his eyes on me. “You're such a liar,” he said

“But... I'm not. I—”

A loud bang from nearby almost knocked me down against my back.

“What was that?” I looked outside the open door.

“Glen, stop it!” Emily screamed, from the other side of the hall. Glen had a tight grip on her arm. “What are you *doing*?”

“You think I'm just gonna let you shove your tongue in that guy's mouth and have nothing to say for it? Huh?” Glen said. “You trying to make me look like an idiot?”

My jaw dropped. The bully was back, in full force. Just like I knew he'd be.

Emily escaped from his grasp, and then he raised his hand to hit her.

I clenched my hand into a fist, and reached out to stop it. I needed time to freeze for a moment, to let me rush forward and push Emily out of the way. I needed time to freeze so I could run downstairs into that gun room and come back with a loaded weapon that would stop Glen once and for all. I needed time to freeze so I could pound Glen's face into the ground and prevent him from hurting another person that I loved. I needed—

“Glen, *stop*,” Emily said. She grabbed his arms and pulled him toward her. He slowly brought his hands to his sides. “It was a stupid game, okay? I know you're upset, and I'm sorry. But that kiss with Cory meant nothing. I love you.”

I stepped forward. I noticed Glen's hands were shaking.

Emily kissed him softly on the cheek, and then Glen kissed her on the forehead. He nodded, and then, most surprising of all, started tearing up. “I love you too. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I ruined your birthday.”

Glen started crying into her shoulder, as she wrapped her arms around him. “You didn't ruin anything. It's the best birthday I've ever had.”

I narrowed my eyes. My hand was still in the shape of a fist. I had been waiting to protect a friend, the way I did back in fourth grade. But I didn't have to anymore.

After Emily and Glen walked back up the steps toward the backyard, neither one even noticing I'd been standing mere feet away, I turned around, and walked back to Josh. I expected him to want to hug me too, after watching those two make amends.

I reached out for him, but he pushed my hand away. “I'm going to the car.”

“What? Why?”

“I'm leaving.”

“But the party’s not over yet.”

“I don’t care.”

“Josh, come on, let’s talk about this. I love y—”

He stopped and twisted around, his eyes cold with menace. “What’s there to talk about? You’re a liar and an asshole and I’m just really tired of you pretending like you give a shit about me. You probably forced Emily to play that game, just so you’d have an excuse to kiss Riley.”

Now I was the one on the verge of tears. “I did not...”

“You know what I think? I think when you kiss me lately, you think about Riley too. Why don’t you just go back upstairs and start the game back up again, but instead of having everyone else play, you make the game just between you and Riley! That way you’ll know exactly who to kiss every time you spin...”

Josh kept going, for another minute, at least, but eventually his nasty, hateful words started to blend in with one another, and his voice started to fade from my senses. I stared into his face, at his eyes of rage, at his reddening cheeks, but then slowly moved my focus to the staircase above him.

Riley stood on the top step, by his lonesome, leaning against the bannister. He stared down at me, and I stared back at him.

Josh kept yelling at me, kept calling me names, but I wasn’t listening anymore.

I knew what I had to do.

The First Day of **Twelfth** Grade

August 28, 2017

“You have to do it, Cedar.” My dad put his arm around my mom and grinned at me. “It’s tradition!”

“But... it’s so *early*.” I glanced at the clock. 4:25 AM. I looked out my bedroom window. It was still pitch black outside.

“Come on, Seed,” Eric said. “I’m not letting you say no to this.” He grabbed my arm and dragged me to the edge of the bed. When my feet touched the floor, he let me go.

“Okay, okay,” I said, with a loud yawn. “I’m up.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and gazed up at my family. It felt like something out of a horror movie: my mom, dad, and brother standing in my dark bedroom, staring down at me with smiles on their faces.

“I can’t believe it’s my little boy’s last year of high school,” my mom said. She leaned down and gave me a far-too-wet kiss on my forehead. “You both grew up too damn fast. How do I make it stop?”

