

Courage in Patience

Beth Fehlbaum



Steady On Books

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Book 1 of The Patience Trilogy (Courage, Hope, Truth)
Summary: After years of sexual abuse by her stepfather, Fifteen-year-old Ashley Asher is removed from her mother's home and starts a better life with her father and stepmother in Patience, Texas. She enters psychotherapy, participates in a summer school class, and begins to realize that her mother's refusal to protect her is not a reflection of self-worth.

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Revised First Edition

For Daniel, Mandy, Alissa, Kristen, and Matt.

I love you.

To those who spend their days hiding from others, themselves, and

Truth:

You are not crazy.

You are not alone.

You are worth the work it takes to claim your life.

Books by Beth Fehlbaum

The Patience Trilogy

Book 1: Courage in Patience

Book 2: Hope in Patience

Book 3: Truth in Patience

Big Fat Disaster

*Sunshine's rays upon my hair
Freeze-tag, childhood play
Blue skies, hopeful careless clouds
Uncluttered simple days*

*Streetlight glow: pretending sun
His shy smile: yes, he's the one
Pack our lives and move away
The monster now will come*

*He stole the glow within my soul
That night in the green chair
Earth's axis broke by fondling hands
He thought me unaware*

*A shadow by my bedside nights
Full eclipse of the sun
The monster reeking alcohol
Left me no choice but run*

*My outcry silenced: broken down
Cold walls, hopeless dread
I plead for rescue, beg for care, then
"Ashley? I'm your dad"*

Contents

PROLOGUE	9
CHAPTER ONE	13
CHAPTER TWO	27
CHAPTER THREE	57
CHAPTER FOUR	70
CHAPTER FIVE	80
CHAPTER SIX	95
CHAPTER SEVEN	115
CHAPTER EIGHT	123
CHAPTER NINE	146
CHAPTER TEN	163
CHAPTER ELEVEN	194
CHAPTER TWELVE	212
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	236
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	250

THUMP!

Mom's voice: "Ashley, get out of bed!"

More fist-rapping on my bedroom door: *THUMP-THUMP-THUMP!*

"Don't make me come in there!"

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP!

"I'll be back in two minutes, and your feet better be on the floor!"

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP—

Wha--? Oh, shit! She can't find me here!

I pulled myself over the intentional mess covering my closet floor, turned the doorknob-so-carefully-and-silently, inched the door open, checked that I am in fact alone, threw myself forward onto the carpet, and breathed in great gasps of cool air. I yanked the alarm clock by its cord and slapped at the *Off* button until the *BEEP-BEEP*-ing stopped.

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP!

Mom hollered through the door: "Ashley, are your feet on the floor?"

I lifted my head and thought, *My whole body's on the floor*, but I answered simply, "Yeah." I grimaced at my sweat-soaked pajamas and allowed my head to fall back to the carpet. I felt gross, needed a quick shower, and every inch of me hurt.

I crawled to the side of my bed, pulled myself to my feet, and stomped to the bathroom to wake my tingling legs.

I closed the door, pulled out the drawers on opposite sides of the cabinet, jelly-rolled a couple of king-sized bath towels, and shoved them between the drawer and door on either side of the counter dividing my room and the guest bedroom. Now nobody can open the doors.

I came up with that trick a couple of years ago when I was desperate to shower in private. It started when *someone* began punching a hole in the guest room's bathroom door. I say *someone* because

no one believed me when I said it had to be *someone* else, because it wasn't me.

The first time Mom saw the DVD-sized peephole, she lost her shit. I denied hitting the door and showed her my hand: wouldn't there be cuts on it if I put my hand through the door? But she opted to believe *someone's* story—not mine, by the way—that I lost my temper and slammed the door into the towel rack: that's why my hand looked fine.

She hired a handyman to make repairs, and within a day, *someone* smashed a hole through the door again. I tacked a towel over the opening. The next day, the towel and my thumbtacks were gone, the hole was even bigger, and I was grounded for weeks. Mom took my phone—I've never gotten it back—and both she and my stepfather, Charlie, lectured me for being an ungrateful, spoiled child who did not appreciate the home they gave me.

Lather, rinse, repeat, until every towel was gone except the washrag I hid in my room so I had something to dry myself, and I nearly passed out from shock the day I stepped from the shower and saw an unblinking eye staring back at me through the hole in the door.

I knew that eye too well, since it and its twin stared openly at my chest.

Sometimes those eyes and the rest of their nasty self "just happened" to go swimming in our pool at the same time I did, and observed me from the deep end through a swimming mask.

My mind and body did what they always do when I freak out: a sound—"Whoosh"—filled my head--like putting a seashell up to my ear—and I froze. This feeling was not new, by the way: I had been mentally checking out and freezing for as long as Charlie, the owner of those grayish green eyes, had been feeling me up in the dark: six long years. I was nine when it began, and I wondered if I'd live long enough to turn eighteen and could move out.

The cycle of *hole-repair, door-break, hole-repair, door-break,*

hole-repair continued until Mom flat-out said that if *I* didn't stop breaking the door, she would remove it completely. The last fix held.

I have to assume that Charlie stopped punching the door for the same reason that hunters hide in deer blinds. Removing the door would take away his cover.

That's when the lockable doorknobs were replaced with ones that don't lock, and that's when I noticed—between frantic bouts of *scrub-scrub-stop-slide-the-shower-door-open-to-check-to-make-sure-I'm-still-alone*—that the bathroom door on the guest room side was open a crack.

I wasn't alone.

As usual, I “Whoosh”-ed, froze, and mentally checked out. But later, when my mind was working again, I thought of the towel-between-the-drawer-and-door trick, and to ensure that I always had towels to “lock” the doors, I took a couple of king-sized ones from Mom and Charlie's bathroom. I hid them between my mattress and bedspring.



The bathroom filled with steam. I shimmied off my pajama bottoms, snatched them off the floor, and used them to clear a circle in the foggy mirror. I leaned in close, studied my face, and forced a smile. My eyes filled with tears and I blinked a few times, then tested the doors one more time to make sure they couldn't be opened.

So.

I wasn't touched last night.

I'd barely slept.

Finals started in two hours.

I stepped into the shower.

Good morning.

CHAPTER ONE

Lisa Rayburn had no idea that Diego Reyes' eyes were locked on her backside as she stepped from the pool and came toward me. She plucked her beach towel from her bag, snapped it in the breeze—for a second it looked like a superhero cape—then pulled it snugly over her shoulders.

“He watched you get out of the pool,” I murmured.

Lisa's eyes widened. “Really?!” Her lips curled into a smirk. “'Bout time! I've only been throwing myself at him all year in chemistry class. Is he still looking?”

I wrung the water from my oversized t-shirt and shook my head.

“Guys might look at you, too, Ashley, if you didn't hide your body under that tent.”

I shrugged and looked away. *That's the point.* I mumbled, “Yeah. Probably.”

Lisa spread her towel on the spot we staked out first thing in the morning when the public pool opened for the summer season. I watched how effortlessly she moved; she didn't seem to feel at all awkward about lying flat on her back with her arms over her head. She was unconcerned about guys noticing her breasts peeking out around the edges of her bikini top.

Eyes closed, she grinned and announced, “This is going to be a great summer! Wish we didn't have to go back to school for finals

next week!”

I spread my towel on the grass next to Lisa’s, pulled the wet shirt away from my chest so it wasn’t so clingy, then fell to my knees and stretched out on my tummy alongside her. I hoped I sounded casual when I asked, “So, is it okay if I crash at your place tonight?”

Lisa was distracted, scrolling through her Facebook newsfeed. I nudged her arm and tried again. “Is it?”

“Hm? Is what?”

“Think your mom will mind if I spend the night again?”

Lisa furrowed her brow. “She probably won’t care, but let’s go to your house instead, since you’ve got a pool. Then we can swim tonight and—”

I hoped Lisa couldn’t sense the desperation that I felt. “I just like being at your house, okay? I mean—I *love* your family, Lisa. They’re really cool, and—”

She tossed her phone aside and picked at her nail polish. “My parents are boring! Aren’t you tired of my stupid little brothers? *I* am!”

I wanted to say, *I’d love boring parents!* but instead I looked away. “Yeah, well. . .”

Lisa touched my arm. “You’re acting weird. What’s your problem?”



Here’s the deal: Lisa would never treat me the same—worse, she’d never *see* me the same—if I told her my secret. I made that mistake with a girl named Hillary in middle school. At first, she asked me questions that I wish I’d never answered, then she acted differently toward me. The next day, I saw her looking at me and whispering to some other girls, then she stopped talking to me altogether.

My mother didn’t believe me when I told her that *somebody’s*

in my room at night. She insisted that I’m just dreaming, and even said that I can’t tell my dreams from reality. It’s all a joke to her, and she thought it was so hilarious that she talked about me like I should be on display in *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*. I was too scared to come out and tell her that Charlie was in my room at night.



I saw these brochures in the school counselor’s office. They said that if someone is touching another person without their permission, the person being touched should ask for help.

I thought about it so many times. I nearly told Lisa’s mom: I don’t know how many times I started to tell her.

But I couldn’t risk losing Lisa the way I lost Hillary a few years before. Lisa’s the only reason I didn’t get the pistol off the top shelf of my parents’ closet and blow my brains out—and she had no idea that I’d even thought about it.

She didn’t know that my body relaxed when I slept at her house—or that I actually slept for longer than thirty minutes at a time! I didn’t lock my arms at my sides, sleep face-down, or sweat like a pig buried under a ton of blankets. At home, no matter how hot the weather, I wrapped my blankets around myself so tightly that I looked like a human burrito.

Lisa’s was right: her dad *is* boring as hell, and I’d have given anything to have him as a father instead of the asshole my mother married when I was eight. Her father doesn’t stare at my chest, get drunk and call me names like “slut” and “bitch,” or act sickly sweet and tell me that my mother hates sex and that he “has needs.”

I spent every second at home on high alert in case I had to beat it to my bedroom and—hopefully—make it to the bathroom to do my towel trick with the drawers.



I spoke more loudly than I meant to: “I just need a break, okay?”

“*You* need a break?” Lisa shook her head. “Do *you* have snott-nosed shitheads taking your stuff? Know what Tyler did last week? Got into my tampons and threw every one of ’em into the bathtub. And Alex is only five, but he’s old enough to go to my room, take my phone, and video Tyler being captain of the Tampax fleet. The little turd already knows how to upload videos—*which he did*—to my Facebook page, and my parents laughed because they thought he was—” she threw her fingers into air quotes and spoke in baby-talk—“just adowable.”

Lisa unscrewed her Sprite, took a giant swig, and gave me a look. “Top *that*.” She tipped the bottle at me and added, “You should have seen the comments I got.”

I shook my head. “No, no, I mean, I didn’t see the video before you took it down, but. . . I understand. I don’t have brothers, but, um. . .”

“What is it, Ash? Are you ashamed of your house? Are your parents slobs? Are *you*? We’ve been best friends for nearly a year now, right? Do you think I care what your house looks like? I don’t! I promise! I won’t even look to see if your room’s a mess, and, well, I’ll put it this way: when I’m having company, I just throw everything in my closet and lean against the door until it’ll close. Seriously, I won’t judge. I won’t even look in your closet to see what’s hiding in there!” She punctuated her sentence with a laugh.

I tried to smile but couldn’t.

Lisa might have still been talking, but I didn’t hear a word. I pressed my face against my towel on the hard earth until it felt as if my nose would break. I focused on the pain and squeezed my eyes shut so tightly that I saw red inside my eyelids. I lifted my face enough to slip my fists under it, and rubbed my thumbs against my eyes until Lisa pulled my right arm from under me. I snapped back into awareness.

“Hey!” Lisa’s voice was high. “Ashley! Look at me! What are you doing?”

I gasped. I didn’t realize I was holding my breath. “—Huh?”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “Are you all right?”

I inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, tried to play it off as nothing. “Y-yeah, why?”

Lisa rolled onto her side, and the look in her eyes drenched me in awkwardness from head-to-toe.

Oh, God, has she figured out I’m crazy?

She spoke slowly, the way everybody at school talked to this kid who just moved from Mexico and didn’t yet know English. “Are... you...like...throwing a tantrum?...I mean...you look like Alex when Mom tells him he can’t have another cookie.” Lisa tilted her head, studied me. “Your face is all red, and you look really pissed.”

“I’m not pissed, it’s just—” The knot in my throat blocked the words I *want* to say: “Your family is so much safer than Charlie”—but then she’d want to know what’s *not* safe about Charlie, and. . .

Annoyance dripped from her words. “Just because I don’t think it’s fair that you always come to my house, I don’t see why you have to get all bent out of shape, I mean—”

Lisa kept talking—*something* about *something* her mom said about *something something*, but I got to my feet, grabbed my bag and beat a path for the front gate.

Her distant voice was drowned out by layers of “Whoosh” in my head. I’m pretty sure she called, “Hey, Crazy!” which just confirmed my fears, and I plowed into the pool manager.

He grabbed me by the elbows, planted his feet in front of me, and his angry eyes and bushy mustache filled my field of vision. It took me a second to understand the onion-scented words blasting into my face.

He leaned forward and growled, “*Did you hear me?* I said, ‘Walk!’ When the lifeguard blows the whistle, you stop what you’re doing. Got it?”

I nodded and stepped around him, made it as far as the bench by the entry gate, and fell onto it. I felt my face doing the ugly-crying thing; I bent at the waist and covered my face with my hands. I sensed Lisa standing in front of me. A nanosecond later I heard her flat voice: “Ya gonna tell me what’s going on?”

My throat was too tight to choke out an answer.

She slid onto the bench next to me and placed a hand on my shoulder, but pulled it back a second later. I heard the smile in her voice: “Hi, Diego, what’s up?”

I peeked at the ground and saw his flip-flops opposite her bare feet.

He asked, “What’s up with *her*?”

I can only assume he was too polite to say “*the weirdo*.”

Lisa sprang from the bench. “Oh, she’s fine. What’s up with *you*?”

I sat up but kept my face down—I know what I look like with ugly crying face—and pretended to be searching for something in my bag. I felt small and stupid and wished I was invisible. I should have known that I’d already disappeared as far as Lisa was concerned.

Diego shuffled his feet. “Well, uh, I was wonderin’ if you might wanna go to a movie with me tonight?”

“Tonight? Yeah, that’d be great. What time?” Lisa took a step toward him.

“I’ll pick you up around seven.” Diego handed Lisa his iPhone. “Add your number to my contacts?”

Lisa was giddy. “Sure!”

I took advantage of being unnoticed; I slid off the bench and through the front gate. I spied Lisa’s ancient Pontiac Gran Prix in the parking lot and considered waiting by her car instead of walking all the way home, but I knew she’d keep bugging me to tell her why I’m such a weirdo. What was I supposed to say? She already thought I was being a brat about sleepovers.

I looked back at the gate: Lisa and Diego weren’t there. I slid

my gaze toward our “staked out” area. Lisa knelt, then stretched out on her stomach, and Diego pulled the sunblock out of her bag. Not like she’d be leaving any time soon.

Shit.

I sighed heavily, slung my bag over my shoulder, and started for home. Within a block of the pool, one of my sandals broke.

“Woohoo,” I said sarcastically. “What a *great* summer this is going to be, Ashley. You. Are. Screwed.”



As I walked, I daydreamed about how I wished things were at my house. A truck passed me and the driver honked. I automatically flipped him off. His brake lights flashed. He threw the truck into reverse, backed up quickly—luckily no one was behind him—and the middle-aged man behind the wheel scowled at me. *Oh, God*: Mr. McGill, my principal, A.K.A. Mr. Intimidation. I froze. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“Young lady, I was concerned that you didn’t realize how close to the road you’re walking.”

“I—I’m sorry. I—I am.”

He frowned and raised one finger in the air—it’s his signature move in the hallway at school when he’s about to lay into a student—but when a car barely stopped in time to avoid hitting him, Mr. McGill yelled, “Get out of the road!” and spun his wheels as he took off.

I watched him go. “Arrrrrrrgh!” It was hard to decide which was worst: my extreme thirst, painful need to pee, or overall hatred of my life. If my parents hadn’t taken my phone away I could call, but it’s not like they’d come get me anyway. They’d say it serves me right and ask me what I did to land myself in this situation.

I growled, “Goddamn Charlie, lying about me breaking the door.”

Since she’d taken the only thing she could really hold over me,

Mom's newest threat was to send me to live with my "real" dad, a man I supposedly last saw when he and mom split. I was just a baby.

I knew four things about him:

1. His name is David Asher.
2. He lives in a small town in East Texas called Patience. (Mom calls it "an armpit.")
3. He is an alcoholic monster with a terrible temper.
4. The only evidence that he's even alive is that he—or someone else, probably a woman, judging by the handwriting—sends my child support check every month and a birthday card with a check in it every January.



A few months ago, when Mom and I fought and she started that tired old song about sending me to live with my father, I cut her off and asked, "Has he—um, David—*ever* tried to see me? . . . M-maybe it would be good for me to know him."

First she looked surprised, then her face hardened, I guess because this wasn't going the way she thought it would. "He didn't care when we left, Ashley. He was relieved to be free. Papaw's attorney filed paperwork to annul the marriage, which means that legally we were never married. Your dad agreed to everything. I mean: *think about it*. He got off easy."

"If he's such a jerk, why do you want to make me live with him?"

Mom's eyes flashed. "Let *him* put up with your shit. He's the one who wanted me to have you, and I don't care that he hasn't seen you since you were three months old. I'm ditching your ass with him if you don't stop being bitchy."



The more desperate I became to get away from Charlie, the more I was eaten up with curiosity to know more about my dad. I tried Googling him, and I found a business—Asher Automotive—in Patience, but someone named Frank Asher owned it, not David. I wondered if Frank was David's dad.

Anyway, what could I do? Call them up and say, "Hi, is David there? . . . Yeah, um, David? I'm the kid you didn't want, and I'm calling to see if you want me now. I heard that when you get upset you throw heavy objects and you're drunk pretty much all the time. . . on second thought, ya know, I already live with someone like that. Never mind."

I still wondered what my father looks like, since I don't resemble my mom much except for being short like she is, so next time I had the house to myself, I took a chance that I'd find something useful in a box marked "Ancient History" on the top shelf of Mom's side of their closet. I dragged a kitchen chair through her bedroom, and when I noticed the tracks I was leaving in the carpet, I made a mental note to vacuum after I finished snooping.

I glanced at the pistol on the shelf next to the box. "Don't touch that," I ordered myself. "Seriously, Ashley. Very. Bad. Idea."

I slid Mom's "*Ancient History*" off the shelf and started my search. I found my baby book, but it didn't answer my questions about David, because his head had been torn off in all the photos of him holding me. I tossed Mom and Charlie's wedding album aside: it was just a reminder that she'd brought an asshole into my life and had a party to celebrate.

I dug deeper through the box: newspaper clippings, pics of *high school* Mom with her friends, what was left of a dried rose. . . but no sign of David as far as I could tell. I heard a familiar rumble and stuck my head out of the closet.

Oh, crap. The garage door's going up!

I tossed the contents into the box, hoisted it over my head, and stepped onto the chair. It squeaked, the legs wobbled, and I nearly

fell backward. I hadn't noticed before: the bottom box flaps weren't taped closed—just folded into each other—and they were bulging open. I lost my balance; the bottom started to give out on one side, and a few pictures fluttered to the carpet. “*Shit!*”

I heard a second rumbling: the garage door going down. The chair protested beneath my weight and I grunted with effort as I shoved the box onto the shelf. I made sure it was positioned as it had been before I snooped. I jumped down, scooped the photos from the floor, slid them down the neck of my t-shirt, and got the hell out of there. I nearly forgot to turn off the closet light, but I did remember that the door is always open slightly, so I left it that way.

I gasped at the chair tracks. *No time to vacuum, gotta get out of here—Wait! The chair!*

I rushed back to Mom's closet and grabbed the kitchen chair, holding it high to avoid creating more evidence of my presence. I stiff-legged it to the door, shuffling my feet over the original drag marks, in an attempt to make them less obvious.

Someone entered through the laundry room. The rattle of plastic bags announced groceries were being brought in. The sound of glass bottles clinking told me the person was Charlie, and he'd probably been to the liquor store.

His voice was rough: “Cheryl, you home? . . . *Cheryl!*” With no response from my mom, next time he spoke, his voice was sing-songy and syrupy-sweet. “Ashley? Ashley, baby, are you home? . . . Come see Daddy.”

My stomach clenched. The sugar in his voice put me on high alert, and I knew that if he discovered me, *Very Bad Things* would happen. I rushed with the kitchen chair to my bedroom, gently closed my door, then stowed the chair in my bathroom. I'd worry later about putting it back in the kitchen.

Charlie was getting closer: “Ash—leeeey, are you home, baby? . . . What are you doin'?”

I raced to my closet, stepped inside, and pulled the door closed.

I left the light off, dropped to my knees, and crawled behind my lower-rack of clothes. I always kept long items like maxi dresses and my bathrobe on the bottom rack so they concealed my presence when I hid from Charlie. I ran my hands over my body, making sure that I could feel fabric against my skin from head-to-toe, hoping for no gaps that would reveal my hiding place even if Charlie got down on the floor. I wound my feet into the fabric and pressed my chin against my chest. When I heard my bedroom door open, I held my breath.

Charlie called, “Ashley? Are you in the bathroom, baby? . . . Do you need some help?” He giggled. “I'll bet I know what you're doin'. . . you're playin' hide-and-go-seek!”

The bathroom door hinges squeaked and he yelled, “Got you!”

I clapped my hand over my mouth, afraid that I might squeak or gasp, or on the off-chance that the roar of my heartbeat could escape through my nose or mouth.

Charlie sounded confused: “Why's there a chair. . . ?” Wood-against-wood, thumping, scraping. Must have been pulling the chair out of the bathroom.

I thought I heard my bedroom door click shut, but even though I was drowning in sweat in the dark behind my clothes, I didn't dare come out. For all I knew, Charlie already figured out where I was hiding and was sitting on the edge of my bed staring at the outside of my closet door as hard as I was watching my side of it.

Just then he yanked the closet door open and yelled, “Got you!”

He flipped on the light switch and stepped into my hiding place.

I closed my eyes and pressed my body into the carpet with all I had. It seemed that he stood in the doorway forever; I held my breath so long that my head began pounding and my body wanted to cough. I pinched myself hard as if doing so would make my body's

survival instincts listen to reason.

At last, Charlie grumbled, “This place is a pigsty. That girl doesn’t appreciate anything she has.” He closed the closet door, then I heard him open my bedroom door and slam it closed.

I gasped, inhaled deeply, and sputter-coughed. I lifted my head, tilted it, listened for signs that Charlie heard me.

I stayed hidden until I heard the vague grumbling of the garage door rising again. Then I cautiously crawled to the closet door and opened it the tiniest bit. The cool air hit my face and I held my hand over my mouth, listening. . . listening. . . listening...for the murmur of my mother’s voice.

I knew for sure that Mom was home when I heard Charlie’s angry voice from the hallway: “That’s just like you, Cheryl, to have no fuckin’ idea where your daughter is.”

Mom rarely talked back to Charlie. She must have been in a crabby mood. “All I know is, Ashley was here when I left. What did you want her for, anyway?”

BAM! It sounded like Charlie punched the wall. Or slammed Mom into it. *Whatever.* I learned a long time ago that rescuing my mother from Charlie’s temper didn’t go both ways. She’d hung me out to dry more than once, and even though I worried that she might be hurt, I couldn’t give up my hiding place.

I knelt forward, craning my neck to see if my bedroom door was closed. It was. The rough carpet hurt my knees, but I crawled forward on them anyway, then pulled myself up to stand. I started for the bathroom but made it only a few steps before my legs gave out. Luckily, Charlie had left the kitchen chair in my room. I grabbed onto it and sat, my palm on my chest, wondering how a heart could beat that fast and not explode.

The photos I’d shoved down my shirt stuck to my skin. I raised my shirt, peeled them off my chest, then looked closely at them for the first time:

Mom and Charlie’s wedding. I wore a dress with a big silk rose

pinned to the waist. I remember that day: Mom and I fought over my shoes because I wanted to wear my boots, and I refused to allow her to put a bow in my hair. I hated that stupid rose on my dress, too: I was a tomboy and I’d much rather have been playing football with my boy cousins in my grandparents’ back yard.

I was chunky, but I hadn’t started developing yet, and there was a big gap where my permanent front teeth would be. My smile looked too big for my face. “*What are you so happy about?*” I whispered to my childish self, “You have no idea what’s about to happen, do you?”

I closed my eyes and tried to remember what it was like to not be worried or hiding or feeling like I was constantly being hunted.

I couldn’t do it.

There was a black and white picture of Nanny and Papaw when they were super young. I guessed maybe they were on their honeymoon: they were wearing leis and stood arm-in-arm on a beach.

And then I saw it, and warmth rushed from my head to my toes. I instantly recognized my mother in her white satin prom dress. She’d made comments about looking like a bride on prom night: “*We got carried away and acted like it was our honeymoon. God, I was so stupid.*”

The guy with her must have been—*had to be* my father —David Asher.. He wore a navy blue tux, and the flowers on his suit lapel matched the ones on her wrist. They stood in front of an ivy-covered backdrop.

I held the pic closely and stared hard at the stranger whose hair color and eye shape I share. I even have his mouth: his smile looks too big for his face, too. *He doesn’t look like a monster. But what does that even mean? Other people who don’t know Charlie probably think he’s a nice guy.*

I folded the photo in half, creased it, and tore it down the middle. Finally, I got to my feet and removed my underwear drawer from my dresser. I placed my second grade picture, Mom’s half of the prom

pic, and my grandparents' honeymoon photo under the drawer slide. I replaced the drawer, then looked around for the best place to put David Asher. He was just some tall skinny guy with dark hair, brown eyes, and a lopsided smile—and I *knew* that. But I think maybe I hoped that just having this person—technically my father, even though he didn't want anything to do with me—nearby in the night, maybe some kind of magical force field would keep Charlie away.