My brother shoved his hands against his hips and swayed back and forth, like he was either trying to wake himself up or attempting to learn a new kind of dance. “It’s really gonna make me feel old when Cedar graduates next year,” he said.

“You?” My mom glared at my brother. “How do you think *I* feel?”

“Ancient?” Eric said.

My mom gave him a soft punch to the shoulder. “Hey, watch it.”

“You going to be okay here?” my dad asked, stepping toward me. “You know... all by yourself?”

I nodded, and yawned, again. I hadn't thought about it much as their big trip grew nearer, but my parents were about to leave me alone at the house for the longest time ever: a whole week.

“I'll be fine,” I said.

My dad put his hand on my shoulder. “You sure? I can make arrangements to fly home early if—”

“Dad, I'm seventeen. I think I can handle this.”

He smiled, then glanced at my mom and brother. “I'll start up the car. We should leave in the next few minutes if we want to beat the traffic.”

He made his way toward my bedroom door, then hesitated before he turned the corner. “I love you, Cedar,” he said, with a a tender grin. “Stay safe, all right?”

“I will.”

“And please don't burn the house down.”

I thought on it for a moment. “Now *that* I can't promise you.”

Eric laughed, but my mom seemed to think I was serious; her eyes just about burst out of her head.

“Mom, I'm kidding.”

“You better be,” she said, and sat down on the bed. “So I have all the emergency numbers for you in the kitchen, and of course you have your dad's cell and my cell, if you need anything. It's gonna take us three days to get to Eric's school, so don't panic if you get our voicemails, we might be driving through an area where there's no service.”

“Mom, it's okay. I know.”

“Frozen dinners are in the fridge, and remember the trash tomorrow night, and the mail every day. And don't forget to lock up every night—”

“*Mom.*” I set my hand on hers. “I've got this.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

She kissed me again, this time on the cheek, and gave me a hug. “I'll miss you,” she said, not like she was leaving for a few days, but rather a whole year.

“I'll miss you too.”

She glanced at the clock. “Don't you need to start getting ready?”

The time on the clock was a little fuzzy. I had to lean in a bit. “I've got some time. I don't have to be there until 5:30.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

She stood back up and headed toward my door. She blew me a kiss and stepped down the hall, out of sight.

Eric approached my bed. He wore a large sweatshirt over his baggy pajamas.

“Well, you've got a big day today,” he said.

“Not as big as you.” I scooted closer to him. “I'm proud of you, Eric. You know that, right?”

“Thanks, Seed. I'm just happy I figured things out. I hope I can help others, the way others have helped me.”

“You will,” I said.

In the four years since my brother tried to take his own life, he had bundled up all that negative energy and turned it into something positive, focusing on volunteer work at a local youth crisis center, as well as graduating with a bachelor's degree in psychology at Sacramento State. Now he was headed to Denver to pursue a master's degree in counseling psychology. The brother who got into so much trouble in middle school, and who was practically aimless in high school, and who tried to off himself over a stupid girl before his sophomore year of college, had found his passion, his drive to keep going. Looking up at my brother, I saw it for him, finally: a future.

"I'm really happy for you," I said. "I hope it's everything you want it to be."

"Me too." He put his fist up, gestured for me to bump it, but I pushed his arm away, and hugged him instead.

It might have been because it was so early, and I was a little out of it, but I said it, anyway. "I'm really happy you're alive. That I didn't have to say goodbye to you."

Eric leaned his head toward mine and said, "Don't worry, Seed. I'm not going anywhere."

"Not going anywhere? You're going all the way to Denver!"

"Well, I didn't mean *literally*."

I laughed. "I'm just kidding. Have fun, okay?"

He stepped toward the door. "*You* have fun. Have an amazing senior year. I can't wait to hear about it."

"I don't know how amazing it's gonna be, honestly."

He shook his head. "Why's that? Cuz you don't have a boyfriend?"