I placed my father's picture under my top mattress, beneath the place where I froze in terror whenever Charlie turned me over.

CHAPTER TWO

Even though it had to be close to seven o'clock by the time I trudged up the steps to my front door, Charlie wasn't outside watering the biggest rock, the centerpiece in our front yard of concrete, gravel, cactus, and railroad ties. The neighbors hated it when Charlie killed all the grass and replaced it with what he calls "our desert landscape." Everyone else has beautiful green lawns, roses, and flowers. The only thing that would make our house even more of an eyesore would be a couple of vultures ripping apart a dead animal. Or razor wire.

When Charlie's outside in all his shirtless glory, watering his rocks while guzzling bourbon and Coke from a Big Gulp cup, the neighbors stop and stare. Since he's usually already drunk by the time he goes outside in the evening, there's no telling how he'd react to me limping onto our driveway, broken sandal in hand and blisters on my feet.

He'd probably ask why I walked home, and if I answered in the *wrong* tone of voice or my facial expression wasn't right—and only Charlie gets to judge whether I'm using the *right* tone of voice and facial expression, I'd be made to sit for hours on what I call the Sticky Leather Seat of Doom--the sofa, while he tells me what a worthless piece of shit I am.

The second I opened the door and stepped into the semi-darkness of our entryway, a sharp blast of water hit me in the face.

“What the—?” I dropped my sandal and bag, leaned forward, and tried to see where it was coming from.

Zip.

I reached for the light switch but another line of water hit my face.

Someone giggled.

Oh, God. Charlie.

My stomach clenched. “Mom?”

No answer.

Oh, shit.

I called again, my voice high. “MOM?”

Her voice from the kitchen: “I’m on the phone.”

I relaxed a little and bent to retrieve my bag as a line of water zipped over my head. “Missed me.”

“I meant to.” Charlie made *rat-a-tat* gun sounds and rapid-fired from his hiding place behind the hall tree.

I ignored the zip of water across my back.

I found Mom at the kitchen table. She glanced at me, but looked away and held up one finger. “Ashley’s home. I’ve gotta go.” She pushed *End* and stared at the phone in her hand. Her face said there’s a lot on her mind, and I assumed it was my fault. It seemed like it always was.

“I—I’m late, I guess—w-were you talking to Lisa’s mom?”

Her brows furrowed. “Who? No, why would I be talking to her?”

“I just thought you were worried about me being home so late—never mind.”

“You’re late? Oh, that’s no problem. I was talking with your grandmother.” She gestured lamely at the phone, as if she just noticed it was still in her hand. She put on a brighter voice: “And, I ordered pizza from Roma’s for dinner! Yum, right?”

Warning alarms went off in my head. *I’m* not in trouble for being late? I get grounded for things I don’t even do. Charlie’s risen

to a new level of weirdo, and Mom ordered restaurant pizza instead of making her usual crappy homemade version with canned biscuit crusts, store brand spaghetti sauce, and whatever mystery meat’s in the fridge as the topping.

“Um, Mom? What’s going on?”

The Return of Zombie Mom: “Nothing, Ashley. Everything’s fine.”

Charlie roared into the kitchen, zapped us both with his water pistol, and acted like it’s the first time we’ve seen his toy. “Look what I found! It was on my jobsite.”

I wiped water from my face and tried to read him. He didn’t seem drunk, but he was probably teetering on the fine line between party guy and rage monster. I purposely kept my voice neutral since he could turn dangerous quickly. “Aren’t you a little old for a water gun? You’re, like, forty, aren’t you?”

“He’s thirty-eight, but men are just boys when it comes to their toys.” Mom headed for the front door. “I’m going to pick up the pizza.”

I called, “Wait, I’ll change clothes and go with you.”

“No, you stay home.”

I dashed after my mother, grabbed her shoulder to stop her. “I really want to go, Mom. Please.” I wanted to say, “Don’t leave me here with Charlie! Please!” but I didn’t.

She whirled on me. “You think you deserve to go anywhere? You were late.”

Instant confusion. “But—you said it was no big deal.”

Mom turned, retrieved her keys from the table in the foyer, and opened the front door. “Stay here. Play with Charlie.”

I stepped after her. “But—”

She closed the door quietly. I sensed Charlie was watching me, and I dared a sideways glance. Dread filled me. His eyes were locked on my chest. I crossed my arms over my breasts and turned my back to him, facing the front door as if I expected my mother to throw it

open and say, “Just kidding! I’d never leave you with this psycho!”

Sharp lines of water tapped across my back, but mostly on my butt. Charlie yelled, “Got ya!” and sprang toward me. I don’t remember deciding to do it, but I must have flown away from the door. He stepped to it and peered out the windows at the top—probably making sure Mom pulled away.

I watched as Charlie turned the deadbolt, pulled the key from it, and slid it into his pocket. He turned to me with an expression I knew too well after six years, and it was as if a rock inside of me fell from my head to my toes.

He raised the water gun and fired at my breasts. *Zip. Zip. Zip.*

I backed away, glanced at my wet t-shirt, and automatically pulled the fabric away from my skin.

He took a few steps into the den and fired on me, but I raced to the kitchen. I hoped to escape through the laundry room to the garage. I knew I couldn’t wait for the overhead garage door to open, but it was possible for me to escape through the side door into the backyard and keep running. I skidded into the laundry room, grabbed the doorknob, and discovered the door was locked. The deadbolt key for it was missing.

I turned to see Charlie a few feet away from me, smirking because he had me trapped. He turned on the tap and refilled the water gun but kept an eye on me. He inhaled deeply and exhaled raggedly. “You’re giving me a run for my money, aren’t you?”

I once saw a TV show where a cop said that when he’s confronted with a shooter, time slows and he sees everything in tunnel vision. I get that. My heart was pounding in my ears and Charlie’s movements as he slid the water pistol into his back waistband were like watching a movie with freeze-framed action scenes.

When Charlie reached for his tall plastic tumbler of bourbon and Coke on the counter by the sink, I lunged forward and gave the cup a backhand sweep, sending ice cubes flying. He jumped back

and I went for it.

I was going for the safety of my bathroom, but I slipped on water in the den and jammed my toes into the bookcase. I barely felt the pain; I scrambled to my feet and started down the carpeted hallway to the bedrooms. Charlie thudded after me with surprising speed.

My bedroom door was within view, but I decided to make a break for the guest room instead since it’s closer and I knew I could reach the bathroom and do my towel trick on the drawers. I was reaching for the doorknob when Charlie lunged and grabbed the waistband of my shorts. I gritted my teeth and leaned forward with everything I had.

He planted his feet and pulled back so that I was clawing at the air, practically crawling on my hands and knees like a wind-up toy. I screamed and growled like a wild animal.

I felt my shorts and underwear slipping off as I fell to the floor, but I kept myself in *Drive*. Charlie blocked the spare bedroom doorway so that my choices were my parents’ bedroom or my own. The carpet burned my knees, but I managed to stagger to my feet. I caught my reflection in the full-length mirror at the end of the hall, but I didn’t connect that girl—*me*—to the freaked-out half-naked person in the mirror. The one being pursued by a man twice her size with a demented smile on his face.

I hooked a left toward my bedroom and Charlie tackled me, flattening me to the floor.

The girl in the mirror never had a chance.

He effortlessly flipped me over, jumped atop me, and straddled me at the waist. I will never forget the look in his eyes or the way he was giggling and panting. He flipped up my t-shirt and underwire bra in one move, then pulled the water pistol from his waistband and sprayed my breasts with one hand while grabbing them with the other. I tried to cover myself—he knocked my hands away. The last thing I saw was his cold eyes, the way his mouth hung open, the

way he focused only on my breasts.

“Just relax, Ashley,” he said breathlessly as he turned me onto my stomach.

I heard someone screaming—me?—and I blacked out.



When I came to, I was on my right side with my knees to my chest. I was in the spare bedroom, on the floor just outside the bathroom. As if shoved from several feet away, the heavy chest of drawers broke partly through the door to the hallway. I stared at it but couldn't form a thought that made sense. A towel was jammed between the drawer and the bathroom door leading to my room.

I didn't remember doing any of that. I shook my head, blinked, and tried to figure out what had happened.

From the other side of the broken door, Charlie pleaded: “Kiddo, open the door. Please. Open the door. Please forgive me. *Please*. Slap my hands, Kiddo. Slap my hands.”

I was irritated at Charlie's use of the nickname he gave me when he first met my mother. He'd been telling me to “slap his hands” for years—I guess whenever he felt guilty for what he does to me. He always chased the “slap my hands” stuff with some excuse about not being able to resist me, or that my mother doesn't like sex, and he has “needs.”

Ugh. Will he ever shut up?

I rose slowly from the floor, feeling as if I was in a dream. I looked at myself in the vanity mirror and was shocked to see my shirt and bra pulled back down, although my breasts were awkwardly sticking this way and that out of my bra. I looked down in surprise at the blood smeared on my inner thighs. I felt sticky down there and on my butt. The area between my waist and thighs throbbed with stabbing pain.

I leaned close to the mirror and looked deeply into my own

eyes. *There's no one in there.*

Charlie knocked on the bedroom door, then it sounded as if he was rubbing his hand in a circle, still whining about my need to forgive him.

I ignored his pleading and moved to the bathroom. I sat on the toilet and saw bright red blood everywhere. Was I having my period? I didn't remember. I slid toilet tissue down my crack and winced at the pain. The white tissue looked like a red bandana. *Which hole am I'm bleeding from?* Everything hurt and I could not focus my thoughts.

“*Whoosh*,” said the white noise in my head. “*Whoosh*.”

I stood and carefully wiped the drops of blood off the toilet seat so that my mother wouldn't be angry at the mess. Then I stepped into the shower, directed the spray below my waist, and washed the blood from my body using my hand and a bar of soap. It hurt too much to use a washcloth.

I dried myself, then wrapped a towel around my waist. Charlie still rubbed that broken door and moaned about needing his hands slapped. I felt like screaming at him, “*Shut the fuck up!*” but I didn't have the will.

Finally, I took a deep breath and exhaled tiredly, saying, “Leave me alone.”

Like a sad parrot, he continued to beg my forgiveness.

My voice was flat and impatient. “Fine—I forgive you—just don't do it again—don't do it anymore.”

He made some grateful sounds and seemed to go away.

I looked at the clock on the nightstand. At least two hours since Mom left, and the pizza place couldn't be that far away. *Where is she?* . . . Then I didn't think anymore. I don't remember any more of that night. . . I don't know when my mother finally arrived back home. . . I don't know if she checked on me. . . But I don't think I had any pizza.



Next morning's trip to the bathroom, I was no longer bleeding but I was still very, very sore. Bits and pieces of the night before scrolled through my head. I didn't know exactly what happened, but my body told a story too scary to think about for long. Whenever I started to go there: "*Whoosh.*"

I crawled back onto my bed, pulled the covers over my head, and pressed my body toward the wall. I didn't sleep, because walls don't sleep, and I was the wall, hard and cold.



TAP-TAP-TAP

The doorknob turned and my door brushed across the carpet. "Ashley Nicole? It's 11 o'clock. Are you hungry? I can make you breakfast."

I lowered the comforter to my chin, rolled away from the wall, and stared dully at my mother. She looked small in the doorway. Her face was very white and her mouth was a straight line.

"Nope." I turned back to the wall.

"Charlie went to work early. I—I don't know when he'll be back." She cleared her throat and seemed to be waiting. I hoped she'd take the hint and close the door, but I could still hear her breathing, and it irritated me just as much as Charlie's non-stop pleading for forgiveness.

I exhaled loudly, rolled onto my back, and glared at her. She stood so close that I could have touched her, yet she appeared ready to spring for the doorway.

I crossed my arms over my chest and forced out the words: "Where were you last night? What took you so long?" I watched her closely.

It was as if a curtain fell over her face, and even though she was

looking at me, she was actually looking *through* me. "I don't know what you mean. I was here. *We all were.*"

My mother turned to leave my bedside but I grabbed her wrist and choked out, "What—about the pizza?"

She snapped her wrist out of my grasp as she stumbled backward and nearly fell. A nanosecond video blipped through my mind: *the instant Charlie tackled me, and my face slammed into the floor.* I pressed my finger against my cheek and winced. I had to feel the bruise so I could believe it really happened.

In the doorway, Mom turned her face to the doorjamb. After what seemed a full minute, she whispered, "There was no pizza...it was sold out." She stepped quickly into the hallway and pulled my door closed.



Moments of intense brainstorming for a way to escape cycled on and off with rapid-fire video blips; hearing myself scream; blacking out; the bloody toilet tissue; utter numbness. There was no difference between my body, the mattress under me, and the sheets on top of me. I wasn't hungry. I wasn't thirsty. I wasn't ... anything.

I considered my options. My grandparents would never believe that Charlie did *Very Bad Things* to me; I mean, Nanny's always saying that Charlie has a "star in heaven" for being a godsend to Mom and me.

On the rare occasions that I dared to complain about my mother always letting Charlie have his way, Nanny always said the same things: Number 1, I must be exaggerating, and, Number 2, my mother is different from other people because she has such a sensitive heart and can't handle "messy situations." It's like my mother was born with a birth defect specific to her: *Gutless Cherylus Wonderous.*

On this day, the most desperate of my life, I slid my hand beneath my mattress and retrieved the photo of my father. I ran my finger

over David Asher's face. *Could you really be that bad? Could you be worse?*



Charlie may have stayed gone all weekend but I couldn't be sure, since I barely left my room except to sneak a bowl of cereal early Sunday morning when I finally felt like eating.

Mom kept "checking" on me until she figured out that every time she opened my door, I asked her the magic words: "Where were you?"

Then she disappeared like a magician's rabbit.

I knew other people who prayed to Jesus for help and I've tried that over the years, but I figured I was either doing it wrong or Jesus had my prayers set to *Block This Caller*. At some point, I gave up on asking and decided that I was the only one I could count on. And most days I'm nearly positive that I'm not the best person for that job.

In desperation, I called in the big guns and prayed to Jesus, Allah, Jehovah—*Anyone Who Might Be Listening*—that *something* would happen to make Charlie leave. I prayed for a tornado to suck him up off his construction jobsite. Or that he would follow through on the threat he used to keep me quiet for years: "If you tell your mother, I'll leave, and you'll have to tell her what we've been doing all this time."

Maybe if I say it the right way, she'll believe me.

Maybe if I say his name instead of "somebody," and tell her what he's been doing since that first time when I was nine years old and fell asleep on his lap in the green chair in our living room. . . that the reason he killed my rabbits and made her cook them when I was nine is that he showed me his privates the day before and he told me if I told Mom, he'd kill me, too.

Maybe she'll get mad at him and call the police. Maybe she'll

finally know it wasn't me who broke the door again and again. Maybe.



I have no idea how I ended up in my first period class on Monday morning. It's like I popped awake and found myself sitting behind Lisa in French class. She didn't speak to me, although she did turn around to shoot me a glare when I didn't notice the exams she tried to hand me over her right shoulder. I took one and passed the others back.

I dropped my pencil on the floor and when I picked it up, I saw that I was wearing two different types of sneakers. I forgot my socks, but at least my shoes were tied. Double-knotted, even.

I stared at the French verbs on the test. I was an A student in French, yet I couldn't figure out the conjugation for *être*: to be. The first verb I ever learned, and I had no idea how to conjugate it. I turned the test over and used the blank space on the back to try to get auto-pilot to take over by making a chart: *Je. . .Tu. . .Il. . .Elle. . .On. . .Nous. . .Vous. . .Ils. . .Elles. . .*

Sharp pain below my waist reminded me of the blood. *Oh my God, what did he do to me?*

My throat tightened and my eyes filled with tears. I planted my elbows on my desk and buried my face in my hands. My nose started running.

Shit.

I slid out of my chair and kept my head down and to the left to hide my face.

Mrs. Tidwell shot lasers over her reading glasses. "Question, Ashley?"

I shook my head, plucked a few tissues from the box on her desk, and ducked out into the hall to blow my nose. My eyes ached from crying so much over the weekend, and my head felt like an

overfilled balloon in danger of popping. I drew a shuddery breath, eased open the classroom door, and returned to my desk, head down and to the left.



I jumped when Mrs. Tidwell announced, “Fifteen minutes remaining.”

Seventy-five minutes gone by, and I hadn’t answered a single question.



I sat at my usual table at lunch and Lisa took her seat across from me as always, but Diego joined her and they both ignored me.

I lowered my head to my crossed arms on the table but kept my eyes open because if I closed my eyes, Charlie’s face appears, his eyes focused on my breasts, his mouth hanging open. And when he flips me onto my stomach, horror rolls over me from head to toe and my entire body shudders.

Because of the Netflix in my mind, I had not slept for more than an hour at a time since Saturday night. My brain auto-replayed the moment Charlie tackled me. I felt myself being picked up, tossed around, and flattened by his body, and every time the image of the bloody toilet tissue blipped through my mind, I gasped aloud.

By the end of the day, I added the rest of my finals to my French exam failure. I didn’t finish my World History test; I totally screwed up on Biology. I would fail Algebra even if I *could* think straight, but I should have passed the other ones, even with my brain turned into mushy oatmeal.



I exited the cafeteria doors and tried to think of somewhere—anywhere—I could go, to avoid going home.

Lisa hates me.

I’ve got nothing.

I boarded the bus and slid onto a seat in the back row.

At once, crazy thoughts churned: I considered opening the emergency door while the bus was moving and throwing myself into the path of the car behind us. I studied the window and wondered if I could pull it down just enough to fit my head through, then raise the window fast enough to break my neck. I knew that Anthony Johnston always has a knife on him. Maybe I could piss him off and he’d stab me. Wouldn’t be that hard. Usually my mere existence pisses off Anthony and has ever since we were in second grade and I told on him for peeing under the monkey bars. The bus pulled onto my street, and some of the kids started laughing when they saw Charlie in our front yard, watering his rock. *What’s he doing home so early?*

Shit.

We stopped in front of my house and I kept my head down as I rushed to the bus door amid “What’s your dad doing?” from both sides of the aisle.

I mumbled, “He’s not my dad.”

The first dangerous choice I made upon stepping off the bus was not saying “Hello,” and “Thank you” to Charlie. The rule has been in place forever: anytime I see Charlie, I’m supposed to greet him, and if it’s the end of the work day, I’m supposed to thank him for working to support me.

I *knew* that my decision to ignore him would get under Charlie’s skin. I purposely stomped on the water hose as I walked past and hoped he couldn’t see me shaking.

Charlie snarled, “Hey! Watch where you’re going!”

I ignored him, continued toward the front door, and he called, “Wipe that goddamn look off your face!”

Something deep inside me—like lava—filled every cell in my body. As I opened the front door, I threw back over my shoulder, “Go fuck yourself, you sorry bastard.”

I stepped inside, turned the key in the deadbolt, took a few steps away, then returned to the lock, removed the key, and slid it into my pocket.

Charlie tried the knob, found the door locked, and roared.

My voice shook but I yelled, “Yeah? You like that, Mother-fucker?” The front windows vibrated as Charlie rammed his two hundred seventy-five pound body against the door. He moved to the picture window in the front room and pressed his face against it. I’d never seen him so angry. Our eyes locked and I knew that if he got to me, he’d try to kill me. Suddenly, Charlie’s eyes widened, and a slow grin formed on his face as he pulled his key ring from his pocket and dangled his house key from it. He pivoted to the front door and within seconds I heard metal against metal.

I shed my backpack somewhere between the front room and the kitchen as I flew toward the garage and my bike.

I slammed open the door to the garage and shoved aside some shovels blocking the path to my bike. I slid onto the seat as I wheeled the bike through the side door, and I barely noticed the steepness of the alleyway leading to the main road. I was rocket-fueled. Guys honked and five o’clock traffic passed me. I had no where else to go except Lisa’s house. Even if she was still mad at me, I hoped she’d at least let me inside. I’d live in her dog’s house if she’d let me stay.

I pedaled faster than I ever had in my life and I swore I’d never go back home.



Lisa and Diego were snuggled up on the tailgate of his truck when I arrived. Lisa’s eyebrows just about hit her forehead when I skidded onto her driveway. “Wh-what are you—I mean—why did

you ride your bike over here, Ashley?”

Diego looked at Lisa and said pointedly, “Hey, girl, that’s cold. Ashley looks like she’s about to pass out.”

“I just meant,” Lisa looked at him but addressed me. “Why would you ride your bike so far? I mean, she lives on the other side of town.” She turned to me and put on a sweet voice. “Want a drink, Ashley?”

I was still trying to calm my breathing and couldn’t form words, but I nodded at the idea of something cold and wet. I pretty much slid off my bike. My legs trembled and I melted into the grass. My head swam.

Lisa sprinted inside and returned within seconds, holding icy bottles of water. I accepted one gratefully and chugged nearly all of it, then poured the remainder over my head. She handed me another and I sipped it more slowly, then lay back on the grass and closed my eyes.

Within seconds, my mind filled with blips of waking up on the guest room floor, noticing the dresser broken through the door. I sat up abruptly, looked around wildly, and found myself in Lisa’s front yard.

She and Diego mirrored each other: arms crossed and puzzled looks on their faces. They exchanged glances.

Diego fished his keys from his pocket. “I’m . . .gonna go. . .”

“No, please don’t! This—” Lisa glanced at me—“won’t take long.”

Lisa’s mother stepped onto the porch with a cordless phone in one hand. “Lisa, honey, Ashley’s not here, is—” she noticed me. “Oh, you *are* here!” She stage whispered, “Honey, your mom’s on the phone, and she sounds really upset and worried about you. Is. . .everything all right?”

“N-no, it’s really n-not—” I began, but even from several feet away, I could hear my mother through the phone in Mrs. Rayburn’s hand.

She put it to her ear and listened. Her eyes widened. “Uh, Cheryl? Yes, Ashley is here. I didn’t think she was, but—I know, honey, I’m a mama, too. I understand you’re—Mm-hmm. Okay.” She shrugged and pointed the phone toward me.

Lisa jogged over to her mother, took the phone from her, and brought it to me on the grass.

I gingerly put the phone to my ear. Mom shrieked, “Get your butt home, Ashley Nicole! You are in *so much* trouble—”

I pressed “End” and tossed the phone across the grass to Lisa, whose voice was squeaky-high when she asked, “Did you hang up on your mom?”

I nodded.

Mrs. Rayburn said sharply, “Ashley, you *know* that I have the utmost affection for you, but I cannot allow you to avoid the consequences of whatever it is you’ve done that has made your mother so upset.” She frowned. “I’m surprised and disappointed that you would hang up on your mother.”

I held up a hand. “But—”

Lisa’s mom gave me the hand right back. “No, ma’am. *No, ma’am*. In this house, children honor their mother and father. You go on home, now, Ashley. Lisa, tell Diego and Ashley goodbye and come inside.” She turned, started to go inside, and added tersely, “Now.”

Lisa looked pissed. “You’ve gotta go, Ashley.” Then she said pointedly, “And now *Diego* does, too.” She turned on her heel but I heard her whisper, “Thanks a lot, Ash.” She stomped up the steps and slammed the front door.

Diego shifted his weight from one foot to another. “Um, is there—do you need help getting home? I can give you a lift if you want.”

I got to my feet and picked up my bike. I shook so badly that I couldn’t maneuver it toward Diego’s truck.

He noticed. “Here, let me help you.”

I nodded and whispered, “Thanks.”



I opened the front door and walked in feeling as if I was outside my body, about to watch someone be put to death by firing squad.

Charlie, the satisfied toad, sat in his oversized armchair and smirked. I kept my eyes forward and pretended not to see him.

Mom was wearing her after-work clothes, and the iron steamed on the stovetop. One of Charlie’s short-sleeved work shirts was arranged on the ironing board, and she spritzed the shirt with water.

It’s now or never. Even if Charlie did horrible things to me because of what I was about to say, there couldn’t be anything worse than Friday night.

I took a deep breath, straightened my spine and squared my shoulders, raised a shaky finger, and aimed it at Charlie. Then I turned to my mom and announced, “Since I was nine years old, he has been molesting me. And. . . Friday night, when you went to get the pizza, h-he—he chased me, a-and—”

Charlie sprang out of his chair and stood behind me. “She’s lying! I would never—Cheryl, she’s making it up!”

I hoped he’d follow through on his threat of leaving Mom if I told. That’s a big motivation for telling, right there. *Adios, asshole. Move on down the road.*

Mom didn’t look at me. Or him. She stared at the shirt on the ironing board.

I felt a little stronger and my voice didn’t shake as badly. “I am *not* lying.” I turned to Charlie and yelled, “YOU CAN’T KEEP ME QUIET ANY MORE!”

His mouth gaped open and for the first time in my life, I saw fear in his eyes.

I looked back to my mother, expecting her to react, to protect me, to absolutely *lose her shit* over what Charlie had been doing to

me. I was willing to forgive her for leaving me with him Friday night; I mean, she couldn't have known what he would do. I must have imagined that she was acting weird when I asked her where she was. *She's my mother. She'll take care of me.*

Time slowed to a crawl. Mom lifted her head, and her face appeared to slide off her skull. I expected it to fall, smack-dab, onto the pearl snap buttons of Charlie's shirt. Then, just as suddenly, she took on a look of boredom, picked up the iron, and ran it over and over the shirt pocket.

She's. . . ironing? Where was her rage? I hadn't even told her about Friday night yet! Isn't saying he *molested* me enough? But there was *nothing*. No reaction at all. No rush of tigress-like protective instinct erupting from her like the steam shooting out the top of the iron.

Did she. . . *know* what he would do when she left?

The noise in my head: "*Whoosh!*"

I started to doubt myself: is what I know to be the truth *really* real? Maybe Mom is right when she says I can't tell dreams from reality.

I heard the escape of air from Charlie's chair cushion as he sat again. *Whoosh*. I glanced at him. The fear was gone from his face, but I cannot begin to describe what took its place. Maybe the wheels in his head were spinning as fast as the ones in mine.

I propelled myself into the kitchen, faced my mother, and practically vomited six years' worth of words that had been kept silent with threats. "*Mama-please-listen-it-started-when-I-was—I-mean—well—th-the-first-time—was-when-Charlie-touched-me-in-the-chair-when-I-was-nine-and-he-thought-I-was-sleeping-and-he-told-me-to-slap-his-hands-and-he-killed-my-rabbits-after-he-showed-me-his-privates-and-he-made-the-hole-in-the-bathroom-door-and-I-saw-his-eye-watching-me-and-I-sleep-in-my-closet-sometimes-so-that-he-can't-touch-me-and-when-you-left-me-Friday-night-h-he-ch-chased-me-and-then-and-then—and-all-that-blood-and-then—*"

I whirled at the crash of Charlie's tall plastic tumbler of booze and bowl of peanuts on the wood floor. I expected him to come at me, but he ran from the den and slammed their bedroom door. I stood in the archway between the den and the kitchen, looking back at my mother, toward the hallway leading to their bedroom, and back again. The house was silent except for Mom setting the iron on the stovetop with a *clank*.

She sighed loudly as she pulled Charlie's shirt off the ironing board and arranged it on a hanger then hooked it to the laundry room door. She brushed past me on her way to their bedroom. I heard the door open and softly click shut.

I was dizzy; I nearly passed out. I caught myself and fell onto the arm of Charlie's overstuffed chair. I don't know how long I stayed there; it's like I was awake and asleep at the same time. Mom's angry voice jolted me into consciousness. She stood before me, her arms folded over her chest, and asked detailed questions about where *she* was when such-and-such happened, and why did I think Charlie would even *want* to touch me when I was nine years old, and just *exactly how do I know* he was in my room if I was sleeping in my closet?" She leaned against the wall and insisted, "You *know* you can't tell your dreams from real life."

"Yes, I can!" I stood and took a step toward her, angled my bruised cheek, and pointed at it. "I got this bruise Friday night when Charlie—" The word I needed to say stuck in my throat, and I couldn't get it out. "Wh-when he—"

She cut me off. "Are you mad at me? Is that why you would come up with these horrible stories?"

I baby-stepped backward until I bumped into the chair. My voice, small and high: "I am not lying."

Mom disappeared into their bedroom again, just to return some time later with more questions. With each interrogation, my mother became more irritated, and it seemed she was trying to get me to say just the right thing to make none of what I'd said be true. "If this

has been happening since you were nine years old, why would you wait so long to tell me? Must not have been that bad, if you—”

I sprang to my feet, my hands curled into fists. “MOM!” I shrieked. “He told me he would leave you if I told, and that I’d have to—”

Her eyes narrowed. “—have to. . .what?”

I sank onto the arm of the chair again, wrapped my arms around myself, and lowered my head. Through tears, I whispered, “I’d have to tell you what. . .we. . .had been. . .doing.”

My mother took a step closer to me and hissed, “Look at me.” I shook my head, my chin to my chest, and tears soaked the neck of my t-shirt.

She clasped my chin and pushed it up so that I had to face her, and when she spoke, her voice reminded me of the way a cat growls before a fight. “Did you have intercourse with my husband?”

I tried to pull away from her grip, but she held tighter. I forced myself to swallow—it took concentration to do it—and even then, I could only whisper, “Mom—I didn’t *want* him. . .I—I—I didn’t want any of what he d-did t-to me.”

Mom released my chin and sneered, “Does he ever call you *Honeybritches* or pinch your breast when he passes you in the hallway?” Her eyes told me she didn’t see me as her daughter.

I closed my eyes and murmured, “No, Mom, but—”

She straightened, squared her shoulders, and went back to hear Charlie’s side of the story. Again.



The sun had sunk, and the house was dark. I sat on the floor in the doorway between the kitchen and den. My back against the doorjamb, I stared blankly at the water dispenser light on the refrigerator door. The iron turned itself off long ago. No steam from the iron, and I’d given up on my mother throwing even the slightest shit

fit about what Charlie did to me. My body felt as if there was no blood circulating. Numbness from head-to-toe.

I heard their bedroom door open and close. Footsteps approached in the darkened house, and I jumped when Mom said tiredly, “All right, Ashley. Charlie admits he did those things to you, but it all happened a long time ago. He was sick then, but he’s not anymore.” She clicked on a lamp in the den, then stepped over me and tapped the light switch in the kitchen. I blinked at the brightness.

My voice hoarse, I asked, “What’s going to happen now?”

Mom pulled another of Charlie’s shirts from the laundry basket and arranged it on the ironing board. She tested the surface of the iron with the tip of a finger, then slid the temperature gauge to the right. “We’re just going to move on.” She picked up the iron and began steaming the wrinkles away.

I awkwardly rolled onto my knees and pulled myself to my feet in the doorway. My heartbeat roared in my head— and it felt as if blood drained from my body at the same time. Absolutely *nothing* would happen because I told.

Their bedroom door opened—actually, it slammed against the wall—and Charlie charged into the den. As usual, I stood frozen in the face of certain death. He ran straight at me and stopped just short of knocking me over. I was too numb to even flinch.

His index finger is all I saw when he stuck it in my face and growled, “You are not mine. You were never mine. Don’t talk to me. Don’t look at me. As far as I am concerned, you do not exist. I want you out of my house!”

He stomped over to Mom and nearly knocked over the ironing board. “Cheryl, call David and tell him to come get his manipulative little slut. It’s about time he started acting like her father. Obviously, *my* efforts aren’t appreciated!”

Mom gave no indication that she heard him. She kept ironing, even when Charlie swiped at the shirt hanging in the doorway and it fell to the floor. He reached up and pulled a tall plastic tumbler

from the cabinet, loaded it to the rim with ice from the fridge, and filled it with bourbon until it ran over the sides of the cup.

He went out the front door and I'm sure he assumed his normal after-work position, spraying the biggest rock in his desert landscape as if he expected it to grow. Why should tonight be any different?

Mom slid the shirt onto a hanger and hung it in the doorway, retrieved the shirt that Charlie knocked down and hung it alongside, then pulled from the basket a few of Charlie's white handkerchiefs. She steamed one, meticulously folded it into a tight triangle, steamed it, folded it again, sprayed it with starch, and gave it one more blast with the iron. "I love the smell of starched linen, don't you?" She smiled tightly and looked away.

My head seemed to hover above the rest of my body. "Mom, how *can* you?"

"Don't worry, Ashley. Charlie will calm down by morning. Tomorrow will be a fresh start. You'll see. Just ...go to your room. Goodnight."

"But—" *This has to be a mistake. She must not understand.*

Mom's sharp voice sliced me deep. "Go on, now. You have school tomorrow. Goodnight."



As I reached for my bedroom doorknob, I caught a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror. Blips—moments of what happened in this very same place—race through my mind as if I was seeing them in freeze-frame. I took a step back, looked closely at the girl in the mirror, and felt myself breaking into a million tiny pieces.

I was sharp shards of glass. For years, I'd had thoughts of hurting myself—they'd been constantly floating around the back of my mind, but beginning with that moment, images of cutting or killing myself become as constant as the "*whooshing*" white noise in my head.



The next morning, it was as if nothing happened—except that Charlie completely ignored me—and I don't think he came in my room the night before. If he did, I didn't hear him skulking around when I was hunkered down behind my clothes in my closet.

Mom made my lunch and handed it to me as I walked out the door to catch the bus. *She hasn't done that since I was in elementary school.* My name was on the brown paper sack in loopy, flowery handwriting. The *i* in my middle name was dotted with a little heart. Tiny daisies with hearts in the centers surrounded my name. I folded over the top of the bag to cover as much of her artwork as I could.



Lisa ignored me in first period, and she sighed loudly when I slid into my usual chair across from her at lunch. I spied Diego exiting the food line: he followed his friends to their table, so I guessed there was trouble in paradise.

"Hey," I murmured.

She pulled out her phone and stared at it.

I unrolled my lunch sack and dumped the contents onto the table. My napkin fluttered into Lisa's territory and she started to shove it at me but pulled it back so that she could read the note written on it.

She smirked. "Oh, my, what's this? . . .A love note, maybe? . . ." Her brows furrowed and she read aloud,

Please apologize to Charlie. He would never do those things to you. Please.

For me.

Love,

Mom

Lisa made a face and slid the napkin toward me. I glanced at

it. Under the message, there was a smiley face, more hearts, and *Love, Mom*. Little hearts took the place of the letter o in *Love* and *Mom*.

Her voice was tiny. “Isn’t. . .Charlie. . .your stepdad?” She squeaked on the last word.

I swallowed hard, felt like the tiny shards of glass that were *me* dissolved into sand on the spot and poured out, hourglass style, onto the floor beneath the cafeteria chair.

“Ash? Ashley, what is it?” Lisa’s upper lip curled and she looked like she smelled something bad. “Is. . . Charlie. . .messing with you. . .or something?” She stared at me as if I actually had crumbled to nothingness on the spot.

“Um. . .” I think I nodded, but my head was filled with “*Whoosh*.” I watched myself in my chair, staring at the note, crashing.

“Is this about yesterday? What happened when you got home? Hey!” Lisa slapped the table with her palm. I was aware of the movement but could not react to it. “I. . . you. . . came to my house yesterday, and I. . .oh, my God. I’m so sorry!” She seemed to be waiting for a response, but I said nothing.

I folded the napkin in half, smoothed it along the crease, and folded it again. I scooted back my chair—I have no idea why—and leaned forward to retrieve the napkin—but Lisa snatched it from me and practically dove across the table and got in my face. “Do you want to talk to Mrs. C.?”



The next thing I knew, Lisa and I sat in Mrs. C.’s tiny office in the theatre classroom adjacent to the stage and auditorium.

Mrs. C.—Mrs. Chapman—was my eighth grade creative writing teacher, and she comes over to the high school to teach theatre classes. Even though she’s not my teacher anymore, she still tracked me down sometimes “just to take my temperature” It’s like she had a sense that my life sucks, even though I’d never told her.

She’s the only person I’ve ever allowed to read my poetry. I love her. I fantasize that she’s my mom, but I had never trusted her with my secret.

Mrs. C. leaned back in her chair and smiled. “I’m so glad my two best girls came to see me! What’s up with you two?”

I gripped my armrests like I was about to climb the hill on a rollercoaster.

Lisa elbowed me but got no response, and that’s when she didn’t give me a choice about coming clean. When I wouldn’t talk or meet Mrs. C.’s concerned gaze, Lisa whipped out the napkin and handed it to her.

Mrs. Chapman silently read it then leaned forward in her chair. “Ashley? What, exactly, does your mom want you to apologize for? Honey, talk to me.”

Lisa sobbed, and the only time she ever cries is if one of those ASPCA commercials comes on. But here she was, crying for . . . why was she crying? I touched her hand and asked, “Lisa, did something happen?”

Her mouth dropped open, closed, opened, fishlike. She slid a glance at Mrs. Chapman then back at me. “I. . . asked you if Charlie messes with you, and you nodded. Remember?”

I mumbled nonsense. “It’s okay, you. . .” but I couldn’t think of anything to say. Molasses covered my brain.

Lisa held my hands tightly in hers. “Please talk to Mrs. Chapman. Tell her what’s going on. *Please*.” I saw her hands on mine; I could feel her sweaty palms against my skin, but I couldn’t *feel* the emotion connected to it.

The bell rang. Mrs. Chapman said, “Lisa, why don’t you go on, sweetie? It’s finals week, and it’s very important that you not miss any of your tests. I know that Ashley appreciates what a good friend you are to her. I’m glad you told me. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of her.”

She watched Lisa go, then stepped to her door and pulled it

closed. “Does your stepfather ‘mess with you,’ like Lisa said? . . . You know, darling, some of the poetry you wrote last year had me concerned. Remember how I asked you about it and you told me I was imagining things? . . .”

I stared at her as I began to understand: *she knows*. I nodded.

“Does he do anything else? *Has* he done anything else to you?” She took Lisa’s place and wrapped an arm around me. “You can trust me, Ashley. Please tell me what’s going on so I can help you.”

I shifted in my seat and winced because I was still sore from what Charlie did to me. Mrs. Chapman noticed. “Are you hurt, honey?”

I shook my head, but my automatic denial and reality clashed: I knew that she really did care about me. But what would happen if I told? Mom would be so angry if other people found out. She’d be embarrassed if people got in our business, and I was sure I’d still have to go home, so. . .

Mrs. Chapman got down on her knees in front of me so she could look up at my face.

“Ashley, I promise, I won’t let anyone else hurt you, but you’ve *got* to tell me what’s going on.”

I felt my face wrenching into ugly cry face and the dam broke inside of me. If my horrible secret could be seen as a tangible object, the entire floor of her tiny office would be coated in bloody ugliness. I told her *everything*, even about Friday night.

She seemed stunned. “Oh, honey, I had no idea. What do you want to do, sweetie?”

“I . . . I want it—him—to stop—and I. . . I’ve read enough stuff in the counselor’s office to know you have to report this, but what if he gets so mad that he hurts my mom? What if Child Protective Services thinks everything is okay and they put me back there; what’s he going to do to me? What if they send me to a foster home and the dad there. . . messes with me?”

“You’re right; I do have to report it. However Charlie handles

this, it’s not your fault, honey. I’m sure C.P.S. can refer your mom to get help, too, and—well—I can only promise that I will do everything I can to help you, because *you* are my number one concern. Let’s take this one step at a time, baby. You’re not alone anymore, Ashley. I’ve got your back, and I won’t let anyone hurt you. They’d have to get through me first, and you *know* what a witch I can be.” She smiled and nodded. “Let’s do this, honey. Let’s get help.”

For the first time, I started to feel a little hopeful. Mrs. C. moved over to her desk and flipped through a notebook until she found the number for the abuse reporting hotline. She started to dial the number then hung up the phone and asked, “Honey, where’s your real dad?”

“I don’t know. But I doubt he’d want me anyway.”

“How can you say that? You’re a great kid.”

“I—he—I’ve never seen him. That I can remember, I mean.”

“First things first. I’m going to call Child Protective Services to report this now, and I imagine you’ll need to answer some questions, too.”

“Mrs. C.?”

“Yes?”

“I think I’m going to be sick. I’m really scared.” I swallowed hard and tried to stop shaking.

She slid her wastebasket toward me, just in case. “Ashley, sweetie, it’s going to be okay. No one is going to hurt you anymore.”



During the last class of the day, a C.P.S. caseworker, A. J. Cornell, met with Mrs. C. and me in the counselor’s office. She asked Mrs. C. to leave, then she asked me to tell her what happened. I repeated what I’d told my teacher, then A.J. escorted us to Children’s Hospital, where the nurse gave me a rape exam.

Mrs. C. stayed by my head and held my hand the whole time.

I've never even been to a gynecologist for a checkup, and I was so sore down there that I cried.

Mrs. C. whispered, "It's almost over...it's almost over."



I'd just finished dressing when some detectives arrived and asked me to tell them my story. They asked more detailed questions about what happened in my bedroom doorway. I answered the best I could, but I couldn't remember anything after Charlie turned me over and I blacked out. I apologized for not remembering anything until I woke up in the guest room on the floor, but they told me that I don't have anything to apologize for, and they wanted to make sure that I knew none of it was my fault and that I was safe now.

I started to feel a little less scared, but then I thought about how bad it would be when I had to go home, and I started shaking all over again.

Mom was going to be so mad, and I couldn't let myself think about what Charlie would do.



After the doctors told us we could leave, A.J. took Mrs. C. and me to her office and gave us each a Coke. She told us that she'd called my mother from the hospital to tell her that I'd just been examined for rape, and that C.P.S. was removing me from her care while they investigated.

Mom hung up on her.

A.J. asked me for the names and phone numbers of other relatives.

I gave A.J. my grandparents' phone number and she went back into her office but didn't close her door, so we heard her side of the conversation.

"Hello? . . . Yes, this is A.J. Cornell, and I am a caseworker with Child Protective Services. Am I speaking with Cheryl Baker's mother? . . . I am calling to inform you that we have removed Ashley Nicole Asher from her mother's home, and to inquire as to if she can be placed with—yes, ma'am, Mrs. Baker is aware of the situation... Ma'am, I can't go into a lot of detail with you, but I will tell you that a rape exam was performed on Ashley and while the results are still being processed, her injuries are consistent with rape... Who? I'm sorry, ma'am, I can't tell you that; I *can* tell you that the police are in the process of securing an arrest warrant at this time... Yes, I'll hold..."

Mrs. Chapman grimaced. She put her arm around me and squeezed me tightly against her side, then stroked my hair the way she had when I was on the exam table at the hospital.

A.J. exclaimed, "Pardon me? . . . Ma'am, it is not possible for you to sue me or the state of Texas for acting on your granddaughter's report... No, your daughter can't sue us, either. . . It doesn't matter who called us to report it—you can't... Ma'am, the law says that when an abuse report is made, an investigation must be... So I take it that you are unwilling to provide a safe place for Ashley to... I see. Well, thank you for your, uh, time."

I turned toward A.J.'s office. She sat at her desk; her eyes were huge, and she stared at the phone like it was about to get up and walk away. She blinked a few times, then pulled a bottle of aspirin out of her drawer and popped a few. I faced forward and put my head in my hands.

A.J. called, "What's the name of the place where your biological father lives, Ashley?"

I took a deep breath and pushed it out. "Mom says he lives in this little town in East Texas called Patience. I've never seen it—or him—I mean—not since I was three months old."

"*Really*," A.J. said. "Is there a reason your dad doesn't see you? I mean, that you know of?"

I shrugged. "I don't think he's ever wanted me, that's all."

CHAPTER THREE

Inside the big red barn that is Asher Automotive, brothers Frank and David Asher repair everything from ancient Chevys to hay balers. Aside from an air compressor and air tools, toolboxes, creepers, jack stands and jacks, it has all the comforts of home. There's a converted horse trough that serves as both sink and parts washer, a refrigerator that freezes up regularly, a 1960s-era Coke machine, a raggedy old recliner, and a ladder-back chair that David found on the side of the highway.

Frank used a screwdriver to chip two Dr. Peppers from the block of ice in the refrigerator, lightly slammed the door, stood back, and sighed as he rolled an icy can back and forth over his forehead. "Boy, it sure is hot to only be May. What do you think, Dave? Want a DP?"

David pushed *End* on the cordless phone, dropped it onto the recliner, and practically fell onto the ladder-back chair, speechless. He leaned forward, put his head in his hands, and stared intently at the shop floor.

Frank walked over, placed the cordless phone in its charger, and sat down in the recliner with a *whump*. A panicked field mouse fled from beneath it. "Hey. Dave. You okay, man? Are you too hot? Have a drink." He held the dripping can out to his brother.

"It's Ashley," David murmured.

"Huh? Ashley who?" Frank popped the top on his drink and

took a sip.

“Ashley. My Ashley. Cheryl’s Ashley.”

“Oh, she called? Wow, that’s—”

“It’s bad.”

Frank placed his Dr. Pepper on an up-ended orange crate that served as a table. “What is it, bud? Did something happen to Cheryl?”

A bead of sweat ran down David’s left temple; he rubbed the top of his hand against it and left a chunky smudge of grease. He put his hands on his knees and started to stand but couldn’t. He began to shake, and his eyes filled with tears.

“You’re scaring me, man. What happened? Who called you?”

David swallowed the bile coming up the back of his throat. “A caseworker from Child Protective Services.”

“You’ve got my attention.”

“They’ve been to the pediatric hospital in Dallas.”

“Pediatric, huh? How old is Ashley now?”

“She’s fifteen, and—” David closed his eyes and clenched his fists. His mouth was a straight line as he struggled to regain composure, but he lost the fight and his face crumpled. He stood and strode quickly to the horse trough, opened up the hot and cold-water faucets, and squirted hand soap all over the place, luckily hitting at least some of his arms and hands. He picked up a stiff steel wool pad and savagely scrubbed his forearms and hands.

“Uh-oh,” Frank muttered. He pushed himself up out of the recliner and ambled over to his brother.

Face contorted in rage and sobbing, David was unaware of the blood seeping from his arms.

“Hey, man, I think your hands are clean now.” The scrubbing continued. Frank reached across David and turned off the faucets, gently took the scrubber away, placed some blue shop towels in his hands, and led him by the arm away from the sink. When they were halfway to the bay door, he stopped David and put his hands on his shoulders.

“Talk to me. What happened to Ashley? What did the caseworker say?”

David could barely choke out the words. “Ashley told her teacher . . . Cheryl’s husband’s been sexually abusing her since she was a small child. They did an exam...” His knees wobbled and Frank held him up. “And it looks like Ashley’s been violated in about every way you can be.”

“Jesus Christ! So what’s Cheryl going to do? Is she ready to kill the guy, or what?”

“The caseworker made it sound like Cheryl seems to be siding with him. They want me to come to Dallas to see Ashley and talk about bringing her here. I can’t imagine what she’s been thinking all these years, Frank . . . what she’s been through. And I wasn’t there for her.”

Frank stayed silent while his younger brother sobbed. Suddenly, David ran for the bay door and disappeared around the corner. Hands on his knees, he vomited into the tall grass until he had nothing left.



Mrs. C. asked permission to take me to get something to eat before we met my dad at the Children and Family Services offices. A.J. agreed and said it would give her time to get in touch with the Northside PD to see if Charlie had been taken into custody.

We went to an Applebee’s nearby. I could barely stop shaking long enough to hold the menu, much less decide what to eat. Mrs. C. made the executive decision that we would each like a burger and fries, and snapped at the waitress when she asked me if I was okay. “Of course she’s okay. Don’t you have some orders to turn in or something?”

I was definitely *not* okay. In fact, to say I was upset is like saying Texas summers are a little warm. I wound and unwound the paper

napkin around my fingers until it was transparent. *Did my mother finally believe I was telling the truth? Would she do as I had hoped, and suddenly wake up and become the way I'd always wished she would be?* When I told Mrs. C. what happened, she didn't treat me like I had wanted Charlie to do those things to me. I could tell that my teacher loves me: I matter to her. *Why is it that a person I've known for less than two years cares more about me than the woman who gave birth to me?*

"What are you thinking about, Ash?"

"My mom. Just wondering how she feels right now."

Mrs. C. snorted and looked like she'd tasted something bad. "You know, sweetie, I think you're going to have to let your mom deal with this in her own way—"

"But she *won't* deal with it. If C.P.S. makes me go back home, it'll be even worse for me because Mom and Charlie will be pissed at me for telling. Especially Charlie. One time he killed my rabbits because he—" something inside me tried to put on the brakes, not to tell, because it was a secret—but I made myself keep going—"wanted me to know what would happen if I told." The empty feeling inside threatened to swallow me whole, and I started to cry again.

Mrs. C. scowled. "Fuck—I mean, *forget* him, Ashley. Charlie Baker can go straight to Hell, and even Hell is too good a place for him." She looked me in the eye for a long moment, then glanced away when her eyes filled with tears. "Where's that waitress, anyway? I'm starved, what about you?"

The way she changed her tone so quickly made my alarms go off. "Are *you* mad at me now?"

"Absolutely not! I'm just so pissed that you've gone through this—but it's not your fault. It kills me that someone I love has been treated so badly." Mrs. Chapman smiled and her chin quivered. She took my hand, and the napkin fell to the table in three irregularly-shaped shreds. I picked it up and tried to put the pieces back together then put my face in my shaking hands and tried to stifle my sobs.

Mrs. C. touched me softly on the wrist. "Ashley, we'll get another napkin, sweetie. It's nothing to cry about." I tried to smile at her attempt to lighten the mood.

I wiped my nose with what was left of the napkin and looked at her. She smiled and nodded reassuringly, then her face took on a look of complete seriousness. "I promise you, Ashley. I'm in this with you all the way. You know you can believe me, right? I'm here for you."

I nodded and stared at the fragments of napkin on the table until they blurred into one piece.



A.J. greeted us at the door when we returned to her office. "I reached your father, Ashley. He agreed to an interview so that I can verify his suitability as placement for you while we investigate your case."

My stomach clenched. "H-he's coming here? Tonight? B-but, I've never even talked to him."

Mrs. C. placed a hand on my shoulder. "Really, A.J.? Can't Ashley go home with me? I already said that I'm more than willing to take her—"

A.J.'s voice was firm but kind. "—and as *I* told *you* earlier, we prefer to place children with close family members if at all possible; furthermore, you are not a licensed foster parent. Should Mr. Asher be unqualified to be Ashley's temporary guardian, we will either send her to our emergency shelter or begin calling foster families for placement. Given that he is her father, he has legal standing to take custody, barring any reasons to disqualify him."

I swayed on my feet. Mom said he's a monster. *Holy shit, what have I done? At least I know how bad Charlie is. What if David is ten times worse?*

Mrs. C. grabbed my arm. "Ashley, do you want to sit down,

hon?” She guided me to the sofa without waiting for an answer.



It seemed as if hours passed. I was so nervous that I kept getting up and looking out the second-story window overseeing the tiny parking lot shared by Child Protective Services and the Northside police department. Most of the employees had gone home long ago, and the lot was nearly empty.

“What kind of car does your dad have? Do you know?” Mrs. C. asked.

I shook my head.

“Do you think you’ll know him if you see him?”

I shrugged. “I’ve only seen one picture of him, and he was in high school. It’s from the same night that he and my mom . . . Hey, what’s she doing here?”

I watched as Mom pulled her green Toyota into the parking area behind the police department. I watched her get out, close her door, and use her reflection in the car window to double-check her appearance as she dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. She raised and lowered her shoulders as if taking a deep breath. Then she started toward the back entrance of the police station. I felt a mixture of relief and sadness that she wasn’t coming for me. “Did my mom ask if I was okay, A.J.?”

The caseworker paused in filing papers. “No. I think she was in shock.”