I sometimes forgot Eric was able to read my mind. I looked away from him.

Eric tapped his fingers against my dresser drawer. “He loves you, you know.”

I glanced back at him, but didn't say anything.

He shrugged, and walked into the hall. “I'll see you when I see you?”

“For sure,” I said. “Bye, Eric.”

“Later, Seed.”

I crashed back against the bed and listened to my dad's car start up on the driveway. I closed my eyes, as I heard the car zoom down the street, to the end of the cul-de-sac. A few seconds went by, and my family was gone.

I sat up, stretched, glanced at the clock. It was barely 4:45 AM, and yet I was already overdue for a shower.

I headed into the bathroom, and as I took off my clothes, I let my brothers words repeat in my head, over and over again: “He loves you...”

#

I pulled up to the high school at 5:25. Normally the parking lot would have been empty this early in the morning, but the lot was jammed, with almost every spot on the east side of campus taken. I parked in the last open spot that faced the journalism classroom, grabbed my backpack—stuffed with a sweatshirt and gloves, just in case I needed them—and stepped into the cool morning air.

The walk to the football stadium should have only taken five minutes, but I kept at a snail's pace, as I took in my surroundings, and tried my best to savor every moment. I was never going to get a morning like this again, at the school I loved, at the school I'd

soon be leaving. I glanced at the bleachers that were filled top to bottom with students; it was Senior Sunrise, an annual tradition where the seniors watched the sun rise on the first day of school, only to later return to the bleachers at sunset on the last day of school. I was more of a night owl so I figured I would have more fun at the second get-together in June, but there was something magical in the air that late August morning. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I could taste it: a major change was coming my way.

I waved to Emily on the left side of the bleachers. She was dating a new boy named Luke, a varsity baseball and basketball player who towered over most of the students. She and Glen broke up amicably last spring, after Glen received a basketball scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, and I even dropped by his house over the summer before he left to wish him well. A lot of people had surprised me over the years, like Josh, and my brother, but no one more so than Glen.

When the sun started showing its red face over the horizon, I hoofed it a little faster to the top of the bleachers and took my seat—my *saved* seat.

“Cutting it a little close there, aren't you?” Riley asked, his green sweatshirt covering up most of his face.

“Really? I thought I was early.” I looked down the left side of the bleachers for Josh but didn't see him.

Riley scooted closer to me, and rubbed his hands together. “I didn't think it was gonna be so freezing out here, it's freaking *cold*.”

“I know.” I unzipped my backpack and put on my black jacket.

“This sucks, I don't want summer to be over yet,” he said, and gazed into my eyes for the first time since I sat down.

I nodded. “Yeah. We had fun, didn’t we?”

“So much fun. It was hard getting over Cory, but... you helped me get through it.” He tapped his fingers against my arm, and smiled. “You’ve always been a good friend to me, Cedar. You’ve been my *best* friend.”

“A good friend,” I whispered, under my breath. I looked at the bottom of the bleachers. Josh had finally taken a seat, next to his new boyfriend, Isaac, the editor-in-chief of the school paper.

“Can you believe it’s been *eleven* years since we met?” Riley buried his head against my shoulder, and let out a goofy laugh. “It was eleven years ago today, I think.”

“Has it really been that long?” I asked. “Jesus, that’s crazy. It just flew by.”

“Tell me about it.” He hesitated, then said, “Do you remember the first thing you ever did for me?”

I stared into his eyes. “Uhh, protect you from Glen, probably?”

“Nope. There was something before that. Before I even knew your name.”

“Really?”

“Yep.” He waited for a response, and then he opened his eyes real big, annoyed I didn’t remember. “It’s okay. It was a long time ago.”

He looked down toward the bottom of the bleachers. I thought he might cry. I laughed, pulled up my backpack, and unzipped the front pouch. I pushed my fingers down past an open water bottle, pens, paper clips.

Then I pulled out the crayon.

I raised it toward his face. When I tapped the crayon against his little nose, he leaned his head back, and I watched in great delight as his eyes bulged out and his mouth opened exceedingly wide.

“No,” he said. He snatched the crayon from my grasp and examined it from every angle, like it was evidence in a murder investigation. “It can’t be. Is this really the same one?”

“Tickle Me Pink. Sorry it took me eleven years to give it back, but...” I grinned. “Better late than never, right?”

He smiled at me. Seemed to be studying me. “Better late than never.”

I peered into Riley’s face. So much had changed about him in the last decade, but so little hadn’t. His cheeks were leaner, his lips were fuller, his chin was a lot pricklier. But it was still the Riley Alvarez from the first grade beside me.

When he sat up straight and grinned at the glowing sun, I reached out for his hand. I didn’t care anymore; I just wanted to hold it, even for a short moment. He brought his hands up to his cheeks and didn’t notice my reach. I stroked a finger against the side of his wrist, but he didn’t catch onto that either.

Finally, Billy Larson, the senior class president, stood up and faced the crowd of seniors. “All right, everyone! Up on your feet!”

I pressed my fingers against Riley’s palm, but it was too late; he rose to his feet and stretched his arms real high in the sky. I brought my hands back to my side, and reluctantly jumped to my feet. I dipped my head in disappointment, and let out a sigh.

Billy’s voice echoed to the top of the bleachers. “It’s time for the school song! Everybody, sing it with me!”

Riley started to sing along with the seniors, belting out every last word and phrase of the obnoxious song. But I didn't utter a single word.

I stood in silence, as I realized, once and for all, that my perfect dream with Riley would never be.

#

Senior year had its benefits, and one of the best was that I was done for the day before lunch. I made it through AP Psychology, AP English, and harder-than-hell Statistics, to get to the one class of the day I had been waiting to take all of high school.

The classroom was at the end of the south hall. With two minutes to go before the bell rang, I peeked my head inside. I panicked for a second, assuming I was in the wrong place; the classroom was nearly empty.

I glanced at the teacher, a tall, elderly man with short, gray hair and a thick, groovy moustache. "Is this Creative Writing?" I asked.

The teacher clapped his hands together, then slapped me on the shoulder. "You bet it is! What's your name, son?"

"Cedar Swinton. Hi."

"Nice to meet you, Cedar. I'm Mr. Mesherry. Take a seat wherever you'd like."

I preferred to sit in the front in the classes I liked (and as far back as possible in the ones I didn't), so I took a seat front and center. I unzipped my backpack and took out my thick notebook. I dropped it on my desk and flipped through 500 blank pages. Was I

going to fill all the pages? Was I going to write down anything worth saving? A single sentence of wisdom I might want to return to years from now?

A minute before the bell rang, Josh marched into the room, a grin on his face that was even bigger than mine. He had taken the class as a junior too, and had told me last year how much Mr. Mesherry challenged everybody, how inspiring he was. Even after we broke up last September, he stopped me in the halls and told me about the newest short story he was writing for Mesherry's class, how I would be an idiot if I didn't take it my senior year. I wasn't obsessed with writing like Josh, but I enjoyed it, and had wanted to push myself further. I didn't know how much I was going to get out of any of my classes senior year, but I had hope for Creative Writing.

"Hey, Cedar!" Josh said. He took the seat next to mine. Even though I was his ex, he treated me like a good friend. For that I was grateful.

"Hey. I didn't think you were coming."

"What, are you serious? This class is the only reason I got up today." He took out a notebook too, as well as a completed manuscript: a *second* completed manuscript. Yes, Josh was never able to sell his first book, so he spent his entire junior year writing his second. His new one was a science fiction epic, with monsters and aliens battling it out on a planet called Pruthor.

"Are you gonna start sending that out soon?" I asked, admiring its thickness. There must have been at least 500 pages.