I flopped onto the sofa. “My mother doesn’t care about me,” I said dully. My throat felt like there were giant hands squeezing it.

A.J. left her file cabinet and sat by me. “Ashley, these things are complicated. The way things look on the surface is not always the way they are underneath.”

“Do you think I’m lying, too?” I squeaked.

“No, not at all, but we don’t make a determination as to whether

abuse occurred until we have time to investigate it. Your stepdad has been picked up by the Crimes Against Children team. We’re trying to get to the truth as fast as we can.”

Mrs. Chapman spat, “I can’t believe you’re serious. Do you have any idea what kind of courage it took Ashley to go through that exam today at the hospital? What ‘truth’ are you trying to find? When I think of her telling her mother what her stepfather did and that woman doing nothing about it, I don’t mind telling you, it makes my blood boil!”

A.J. spoke quietly. “Ultimately, the goal of CPS is to keep families together. Our policy is to make every effort to reunite Ashley with her mother at some point; to preserve the family structure if possible.”

KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK

“Excuse me, are you A.J.?” The tall man standing in the doorway looked like a wider version of the guy in the prom picture. His hair was much shorter, cropped close on the sides, and a little long on top. His skinny body had become muscular and broadened. He wore a maroon t-shirt, baggy, faded blue jeans, and scuffed-up work boots.

A.J. rose, moved toward him, and opened the door all the way for him to enter.

“I’m David Asher. You asked me to be here by 7 o’clock. Hope it’s okay that I’m a little late. I dropped everything and came when you called, but there was an accident on the expressway.”

I suddenly felt very shy. His eyes caught mine, and I looked down at the carpet.

I crossed my arms in front of my chest, and my eyes filled with tears.

David came forward cautiously. “. . . Ashley?”

Mrs. C. pulled me to my feet and steered me toward the stranger whose huge hands looked like he had taken a cheese grater to them. “I’m Tanya Chapman. I’m Ashley’s teacher. . . What. . . happened to

your hands?”

He glanced at his hands and grimaced. “I . . .uh. . .when the caseworker called me about Ashley, I was pretty upset, and I used a steel pad to get the grease off.” He brought his hands forward and held them out to us. “I’m a heavy equipment mechanic. My hands get pretty dirty.”

Mrs. Chapman spoke quietly. “I can understand why you’d be upset, given what Ashley’s been through and the fact that you’re her father.”

He nodded. “Oh, are you the one she, uh, talked to about what’s happened?”

“Yes, I am, and, yes, she did.” Mrs. C. took my chin with her forefinger and pushed it up so that I had to look at her. My lower lip quivered, and I felt like I was going to faint. She mouthed, “I’m right here,” then nodded at me in a way that said, “*Got it?*”

I frowned and whispered, “Yeah.”

“Let’s all sit down.” A.J. gestured to the sofa and love seat.

Mrs. C. supported my weight like I’ve seen Mom help Charlie walk when he was wasted. She settled both of us onto the love seat directly opposite David and A.J. on the sofa.

A.J. offered, “Would you like something to drink, Mr. Asher? I know you had a long drive and I appreciate you coming so quickly.”

Mrs. Chapman cut in. “How far do you live from here?”

“Patience is about two and a half hours southeast of here. Like I said, I left for Dallas right after I talked to my wife about Ashley.”

“Oh, so you’re married. Do you have other children, Mr. Asher?” Mrs. C. boldly questioned him, and I wondered if Mr. Asher—I mean, David . . . I mean, my dad—realized that he was in the hot seat. Mrs. C’s arm remained firmly around my shoulders as if she were saying, “*Hurt Ashley, and you’ll have to deal with me.*”

David crossed his arms, looked down, uncrossed them, and

relaxed into the sofa. I remembered when Mrs. C. talked to our class about using body language to communicate: it looked like David was trying to show he was *open*. “Yeah, I adopted my wife’s son when we got married. His name’s Ben, and he’s twelve. My wife and I have been married for ten years, since he was two.”

Mrs. C. kept at him. “And your wife is...?”

“Beverly. But everybody calls her Bev. She’s a high school English teacher.”

A.J. cut in. “You said you’re a mechanic?”

“Yeah. My brother, Frank, and I own a repair shop that’s just up the hill from our house—which, before you ask, is a log house that my family built several years ago.”

I sneaked a glance at my father and caught him looking at me. We both dropped our eyes.

“If you’re approved to take custody of Ashley, will she have her own bedroom?” A.J. asked.

David nodded. “Yep. Her own bathroom, too.”

A.J. tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. “If Ashley had told you about what she says happened, what would your reaction have been?”

He pressed his right fist into his left palm and his biceps bulged. “There’d be one less piece of shit scumbag walking the planet right now.”

“*I’d like to know something, if you don’t mind.*” Mrs. C. withdrew her arm from my shoulder and scooted to the edge of her seat until her knees were practically right up against David’s.

“O-o-okay. . .” He started to pull away from the contact, but stayed put instead and smiled weakly. “Ask away.”

Mrs. Chapman didn’t take it easy on him at all. She spoke harshly, the way she does when a kid in her class won’t straighten up and fly right. “Mr. Asher, I cannot imagine what has kept you away. You have missed out on knowing a magnificent person, and I’ll tell you straight up: that’s *your loss*. Ashley believes, *I hope*

mistakenly, that you don't care about her. Surely you can understand why, since you have not bothered to make the effort to be her father. Not that any excuse will be good enough, but where have you been? Why haven't you tried to see Ashley for all these years?"

David's head dropped slightly, and when he spoke again, his voice was quiet and thick. "That," he said, "is the great shame of my life. Ashley. . ." He inhaled raggedly, and I forced myself to meet his gaze. "Honey, your mom and I were babies when we had you. Neither of us knew what it took to make a marriage work. I was a heavy drinker with a temper that wouldn't quit."

Fear hit me like ice water, and I couldn't keep eye contact with this man, this stranger. I focused on his worn boots. *So even he admits he's a monster. Man, I don't think I can go through living with another crazy guy. I hope A.J. doesn't make me go home with him.*

A.J. flipped to a new page on her clipboard. "I ran your driver's license number, Mr. Asher, and I found no convictions— nothing worse than a speeding ticket." She smiled. "Obviously, that's a good thing. . . Now, tell me this: when you say that you *were* a heavy drinker with a bad temper, does this mean the drinking and temper are no longer a problem?" She held her pen above the paper, poised to add to the notes she was taking.

David's voice cracked, but he met her gaze head-on. "Well, I'm a human being, not perfect by any stretch, but I haven't touched a drop of alcohol since the day Cheryl left with Ashley. I went through anger management counseling, and I rarely give into rage anymore. That said, just like anybody else, sometimes I—"

Mrs. Chapman cut him off. "*You* haven't answered *my* question. Why haven't you been a part of Ashley's life all this time?" She turned to A.J. "Surely that matters to you, doesn't it?"

David looked away. "First, I told myself that I couldn't deal with Cheryl, then the idea of facing her parents was more than I could stand. But I've grown enough to know that it was shame, of thinking that I could never be enough for Ashley. Then, when I never

heard from Cheryl, I figured that if I did any more than send child support, I'd be intruding on Ashley's life." He took a deep breath and blew it out before continuing in a thick voice.

"I. . . there is no—I mean, I have no—uh, you're right, there is no excuse for not contacting Ashley—I mean, I did make sure to send her a birthday card every year, but it wasn't. . . I'm here *now*. You called me. You asked me to come. I can't change the past, and. . ."

He reached forward and touched my leg. I flinched and he pulled his hand back. He whispered, "I'm sorry, Ashley. I failed you, and I will never forgive myself for it." His eyes were tearful, and he didn't try to hide it.

A.J. offered him a tissue, but he waved her off.

I tried to say, "Thanks," but I couldn't make my voice work. Mrs. Chapman leaned back into the cushions and seemed to relax somewhat.

David blew out a big breath, and asked, "My turn for questions now?"

"Sure," said A.J.

"What's next as far as the law, here? I don't have full custody of Ashley. And Cheryl's husband: is he under arrest?"

A.J. seemed to choose her words carefully. "The accusations Ashley has made against Charlie Baker are under investigation. The police are working to determine if there is sufficient evidence to charge him with a crime. I called the PD earlier, and I was told that Mr. Baker has been brought in for questioning. With regard to custody, since you're Ashley's biological father, we are temporarily placing her in your custody . . . if it's okay with you and your wife."

David sat up straight. "Hell, yes, it's okay. Absolutely. Ashley, if I had only known. I thought your life with your mom was fine."

"It would have been nice if you had bothered to find out." I barely recognized the voice as coming from me.

His eyes looked like I'd struck him. "I know, and I'm *so* sorry. I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you."

I nodded dully. My arms and legs felt like anchors.

"What now?" Mrs. C. asked A.J.

"It's been a long day. I think we should let Mr. Asher take Ashley home so they can start getting to know each other, and when I have something to report about the investigation, I'll be in touch." A.J. stood, a signal that the meeting was over.

David looked around the room. "Ashley, do you have any bags or suitcases I need to carry down?"

I retrieved my backpack from A.J.'s office. "I have this, but it's pretty much empty."

"What's the situation as far as school? Is Northside out yet? Patience got out today for the summer."

"Tomorrow is the last day of school. But my last exam was today."

"No clothes? Toothbrush? Favorite pillow? Noth—"

What does he think this is, a sleepover? "When I walked out the door this morning, I didn't exactly realize this would be happening."

David grimaced. "Right, okay. I'm sure Bev can take you shopping tomorrow." He started to reach out to put his hand on my shoulder, but stopped as if he might be doing something wrong if he touched me.

Good. Back off, bud. "Sure, whatever."

Mrs. C.'s eyes were glassy when I turned to hug her, and she handed me a slip of paper with her phone numbers and email address on it. "Any time, Ashley. Any time you need me, day or night, 24/7, you call, e-mail, or show up. I am here for you, and that is not going to change." She could barely speak, and she sounded a little like *Kermit the Frog*.

I buried my face in her shoulder. "I love you, Mrs. C."

"I love you too, honey." She looked over my head at David.

"Mr. Asher, you'd better take good care of my baby."

"I will. I promise."

CHAPTER FOUR

I woke to the smell of bacon and numbly surveyed my surroundings. I ran my finger along the roughed-out cedar wall my bed was against, the white eyelet comforter and smooth cotton sheet over me.

The room was a little smaller than my room at home. A braided rug covered most of the shiny dark wood floor. A white ceiling fan rotated slowly, and the sun shone through a window with no curtains. There was no closet. Instead, there was a pine wardrobe.

I threw the covers back, then rose and shuffled over to peer out the horizontal window opposite the bed. Trees, as far as I could see.



Driving down the curving roads outside Patience the night before, David told me that he'd built this log house in the middle of a forest. I couldn't see much when we arrived, but when I opened the truck door and stepped into the coolness of the starry night, the sounds of the forest and smell of pine trees surrounded me.

The window in my bedroom was open, and I was uneasy about leaving it that way even though it was pretty high off the ground. I asked David if he would close and lock it, and he did so without arguing with me about it like my mom or Charlie would. They always made fun of me for worrying about people breaking into our house,

but I sort of wonder if I'm that way because Charlie made sure I couldn't ever keep him from coming into my bedroom.



I squinted at the morning sun, examined the window latch to see how it opened, and slid the window up. The air was cool but thicker and more moist than back home in the Dallas area. I could see a large pen above a terraced area. Ducks and turkeys pecked at the ground and made their usual sounds. One of the ducks splashed in a wading pool. An orange striped tabby sat on the pavestone wall. She resembled a furry statue as she watched a pair of cardinals eating from a bird feeder. The wind rustling through the trees sounded a little like my "*Whoosh*."

I chewed my lower lip and looked around the room. Could I fit in the wardrobe if I needed a place to hide? I opened the door on the left side and saw a plaid wool blanket topped by a king-size pillow. I closed the wardrobe door, then lifted the dust ruffle on the bed to scope out the space underneath it. No luck: it was a trundle bed. The bedroom door could be locked, though. I'd made sure of that when I arrived.

Another door led into a very small bathroom. This door, made of solid wood (I checked) also had a lock. Toilet, sink, and bathtub shower with a liner curtain and a heavy fabric curtain as well—no way to see through. Good. I looked around to see if there was a drawer next to the door so I could stuff a towel between them if anyone broke the lock. There wasn't; just shelves on the wall to hold small items.

I jumped at a light tapping on the bedroom door.

David asked, "Ashley? You up?"

I looked at the mirror above the sink. I was wearing one of his t-shirts, and my nipples could be seen through it. "Yeah."

"You hungry? Bev's made bacon, biscuits, and scrambled eggs."

“Uh, yeah, sounds good.” I began frantically looking for the clothes I was wearing the day before. “David?”

“Yeah?”

“Do . . . you know where my clothes are?”

“Remember, Ash? Bev washed them last night so you’d have clean clothes. Hang on and I’ll get them for you.”

Fear surged through me; what if I only *thought* I’d locked the bedroom door? I crept close to it, throwing myself against the door with a *thud* just as he tapped on it again.

“What was that noise? Did you fall?”

I took a step back from the door, tried to normalize my breathing and slow my rabbit-heart. I reached for the doorknob: *it was locked after all!* I turned the lock and opened the door as little as possible, sticking my hand through the space. He threaded the thin stack of clothes carefully through the narrow opening.

“Thanks,” I said.

“No problem. Are you okay? You sound a little breathless.”

I exhaled raggedly, “I’m fine.”

“That’s good. Come out after you get dressed, okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

I dressed and started to open the door, but hesitated when I heard a kid’s voice. Ben had already been asleep when I’d arrived the night before, so I hadn’t met him.

I opened the door just enough to see into the kitchen. A scrawny brown-haired boy stood next to the counter, ladling scoop after scoop of chocolate milk mix into a tall glass of milk.

“So, *what’s her name?* And why is she here?” he asked, looking toward the table. I couldn’t see David and Bev, but I heard her reply.

“You know her name, Ben. Ashley’s staying with us because her mom can’t take care of her right now.”

“Wasn’t there anywhere else she could go. . .you know, like, to people who actually know her?”

“Stop it, Ben,” Bev said sternly, then called to me in a bright voice, “Ash? The food’s getting cold.”

I eased my door open and took a tentative step into the hall.

“Good morning, hon. Come join us. Did you sleep well?” Bev said.

“Yeah. Thanks for washing my clothes.” I kept my eyes on the floor.

“You’re welcome. Help yourself to some juice if you want. This morning I need to run by my classroom to wrap up a few end-of-the-year details, then I thought we’d head to Tyler to shop for some clothes and other things you need. Okay?”

“Yeah.” I poured a half -glass of juice. The smell of food made me queasy. No way I could eat right now. I sat down in front of an empty plate and asked David, “Are you coming, too?”

“I’m not much of a shopper. You’ll have a better time without me, trust me.”

“Do I have to go, Mom?” Ben asked. I watched as he leaned back and held his now-empty glass upside down above his mouth. Lumps of chocolate milk mix oozed down the inside of the glass toward the rim.

“Absolutely not. I don’t think you’d have too much fun shopping for teenage girl clothes. You and Steven can hang around here today—and I’d better not hear that you and he blew up anything with those firecrackers you bought from Wade at school. I only let you keep them because you *swore* to me you’d save them for the Fourth of July.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” He sandwiched bacon in a biscuit, put it in one of his baggy cargo shorts pockets, then repeated the process with the pocket on the opposite side and headed for the front door. “I’m going to Steven’s. See you later.”

“Benjamin? Are you forgetting your manners?” The firm tone of David’s voice made me cringe.

Ben sighed. His shoulders dropped as he hung his head and

pivoted back to us. “Uh, yeah, I guess so,” he mumbled. He shuffled toward me, extended his hand, and said flatly, “Hi, I’m Ben.”

We didn’t shake hands but just touched quickly. I managed a whisper: “Hi.” I kept my eyes on his faded green t-shirt, which showed an encircled stick figure wearing a cape. The circle had a slash through it and the words “*Cape does not enable user to fly.*”

Ben turned to David and Bev and asked wearily, “Okay, now can I go?”

David answered, “Yes. You guys stop by the shop around noon and go to Dairy Queen for lunch with Frank and me.”

“Yes, sir.” Ben grabbed one more biscuit from the basket on the table as he turned to go.

Bev asked me, “Do you have any other brothers or sisters?”

“No. It was just me at home. I mean, with my mom. And Charlie.”

“Well, twelve-year-old boys are a whole different animal from teenage girls. Hope he doesn’t drive you crazy.”

I didn’t answer; just traced the pattern on the edge of my plate with my finger.

The phone on the kitchen table rang and Bev picked it up, glancing at the Caller I.D. screen as she did so. “It’s a Dallas number.” She handed the phone to David.

He frowned before answering. “Hello?” His brows furrowed. “You got him. . . Mm-hmm . . . She’s here, but I’m sure you know that, Cheryl.”

My stomach knotted. “*Whoosh.*”

I watched David. Seeing his fist opening and closing as he talked to Mom was alarming me. He listened a moment or two longer and nearly yelled, “Are you telling me you didn’t know that C.P.S. called and asked me to come get her because of what’s been going on in your house?”

David moved the mouthpiece away from his face, closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and exhaled slowly. He listened some more then

asked softly, “Are you finished now? . . . You sure? . . . Okay, well, I’m not going to get into this with you. Any other reason you called, Cheryl?”

I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I was frozen to that spot, and it felt like my whole life depended on what my mother wanted. It had *always* been about what she wanted and keeping *her* happy and comfortable. I felt myself fading in and out of awareness of where I was.

David sounded upset again. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Cheryl. She’s pretty traumatized right now. You do know they did a rape exam on her?”

I jumped, jolted to the core, and Bev gasped, “David!”

David’s voice was acidic. “Well, honey, I’m pretty sure she knows she was raped; *she’s* the one who had to live through it.”

I don’t remember getting up from the table, but somehow I ended up inside the pine wardrobe, curled tightly into a ball and covered with the plaid blanket. I tried to make myself feel safe in the only way that ever worked—but it *didn’t* work, because I wasn’t able to shut out the world. In my rush to get to the dresser, I hadn’t closed my bedroom door. I could still hear David. I pushed open the wardrobe door the tiniest bit and listened.

“Goddammit, Cheryl, what kind of mother are you? How could you let this happen to her? . . . Dreamed it? How did she dream up a rape exam that showed she’s been raped in the front and the back, huh? . . . She’s my kid, too, and in case you don’t know the difference between the two, it wasn’t intercourse, you heartless bitch. It was rape.”

Rape.

Rape.

I covered my ears with my hands, clawed at my head, and rocked my body in the tiny wardrobe space. *It can’t be true. It can’t be true. I must have been wrong about everything.* The blanket seemed to smother me. I shoved it away, then immediately drew my arms up

around myself again.

David said loudly, “Fuck. You. Ashley’s staying here, Cheryl. I’ll be goddamned if I’m going to let her go through any more of your mothering . . . You think so?. . . Well, I’ll have my attorney contact you. Don’t call here again!”

SLAM!

“Honey, calm down,” Bev said. “. . . Well, you broke the phone. Did that help anything?”

“How could I have let this happen?” David sobbed. “How?” Then—silence.

Moments passed. The only sound was a gray cat meowing on the floor outside the wardrobe. I stopped rocking myself. I eased out of the dresser and crawled on the floor until I was just inside my doorway, spying on David and Bev. The cat wove in and out of my arms and legs, brushed his face against mine.

David sat in a rocking chair next to the kitchen table, his head in his hands. Bev bent low to him, speaking too softly for me to hear. Suddenly, he sprang to his feet. “I’ve got to get a grip! I’m going to blow it all again if I don’t!”

“Honey, you’re not going to blow anything. This is a rotten situation, but at least Ashley’s out of there now, she’s—”

“Yeah, but what if it’s too late? What if she’s so—”

“Come on now; you can’t think like that,” Bev said soothingly as she walked toward him.

He backed away from her. “I’m going to work. I—I need some time to think.”

I heard the front door open and close.

“David, wait!” Bev followed him out. I jumped up, ran to my window, and watched as she stepped up onto the pavestone retaining wall and followed David up the hill to the pen. He stood by the ducks and turkeys and wiped at the tears on his face with the back of his hand. She looped her arm through his and laid her head against his shoulder.

“Meow.” The cat sat on my bed, his olive green eyes watching me. “Come here, kitty, kitty,” I crooned. His tail swishing, he ignored me, jumped down, and padded to the hallway. Just outside my door, he stopped and rolled onto his back. I sat on the floor next to him and began rubbing his tummy. “You’re a sweet kitty, aren’t you?” I picked him up and cradled him in my arms like a baby. The cat stared at me, his eyes huge. Someone came into the house.

“Wow, it’s a miracle Loki’s not biting or scratching you. I can’t remember the last time he granted me the privilege of cuddling him. That cat hates all living things except himself, usually.”

Bev was smiling at me, hands on her hips. Her eyes were puffy and red.

Suddenly, Loki screeched and swiped my nose with a razor-sharp claw.

“Shit!” I howled.

“Yowza!” Bev said. “Are you okay?”

I touched my nose then looked at the blood on my finger. “Yeah, I think I am.”

Bev offered her hand. “Let’s get you cleaned up. Damned cat! I’m not sure why we keep him around.”

I took Bev’s hand and followed her into her bathroom, where she put the lid down on the toilet. “Sit!” She retrieved the Bactine and cotton balls.

“I feel like a little kid,” I said.

“Why?” Bev asked.

“I don’t think my mom’s done anything like this since I was four, maybe younger.”

“Really? Well, if you knew your way around here, I suppose I’d let you doctor your own nose.” She dabbed at my nose with a Bactine-soaked cotton ball, then held pressure on it. “I hope you don’t mind. I don’t mean to baby you if you don’t want me to.”

“No, it’s okay, I don’t mind.” I took over holding the cotton ball.

Bev opened a bathroom drawer. “As long as I’m here...” She shook a bottle of foundation makeup, then unscrewed the lid. “May as well put my face on so we can get going on our clothes-buying mission.” She gave me a little smile in her reflection.

David appeared in the bathroom doorway. When he saw me holding the cotton on my nose, his eyes widened. “What happened?”

“Loki inducted Ash into the family.”

“Yeah? Scratch or bite?”

“Scratch.” I examined the cotton ball. “I think I finally stopped bleeding.”

Bev glanced at David in the mirror. “What are you doing home? I thought you went to work.”

“Well, the way I left things ... I wanted to come back and say I’m sorry for losing my temper. Could you buy another kitchen phone while you’re out shopping?”

“You going to be nicer to the new one, David?” Bev gave him a sideways look in the mirror and arched her eyebrow.

“Oh, not the teacher look! It’s... burning my eyes!” David covered his face as if in agony.

“Well, seeing as how you traveled *all the way* back home from work to tell us, as far as I’m concerned, you’re forgiven. What do you think, Ashley? Do we let Dad get away with a temper tantrum?”

I focused on the cabinet instead of my dad and answered shyly, “Didn’t seem like much of a tantrum to me.” *Maybe Mom exaggerated...*

“No, Ashley, it was something. I let myself get set off, and I’m afraid my diarrhea of the mouth is what upset you. I messed up and I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I dragged my lower teeth against my upper lip then bit down hard on it until I tasted blood.

“Hey, um, we don’t have to talk about the hard stuff now or

anything, but sometime, we’re going to have to sit down and figure out what we need to do to help you get on the road to a normal life. I want you to know that you’re important to me—to us—and I’m here for you.”

David seemed to be waiting for some kind of response. I forced my eyes from the cabinet to his. They were filling with tears, and he turned away as if to hide it.

He took a deep breath and exhaled, “Okay, ladies. I’m out of here.” And just like that, he was gone again.

“He’s a good guy, Ash.” Bev’s voice was thick.

I nodded, clenched my fists, and dug my nails into my palms until it hurt.

CHAPTER FIVE

Patience High School is a long white building that looks like it's been added onto again and again. There are a few portable buildings behind it and a life-sized statue of a black panther just inside the front door. I'm guessing that the panther's supposed to look fierce, but most of the paint is flecked off its ears and somebody painted its front toenails hot pink.

I followed Bev into the office. A large lady was sitting at a desk, filing her long manicured nails and looking bored. Her face lit up when she saw Bev. "Hey, girl, what are you up to?" When she said "you," it sounded like "ye-ew." Her Texas twang was so strong that she dragged every word out into at least two syllables. For a second, I thought she was putting us on.

"Hi, Marvella. I'm just here to finish checking out for the summer. This is David's daughter, Ashley."

Marvella wiggled out of her chair and leaned across her desk, offering me a strong whiff of Chantilly perfume, her hand, and a kind smile. "Nice to meet you, sweetheart." *Nope, the accent was real.*

"Thanks." I forced a smile.

"Bev, did you see Gabe out front when you got here? He's supposed to be digging up the flowerbeds just outside the boss's window." She leaned closer to us and whispered, "I'm hoping he can keep this landscaping job, and besides that, I'm trying to convince Mr. Walden to hire him as a custodian when school starts."

"No, I didn't see him, but I wasn't looking for him, either," Bev whispered back.

Marvella's brow creased and she leaned further across her desk toward the door, as if by doing so she'd be able to see through the walls of the building. She muttered, "That idiot Billy Ray Sublett better not come up here and bother Gabe again while he's working."

"We need to run on, Marvella. I'll keep an eye out for Gabe, though."

Marvella sighed loudly as she plopped into her chair. "Well, it shouldn't be too hard to find him. Just look for the shiny-headed perpetual disappointment."

Bev started toward a long hallway in the back of the office. "Okay, Ash, come this way. We'll get this stuff wrapped up and be on our way to go shopping."

"Mrs. Asher, could you come in here a moment?" Bev stopped short, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. She did an about-face, and I followed her to the doorway of an inner office. Outside the door was a sign: *Terry Walden, Principal.*

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Asher, is that a student with you? Because as you know, students are absolutely forbidden to be in this hallway unless they're being disciplined. Just because the students were dismissed yesterday does not mean—"

"No, Mr. Walden, that's my stepdaughter, Ashley."