"I'm giving it one more read-through. And Mr. Mesherry said he would read it too." Josh smiled up at the teacher. I didn't know how I was going to impress Mr.

Mesherry with anything, particularly in those first few weeks; I was seated next to the author superstar, after all.

“You really love it, don't you?” I asked.

“What?”

“Writing.”

He tapped his fingers against the first page—*The Monster Apocalypse* was his working title—and manipulated his lips into an adorable, child-like grin. “It's all I ever want to do,” he said.

“That's great, Josh. I wish I could feel that way about something.”

“Don't you like to write?”

“I do. I just... I haven't found a story worth telling yet.”

He patted his hand against my shoulder. “Don't worry. You will.”

“Thanks.” I rested my chin against my thumbs. “So you and Isaac seem to be doing well.”

He nodded. “Yeah, we're doing great. It's been almost six m—”

The bell finally rang, and Josh stopped mid-sentence. Mr. Mesherry approached the front of the room, with a calm and pleasant demeanor. He didn't shut his door and face us all with a stack of a hundred books, but instead leaned up against the whiteboard, crossed his arms, and grinned.

“Welcome to Creative Writing, everyone,” he said. “I'm thrilled to see a full class. And so many new faces! *Fantastic!*” He stepped forward, straight toward my desk, and said, “We're going to be examining and writing a variety of creative mediums this year. If you've had me before, you know we alternate every three weeks. One week, we

look at poetry. The next, screenplays. The next, short stories. We will stay the same this year, but with one little change.”

“A change?” Josh asked. His eyebrows rose enough to instill some worry in me.

“Not a bad change. A good one. A very good one.”

He took one more step, then glanced at me, noticeably. “I’ve decided to give you all an extra credit assignment this year. It’s completely optional. I know you all have busy lives, especially you seniors, with college applications, AP tests, and the like. But I thought it would be fun for all of you to have a long-form project, one you can start today, and turn in on the last day of school, next June.”

A student raised her hand behind me. “How many extra credit points is it?”

Mr. Mesherry pursed his lips, like he didn’t want to answer such a trivial question. When more silence ensued, and I realized he wasn’t going to ever say anything, I raised my hand too.

“Yes?”

“What kind of a writing project is it, Mr. Mesherry?”

“Now *that’s* a good question,” he said. He leaned against my desk and clasped his hands together. “Your extra credit assignment is this: it can be any genre, any subject matter you like. It can be fiction or non-fiction. I only ask that if you start the project, you have to finish it. Once you write the first sentence, there’s no going back. I don’t care if it takes you until the last day of school to write THE END, you *will* finish it. Or no points will be rewarded.”

An eerie silence fell over the room. “Well...” I said. “What is it?”

“I’m asking all of you to write a book. At least 60,000 words. Chapters will be due every three weeks.” He walked back to the front of the classroom. “Now, show me, by a raise of hands... who wants this extra credit?”

Only one hand went up—Josh’s, of course. Wasn’t that cheating? He already had two books ready to go. I glanced around the room. Everyone cowered in his or her seat, terrified at the thought of more homework, of another project to be tacked on to everything else. Five seconds went by. No arms left the desks.

I turned back toward the front—and raised my hand.

“*Cedar*. Great, I’m glad. I can’t wait to see what you’ll write.”

I let out a deep breath, and said, “Me too.”

Three more hands went up, with reluctance, but finally Mr. Mesherry moved on, and handed out the class syllabus. We were starting the semester by studying Renaissance poetry—*snore*—but in week two, we were going to be studying the screenplay to *Brokeback Mountain*, of all things, so that was something to look forward to.

I followed along with the reading of the syllabus, but Mr. Mesherry’s voice eventually drained from my senses. All I could think was that come June, I’d have a completed book. But what was it going to be? What story was I going to tell?

Josh had fifty ideas in him.

But I didn’t have a single one.