"I was not aware that you had a stepdaughter."

Bev said nothing, just stood in his doorway.

"Well, aren't you going to introduce us, Mrs. Asher?"

"Sure, Ashley," She gently took my arm and pulled me up next to her, "This is Mr. Walden. He's the principal."

I normally don't have bad manners, but I had a hard time making eye contact with him. "Nice to meet you," I said.

"Young lady, in my school, it is expected that youngsters will

show respect to their elders by looking them in the eye when they are spoken to. Or have you not been raised right?”

I forced myself to make eye contact, but my gaze immediately gravitated to the floor again. I noticed that Mr. Walden wore hunting boots with his striped suit.

“Is there something else you need?” Bev’s tone was sharp, and I automatically took a step back.

“Excuse me?” Mr. Walden said.

“We’re not staying long. I’m only here to turn in my grades.”

“There’s another reason I stopped you. Something has come up.” He glanced at me. “Please close the door on your way out.”

I found a seat on the wooden bench outside Mr. Walden’s office and examined the armrest. *Walden = Priklus Wunder* was carved into it. It looked like someone had tried to correct the original artist’s spelling to *Prickless Wonder*, but the scratches were so darkened with ink and pencil marks that Mr. Walden would forever be *Priklus*, unless somebody sanded the bench.

A few minutes later, Bev emerged from the office. “Would you like your door open or closed? . . . Okay.” Bev closed the door and gestured at me to follow her. Her mouth was a straight line, and she might have been holding her breath. She walked briskly out one door, up the locker-lined hallway, and took a left. I nearly ran into her when she stopped abruptly at her classroom door.

She opened it, signaled me to come in, and closed the door loudly behind her. Only then did she expel a long breath and take another one. She moved to the chair behind her desk and sat down hard, then blew out a sigh.

“Um, are you okay?”

“Yes,” she exhaled. “I’m breathing like this to keep from screaming!”

I took a step back. She noticed. “It’s okay.” She motioned like an orchestra conductor signaling the musicians to take it down a notch. “I just found out I have to teach summer school,” she said,

drawing out the *s*-sound through clenched teeth. She tilted her head from side to side and exhaled all in one breath, “I have to teach summer school because Mr. Walden’s incompetent English-teacher-niece, who is not even certified and got her job because of who she is, decided that she would rather go to Europe for two months than teach!”

“Oh.”

“Yeah! So now, instead of getting to spend time with you so that we can get to know each other, I have to teach English II for people who failed it or want to take it in the summer instead of during the school year.” She ran her fingers through her hair and frowned.

“You can do that here? I mean, you can take a class during the summer to get ahead for the next year?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Well, I’d like to take English II. I love reading and writing. I mean, that’s what it is, right?”

“Reading and writing about literature. We read a novel and the students write responsively about what they read. Are you serious, you’d like to take the class?”

“If it’s okay, I would.”

“Let’s talk to your dad first and see where we are as far as enrolling you in school. I mean, we don’t know if you’ll be going back to Northside, right?”

The punched-in-the-gut feeling hit me so hard that it took my breath away. Bev must have read my face, because she sprang out of her chair lightning-fast and came over to me.

“Oh, honey, I’m not saying I want you to go back there. I don’t. *We* don’t! Your dad and I want to keep you with us. We want you to be safe, sweetie, we—”

I started crying, and I don’t mean sniffing, I mean sobbing. Standing in Bev’s classroom with textbooks stacked all around us and the desks in a jumbled mess, I lost it.

“Come here, Ash,” Bev said. “Let me hold you.”

I wrapped my arms around myself but didn’t move toward her. Bev met me where I was, embraced me, and rocked me while she rubbed my back.

“It’s going to be okay, sweetie, I promise,” she crooned.

“I’m so mixed up.” I backed away from her and practically fell into a student chair. Without even thinking about it, I started using my finger to trace the lines carved into the desk. Immediately the lines took on the shape of human legs and feet, and I began to imagine they were running across the desk as I traced them.

I sobbed, “I don’t know why my mom won’t believe that Charlie did that stuff to me.” Huge teardrops created puddles on the desk .

“I know, honey. I know.” Bev bent over me, her chin resting on my head. “This situation sucks. It’s horrible that you’ve been through what you have. Things are going to get better now.”

I put my head down on the desk and Bev stood silently beside me, rubbing my shoulders until I was out of tears. She retrieved a box of tissues from her desk and set it in front of me. I sat up and blew my nose, dried my eyes, and realized I was exhausted.

“Bev, I’m too tired to go buy clothes today. I’m sorry, but I don’t even know if I can think enough to make choices. I really just want to go to sleep.”

“Okay, Ash. If it’s all right with you, I can pick up some basic t-shirts and shorts for you until you feel like going out to pick out your own clothes. What size are you, about a six?”

I nodded, feeling even more like a small child than when Bev put Bactine on my nose.

A lost child.



Driving away from the school, we passed two men: one short,

one tall, both with shaved heads.

“Well, there’s Gabe Brown, and he’s with Billy Ray. Marvella’s not going to be happy about that. Gabe, the shorter one, has been a follower his whole life. He dropped out of high school in tenth grade and spent the next three years on her sofa. She told him to get off the couch, so he drifted from job-to-job, took up drinking, even disappeared for about six months. The big guy is Billy Ray Sublett. He’s bad news. Marvella’s out of her mind with worry that he’s got Gabe mixed up with the K.K.K.”

“The what?”

“The Ku Klux Klan. East Texas is kind of a holdover from the bad old days. It’s not everyone, but there’s a White Power presence here. They were in the news just last week, leaving recruitment letters on people’s front doors.”

“Oh.”

Gabe and Billy Ray were headed toward the Dairy Queen parking lot. Bev turned her red Ford Focus into the restaurant’s parking lot. “I see your dad’s already here. Let’s stop in and see him, okay?”

We parked and walked in. The restaurant reeked of cigarette smoke. I covered my nose and mouth with my hand.

David and Ben stood in line with a guy who looked like an older, heavier version of my father, and a boy wearing a ball cap that sat low over his eyes.

“Is that her?” the boy asked Ben.

“Duh, who do you think it is?” Ben glanced at me then turned to stare at the menu hanging from the ceiling.

The boy in the cap answered by slugging Ben on the shoulder, and Ben elbowed him without turning around.

“Boys,” David warned. He smiled and put his arm around Bev. “I figured you and Ashley would be halfway to Tyler by now.”

“Slight change of plans. I think we’ll do it another day.” Bev slipped her arm around his waist. I started to remove my hand from

my nose, caught another whiff of cigarettes, and quickly covered it again.

“Is everything all right?” David looked at me worriedly.

Bev answered, “Yeah, I’ll tell you about it later. Hey, Frank. Hey, boys.”

“Frank, Steven, this is my daughter, Ashley. Ashley, this is your Uncle Frank and your cousin Steven.” David put his arm over my shoulders. I cringed and he pulled his arm away.

“Hey, Ash, nice to meet you. Well, actually, we *have* met before, but I doubt you remember it, seeing as how you couldn’t even crawl yet.” Frank smiled and extended his large calloused hand to me. I took it with my left hand—my right hand was still blocking the gross smell. “Like David said, this is your hard-headed cousin, Steven.” He pulled off Steven’s ball cap and ruffled his white-blonde hair.

I looked at the floor and said, “Nice to meet you.”

“Is she blind or something?” Steven asked Ben.

Frank thumped Steven on the back of the head and Steven said, “Why’d you do that? Jeez!”

“Are y’all hungry? I’m buying. Best deal you’ll find all day,” said David.

“I could go for some food. Do you want something, Ashley?” Bev asked.

“I guess. Yeah.” I continued to stare at the flecked pattern of the linoleum floor.

“Hey, Ms. Asher,” said a voice from behind us.

Bev turned to it. “Hello, Gabe. I just saw your mother. She wondered where you were.”

I glanced back and saw that Gabe had little knicks all over his head, like he had cut himself shaving.

Billy Ray snorted. “Gabe’s a big boy. He don’t have to answer to his mama.”

David shot a look at Billy Ray.

“You got a problem?” Billy Ray challenged.

David smiled. “Nope. Do you?”

The man answered his question with another one. “Hey, you’re a mechanic, right? You want to know how to make some big money? You want to join my racing team?”

David shook his head as if the guy wasn’t making sense. “What are you *talking* about?”

“Never mind. You don’t have what it takes to be on my pit crew,” Billy Ray snorted.

“Racing team, huh? Hmm,” David smiled.

“Really, Ms. Asher? Mama was asking about me?” Gabe squeezed a pimple on his chin. I grimaced behind my hand and turned away.

“May I take your order?” the teenage girl behind the counter asked. Billy Ray and Gabe started arguing.

“I just don’t want her to be mad at me again, Billy Ray! You don’t know what it’s like when she’s mad!”

“Dammit, Gabe, you got more important things to do than planting flowers.”

“I know, I know, it’s like they said last night at the meeting—“

“Shut up! You know that you’re not supposed to talk about any of that!”

“Oh, yeah. . . Sorry.”

David’s phone rang. “This is David.” Covering the mouthpiece, he told us, “It’s A.J., the caseworker. I’m going to step outside. Be right back.”



“Hey! . . . Hey!” A young black man in a Dallas Mavericks jersey and a Texas Rangers ball cap waved and called to David from across the street. David pointed at the phone and shook his head, but the young man kept waving and yelling, “Hey!”

“Could you hold on a minute, A.J.?” David put the phone

against his chest and yelled, “Hey, Jasper! I’m on the phone, okay?”

Jasper smiled broadly, waved, and went on his way.

David asked A.J. to repeat what she’d just told him and as he listened, his eyes grew huge. “So, what you’re telling me is, they’re not filing charges at all? How the hell...?”

A.J. replied, “Mr. Asher, this is what I’m saying: while the physical exam revealed evidence of tears and deep tissue bruising indicating a rape, lab tests revealed no evidence of bodily fluids. Scrapings of Ashley’s fingernails indicate no evidence that she tried to fight off an attacker by scratching him, and Mr. Baker’s body showed no signs of scratches or other defensive wounds.”

David’s voice rose. “Well, couldn’t that be because she didn’t get a chance to fight him off?”

“Please, Mr. Asher, let me finish.”

“I mean, it’s not that I want her to have been raped.” David took a calming breath.

“I know, I know where you’re coming from, Mr. Asher. But the problem is, it’s Ashley’s word against Mr. Baker’s. There are no siblings in the home to corroborate her accusations, and her own mother says she has been sexually active with several boys. We have to consider the possibility that the tissue damage could have been caused by rough sex.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Stop right there. So, even though my fifteen-year-old daughter is the victim of abuse and neglect, her word is no good? What the fuck?”

“Please, Mr. Asher, don’t become verbally abusive with me. Your ex-wife has told me about your temper, and I must admit, it concerns me. Even though you *claim* to be rehabilitated. . .”

“Are you kidding me, A.J.? We haven’t lived together in fifteen years. Cheryl doesn’t know me any better than you do.”

“Look, I’m not on anyone’s side here.”

He snapped, “You’re damned right you’re not. And you should

be on just one person’s side in all this: Ashley’s.”

“I assure you, Mr. Asher: C.P.S. is committed to the utmost safety and well-being of all children.”

“Yeah? Is that right, A.J.? Because what I hear you saying is that my daughter can be manhandled and raped by that animal while her mother doesn’t do a goddamned thing, and now C.P.S. is saying... what? What are you saying, exactly?”

“I’m saying, quite simply, that no criminal charges are forthcoming, due to lack of evidence. With regard to Ashley’s current placement, we are in discussions with Mrs. Baker about retur—”

“You can stop right there, because Ashley’s current placement is permanent. She is not going back to her mother. What’s it going to take to convince you of that?”

“A psychological evaluation would be helpful. If, in the opinion of a licensed psychologist, it would be harmful for Ashley to return to Mr. and Mrs. Baker’s home, that would go far to show a judge that remaining with you is in Ashley’s best interest. In addition, since she’s fifteen, Ashley’s opinion about which parent she would like to live with is given greater weight, as long as there are not substance abuse issues in the home of the desired parent.”

“Okay, when can we have a psych exam done, and who’s going to do it?” David cradled the phone between his cheek and shoulder then whipped out a small notepad and pen from his back pocket.

“I can email a list of psychologists we work with routinely, whom we and the courts have found reliable and entirely objective. I must warn you that it might be a week or two before a doctor can see her. I assume the email address on your business card is current?”

“Yeah, so then what?”

“After the doctor gives us his report, we will bring it to the table for consideration, should we need a placement hearing. Of course, ideally, you and your ex-wife can come to your own custody agreement.”

“A.J.?”

“Yes, Mr. Asher?”

“I need you to hear me loud and clear. I’m going to tell you this once. You might want to write this down so you don’t forget.”

A.J.’s voice was flat. “I’ve taken notes throughout our conversation, Mr. Asher.”

“That’s great. Here goes: I was not there for Ashley when she was a baby. Hell, I wasn’t there for her until you called me to come get her because her stepdaddy has used her to satisfy his sickness since she was a little girl.”

“The point remains that we could not find conclusive evidence—”

“I’m not letting my daughter down again. I won’t turn my back on her. So, you people can say whatever you want about discussions with her mother about returning her to that hellhole. But if it costs me everything I have, I will fight for Ashley’s right to life as a whole person, not a victim. And you can pass this on to her mother the next time you talk to her. Ashley *is* home. In Patience.”

“I’ll email that list of psychologists as soon as we hang up.”

“You do that.” David pressed End, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. He closed his eyes for a moment, envisioned a calm, picturesque lake, and turned to go back into the Dairy Queen.



“ . . . So now I have to teach summer school, thanks to Walden’s niece. I’d be surprised if she can find Europe on a globe.”

“What’s up, Bev?” David stood behind Bev’s chair. His meal had been bagged to go.

“I was telling Frank and the boys about Mr. Walden informing me that I’ll be teaching English II. Monday’s Memorial Day, so summer school starts Tuesday.”

“Are you okay with that?” David asked.

“Not really. The good thing, though, is that his airhead niece, Tiffany, hadn’t planned any sort of curriculum for the six-week course. He said that when he asked her where the lesson plans were for summer school, she said, ‘Oh, I needed lesson plans?’”

Frank sounded skeptical. “You think that that’s a *good* thing? Aren’t you going to be scrambling to pull something together?”

“It works out well for me, because I have the freedom to choose the novel I’d like to teach. Tiffany didn’t plan ahead, so no materials were ordered for Walden to insist that I use. Luckily, I’ve been teaching so long that I own class sets of novels that I love, and I have a toolbox of how to teach them right here.” Bev tapped the side of her head.

“David. I mean, D–dad . . .” I stammered.

He gave a little smile. “Ashley, it’s cool with me if you call me David. I understand if it’s weird for you to say *Dad*, okay? You call me whatever you’re comfortable with.”

Ben snorted, “Oh, can I do that too? I’ve got some names I’d like to try out!” Steven whispered in Ben’s ear, and both boys exploded with laughter.

David and Bev shot them simultaneous dirty looks.

“Never mind.” Ben moved to the trashcan to dump his tray. Steven pulled his hat down over his eyes, tilted his head back and worked his eyes side to side.

I traced a cigarette burn on the table. “What I wanted to ask, uh, you, is, do you think I could maybe be in Bev’s class, too? I really like reading and writing, and I’d like to get ahead in my sophomore year.”

David shrugged. “I think it would be okay. What do you think, Bev?”

“Oh, it’d be great, I just wasn’t sure—”

“What?”

Bev sighed. “I wasn’t sure how it would work as far as your custody agreement. Do you think there will be a problem with enrolling her in school?”

“No, I don’t think it’ll be a problem at all. Stop by the shop on your way back, okay? A.J.’s emailing some information. I’ll fill you in later.”

“Are you coming, Ashley?” Ben called from the door of the Dairy Queen.

“Yeah, want to ride in the service truck with me and Ben?” Steven swung his ball cap at a fly on the door and was nearly flattened when a tall bald guy kicked the front door open, followed by two more men with shaved heads.

“Hey!” Steven caught his balance against the trashcan.

The guys slid into a booth with Billy Ray and Gabe, and the oldest-looking of the three loudly said, “Did you see that nigger walking by here just now? That boy thinks he’s in the damned NBA, don’t he? Somebody needs to teach him a lesson about being big for his britches.”

David said sharply, “Excuse me, but I don’t appreciate your language or your message.”

The speaker started to get up but stopped when David crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side, his mouth a straight line.

Billy Ray slammed his hand on his table and snapped, “*It’s a free country.*” His tablemates looked uneasy.

David shook his head slowly and frowned at them.

Frank leaned into David and murmured, “Let them be. They’re not worth the trouble. Just relax.”

I slid my tray into the flipping door of the trashcan to dump most of my lunch. My thoughts were sluggish, and my body felt as if it was disconnected from my head. Something about those words: *Just relax. . .*

“Is she okay, Dad?” Ben sounded far away.

“I’ll check, Ben. You and Steven ride with Frank, okay? I’ll catch a ride with your mom.” David came from behind me and touched my elbow.

I jumped, cried out, and the tray fell into the trashcan.

“Oh, no!” I reached inside for it. The door closed on my arm and I stood, statue-like, as my mind replayed Charlie flipping me onto my stomach, breathing heavily, “Just relax.”

At that moment, it was as if Charlie was there, right behind me, and—

“Hey!” David said softly, and I jumped again. “Ashley...” he whispered, bent down, and put his face in mine. “Are you okay, honey?”

He gently pulled my arm back from the trashcan, and I gasped when I saw sticky red stuff on my forearm. My legs gave out and I sat on the floor near the front door of the restaurant. That Friday night—blood below my waist—and a sense of horror seemed to be smothering the life out of me.

“David? What’s going on? Oh, my God!” Bev’s voice sounded like she was inside a seashell, cushioned by “*Whoosh.*”

“It’s ketchup, Bev... Ashley? Bev’s going to take you to the bathroom to wash up, and then we’ll go home, all right? Can you do that, sweetie?”

David put his hands under my arms, lifted me, and walked me over to Bev. I felt people staring as he half-carried me, holding my arm away from my body so I wouldn’t get ketchup on my clothes.

“What’s wrong with her?” a lady whispered.

“Probably drugs,” the man next to her answered, not even trying to whisper.

When we emerged from the ladies’ room a few moments later, David was sitting at our table with his head in his hands.

“David?” Bev called.

He looked up, then stood. “Y’all ready to go?” His voice was shaky.

I could feel people’s eyes on me, and I wanted to vanish on the spot. David started to reach for me but stopped. He pursed his lips then said, “Ashley, I promise you. . .” He turned away from me and when he looked back, his eyes were glistening. “I’m not going to let

you down anymore.”

I tried to swallow past the lump in my throat; tried to say something, anything, but I couldn't. “*Whoosh*” was quieter, but I could not get my body to stop shaking.

CHAPTER SIX

That Saturday, I got a card in the mail from my mom. It had a picture on the front that looked like a little kid drew it with crayons. It showed a girl flying a kite, and the kite was a heart flying through clouds. On the outside, it said, “*Just thinking of you,*” and on the inside it said, “*And wishing you were here.*” Below the printed message, Mom's flowery handwriting read,

Ashley Nicole,

Charlie and I miss you so much. Please come home so that we can be a family again. We can have a fresh start. I love you.

Love,

Mom

I felt so light and happy inside, because my mom really did love me; she must, because she missed me and wanted me back. But then I felt kind of sick, because when I was living with her, things were so bad for me. Did she believe me now?

Mr. Walden let Bev and David enroll me in summer school, but he said that if anybody kicked up a fuss about the custody thing, he was going to act like he didn't know anything about it. Bev offered to let him talk to A.J., but he waved his hand at her to get out of his office.

A.J. called me. “I think it would be a very positive thing for you to be engaged in normalcy while we're waiting for the appointment with the psychologist to come through.” *Engaged in normalcy?* Do

people really talk like that?



Early the first morning of summer school, Bev and I pulled into the Patience High School parking lot and unloaded her teaching supplies.

“Could you grab the last box?” Bev’s arms were full and she nodded toward a box of paperback novels. A bicyclist was featured on the cover, the title *Ironman* above the picture.

“Chris Crutcher,” I read aloud. “Is he a good writer?”

“He’s awesome. He writes stories that are fantastic for kids who don’t like to read.”

I frowned. “But I like to read.”

“Yeah, but the kids that’ll be in this class who *don’t* like to read will be a lot harder to sell a novel study than those of you who are taking it to work ahead. You’ll love this book, too. Trust me.”

We entered the building and turned up the hallway to Bev’s classroom. A girl was sleeping on the floor outside the classroom door. She jolted awake at Bev’s voice.

“Hey, good morning,” Bev said.

The girl sat up and looked around as if she had no idea where she was. I noticed that she had a jagged scar cutting diagonally from the left side of her upper lip, across her lips, and then sideways and down across her cheek and jaw on the right side of her face.

“Are you here for English II?” Bev unlocked her door and flipped on the lights.

The girl stood and the top of her head only came up to my armpits. Her clothes were really worn out, and I wondered if she knew that her bra could be seen through her shirt.

The girl seemed shy. “Yeah. I hope it’s okay that I’m here early. My mom had to drop me off on her way to work.”

“Sure, it’s no problem. You can help us set up,” Bev smiled at

her. “What’s your name?”

“Roxanne Blake.”

“Roxanne, I’m Mrs. Asher, and this is my stepdaughter, Ashley. She’ll be in this class, too. Are you taking the class to get ahead, sweetie?”

Roxanne blushed and looked away. “No, ma’am. I failed it last year. I missed a lot of English classes and got behind.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. Most of the class is going to be guys, so I know that Ash will appreciate having another girl to hang out with. Hey, how about you two straighten the desks into rows, tidy the book cases, and put my stool by the door with these surveys on it?” Bev tucked her hair behind her ear and moved to erase the board. “There’s so much to do! Maybe I should have come up here yesterday. . .”

“Excuse me, is this English II?” The high voice came from a boulder of a boy who filled the doorway. He wore a Dallas Cowboys jersey, faded jeans, and black flip-flops. He looked like the entire defensive line of the football team. He had a chubby baby face with big blue eyes and barely-there blonde hair.

A wiry boy with a sharp nose and gelled, spiky black hair emerged from between the hulking guy and the doorframe. The smaller of the two wore a black t-shirt with a lightning bolt on it, denim cargo shorts, and black high-tops. “No shit it’s English II, Widetrack.”

Bev snapped, “Excuse me?”

“Oh, shit, I mean . . .” The smaller boy smiled, showed all his teeth, and over-pronounced each syllable: “Hey, Miss. No offense. I was just telling Widetrack that we find ourselves in the correct room assignment.”

“And your name is?” Bev didn’t acknowledge his attempt to charm her as she looked down at the roster on her clipboard.

Fast-Talker pointed to himself first, then his friend. “*Mi llamo* Dub White, and this here’s *mi compadre*, Kevin Cooper, a.k.a.

Widetrack.”

Bev frowned. “Hmm. Says *here* that your name’s *Wilbur*...” She looked up from her roster and raised her eyebrows along with the corners of her mouth.

Dub blushed. “I—I go by Dub, okay?”

Bev shrugged. “Okay, guys, pick up a reading survey from the stool, be seated, and fill it out.” She strode to her desk and dug through papers on it while muttering under her breath. “Mrs. Asher? May I see you a moment?” A tall, athletic man dressed in a Kelly green and white shirt and matching shorts stood just inside Bev’s door with his arm around a kid who was obviously his son. The kid was even dressed in the same style and color shirt and coach’s shorts.

“How are you, Mr. Griffin?” Bev greeted the man.

“Mrs. Asher, this is my son, T.W. He’s an incoming freshman who tested out of English I. Walden gave permission for him to take English II in summer school.”

“Hi, T.W. Happy to meet you. Is there anything else you needed, Mr. Griffin?”

“That’s *Coach* Griffin, Ms. Asher.” The man’s voice had an edge to it.

“Right. *Coach* Griffin. If you don’t mind, I’m trying to get ready before the rest of the students arrive.”

“I want to make sure T.W. knows that we—you and I—are going to be keeping in touch throughout this course. I want a weekly progress report on his work. He knows this, but I will tell you as well: I expect him to be the top student in this class at all times.”

Bev narrowed her eyes. “Well, Mr.—*Coach*—Griffin, I’m actually more interested in T.W. doing *his* personal best. He’s not competing with anyone. It’s about learning and the application of knowledge, not competition.”

“Everything is about competition, Ms. Asher. *Everything*. Anyone who tells himself otherwise is a damned fool. T.W. is not like other students. He’s a gifted running back and scholar as well. Our

intention is for him to graduate two years early and head off to play ball for U.T. Austin. It’s what I—I mean we— want. Isn’t that right, son?”

“Sure, Dad.” The boy stared straight ahead but didn’t look like he was really seeing anything.

“Well, T.W., pick up a survey and be seated.”

T.W. trudged free of his father’s grasp as if his feet were in concrete boots.

“I’ll be in touch, Mrs. Asher,” Coach Griffin warned, then left without waiting for an answer.



Bev was introducing herself to the class when a black girl wearing wire-rimmed glasses, a tight sleeveless shirt, and a short denim skirt shuffled in. Her long beaded braids rattled softly when she walked, and she was built like solid rock. Pink, flower-topped flip-flops never lifted from the floor when she walked.

“Good morning. Are you here for English II?” Bev glanced at the clock above the whiteboard.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry I’m late. I thought class started at eight-thirty.” She stood very straight and did not divert her eyes from Bev’s.

“Nope, it starts at eight. What’s your name?”

“Zaquoiah Freeman. But you can call me Z.Z.”

“Hi, Z.Z., I’m Mrs. Asher. I don’t see your name on my roster. Did you register late?”

“I just moved here from Nacogdoches, and my granny signed me up for school on Friday.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s cool. What’s your granny’s name?”

“Aurelia Freeman. She lives in the—”

“I know her! She’s awesome. Y’all live in the Mason mansion, right? That’s a beautiful place. I know your cousin Jasper, too.”

“Is he that weirdo who’s always wearing a Dallas Mavericks jersey, walking up and down Main Street waving at people?” Dub asked. He crossed his eyes and waved. “Uuuuuh-duuuuh, my name’s—uuuuuuuuuh--Jasper, and I’m uhhhhhhhhh weirdo.”

Bev’s voice was sharp. “Stop it! Now!”

Z.Z. worked her neck. “For your information, Jasper *isn’t* a weirdo. He has some problems from a car accident that happened when he was a baby. He sees the world like he’s six years old.” She put her hands on her hips and leaned forward at the waist. “What’s *your* excuse?”

Dub stammered, “I—I just don’t think it’s right that y’all live in that big ole mansion, when ya’ll didn’t do anything to earn it.”

Z.Z.’s lids lowered about halfway, and she set her jaw. “Not that it’s any of your business, but Eula Mason left my granny that house because she and Great-Granny worked for her family, and Eula *loved* them like family. My family treated her better than her *own* family did.

Dub cut her off. “Yeah, ’cause Eula was a *nigger* lover—”

Bev cut him off. “Dub! That is *enough!* I will *not* tolerate racial slurs!” She turned her attention back to Z.Z. “I apologize for his behavior. *Please* don’t assume that everyone in Patience is—” she shot lasers at Dub “— like *him.*” She handed Zaquoiah a survey. “Please have a seat, and we’ll get started.”

Bev addressed the class. “Welcome to English II, summer school style. Over the next several weeks, we’re going to read *Ironman*, a book by Chris Crutcher. The objective of the class, according to the district’s guidelines for English II, is that you read and respond to literature in a critical way. You will go above and beyond the standardized test-type questions that you were subjected to in English I.

“In terms of my expectations for you, it is my goal that by the time you complete this course, you will know how to write an essay that communicates how you relate to *Ironman*. I hope that you will

also know yourself better because of your journey through this book. This class, you should know, is a *quest for truth.*” She placed the novel on her desk. “I’ll give you a few more minutes to complete your reading surveys before I begin instruction.”

A tall Latino guy in a maroon shirt and khakis burst into the room. “Sorry I’m late, Miss!” He slid into a seat near the door, yawned, and stretched his arms over his head. “I had to work from eleven last night to eight this morning, restocking at the grocery store.” He had a peach-fuzzy black moustache and a large number three tattooed on his right forearm.

“Well, the important thing is, you’re here now. I’m guessing you’re Hector Alvarez, Jr.? You’re my only no-show. Or were.”

“Yeah, that’s me, but I go by Junior.” He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

“Welcome, Junior.” Bev handed him a survey. “Fill this out, and we’ll talk about it in a second.”

Dub held up his survey. “What’s this, question, Miss? ‘*How often do you read? What do you like to read? What’s the best book you’ve ever read?*’ . . . This is easy: *Never, nothing, and nothing.*” He folded the survey into a paper airplane and sent it sailing toward Bev. She ignored it.

“Is this for a grade?” T.W. asked.

“No,” Bev replied.

“Then what’s the sense in doing it? It’s a waste of time.”

He rose to return the paper to her, but her mouth was a straight line and her tone was no-nonsense: “Sit down, T.W. And, Dub, before you leave today, you will pick up every speck of paper, lint, and dust off my floor.”

Dub sighed loudly, swiped at an imaginary target, and dramatically threw himself back in his chair. “That’s whack, Miss.”

Bev arched an eyebrow his way. “Thank you for your feedback. Does anyone need more time?”

Roxanne shakily raised her hand. “How long do our answers

have to be?”

“However long they need to be for me to understand how often you read, what you like to read, and the best book you’ve ever read.”

“How long do our *answers* have to be?” Dub mocked. “I’ll bet when Dr. Frankenstein finished sewing up your face, he realized he left your brain on the table.”

“Dub, cut it out, man,” Kevin said quietly from the seat behind his friend.

“Stay out of it, Widetrack. Hey, *Roxanne*, when you look in the mirror, does it crack just like your face?”

Roxanne stared at her desk, her fists clenched.

“Wilbur White, get out! Out! Now!” Bev jabbed her finger at the door and walked toward him. I was frozen to my seat because she looked so angry, I thought she might tear his head off and send it out to the hall like a bowling ball.

“What?” Dub held his hands up in mock innocence. “What did I do? It’s a free country, you know. What happened to my First Amendment rights?”

“*Now!*” Bev stood by the door and jerked her head toward the hallway. “Get moving or I’ll have you removed!”

Dub took his time getting up out of his seat, but he finally went to the hallway. Bev followed him out and closed the door to the classroom. I could hear her voice rising and falling.

I gave a hateful warning glare to the boys and went over to Roxanne, who had her head down on her desk. T.W. had a little smirk on his face. It faded away under my evil eye.

I gently placed my hand on Roxanne’s shoulder and spoke quietly. “Are you okay?”

She nodded and whispered, “Leave me alone.”

“Yeah, I understand. I’m right here behind you, okay?”

Dub returned to the classroom with his head bowed. He had a choice: apologize for his behavior or be dismissed from English II

on the first day of class and repeat it in the regular school year.

He cleared his throat and made a face at Bev.

“Get cracking, Wilbur,” she snapped. “You’re wasting my teaching time, and we have a lot to do. This is your last chance to stay in this class.” She punctuated her statement with a chilling look that could have peeled the paint off the walls.

“All right, all right.” He sighed heavily and stared at the floor so intently that he seemed to be trying to burn a hole through it with his eyes. “Roxanne—and Z.Z.—I apologize for being rude. It was inap—inappro—”

“Inappropriate,” Bev said.

He hyper-pronounced the word: “In-ap-pro-pri-ate, and I was out of line. I am sorry.” He worked his neck at Bev and mouthed, “Are you happy now?” Bev gave a curt nod, and he returned to his seat.

Z.Z.’s flower-topped flip-flops were bouncing; she was clearly still pissed. Roxanne stared at her desktop.

“*Moving on. . .*” Bev began distributing the novels. “Chris Crutcher is an author who is unafraid to write the truth. We’re going to examine our own truths as we explore the issues of anger, respect, fear, and responsibility in his book, *Ironman*.”



Bev and I returned home and found a big cardboard box addressed to me on the front porch.

We dragged it inside. My mom sent my clothes. Sort of. They were mine, I mean, she gave them to me to wear and everything, but she rarely bought me new clothes. She gave me her stuff, especially her nightgowns and underwear. It was the really itchy, lacy stuff, too.

Bev’s eyes got really big when she saw the underwear spread out all over the top of the clothes. “These are your clothes, Ashley?”

You. . . wear that stuff?"

My heart raced and shame washed over me. "No, I mean, well, yeah, I mean . . . I'm sorry you went and spent money on new clothes for me. I didn't know she'd be sending these."

I wanted to crawl into the wardrobe and curl into a ball.



I'd been so excited on Saturday when Bev took me shopping for clothes that were brand new, bought just for me! I'm sure she thought I was crazy, dancing around in the Junior department with the pajamas, t-shirts, and shorts, rubbing the soft fabric on my face. She even bought me the kind of soft cotton underwear with the days of the week on the waistband! I always wanted those! *But. . . Mom sent my old clothes, and. . . at least I hadn't taken all the tags off my new clothes yet, so Bev could get her money back, and . . .*

I jumped when Bev touched my arm. She spoke in a quiet, measured tone. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, honey, but those clothes your mom sent are really, really, um . . . worn out. It's your choice to wear them—or not—but you should know that you don't have to."

I whispered, "I don't want these clothes at all. I don't even want to look at them. Can you just make them disappear?"

I instantly felt guilty for not wanting what my mother took the trouble to send me. Charlie's voice echoed in my mind: "*You're an ungrateful little bitch. You don't appreciate anything.*" My mind was swirling, and I leaned against the back of the sofa.

"Sure, sweetie. Don't worry about it," Bev said.

The guilt didn't last long. I was just so content every time I put on one of my new pajama sets instead of one of my mom's see-through baby doll nightgowns, I didn't feel so bad about Bev spending money on me.

The next day, we arrived home to find the answering machine

full of messages.

BEEP.

"Ashley? It's Mama. Did you get the clothes I sent? When you get them, be sure to call, because it cost *a lot* of money for me to mail them to you . . . Honey, Charlie is *so sorry* that he said he wanted you to leave. He misses you and thinks of you as his own daughter. He's been more of a daddy to you than David ever has been. Don't you feel any loyalty to Charlie at all? You're breaking our hearts, baby."

BEEP.

"David, I called a counselor. We have an appointment for tomorrow for Charlie, Ashley, and me to work on healing our family. Please call me so that I know when to expect my daughter home. The appointment is tomorrow in LaSalle at 5 p.m., so she needs to be home by 4:00. Call me."

BEEP.

"I don't know why you're not returning my calls. Ashley is *my* daughter, and I expect you to call me back. I know Ashley got the clothes, because I had Delivery Confirmation. Why isn't she calling me to thank me for sending them? . . . Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? I *know* you're there. Pick up! *Pick up* the phone!... Hello?"



Over the next week, I received a card a day from my mom. They all said the same thing: "*I miss you; I want you to come home. I miss my big girl and I need her here with me.*"

It felt good to have my mom miss me so much, but I wondered why I was so important to her now when I wasn't that important to her when I told her what Charlie did to me.

I missed Nanny, too, and when I saw a letter from her in the mailbox, I snatched it out and was immediately soothed by the smell of *Estée*, the perfume she always wears. I don't think I touched ground

from the mailbox to the front door, holding that envelope to my nose and feeling as if Nanny was hugging me tight. I stepped just inside the front door and opened the letter.

Ashley:

Your grandfather and I are absolutely devastated that you would say such vicious things about your mother and stepfather. I insist that you take back the lies you have told and immediately return home to your mother. You have broken her and Charlie's hearts, to say nothing of how much you have disappointed and embarrassed us.

I'm sure my heart stopped beating altogether. That's what it does when it's breaking, right?

If you do not return home immediately, Papaw and I will never buy you another gift as long as we live. Furthermore, we will instruct our lawyer to remove your name from our wills. This is for your own good, young lady. You must be forced to see the family you are sacrificing because of some wild idea you probably read about in a book or saw in one of those Rated R movies. You are not poor white trash, so stop acting like it. I shudder to think what will be left of your proper upbringing if you remain in that socially backward Hooterville of a place your father lives.

"Ashley? Are you all right, honey?" Bev stopped washing dishes and turned off the faucet. I didn't answer. I couldn't take my eyes off Nanny's words, and a suffocating emptiness made it impossible to breathe.

Teenage rebellion is one thing, Ashley. Libelous charges against the only father you have ever known are quite another. You should consider yourself fortunate that any of us are willing to take you back after what you have done.

I do love you.

Nanny

"Are you okay? Honey, you don't look well." Bev stepped toward me, but I backed away. I was breaking into tiny shards of glass and

dissolving into sand. It was just like when I read the note my mom had written on my lunch napkin.

When I popped back into awareness, my face was throbbing and my fingertips felt warm and wet. I was inside my wardrobe, staring at my hands, and I was surprised that Nanny's letter wasn't still between my fingers.

TAP-TAP-TAP.

Apparently I'd closed my door when I'd gone to my room. The wardrobe door opened slowly, and Bev leaned in. I turned my face to the back wall of the dresser.

"Ashley? . . . Honey, I read the letter your grandmother sent you. Don't pay attention to her. She doesn't know what she's talking about. She must not know the whole story. Can you hear me? Will you look at me, please?"

I turned to face her and she gasped.

"What's going on, Mom?" Ben asked from the doorway. "Why's she sitting in there like that? . . . Is that . . . blood on her face?"

"Ben, please go call your dad. Tell him we need him here."

"Bev?" My voice sounded like it was coming from someone else.

"Yeah, Ash?"

"Could you close the door, please?"

She did as I asked, and I was covered in darkness again.

Bev's voice through the wardrobe door: "Ben gone to Frank's?"

I heard David's low reply, but I couldn't make out his answer. Her voice was tight. "Probably a good idea . . . I hope he doesn't

feel that we're pushing him away."

David again, closer now: "Frank and I talked about it. I'll tell you later." He opened the wardrobe door all the way and spoke softly. "Hey, girl, looks like you did a job on your face. Come on out of there and we'll get you cleaned up."

I didn't move. I wanted to do as David asked, but I was so lost inside myself that I couldn't even show him that I heard him. And . . . I felt so confused. *I know the truth* about Mom and Charlie, but there's this, like, huge collision, like when the universe formed from an explosion of stars. There's *what I know*, and there's what Nanny said to me in the letter, and . . . I can't stay around when the crashing happens. I have to get away, get inside myself so deeply that no one can touch me, even though they can.

It's hard to explain.

I know I have problems in my head. I mean, I really don't think normal people go crawling into a piece of furniture or sleep in a closet. But what if Mom and Charlie are right, and I *am* crazy, like those people who hear voices or have five different personalities? Would a person who could tell real life from dreams do the weirdo stuff I do?

David finally scooped me out of the wardrobe, and when he picked me up, I thought he was Charlie. I kicked my legs, clawed at him, looked right through him. I even screamed, "No! No, Charlie, no! Mama! Mama!" I never hollered at Charlie like that, and I could never find my voice to call my mother when it was happening for real.

David panicked. "Bev, we've got to get her some help. We need to have the psychological evaluation done anyway, but we can't wait for C.P.S.'s shrink. Ashley's going to need a lot more than you and I can give her."



I don't know what made me snap out of it, but when I did, I was

sitting in the rocker in the kitchen. The hair around my face was damp where my wounds had been washed. I gingerly touched my cheek and discovered there was ointment on the long painful scratches. I looked at my hands and there was blood under my nails. I slowly raised my head and watched David and Bev at the kitchen table, about two feet away from me. I couldn't catch everything they said, but I got some of it.

Bev frowned as she shuffled through a stack of papers. "Hand me that insurance booklet, would you, honey? I'm trying to see if any of the doctors on the caseworker's list are on our plan . . . What's our deductible again?"

"I'm looking for it . . . Here . . . says they pay eighty percent for outpatient therapy. That's pretty good, right?" David ran his hands through his hair.

Bev nodded and jotted some notes on a yellow notepad. ". . . Yeah, so how much of that would they cover if she has to do in-patient?"

"I don't care what it costs. We have that money in savings from when I scrapped out all that metal. A few thousand dollars, at least. And I can always ask Frank for a loan from the business, or we could use the house as collateral for a loan, I guess, but . . ."

Seeing the worry on their faces, I was covered in guilt. They had this normal quiet life going on until I came along: a fucked-up freak that they didn't ask for. My thoughts raced until they didn't make any sense, and I shook my head slightly as if that would clear the cobwebs.



I'd spaced out at least once a day since that Friday night Mom left me with Charlie. I went on mini-excursions, completely unaware of my surroundings for God knows how long, then popped back into my life.

And, what about my surroundings? What if Bev and David decided to send me somewhere else? I needed to get the gears moving to hatch an escape plan in my head. But where could I go? I *had* nowhere else to go. Except a foster home. And I'd rather die than have to do that. Actually, I wanted to die no matter what.

I was having those thoughts of hurting myself a lot more—more than scratching my face or arms. I mean, checking out all together. I was even starting to figure out how to do it. When Bev and I drove home from school, sometimes I thought about jumping out of the car and running onto the highway just when an eighteen-wheeler was coming over the hill. I figured that way, I wouldn't feel anything anymore. My mind was constantly spitting out images of knives going into the side of my neck. I'd dug through David and Bev's bathroom drawers looking for prescription bottles, but couldn't find anything stronger than aspirin.

Loki jumped into my lap for the first time since the day he screeched at me and used my nose for target practice. I stroked his fur and whispered, "I hate me, too."

David stretched his arms over his head and leaned back in his chair. "So, they pay seventy percent for in-patient, but only for the first ten days, then it drops to fifty percent up to thirty days, but what if she needs longer—what—?"

Beverly nodded my way and smiled. "Hey, Ash. How are you feeling, baby?"

David turned to face me, and I could see dried blood and a long scratch on his cheek.

When I saw how big his eyes were and how scared he was, I looked away.

His voice was soft. "Want to sit with us?"

Tears filled my eyes and I couldn't talk through the lump in my throat. I pushed Loki off my lap and slid into a chair at the table. "I'm sorry, David. And Bev."

"Why are *you* sorry?" David's dark brows were a straight line.

"I . . . scratched you, and . . . I heard you talking about money and stuff, and . . ." I sobbed, "Please don't make me leave. Please. I'll do better." I gestured to my face. "I won't do this anymore. I'll *make* myself not do it anymore. I-I'll be normal, just like everybody else. Please, *please* give me another chance."

"Ashley, you're not going anywhere, and that's final," Bev put her hand on mine and reached for David's arm with the other. "Tell her, honey."

"Of course you're not leaving. We have a lot of lost time to make up, and we care about you very much. Why the hell would we want you to leave?"

"I'm a . . . mess," I managed to say.

Bev said gently, "Yeah, honey, you *are* a mess. But the answer isn't going to be found inside that wardrobe or wherever it is you go inside your head. Girl, your dad and I are going to find someone to help you so that you can start to feel better and not think that the only way to take care of yourself is to hide."

I pointed to the words *Mental Health Facilities* on the open page of the booklet David had been reading. "Am I going to have to go . . . stay somewhere?"

Bev seemed to choose her words carefully. "I don't know, Ash. I don't think so; but we're going to do whatever is necessary to help you get better."

"But the money," I protested. "I heard you talking about your savings and stuff."

"Hey." David's voice was firm. "Ashley, don't worry about that. That's parent stuff, not kid stuff." Then, in a softer tone, he said, "You are worth whatever it costs to heal your life. Got it?"

I nodded.

"So, Bev, could you call this guy?" David flipped back through the book and circled a name. He's not on A.J.'s list, but he takes our insurance, works with kids, has twenty years' experience and it looks like he's near Palestine. That's not too far. If everything's okay now,

I'm heading back to work. Customers are cryin' for me to finish up their trucks." He bent down and kissed me on the head. "I love you. Remember that." Then he left.

"Want to watch a movie together, Ashley? We can check out what's on TV or go to the movies in Six Shooter City if you want."

She talked to me like I was normal, like I hadn't just demonstrated what a complete psycho I am. It blew my mind. I didn't know how these people could say they love me, because they didn't even know me yet. They didn't know what a piece of shit I am, like Mom and Charlie do. I wished I could feel something besides numbness, but I couldn't. And . . . I didn't say it back to David. Didn't tell him I loved him, too, because I didn't know if I did and, anyway, I figured if I relaxed and started trusting him, he might think it was okay to do the stuff Charlie did to me, and then I'd be back where I started. That was too big a chance to take.



The day before my first therapy appointment, I was in no shape to attend summer school. David and Bev put Ben in charge of keeping me company. He didn't want to, and I didn't blame him.

I tossed my dirty clothes into the hamper in the laundry room and headed down the hall to the kitchen when I heard Bev and Ben talking about me.

"What if she goes crazy again? What am I supposed to do with her?" he asked.

"I don't think she'll do that, Ben. But if she does, just call your dad. We don't expect you to do anything but be good company. And leave your hockey stick in your closet, please."

"Aw, man," he whined.

"Teach her how to play your new video game. Y'all can take turns."

"Can Steven come over, too? I told him what Ash looks like

when she spazzes out and he wants to see."

Bev must have shot him one of her scary "teacher looks," because Ben groaned, "Fine, he won't come over. But it's going to suck, having to teach a space cadet. I'd be surprised if she knows how to turn on the TV."

Ben had nothing to worry about. I couldn't think quickly enough to catch on, and I sat next to him and stared at the TV for three hours straight before falling asleep on the sofa. Ben never noticed, or if he did, he didn't say anything.

I barely slept that night. I tossed and turned, horrified at the idea of talking about what I knew deep inside *had* happened to me, whether my mom believed me or not.

When I got out of bed to get dressed in the morning, I was in full-tilt weirdo mode: silent, staring, spacey, and my shoulders ached from being hunched up, as if I was doing a full-body cringe.

The doctor's office looked like a red brick house in the shadow of a huge pine tree with several smaller pine trees around it.

The sign on the front door read *Piney Woods Psychological—Scott Matthews, Ph.D. and Leslie Trevino, Ph.D.* The waiting room was very homey, like somebody's living room.

A red and white checked sofa and love seat, a couple of chairs, and a kid-sized table painted to look like a dairy cow took up the entire space, which smelled like sugar cookies. Dulcimer music softly played, and a large painting of an old red barn surrounded by rolling fields of bluebonnets hung above the sofa.

A stocky blonde man wearing a rust-colored t-shirt, Wrangler blue jeans, and black cowboy boots walked through the waiting room with an envelope in his hand. He opened the door, deposited the letter in the mailbox on the front porch, and returned, closing the door behind him.

"I'm Scott Matthews." He extended a hand to David and Bev, who stood when they saw him come in.

They exchanged introductions while I remained seated: a lump

of freakiness.

“Ash?” David bent down to me. “Hey, stand up, sweetie.”

Dr. Matthews stopped him. “Maybe it’s better if we talk first. When your wife called, she told me a little about what’s been going on, but I’d like to hear from you about the situation, too.”

“Sure.” David told me, “Stay right here, and I’ll be back to get you in a few minutes.”

I couldn’t feel my head. My mind was looping the memory of running down a long hall, then falling and burning my knees on the carpet. High, hysterical laughter echoed all around me, and I could not, no matter how hard I tried, get away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A sandbox with a shovel and tractors in it, a kid-sized freestanding basketball hoop, a whiteboard with the words, “*How I feel when people are mean like me*” printed on it in big black letters, and a poster depicting different emotions lined one wall of the paneled office. I sat opposite the wall and studied the tops of the closed blinds covering a huge window.

To my right, an overflowing bookcase with a chalkboard easel leaning against it held psychology texts, a big dollhouse, and framed pictures of Dr. Matthews’ family. To my left was his desk—a plank of unfinished oak—and Dr. Matthews, who sat in a high-backed black office chair, watching me survey my surroundings.

“So, how’s it going?” he asked.

I dragged my eyes from the mother and daughter dolls with their arms around each other in the kitchen of the dollhouse. My eyes filled with tears. “Not so good,” I whispered, shaking my head.

“You want to tell me about it?” he asked.

I looked down at my lap. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Why don’t you tell me about what it’s like to live with your dad?”

“It’s okay. I mean, he doesn’t drink like Charlie does. And he’s usually in a good mood instead of being mad all the time. My dad, that is.”

“Who’s mad all the time?”

“Charlie, my stepdad. I do things all the time that make him mad.” I found a point to focus on, just above the doctor’s university diplomas.

“Like what?”

“I forget to thank him for working when he comes home from work, or I cross my arms over my . . . chest, and he gets mad because he says I’m accusing him of looking at me. I shoot my mouth off and say dumb things.” My voice was expressionless; it sounded like the way I felt: an empty jar.

“And then what happens?”

“Well, one time he got really mad and said he wanted to kill us, so we left for a while. We finally came home and he had blocked all the doors and windows with broken furniture.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Me and my mom.”

“Tell me about her,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Tell me about the night you and she left.”

“We drove around. Talked about leaving for good. She kept calling him and he kept hanging up. Or not answering.”

“So, did you and your mom leave for longer than that night?”

“Oh, no. She would never do that. She would never leave Charlie, even . . .” My eyes shifted from the wall above the framed documents and found a place on the floor by the sandbox to focus on.

“Even what, Ashley?”

“Even if she knew what he did to me.” I grimaced and hugged myself tight.

His voice was gentle. “Does your mom know what Charlie did to you?”

“Well, yeah, basically, I guess.” My eyes cut to the Feelings poster. I stared at the picture depicting *Sad*.

“What do you mean, basically? What does your mom ‘basically’ know?”

My throat tightened. *Whoosh*. “I . . . don’t think I told her everything yet.”

“Talk a little more about what you haven’t told her.”

“Um . . .” I couldn’t go on. My head felt like it was floating just below the ceiling.

Dr. Matthews scooted his chair across the floor until he was about a foot away from me. He tilted his head to the left, trying to catch my eye, but I was frozen in a stare. “Ashley?”

I jumped at his voice as if startled awake.

“Ashley, where were you just now? Where did you go?”

It felt like it took a full five minutes to say it. “I was in the guest bedroom . . . Bright red blood everywhere. And I still don’t know exactly what happened . . . because I can’t . . . I can’t remember.” I broke down, my face in my hands, trembling from head to toe.

Dr. Matthews reached across his desk and handed me a tissue.

I went through several more tissues before I finally managed to slow my breathing.

“Ashley. . . Sweetie, can you try to look at me, please?”

The strength it took to do it was exhausting, but at last I raised my red puffy eyes to the doctor’s intense blue-eyed gaze.

“Ashley, do you want to go back to living with your mother and Charlie?”

“I wish I could live with my mom, I mean, I feel so guilty for . . . she even sent my old clothes to me but I just. . . I *couldn’t* wear them again, and I worry about how upset she must be, but she. . . she. . .”

“She—what?”

I wound the remaining unused tissue around and around my left index finger, then backwards over my middle finger, then forward again, until the material was translucent. Dr. Matthews waited

patiently. The mechanical voice of his talking alarm clock said, “It’s eleven o’clock.”

“Ashley, before our session ends, what is the most important thing you need me to know about your mom? About living with your mom?” He leaned forward in his chair.

“I ... I can’t live with her. She won’t keep me safe.” For the first time, I was able to raise my eyes to his for longer than a millisecond. I pleaded, “My mother won’t keep him away from me. Please don’t make me go back there.”

“Ashley, there is no way I am going to recommend that you be returned to your mother and stepfather. I need you to know something very, very important: what happened to you is not your fault. The people who let it happen to you and who did it to you are not parents. Parents do not do those things to children. We have a lot of work to do, sweetheart.”