#

Barely five minutes seemed to go by, and the lunch bell was already blasting. I stepped out of the classroom, waved good-bye to Josh, and marched down the hallway with a cool confidence. Senior year I didn't have to walk outside, bake under the sun, and shove in a watery ham sandwich before a fifth period class. I could walk out the exit doors, get in my car, and just *leave*. And that was a nice feeling.

I reached the end of the hall, but stopped when I saw a familiar face—well, not her face so much, but the back of her head. She was standing in front of a locker that wasn't hers, as she pounded her thumbs against her cell phone keypad.

“Stupid *jerk*,” Emily said, and when she whirled around, she nearly struck her forehead against mine. “Oh! Hey, C!”

“Hey. What's the matter?”

“Nothing. Luke's being an ass, that's all. We've been talking all summer about how we should apply to the same colleges, so we don't have to break up when we graduate, the way I had to break up with Glen. But now he's saying he doesn't want to apply to my top school!”

“What's your top school?”

“UCLA. Duh.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Em, you and Luke have been dating for like four months, way less than you dated Glen. Shouldn't you wait and see how things work out?”

“But... I care about him. And deadlines are soon. You need to start thinking about applications too, C. You can't wait 'til the last minute.”

I set my back against the lockers and crossed my arms. "It's the first day of school, Em! Can't I enjoy *one day* of my senior year before I have to start obsessing over college?"

She nodded, like she didn't want to argue. "No, I know. It is a little early to think about all this. But what if I get into UCLA, and Luke gets into Yale? Or Harvard? I'll have to break up with him too!"

I grabbed Emily's hands, and pulled her close. "Listen." I sighed. "Say you and Luke grow even closer over these next few months. Say you're more in love next summer than you've ever been. Even then, are you *sure* it's for the best to go to the same school together? You did the right thing by breaking up with Glen, to not try the long distance thing. Enjoy the moment, Em. Don't worry so much about things that are gonna happen a year from now."

She had to know I was making some sense, because she wasn't interrupting me; she also no longer had a scowl on her face.

"You're right," she finally said. "I'm sorry."

She smiled, and gave me a hug. It lasted awhile, like she wanted to spend the rest of the day with her arms wrapped around me. I wouldn't have minded one bit.

When she backed away, I asked, "What was that for?"

"Just... you being you." She grabbed my hand and tugged me toward the side doors. "So what schools *are* you looking at? You looking at anything?"

I had been starting to consider a few options over the summer, but one stood out, time and time again. "They actually have a really good Creative Writing program at UCLA. I was thinking I might apply there too."

We walked outside, but she stopped me at the top of the staircase. “Shut up. Really?” She smiled, all giddy.

“Wouldn't that be something,” I said, and guided her down the steps. “If we ended up at the same college? It would be so great!”

“It would be perfect,” she said, and kissed me on the cheek.

#

I pulled up to my driveway and turned off the ignition. My house looked so lonely from the outside, so empty. I figured my mom, dad, and Eric were somewhere in the Nevada desert by now, probably minutes away from being abducted by aliens. I didn't want any harm to come to them, but maybe an alien spaceship would be able to get them to Denver a little faster.

“I'm starting to think like Josh,” I said, with a laugh, and stepped out of my car. I grabbed my backpack from the passenger seat, and almost hit the clicker to open the garage door, when I caught a scary sight in the corner of my eye, something a whole lot scarier than aliens. “What the hell...”

I slammed the car door, walked past the garage, and stopped in front of the gate that led to the backyard. Most days of the year, the gate was locked tight, but today, it was wide open.

I glanced in every direction. I stood perfectly still, and listened. My parents wouldn't have left the gate open. Was someone breaking into the house?

Part of me wanted to lock myself in my car and call the cops. But I didn't hear any loud bangs of any kind, no glass breaking from a window somewhere. Maybe it had just been the wind.

Maybe.

I marched into the backyard, and turned the corner, toward the back door of the house. It was closed, thank God. I tried to slide it open. Locked. I glanced at all the windows. They were shut too.