Ironman is about a teenage guy named Bo Brewster who is training for a triathlon and has to face his anger problems. The author, Chris Crutcher, writes like people my age talk, so when I’m reading it I can see the story happening in my head, and I feel like these people could be real. No teachers in my old school would ever have let us read a book like *Ironman*. I mean, it has cussing in it, and it talks about stuff that isn’t usually in books I’ve read in class.

I asked, “Do you teach Chris Crutcher books all the time, Bev?”

“Our curriculum is more structured than it used to be, so I haven’t had the chance in a while. But Mr. Walden told me that as long as you guys are meeting the objective of analyzing literature and responding to it, I can teach any book I’d like for this session. I took advantage of his desperation to get him to agree to it.” She worked her eyebrows up and down and smiled.

The *Bo Brewster* character gets into trouble by shooting his mouth off, kind of like I do when I have so much of Charlie that I can’t take anymore, or when I see other people being picked on. It takes a lot to get me to stand up for myself, but it doesn’t take much to get me to take up for others or try to make them feel better. Bo has a defiant streak that kicks in and takes over his thinking for him, and I totally get that. Sometimes I wonder if being defiant is the only thing that’s kept me alive.

Bev reminded us daily that the study of *Ironman* was a “quest for truth.” I wasn’t too sure what she meant. I mean, I’m a lousy liar, and I automatically tell the truth, even when it would be a better idea to step back, wait a minute, and think up a creative lie instead. And when I do try to lie, I end up giving myself away. David and Bev are really into truth, for lack of a better way to say it.

Bev wears a silver ring with the word *Truth* engraved in it, and she uses the word *authentic* a lot, too. She talks about us asking the book “authentic questions,” which are questions that help us discover more about the story, and, in turn, more about ourselves. An authentic question is, “Why does Bo keep calling Coach Redmond an asshole, even though it’ll get him into trouble and he knows that?” An inauthentic question is, “Why did Bo’s parents name him Beauregard?”

It occurred to me, when my mom asked me those questions after I told her what had happened to me, like, if Charlie called me a silly name like *Honeybitches* or pinched my breast when he walked by me in the hall, that those questions were inauthentic. They didn’t do anything to deepen her understanding of what was happening to me.

What I *needed* her to ask me was, “What do you need me to do to protect you, Ashley Nicole? Are you okay, Ashley Nicole? Would you prefer that I beat him to death with an iron skillet, Ashley Nicole, or would you like it better if I run him over with the car about a hundred times?”

Sometimes I think that her doing nothing about what he did to

me is worse than living through it all. I know I think about her a lot more than about him, and that's just plain weird. Jeez, if she had at least gotten angry with him instead of *me*. I know it's crazy thinking, but I thought that it was my *body's* fault that he did this stuff to me, and it made me feel like hurting myself.

When I was younger and I tried to scratch my breasts off, I think I was trying to rip them from my body. I can remember blood on my nightgowns and sheets. I used to worry that my mom would ask about the blood, but she never did. I'm not sure when I gave up on stopping my breasts from developing, but now they have thick pink lines on them, as if a tiger had attacked me.

I guess my breasts represent what it's like to keep the secret I kept for so long. On the outside—with my clothes on—I look like anybody else. But peel back the layers—take off the clothes—and it's only then that the scars can be seen.

Since I started seeing Dr. Matt—that's what he told me kids usually call him—I've been fighting the urge to hurt myself, but the emotions still hit me in waves and sometimes I give in. Actually, I still give in a lot. That's another thing I'm working on: no longer lying to myself about the way things really are.

At the end of one of my first appointments with him, Dr. Matt told me that recovery from sexual abuse is like being on a rollercoaster, and he showed me what he meant by moving his hands up and down like a rollercoaster track.

I learned that the reason I want to hide when I freak out is that I have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or P.T.S.D. for short. It's what soldiers sometimes get when they go through really horrible stuff on the battlefield. My mind recognizes, "Hey, this situation is too intense, and I need to protect myself, so I'm just going to go somewhere else now, and I'm not going to remember this."

But my mind really *does* remember it, and then stuff happens; little things, like hearing words or smelling a smell—these are called triggers—and they make my mind go, "Oh, shit, here we go again."

Even though I'm not really in the situation, my body thinks that I am, and sometimes it even hurts the same way it did that Friday night when Mom left me with Charlie.

P.T.S.D. is the reason that I freaked out when David pulled me out of the wardrobe when I thought that he was Charlie.

I felt a *little* less crazy after Dr. Matt explained that to me. He also insisted that I stop referring to myself as "The Freak in the Furniture."

"Your friend from Northside, what's her name?"

"Lisa Rayburn." I wondered why he wanted to know.

"Okay, let's pretend that instead of you riding your bike to Lisa's house the day you told, she is the one who came to you. Totally switch lives for a moment. You got it?"

"Got it." I re-crossed my legs in the chair that I always sit in next to his desk.

"Fast-forward to now. Ready for this?" He took a sip of water and set his mug back on his desk.

Uh-oh. I've learned that when Dr. Matt says, "Ready for this?" it could be something I would rather not think about or deal with. I mean, it's always something I need to work on, but it still pretty much sucks.

"Are you?" he asked.

"I ... guess so," I said, making a face like when there's a big drop coming on the rollercoaster, even though it's part of the ride.

"So, Lisa comes to you today and says, 'I'm the Freak in the Furniture. Want to know why, Ashley? It's because I've been hurt so badly by people who were supposed to love me, I go hide in my wardrobe so that I can feel safe again.'"

Dr. Matt rose from his chair, picked up his mug, and strode to a cubby in the corner of his office where he has a cold-water dispenser. He refilled the mug and stood in the corner a moment longer, watching me. I glanced briefly at him then looked at my sandals on the floor next to the chair. I watched his boots walk back to his desk.

“So?” he said, leaning back in his chair. “What do you think, Ash? How would you treat Lisa if she told you that? Would you point and laugh? *Agree* with her that she’s a freak?”

“No,” I said so quietly that I could barely hear myself. I ran my finger back and forth along the edge of his desk.

“Well, why not? Isn’t she? I mean, come on, Ashley. The girl climbs up into a dresser, curls into a ball, and stares at her hands,” he said emphatically.

“How did you ... did David and Bev tell you that?”

“Don’t change the subject. If you are telling me that you wouldn’t be cruel to your friend if she was going through what you are, then why the hell do you get to treat *yourself* like shit?”

“I ... I don’t know.”

“Well, think about it. Your homework for next week is to explain to me why you think it’s okay to hate yourself because you have problems as a result of someone doing things to you that you had no control over. I’ll be expecting an answer.” He smiled and rose to open his door for me.

I had a lot to think about, especially when I got home and there was another message from my mother on the answering machine, griping at David for not returning me to her for the family therapy appointment. She hung up mid-rant then called back immediately and said, “How do you expect us to be a family again, Ashley Nicole, if you won’t bother even trying? Huh? Tell me that. As far as I’m concerned, all of this is your problem anyway, I mean, I *seriously* doubt that anything even really—”

[BEEP.]

CHAPTER EIGHT

A few weeks into summer school, *Ironman*’s Bo Brewster had settled into his anger management class, fallen in love with a girl who is more than capable of whipping his ass, and begun to recognize that his anger comes from within himself and his reactions to his own life, not from other people. I had already read the entire book. Once I picked it up, I couldn’t put it down. I identified with the girl that Bo had fallen in love with—not because a guy was chasing her—but because when she told Bo about her family and its history of sexual abuse, it could have been my own.

The kids in Bo’s anger management group each have a unique history and, well, story. Bev pointed out how the author created his characters with the plot of his story in mind. It made me look around our little English II class and wonder if any of us had stories interesting enough to become a book.

T.W. Griffin should have the word *intensity* tattooed on his forehead. It was hard to tell if the way he came off was because he was killing himself trying to be perfect, or if he was about to crack from the pressure his father put on him to be a super-early super-achiever. He constantly questioned the value of the stuff we did in class. If it didn’t involve a paper and pencil assignment and a grade between zero and one hundred percent, he didn’t see the point of it.

Coach Griffin made it known on the first day of summer school

that T.W. was to be the *King of English II*, and T.W. was competitive to the point of making Bev nuts. We'd be having a discussion about a fight Bo had with his dad, and Junior would tell what he thought (on the rare occasions that he attended class). Then T.W. would give a head-scratcher of a response that usually included a lot of long words, like he was looking at the SAT vocabulary list to find adjectives. Before anyone else could chime in with what *they* thought, T.W. would interrupt and ask Bev, "Which of us was better? Which of our answers would you consider most correct and comprehensive, while at the same time being concise rather than wordy?"

Bev would sigh, roll her eyes, and say for the hundredth time, "T.W., that's not what this class is about. It's about learning to respond to literature in an authentic way. As long as you are able to justify your point by connecting it to your own life and relating it to the text, you're doing fine. Okay?"

Not okay. T.W. got so put out with not getting a "gold star" every day like he was used to in classes he'd had before, he'd literally collapse face down on his desk and groan in agony. To make matters worse—at least to T.W. and his dad's way of thinking—our grades came from four essays—and *only* those four essays. And the criteria for the essays, aside from the usual grammar and spelling and all—was that the writer be as honest as possible in examining his or her own truths, using text from the novel to support their realizations. It was possible to bullshit, I guess, but, as Bev said, this class was a "*quest for truth*."

T.W. might have been freaked out because he had to rely on his gut instead of his ability to complete worksheets and pop quizzes, but I was so unaccustomed to looking at my own life in the harsh light of the truth, I didn't even know where to start.

I was still trying to remember simple things, like which drawer the forks and knives were in at David's and Bev's, and trying to resist the urge to crawl into my pine wardrobe dresser whenever I felt overwhelmed.

Hector "Junior" Alvarez was a father already. One year before, when he was fifteen and his girlfriend Moreyma was fourteen, she got pregnant. Now they lived in an apartment above his family's garage, and Junior worked two jobs: at Brookshire's grocery as a stocker, and as a busboy and dishwasher at *Mi Abele's* restaurant.

His little boy, Hector Alvarez III—a.k.a. "Three"—the inspiration for the "3" tattoo on Hector's arm—was born in April. Nothing was more important to Junior than taking care of Moreyma and Three. This class was fine; yes, he intended to graduate high school; his studies were important as well—but *nothing*, absolutely nothing, could make him risk being able to support the two most important people in his life.

Junior was obsessed with the idea of "making it," of doing things differently than his father had. He was still pissed at his dad for leaving his mom to raise six kids on her own, even though his father had not exactly chosen to walk out the door. The only way "out" Hector Alvarez, Sr. could think of was selling hot car parts. It led to a two-year jail sentence, and Hector Sr. was killed in a prison riot just two weeks before he was to be released on parole.

Junior attended class about once a week because he was working long hours and didn't want to ask his bosses for time off. After he explained his situation to Bev, she was so impressed with his determination to do right by his family, she made a deal with him: read the book on your own—whenever you can. Write the four essays—she gave him the topics ahead of time—and turn them in by the deadlines—which she gave him in advance. Spend about five minutes a week—on the phone was fine, and she gave him our home number—discussing the essay, the story, the way he was relating to it. Do all these things to the best of his ability and be fearlessly honest with himself and with Bev, and he'd get an A in the course. Bev told me that if anyone was going to "make it" in the world, Junior could.

Kevin Cooper and Dub White seemed like pretty tight buds

when class first started, but I, the *Princess of Perceiving Pissy Moods*, could sense that their friendship was coming apart. I think it started when Dub ridiculed Roxanne and Kevin called him on it.

Dub was a quicker wit and faster thinker than Kevin. On the other hand, Kevin had a really sweet nature, while Dub was a jerk most of the time, even to his supposed best friend. I probably spent way too much time watching them and wondering about their friendship, and when they were tense, I picked up on it and it made me uptight, too.

I've learned since I started therapy that it's not really healthy to be so tuned in to everyone else's moods that your own feelings are affected. It's a "skill" that served me well when I lived in the war zone, knowing Charlie's mood could change in the blink of an eye. It helped me be a little better prepared in the event that he became threatening.

The problem is, it's hard to turn it off, even when I don't need it so much anymore, because I get filled with anxiety from other people's stuff and for no reason related to me.



We were in class, reading silently, when Kevin blurted out, "I really like *Ironman!* It's the first book I've ever read in my entire life. I wish somebody had told me before that there was a book like this. I mean, it's got football, man ..."

The whole class heard what Kevin had said, and a few people said they liked it, too, before quickly returning to their reading. But Dub mocked him, saying, "Ooooh, what are you, a kiss-ass? '*I really like Ironman.*' You got a boner for Miss Asher, Widetrack?"

Kevin's face turned purple. Sitting behind him, Dub poked him in the shoulder with a pencil. "Did you hear me? Hear me? Hear me?"

Kevin sprang from his seat and Dub did, too, although Kevin

could have remained seated and still looked Dub in the eye. "What the fuck is your problem, man?" Kevin hissed.

"*You are!*" Dub reached up and jabbed a finger into Kevin's chest.

"Yeah? What'd I ever do to you?" With barely a shove, Kevin sent Dub flying backwards.

"Cut it out, guys, or you're *both* out of here!" Bev's arms were crossed and her face was furious. I felt my body tense in reaction to her anger.

Kevin and Dub glared at each other, breathing hard and radiating rage.

Bev commanded, "Kevin, take a break. Go get a drink of water, walk around for a minute, see if you can get a grip. Do it now. Dub, I want to talk to you in the hall. *Now.*"

To the rest of us, she said, "You have about thirty minutes left in class. I'm going to see if I can find out what's going on with these two clowns. Keep reading. If you don't finish in class today, read through Chapter Eight by tomorrow morning."

With a sigh, she opened the door and asked Dub, in a voice mocking his own, "Okay, Mr. *You Got a Boner for Miss Asher?* Convince me to spare your life. You may begin. . . now."

Roxanne mouthed, "What's going on?"

I shrugged and looked down at my book. Every day there was at least one confrontation between Dub and Bev, as he did everything in his power to knock our discussions off course. He asked not only inauthentic questions but stupid inappropriate ones like, "Do you think Shelly"—Bo's girlfriend in the book—"wears thong underwear?"

Bev wanted to kick Dub out of class. She even went to Mr. Walden about it, but was told that since students had to pay for summer school, she didn't have the option of dismissing him. The principal let her know that as long as the students attended class each day, she would pass them, no matter what. She didn't tell him

about her “contract” with Junior. It came down to Bev having to decide how much of a headache she was willing to create for herself, seeing as how only three weeks were left in summer school.

She made a deal with Dub in return for participating in the class discussions “like a big boy” and being less of a clown for the remainder of the class. If he could make it through three hours and forty-five minutes without calling excessive attention to himself by acting like a doofus, he could have the last fifteen minutes to stand at the front of the room and tell all the (clean) jokes he could think of. “You don’t even have to tell jokes, Dub. I don’t care if you turn on the projector and show the class shadow puppets for those fifteen minutes, if you’ll either join the discussion with something to add or shut up for the rest of the time.”

While Dub was impossible to silence, Roxanne was the opposite. Ever since Dub made fun of her on the first day of school, she was absolutely silent about everything. I could have kicked that guy up and down the street for making her afraid to talk. But there I go again: looking out for others is always easier than speaking up for myself.

Roxanne was a mystery; it was almost as if she lived at the school. She was always waiting outside Bev’s door when we arrived, and it seemed that she’d rather stay and repaint the hallways with the maintenance crew than go home at noon. For the first couple of weeks, she always apologized for being there so early and told us that her mom had to drop her off on her way to work.

But then one rainy afternoon, we found out that this was not the case. Not at all.



Storm clouds had been building all day. There was no wind, and the humidity made stepping outside feel like a walk through a hot wet sponge.

Class ended and Bev and I made a dash for her car, slamming the doors before a bolt of lightning struck a tree on the other side of the parking lot. After we screamed and Bev stopped shaking, she started the car and we pulled onto Main Street, only to see that the intersection on the town square was a mess of emergency vehicles and flashing red lights. A police car had T-boned a minivan coming out of the Dairy Queen parking lot. We turned around in the middle of the street and headed for Highway 175.

Just as we pulled up to a crossover lane to turn onto the highway, I saw someone who looked familiar. Then I recognized her: Roxanne trudged along the side of the road, her yellow English folder wilted and doing an awful job of keeping the storm off her head. A clap of thunder exploded and she hit the deck: got down on all fours right there on the side of the highway.

“Look, Bev, it’s Roxanne!” I said.

“Oh, my God.” Bev pulled onto the shoulder. She honked and Roxanne, who had just started to get up from her hands and knees, dove for the asphalt again.

Bev stopped the car and I jumped out and ran to Roxanne in the rain, calling her name. She looked around, terror in her face. When she recognized me, her face relaxed a little and she even smiled, then rose to her feet and walked rapidly toward me, hunched over against the lightning strikes and pounding rain.

“Come on, get in the car before we get electrocuted out here!” I grabbed her arm and we ran the short distance to Bev’s car. I threw open the door and shoved Roxanne into the front seat, then jumped in the back.

“Whew!” Bev said. “Roxanne, what on Earth are you doing walking on the highway? Where’s your brother? Doesn’t he pick you up from school?”

She answered softly, “I don’t have a brother. I lied to you.”

“Why?” Bev asked.

“It’s a long story,” Roxanne said.

Bev thought for a moment, then said, “Tell you what. Let’s talk about this. Are you hungry, sweetheart? Because I’m starving.”

“Yeah, sort of. I guess so,” she said.

“Would it be okay with your parents if I take you to lunch with Ashley and me?”

“I don’t really know.” She wouldn’t meet Bev’s eyes.

“Well, do you need to call them?” Bev pulled her cell phone out of her purse.

“I can’t call them,” Roxanne said softly, staring past the wipers going back and forth. “They’re dead.”

Bev’s eyes got big. “So... who do you need to tell that you’re going to go out to lunch with us, honey?”

Roxanne said flatly, “I live with my aunt and uncle. But we don’t have a phone. They both work two jobs, and neither one of them will be home until midnight. They won’t mind if I go out, but I don’t have any money, Mrs. Asher. And I don’t know when I could pay you back.”

“Honey, don’t worry about paying me back. How does Mexican food sound to you?” Bev signaled to get back onto the highway.

She smiled. “Sounds great.”

Over chips and salsa, we found out that Roxanne’s parents were killed in a car crash when she was ten years old. She was thrown through the windshield, resulting in the horrible scar that stretched across the lower part of her face. After being passed from relative to relative, Roxanne moved in with her dad’s sister and her husband, who were newly married and struggled from paycheck to paycheck. Roxanne knew they loved her, and they provided what she needed, but they both worked so much that she was essentially raising herself.

“So, how *do* you get to school? You’re always there before we arrive.” Bev stabbed a piece of chicken with her fork and placed it across a tortilla.

“My next-door neighbor drops me off on his way to Dallas,

around 5 a.m. or so.”

Bev dropped her tortilla. “So you’re at school alone until we get there at 7:30?”

Roxanne nodded as she slowly sliced her cheese enchilada into equal sections.

Bev arched her eyebrow. “And you normally get home *how*?”

“Just the way I was going today.” Roxanne sounded as if she was confessing to doing something stupid, which she was. The business highway through Patience is a narrow, two-lane road, and people blow through there like it’s the Indy 500.

By the time we polished off sopapillas with honey and butter, Bev informed Roxanne—not asked her—*told* her—that we would pick her up each morning on our way to school, and, furthermore, she was not to walk home anymore, since the only way to get to her house without crossing under barbed wire fences and dodging Mr. Sanchez’s Texas Longhorns was to walk along the highway.

Bev sounded like she was fussing at Roxanne, even though she wasn’t: “If you were my own child, I would have a heart attack knowing that my baby was walking along that highway with idiots blasting by at eighty miles an hour. That is absolutely unacceptable, and I will not have it, because my students *are* my babies. Once you walked through my classroom door, you became one of my kids. I’m afraid you’re stuck with me, dear.”

I smiled over the rim of my Diet Coke. “Roxanne, I think you just got told.”

“Yeah.” Roxanne’s eyes glistened with tears. “I guess I did.”



Z.Z. usually participated in our classroom discussions and debates, but in the last week, she’d become quiet and cranky. She was distrustful of other people’s comments and questioned all of us about what we “really” meant to say, as if disagreeing with her take

on a topic was actually a personal attack on her. She kept steering the conversation to racism, and her voice shook with rage when she spoke.

Bev asked us what a quote from *Ironman* meant, but instead of answering it, Z.Z. stood up and practically walked her desk across the room. Her book and papers flew to one side and her purse sailed off, too, but she didn't give it a glance. Instead, she pointed at the floor in front of Dub and yelled, "Where you been, boy? You been creeping around my granny's house at night?"

Bev's eyebrows were raised, but her voice was calm. "What's this about, Z.Z.?"

Dub sat up straight in his desk, his eyes huge and his mouth hanging open. He looked like he couldn't decide whether to dash for the door or jump right back at Z.Z. He was doing what Dr. Matt would call flight or fight. *Oh, so that's what it looks like when somebody else does it.*

Z.Z. spoke through clenched teeth and tears. "Somebody poisoned my dog, Ms. Asher. And then somebody ran my cousin Jasper off the road into a ditch, like he's somebody deserves messing with. He got the mind of a child!"

She lowered her desk then raised her right hand slowly and pointed her index finger at Dub's still-shocked expression. "He. *That boy*. He's the one. I know he's the one. And now, last night, somebody sprayed 'Get Out Niggers' on my granny's front door. In orange paint. Bright. Orange. Paint." She lowered her index finger to the floor, to Dub's feet, which were still crossed at his ankles.

We all followed her finger to his shoes and saw it: luminous orange paint on the white rubber soles of Dub's black Converse high-tops. Dub looked down right along with us and gasped, then tried to curl his feet up into the bottom of his chair.

"Dub, you want to tell us about the paint on your shoes?" Bev asked.

Dub sputtered, "I don't have to say nothing to no uppity nigger.

Calling the Masons' place *your granny's*. Your granny was their maid. She never worked for none of that stuff. She's got no right to live in that house." He spat on the floor to punctuate his point.

Z.Z. left her desk so quickly that she looked like she was levitating. Dub's shot of adrenaline chose one of the responses: flight. That boy barely touched ground until he was through the door, and we watched out the window as he zoomed through the herd of Texas Longhorns behind the school.

Bev moved swiftly to stand in front of Z.Z. so that she could not follow him out. "Z.Z., stop! You've got to calm down!" Bev had her hands on Z.Z.'s shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. Her knees bent, she placed her hands on Bev's arms, folded herself inward, lay her head on Bev's shoulder, and wept.

"Why? Why do people hate us?" Z.Z. sobbed.

Bev rubbed the girl's upper back and said, "I know. I know it hurts, Z.Z."

"Son of a bitch," Kevin growled. We all turned to him. He clenched his fists, and his biceps bulged. I couldn't imagine what linemen on the opposing team thought when they saw him under the Friday night lights.

Bev blinked a few times. ". . .What?"

"Dub threw those empty orange spray paint cans in the back of my truck. I picked him up for school this morning. I noticed the cans in my pickup bed when I parked here, but I didn't really think about it." I thought the vein in the side of his neck might burst.

The paint on Dub's shoes and the slurs he threw at Z.Z. made Dub look guilty enough, but when Kevin spoke out against his best friend on top of what we had already seen and heard, it was as if Dub had already been tried and convicted of a hate crime. There was no getting us back into Bo Brewster's life after all that. Not that day, anyway.



Dub White trudged up the long dirt driveway to the 1970s model singlewide mobile home his parents rented. His stepfather, Billy Ray Sublett, had the perfect set-up for yard work. Bungee cords affixed a white Styrofoam cooler to the hood of the riding mower so he could reach for a fresh longneck beer without rising off the seat so high that the kill switch was activated. A fifty-five-gallon trash barrel outside the ragged chain link fence served as an imaginary basketball goal for the empties, but Billy Ray missed most of the time, as evidenced by the beer bottle fragments littering the ground around the barrel.

Anyone just driving by the beat-up white mobile home might think, “The house should be torn down, but, boy, the yard looks great!” They might scoff at the sign warning potential burglars that the home was protected by Brinks, but the *Keep off the Grass* sign made sense. In an area where most people’s lawns were mowed buffalo grass, Billy Ray’s looked like the picture on the front of a bag of grass fertilizer. Just seeing it made people want to stop and touch its greenness.

But Billy Ray didn’t even notice the beauty of what he called “The Practice Field.” He was simply following the guidelines of the N.L.R.A., the National Lawnmower Racers’ Association. He was in training, and he’d been perfecting the most recent adjustments to Bubba’s Dream—his customized racing mower.

Billy Ray quit his job with the Texas Department of Highways to train full-time for the upcoming riding mower race in Tyler. He was convinced that Bubba’s Dream was his ticket to fame and glory. It was rumored that The Outdoor Network was going to be in Tyler to broadcast the race live. The right race, the right moment, and Billy Ray Sublett was on his way to the big time. He kept Bubba’s Dream—B.D. for short—washed, waxed, and polished to a blinding sheen. Lost in his thoughts as he peed on his wife’s potted azalea bushes, he almost missed seeing Dub take off the black high-top shoes and throw them like footballs into the trash barrel.

“Hey! Dub! Boy, what’re you doing with those shoes?”

Dub jumped, startled to see his stepfather in plain view with his shorts around his ankles. He chose to climb the stairs to the house and pretend not to have heard Billy Ray, much less seen him.

“Dub! Did you hear me? Come here, boy! Now!”

Dub’s shoulders dropped and he turned, head down, dragging his white socks through the sandy area that Billy Ray defined with orange cones as “The Pit Stop Thing.” Reflective letters reading Property of Texas Highway Department seemed to wink at Dub as he approached Billy Ray, who had forgotten to zip his fly.

“Yeah?” Dub said.