And then I heard it. The loud tapping noise from behind me. It sounded like a large wire striking against a metal bar.

I spun around. The tapping grew louder. I looked in every direction, but didn't see anything. I almost turned back toward the house—when I saw a pair of legs dangling in the distance.

I squinted. “Are you *serious*?”

I moved past the swing-set, past the little yellow slide, all the way up to the decaying tree house. I had asked my dad over the summer if he ever planned on demolishing it, and he said he wanted to keep it as is, for the next family that would move in long after we were gone. I had climbed into the tree house seemingly every day after school when I was a kid, but it had been mostly vacant lately, with visits only from cobwebs and soot.

Which made this special visit quite the surprise.

“Riley?” I stepped up to the ladder.

“Hi, Cedar.” He pushed himself closer to the edge.

“What are you doing up there?”

“Waiting for you,” he said, with a smile. “You coming up?”

I hesitated. I placed my arm above my eyes, to block out the sun. “How'd you even know I'd come out here?”

“I don't know. I guess... I had a feeling.”

I scratched my chin, as I kept my gaze on him. “Okay... so you thought I was gonna come home from school, and just randomly wander into my backyard, assuming you might be in our old tree house?”

“Uh-huh. I was right, wasn't I?”

I wrapped my arms around the nearest rung. “That you were. You wanna come inside? We can watch TV or something.”

“No, Cedar, you're not listening. I want you to come up here.”

“Why? What did you—”

I stopped in mid-sentence, when I noticed a piece of paper nestled in Riley's right hand.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Oh... just something I found when I came in here.” He pulled the paper up to his face. “Want me to read it?”

I clasped my hands together. Was that what I thought it was? “Uhh, yeah. Sure.”

“Okay.” He cleared his throat, and started to read aloud. “If I could have one thing in the year 2018, I would want Riley as my best friend. We met today at the bus stop, and he was very nice.”

Yep, it was my letter, all right. I closed my eyes, and saw Riley's adorable, chubby face, from 2006. The first time he laid eyes on me. The first time he smiled at me.

The first time he recognized that he could talk to me, and feel protected by me. I opened my eyes.

“I do not know if he likes me back,” Riley continued reading, slowly, trying to make sense of my first grade writing, “but I hope he does. I hope in 2018 we will be friends. I want to know him more.” He looked away from the paper and shook his head. “You spelled know, n-o-w, nice going.”

I laughed, real loud. “Hey! I was six. Give me a break.”

He laughed too, and returned to the paper. “I do not know who I will be in 2018,” he continued to read, “but I want Riley there. I want him at my school. I want to ride my bike and play games and read books with him. I want him to be my very bestest friend.” He sighed, as his eyes welled up with tears. “I want him to love me.”

I knew that last line was coming. I don’t know why I wrote it all those years ago. I didn’t even know what love was when I was six. But there it was, in my handwriting, on the first day of first grade.

Riley folded the paper in two, and smiled down at me, as a tear trickled down his cheek. “Wish granted.”

I leaned my head against the ladder. I couldn't have heard him correctly. “What?”

He shrugged. “I love you, Cedar. I’ve always loved you. It just took me until now to say it. It just took me eleven years to say it.”

My knees started to buckle beneath me. I thought I was going to collapse, or faint, or die of shock. “I…” What was there to say, except the obvious? “I’m totally in love with you too.”

“Yeah? I was hoping you would say that.”

We both stared at each other. I didn't move. Didn't even take a breath.

Riley finally waved me toward him. "What the hell are you doing? Are you gonna get up here and kiss me, or *what?*"

I sped up the ladder, two rungs at a time, and collided against Riley, knocking him down to the middle of the tree house. We both sat up, at the same time, and faced each other. He placed his palm on my chest, and I stroked my fingers against his cheek. I had wanted this for so long, too long—but it was definitely worth the wait.

Riley and I kissed, and I swear that time came to a complete stop. I wrapped my arms around him and I pressed my lips against his so much and so hard and so long that by the end of the first hour, I was in dire need of chapstick.

When the sun started disappearing over the trees of the green belt, we moved into the house, and stopped in the kitchen.

"We should go to your room, yeah?" Riley said. "We don't want your parents walking in and surprising us."

I kept a tight grip on his hand, and leaned against the kitchen island.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's just... my parents are moving Eric to Denver right now. I have the house to myself."

He shot me an infectious grin, and grabbed hold of my shirt. "You have the whole house... to yourself? What, for tonight?"

I opened my mouth, very slowly, to announce the greatest news of all: "I have the house to myself for the rest of the *week*."

He stopped an inch from my face. "Cedar?"

“Yeah?”

“It's true what they say, isn't it?” He kissed me, softly, first on my cheek, then on my chin, as he brought his hands down to my waist.

I licked my lips. The kissing had only just begun. “What do they say, Riley?”

He smiled. “Senior year is going to be the best year ever. Don't you think?”

Riley gazed into my eyes, really looked at me like no one else had, not Josh, not Emily, not my family, not any of those crazy teachers. He looked at me with the utmost trust, like he knew I would never do anything to hurt him. And it's true: I never would. I loved Riley Alvarez, with all my heart—and I wasn't ever going to let him go.

“Oh, I agree.” I took his hand and pulled him close. “It's going to be the best year of them all.”

#

After I double-checked that every door in the house was locked and that every light was turned off, I returned to my bedroom and slipped back in to bed with Riley. I rested my head against his, and held his warm hand. We stared up at the ceiling, both of us in a daze.

“Best first day of school *ever*,” I said.

“Nuh-uh,” Riley said. “What about when we first met each other?”

“Well, yeah, but... this is better.”

“Okay, but it's not as memorable as when you *first* kissed me. Remember, coming back from Disneyworld? When we thought we were going to die?”

“That was on the first day of school?”

“Yep. Third grade.”

“Why were we on a plane?”

“I don’t know. My mom should never be a travel agent.”

I laughed, and searched my brain. “The first day of ninth grade was good too.

When you showed up in the hallway that day, I just couldn’t believe it. I thought I’d lost you forever.”

“What about tenth grade? When we came out to our parents?”

“Oh, yeah. And last year there was that party at Emily’s house.” I shook my head.

“Man, we’ve had a lot of epic first days of school, haven’t we? Fifth grade, I got sick, and you took me bike riding. Let’s see... eighth grade, I hid in a storage closet with Josh and we...”

I stopped talking, as Riley turned his head toward me and shot me a death glare.

I let out an awkward chuckle. “Okay, so they weren’t all good days,” I said. “The ones with *you* were the best.”

“Nice save.” He leaned his head against the pillow, closed his eyes, and yawned.

“Sleepy?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m exhausted.”

“I wonder why.”

We both laughed, as Riley closed his eyes. “Goodnight, Cedar,” he said, resting his head against my shoulder. “I love you.”

I kissed him on the cheek, and said, “I love you too, Riley.”

He was out a minute later, and then I closed my eyes too, even though I was too restless to sleep. I spent the next few minutes thinking back on all those first days. The day we met, the day on that plane, and today, the best day of them all...

My eyes shot back open.

I leaned over the bed, and as quietly as possible, I unzipped my backpack and pulled out my creative writing notebook. I turned to the first fresh page, grabbed a pen from my nightstand, and started to write.

“The first time I met Riley Alvarez,” I wrote, “he stood at the edge of a sidewalk, his tiny hands clasped together, his bright green backpack nestled over his left shoulder. He pursed his lips and rocked his body back and forth, like he had invisible headphones blasting music into his ears...”

I stopped, and glanced at the clock. 11:59 PM.

Then I looked at Riley. He had a smile on his face.

I clicked my pen, took a deep breath, and returned to the page. “He didn’t see me at first. He had no idea I was there. He had no idea he was going to change my life forever...”