“‘Yeah?’ What do you mean, ‘Yeah,’ boy? You better jump back with that attitude,” Billy Ray snarled, ran his hand over his shaved head, and spat at Dub’s socks.

Dub answered the way his stepfather demanded: that every sentence end with the word, *Sir*:

“I’m sorry, sir. Yes, sir? You called me, sir?”

“You know I called you, you little shit. Why’re you throwing away a perfectly good pair of shoes, boy?”

Dub gritted his teeth and set his jaw, staring down at Billy Ray’s long yellowed toenails.

“I asked you a question, *Wilbur*,” said Billy Ray, using Dub’s given name, because he knew how much Dub hated it.

“They’re ruined, sir.”

“What’re ruined, Wilbur?”

“The shoes, sir. They’re ruined, sir. They have paint on them, sir.”

“Paint? You’re throwing away a fifty-dollar pair of shoes because of paint?”

Dub mumbled, “With all due respect, sir, I bought them myself, sir.”

“That don’t matter, Wilbur! In this family, we value what we spend money on. We appreciate the gifts the Lord has blessed us with.”

Yeah, thought Dub. *That's why you quit your job and spend all your money on beer and your stupid riding mower.* But he didn't say that.

"You want to try again, boy? Justify your actions."

"The shoes, sir. They have orange paint on them, sir. And a girl at school accused me of painting something in orange paint on her front door, sir. The shoes are going to cause me problems if I keep them, sir."

Billy Ray spat near Dub's feet and demanded, "Who accused you?"

"It doesn't matter, sir. I don't know how the paint got on the shoes, but if I keep wearing them, people are going to think I did it, sir."

"Did what? Painted what? You tell me who accused you of something, and I'll take care of it." Billy Ray picked a fresh longneck out of the cooler and twisted the top off.

"Get Out Nigger. Sir."

Billy Ray threw the bottle to the ground and leapt so close to Dub that he nearly blew him back. "What did you say to me, you worthless little shit?"

"No! No, sir! I wasn't saying that to you, sir! That's what it said on her door, sir. 'Get Out Nigger,' sir. Actually, I think it was, 'Get Out Niggers'—with an s—sir."

Billy Ray threw his head back, laughed, and clapped Dub on the shoulder, giving it a brutal squeeze. "Oh, yeah! Yeah, the Mason place. First on our list." He worked his eyebrows up and down and smirked.

"List, sir? What list, sir? And h-how—how did you know that it was the Mason place, sir?" Dub's voice was high, and his head was swimming.

Billy Ray smiled and winked. It all began to tumble together in Dub's mind. The orange paint. Fluorescent orange paint used to mark places to be repaired on road surfaces. But how...?

"Yeah, Dub, I borrowed your shoes last night. Couldn't find mine and I didn't want to keep the guys waiting. I *might* have been a little drunk. Your shoes were on the front porch, and I—" Billy Ray shrugged in a way that said, *Oh, well, these things happen.*

"Y—You painted 'Get out Niggers' on Z.Z.'s front door, sir?" Dub hoped the heat he felt in his cheeks wasn't visible to his stepfather.

Billy Ray squinted at his stepson and leaned in close, nearly knocking him over with his breath. "Who the hell's Z.Z.? Oh . . . she one of the niggers lives there?"

"She's in my English II class, and she lives with her grandmother, sir." Dub was surprised at feeling embarrassed that Billy Ray had done such a thing. He had heard him talk about the Freemans' inheritance, and the things Dub spewed to Z.Z. was word for word what Billy Ray had said about her grandmother. Dub had learned long ago that thinking for himself was not tolerated. Billy Ray's opinion was the only one that mattered, and if Dub tried to talk to his mother about it, she reminded him of how broke they were when Dub's father left.

"Billy Ray's not perfect, but he's a real man," she told Dub, whose actual father left him and his mom for another man when Dub was seven years old. Said he couldn't hide his true self anymore and just walked out the door.

Dub was not allowed to cry because men didn't cry. He wasn't allowed to play with dolls because Billy Ray said that only girls and faggots did that.

Now fifteen years old, Dub laughed at race jokes and fag jokes and had a huge Confederate flag on the wall of his bedroom. On the rare occasions that other students questioned his love for the Old South, he claimed it was "heritage, not hate," even though he really had no idea what he was talking about. He was just repeating what he'd heard Billy Ray say to people who questioned the Confederate flag in his pickup truck's back window.

Dub found it simpler, survival-wise, for Billy Ray to call the shots. He was accustomed to Billy Ray telling him what to believe, and it confused and frustrated him that he was starting to question his stepfather's authority.

Dub identified with *Ironman's* Bo Brewster. Like Bo questioning his coach's decisions, Dub began to wonder why Billy Ray's opinion was always the only one that counted, and why he, Dub, was always wrong. He wanted out, but he thought he had no place else to go. Even worse, if Billy Ray ever found out about Veronica Salazar... well, he had to be very, very careful. Play it cool, and he'd be okay.



Billy Ray picked up a can of wax and a polishing rag and started toward Bubba's Dream.

Dub forced himself to speak. "Um, Billy Ray—Sir—don't you think the police could trace the road paint to you?"

His stepfather stopped short. "You're such a little pussy! Jesus, Dub, don't worry about it. The cops can't prove a thing. I even got rid of the cans. Tossed them in the back of that fat boy's truck— that kid who picked you up for school this morning, what do you call him? Fat Boy? Somethin' like that?"

"I call him Widetrack, sir. But his name's Kevin, sir. Why'd you throw them in his truck, sir?"

"Aw, hell, boy. I figure them cans blew out the back of the truck before y'all got to school. And who's going to think twice about seeing a couple of cans of highway paint on the side of the road? When I worked for the state, I tossed them there all the time."

Dub felt like crying, and he wasn't sure why.

Billy Ray squinted at him. "You got a problem, boy? You turning soft like your daddy?"

"No, sir. No problem, sir. None at all, sir." Dub turned away from Billy Ray, biting the insides of his mouth to try to keep his face

expressionless. It didn't work.

"I knew it. You're a pathetic pussy. Just like your old man." Billy Ray picked a fresh, icy, longneck beer out of the cooler, twisted off the cap, and threw it in Dub's direction. "I pegged you as a faggot years ago."



Bev, Roxanne, and I drove Z.Z. home from school. We pulled up in the driveway of the Victorian-era mansion to see Z.Z.'s Auntie Jewel and cousin, Jasper, on the front porch with sponges, brushes, and a bucket of soapy water, working on removing the words from the massive double front doors. The paint came off the lead crystal ovals fairly easily, but not so from the wood. Aurelia Freeman sat on a pine glider under an ancient pecan tree in the front yard. We parked and walked over to her.

"Hello, Miss Aurelia. Can we help your family with anything?"

"Well, Jewel and Jasper's working on getting that hatred off the door right now. I guess we'll see if they can get it off before we know if we need help."

Z.Z. asked Roxanne and me if we wanted to go upstairs to see her room.

"They really poisoned your dog, Z.Z.?" Roxanne asked as we climbed the stairs.

"Yep. Gave him some steak that had anti-freeze on it. The vet thinks he's going to live. We're waiting to see right now. My room's down here on the left."

"Is Jasper okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, he got bumped and bruised and shook up, but luckily somebody come along and saw him laying there in the ditch, crying like a little kid." Z.Z. sat on the edge of her bed, and Roxanne and I did the same. "I'm sorry I've been so mean at school lately. I know

all you white folks aren't like Dub, but this kind of stuff makes a person not trust anybody. You get what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, I understand. I know what it's like to be really pissed off," I said.

"Me, too," said Roxanne.

We heard Bev calling us and ran back downstairs to where she waited. *Get Out* was gone from the glass, but *Niggers* was still plainly visible. Jewel had gotten so outraged that she took a wire brush to the paint, leaving deep grooves in the wood over the leftover shadow of the word. It made me think of my breasts and the lines on them.

On the way to Roxanne's house to drop her off, Bev told us the police had no leads about the poisoning, near miss of a hit-and-run, and racial slur on the front door, and the family was not optimistic that anyone would be arrested. They didn't have faith in the police trying too hard to find the guilty party or parties, either. "Aurelia's more focused on getting the Eula Mason Community Resource Center underway than in finding out who wanted them out of their house. That old woman has beautiful insight. Instead of grabbing power for herself by throwing the Mason family money around, she wants to use it to help poor people, no matter what color they are, so they don't assume that only white people with money are the decision-makers."

Bev pulled into the short driveway of Roxanne's aunt and uncle's small brick starter home in one of Patience's newer neighborhoods, just off Highway 175.

"I don't understand. Why are some people so upset that Z.Z.'s family is living there, and they have the Mason money now?" I asked.

"Yeah, I don't really get that, either," Roxanne said as she got out of the car. "See you tomorrow, Ash. Thanks, Miss Asher."

We watched until Roxanne went inside, then Bev backed up. "They're closed-minded people who live in fear that someone will have more than they do. They operate on an economy of scarcity in

their minds, whether the scarcity exists in their own lives or not."

"Economy of scarcity?" I asked.

"Everybody's poor in some way, Ash. But those who blame others for their problems are always going to be needy, because they refuse to take responsibility for their own failures in their lives. Can you understand that?"

I wasn't sure I could then. But I think I'm starting to now.



When I told Dr. Matt about someone—probably Dub—vandalizing Z.Z.'s door, he asked me if I was upset about it.

"Yeah," I said, stretching my arms above my head and yawning. I was getting more comfortable in his office. I rarely got a nervous stomach before my appointments anymore, and my hands only shook a little bit before I went in each time.

"What are you going to do about it?" He looked like he really wanted to know.

"What do you mean?" I returned his gaze, which was also a new development: being able to maintain eye contact with him.

"Well, it's messed up that somebody thought it was okay to write those words on her door, poison her dog, and run her cousin off the road, right?"

"Well, yeah, but they didn't do it to me." I wondered where he was going with this.

"But you're upset about it, right?" His tone was a little challenging, and I didn't know why.

"I'm pissed off, yeah." *Can we move on now?*

"Why?" he gave me what I've come to know as *The Look*: a laser-sharp blue-eyed stare that works like truth serum. I looked away.

I felt my defensiveness rising. "Well, don't *you* see anything wrong with it?"

Dr. Matt leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. “Of course. It’s not only a hate crime; it’s also spiritually, morally, and ethically wrong. So what are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know—help clean off the paint? They already got most of it off, but—”

“Why do you think your friend was so angry that she physically went after the boy she suspects did the painting?”

I thought, *Boy, this thing is really bothering you, isn’t it, Dr. Matt? Let’s see, if I give you the right answer, maybe we can move on and talk about—me?*

I didn’t try to hide my irritation. “Because it was wrong of him to do that and she feels protective of her granny and her cousin. I mean, her cousin is has a lot of problems, and—”

“You think she felt anything else when she saw those words on her door?”

I groaned. “Well, she cried and said, ‘Why, why?’ after Dub ran out of our classroom. Bev told her that she knew that it hurt.”

“Do you agree with that? That Z.Z. was feeling hurt?”

“Yeah ... Sure.” *Okay, should Z.Z. be sitting in here right now, or what?* He was pissing me off. What did he want from me, anyway?

“Sometimes it’s not obvious to people that their actions hurt others. Or they don’t show they care, if they do. Or they may not give a shit about others’ feelings. And if you’re the person being hurt, like your friend, Z.Z., how do you think it would make her feel when she’s hurting, but the person who hurt her doesn’t seem to care?”

I thought about what I had done to my mom. I remembered Nanny’s letter telling me how devastated my mom was by my actions—how much I had embarrassed all of them by telling what happened to me. I felt myself slipping away again.

“Ash?” His voice sounded far away.

I forced myself to hold on, not to let my mind carry me to a happier place, which would have been anywhere but where I was

right then. Hot tears filled my eyes.

“Ashley, what are you thinking about right now?”

I choked out the first few words, and then I vomited words. “I blew my family apart by telling on Charlie. I mean, what difference does it make, anyway? There’s nothing anybody can do about it now; what do I want Charlie to do, turn back time? That exam at the hospital—they couldn’t find *proof* that he did it to me. It was stupid and selfish of me to expect my mom to divorce him just because he looked at me and touched me and, well, I can’t really remember—”

SLAM!

I jumped so high, I probably had ceiling plaster in my hair. I squeezed my eyes closed and curled into a ball without even realizing I had done it.

“Open your eyes,” Dr. Matt quietly said.

I saw that his hand was poised about a foot above his desk, ready to slam it down again. “You’re spinning.”

“I’m what?” My voice was high, and my heartbeat thumped in my ears.

“Spinning your wheels, like when a car’s tires get stuck in the mud and it doesn’t go anywhere, even though the accelerator’s on the floor.”

“Oh.” I blushed.

“When you spin, you get more and more upset, unable to calm down and think. I slapped my desk to jolt you out of it.”

“Could you please not do that anymore?” I asked in a tiny voice.

He smiled at me and lowered his hand silently to his desk. Then he rolled his chair toward me until he was directly in front of me, and I could not help but look at him when he said, “Ashley Nicole Asher, listen to me: there is never, never, *never* any excuse for a child being sexually abused. *None*. There’s just one way to describe it, sweetheart, and here it is: Fucked Up.”

A smirk formed on my lips at his use of the F word. Not the sort of conversation I'd imagine would take place in a therapist's office, but he'd already told me that he didn't have very many patients who had lived through what I had. Sometimes I got the feeling that somebody doing what Charlie did to me really pissed him off.

"It's Fucked Up that your mother reacted like she did when you told. The fact that you were treated like a second-class citizen in your mom's house is Fucked Up. Sexual abuse is never okay, under any circumstance, no matter what anyone may have told you. It's not your fault that it happened. Period."

It felt so good to have someone say it in such a strong, direct way. Everyone had been tiptoeing around me for so long, and I had too. I was so afraid of the secrets my mind held that I was practically still locked in a closet in the dark. Putting words to it was like exposing a flower to light, essential for the flower to live, and I felt something inside myself wake up and turn toward that light.

His expression was completely serious, his gaze unrelenting, and I looked away under it. He leaned forward in his chair and softly said, "It's natural that you would feel incredibly angry at your mom and Charlie, to say nothing of how hurt you must feel." He waited for a response. I had none.

He sat back, crossed his arms, and tilted his head, watching me. "It's interesting that you can understand how Z.Z. probably feels, but you don't get that it's okay for you to feel pissed off or sad that this shit happened to you. You were never taught that you do not have to feel guilty about taking care of yourself. And that's a shame."



Before our session ended, we decided that I needed to learn how to tell people very clearly what I want or need from them.

"People with your kind of history tend not to have boundaries,

Ashley, and they don't recognize other people's boundaries, either." Dr. Matt handed me a card with steps for careful communication on it.

Say what you think or feel.

Say what is making you think or feel that.

Say what you think the other person thinks or feels.

Say what you want.

CHAPTER NINE

On my one-month anniversary of waking up in East Texas, the phone rang as I was pouring Raisin Bran into a bowl. Ben pulled himself away from a TV show on how video games are made and snatched the cordless phone off the armchair next to the sofa.

“Joe’s Pool Hall, Joe speakin’,” Ben answered. “Hey, Dad. . . No, Mom went to the grocery store, and it’s about time, there’s nothing to ea—huh? Yeah, she’s up. Ash: phone.”

My dad’s voice sounded funny, kind of like it did the night I met him at A.J.’s office. “Hey, sweetie.”

“Hi, David.”

There was a long pause. “Um, you doing okay today?”

My radar was up. “Yeah. Is something wrong?” Then I heard it.

“Are you going to tell her I’m here or what?” My mother’s voice.

My stomach hit the floor, and I grabbed on to a bar stool. Loki gave me a dirty look and jumped out of the seat. I took his place. I could hear the pounding of my heart in my ears.

A momentary pause on the line; it sounded like David had pressed the phone against his shirt, but I could still hear them talking. A rustling sound, then, “Uh, Ash? Your mom’s here.”

My mouth went completely dry and my mind whispered, “Whoosh!”

“Hello? Ashley?” David’s voice shook.

I formulated a response as I traced the pattern on the edge of my cereal bowl: “Yeah?” was all I came up with.

“Did you hear what I said? . . . Your mom’s here.”

“How did she find me?” I whispered.

“Yeah, well, remember that she lived here before. When you were a baby.”

“I forgot.”

He covered the mouthpiece better than he had the first time, and all I could hear was the muffled hint of his voice.

I strained my ears, panic-stricken with fear that my mother was here to get me. *Had David and Bev known? Is that why Bev wasn’t home, so that she could say she didn’t know that my mother was coming?*

All of the baby steps of trust I had walked toward David and Bev suddenly evaporated. I just *knew* that they expected her to come here, and they were glad I was leaving.

If I’d been in his office telling Dr. Matt the absolute crazy running through my mind, he would have looked like a piece of bacon frying in a skillet, doing a full-on body slap on his desk to try to pull me out of it. Talk about spinning. Much longer, and I would have spun right off the planet.

David came back on the line, his voice louder and angry-sounding. “Your mom would like to see you. Is that okay with you?”

I couldn’t get my voice to work. Ben stood in front of me, his eyes huge, whispering to himself, “Oh, Jeez, is she going crazy again? What am I supposed to do with her?” He left the room at a run.

“Ash? Are you all right?” David was definitely upset.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m okay.”

“Do you—” he sighed “—want to see her?” He was interrupted by my mother. I couldn’t understand what she said, but she sounded very annoyed. He didn’t bother covering the mouthpiece this time. “Well, goddammit, Cheryl, you just showed up here without telling any of us you were coming. Do you ever think of *anyone* but yourself?”

Do you ever think about what Ashley might want?”

“David? ...David!” He was still bitching at Cheryl, using more curse words in a minute than I had heard in a month’s time of living with him.

“What?!” he practically yelled into the phone.

I was startled by his tone. I whispered, “I’ll come up to the shop. Okay? I don’t want her to come down here.”

“Okay, Ash. That’ll be fine. See you in a little bit.”

My cereal forgotten, I ran to my room, slipped off my nightshirt and pajama shorts, and put on a bra, underwear, t-shirt, and denim shorts. I had finally started getting comfortable enough around the house that I would walk around in my pajamas instead of being fully dressed all the time.

I was heading out the front door when I nearly ran into Ben and his hockey stick on the porch. Ben’s hockey stick is like a security blanket for him; he pulls it out whenever he feels the need for some kind of protection, like if he startles the big fat raccoon that climbs up on the old-fashioned Coca-Cola cooler on the porch to eat the cat food at night. Ben says he’s not afraid of it, but he won’t be caught dead outside after sundown unless he’s packing his hockey stick.

I glanced at him, said nothing, and headed for the pasture gate.

The turkey hatchlings were starting to make the same sounds as their parents, and the entire barnyard crew greeted me with quacks and gobbles as I trudged up the hill to the gate. Ben followed with his hockey stick.

As I undid the chain to unhook the gate, he asked, “Well, she’s not going to take you back, is she?”

I looked back over my shoulder at him. “I hope not.”

“She *can’t!* You can’t go back there and—” he stopped suddenly and looked away.

“And what?” I asked.

“And, well, Frank told me that guy, uh, Charlie, he ... and then

your mom didn’t, you know.” He stabbed his hockey stick at the ground impatiently. “So are we going up to the shop or what?”

“You’re coming with me?” I asked.

“Hell, yeah, I’m coming with you. You’re my sister.” He squared his shoulders and flexed his scrawny biceps.

Ben and I walked through the pasture barefoot. We dodged cow patties and stinging nettle, and Ben pretended the grasshoppers were hockey pucks. He nearly beamed himself when we walked through a patch of them. Oblivious to Ben swinging his hockey stick like a golf club, their huge yellow and black bodies bounced around like popcorn.

My mother’s green Toyota sat crookedly in the Asher Automotive driveway, as if she had been in a great hurry when she parked. Frank loitered around behind the shop and did a lousy job of not being obvious that he was watching out for us. When he saw us coming, he jogged down and met Ben and me.

“Hey, Ash. Ben. Your dad wanted me to walk up with you.” He didn’t run very often, so he was breathless and his cheeks were rosy.

“Why?” Ben asked. “I *have* my hockey stick.”

“Is Charlie in there?” I felt my knees gravitating toward the ground instead of continuing toward the building.

“No, no. Hell, no!” Frank laughed uneasily and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“What’s funny about that?” Ben’s knuckles were white on the handle of his stick.

“I was just trying to picture it—what your dad would do to him—that’s all. No, it’s Cheryl, um, it’s just your mom, Ash.”

“Is she going to make me go back with her?” The air in my lungs was suddenly gone and my spine curved forward as I caved in on myself again.

“I don’t think so. She hasn’t mentioned it, anyway. She just said she wants to see you. Okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, while thinking *No!* My mind screamed *Run!* while my feet went forward. Before I knew it, I was walking around to the front of the shop, following Uncle Frank like a lamb to be sacrificed. At least that’s how I felt until I saw my mom standing in the shop, so small next to my dad. Her arms were crossed and she looked really lost, like a little kid, but a lot older at the same time.

A new wave of guilt washed over me as I realized what I’d done to her. She wasn’t wearing makeup, and she never goes anywhere without makeup. Her hair was pulled back in a barrette instead of styled—something else she never did. When I broke my arm in seventh grade P.E. and the school called Mom to come get me, she still took the time to put on makeup and do her hair: *that’s* how important her appearance is to her. Or maybe, that’s how *not* important I am to her.

“Honey!” Mom ran to me. She buried her face in my hair and hugged me, rocked me back and forth, back and forth, like Bev had in her classroom. Warmth rushed through my body. “I’ve missed my big girl so much! Oh, let me look at you!” She stood away from me and held me at arm’s length, studying my face and looking me over from head to toe.

David stood by silently. I glanced past my mother and tried to read his eyes. Maybe Dr. Matt’s been giving him lessons on how to have no expression at all: unreadable.

Ben tapped his hockey stick as he walked over to stand by my mother, a little reminder that he was ready for anything. David shot him a look and the tapping stopped, replaced by golf swings instead.

I stood before my mom, feeling as if the dream I’ve had at least a few times a week since moving to Patience was coming true. In it, she hugs me, and I feel her body against mine, smell her smell, and I inhale as if it’s the breath of life. I wake up feeling peaceful, like I do when I have the dream where I’m finally able to solve a math problem that I couldn’t figure out when I was awake. I open my eyes

and love the warm, fuzzy feeling that fills me up.

Then it hits me that I can’t remember how to solve the problem after all, and I’m back where I started: stupid all over again.

My eyes filled with tears and I soaked it in, loving the sensation of being loved by her so completely, like a baby at home in her mother’s arms.

At last she pushed away from me and again looked me up and down. Her eyebrows lowered and her eyes narrowed. Her tone changed from excited to suspicious. “Where did you get the t-shirt? And those shorts? Where are the clothes I mailed you? What’s that supposed to be on your toenails?”

I talked fast, propelled by a sense of impending doom. “Bev bought me the clothes, and we had pedicures and got our toenails painted. I got ladybugs on mine, see?”

“So... *she* takes you shopping? I wanted to take you shopping, but you never wanted to go.”

That wasn’t true. Or was this another case of my inability to tell the difference between reality and dreaming?

Ben sounded offended. “*She?* What does that lady mean by *she?*” His hockey stick was poised in mid-air, ready to defend Bev’s honor.

“Ben, I think it’s a good idea for you to go to my house and see what Steven’s doing.” Frank placed a hand on Ben’s shoulder and navigated him toward the bay doors. “This situation doesn’t need any heating up, okay?”

“But . . . she’s my sister.” Ben’s voice thickened like he was going to cry. “I don’t want her to leave, Uncle Frank.”

“Don’t worry, Ben. Your dad’s got it under control. No sweat. You run on now.”

My stepbrother dejectedly dragged his hockey stick behind him as he left the shop. I shot him a little smile as he walked by, trying to reassure him it was going to be okay... I hoped. Maybe he wasn’t quite as obnoxious as I originally thought.

Mom's tone was sarcastic. "Aw, how sweet. Must be nice for your brother and you to have such a perfect mother. . . *And* she buys you brand new clothes, because you're too good to wear what I sent."

My throat was tight. "But I—I didn't *have* any clothes when I came here, and . . . I didn't know you were going to send those clothes, and I really, um, liked getting to pick out my own clothes." I tried to curl my toes under so Mom couldn't see them anymore.

David warned, "Cheryl . . ."

She ignored him.

"Ashley, I'll be over here if you need me." David moved to join Frank by his ancient Coke machine. My uncle put his hand on my dad's back and whispered in his ear. David scowled but stood with his arms folded and nodded at what Frank told him.

"Let's sit down and talk." Mom took me by the hand, lacing her fingers through mine. She led me to a recliner and the ladder-back chair. I took the ladder-back; I knew that field mice live in the springs of the ugly yellow recliner.

"So, how have you been, baby?" she asked. *Angry Cheryl* vanished, replaced by *Concerned Cheryl*.

"Okay. . . I guess."

Mom spoke to me in baby talk. "Better?" She said it as if I had just thrown up or something.

"Well, yeah, I guess."

"Good." She rubbed my forearms gently.

Giant invisible hands squeezed my windpipe. "What about you? Are *you* okay?" I forced myself to look at her.

"Oh, I'm making it through day-by-day, I guess. Except my big girl's not home, and I need her there."

Really? Why? Warning bells went off in my head. I didn't know what to say to her, so I went for graciousness instead. "Thanks for the cards you sent. I liked them."

"Oh, you're welcome, baby. It was the only way I could get

through each day." She looked and sounded like she was starting to cry, but there were no tears in her eyes. "Then Charlie and I went through intensive therapy, and we're doing great now." She smiled bravely and wiped her invisible tears.

I tried to make the leap from Mom sending me cards—to Charlie and she going to therapy—but I couldn't see the connection. Even so, I acted like it made perfect sense.

Mom took advantage of the opening. "Yeah, we saw a great lady over in LaSalle. We saw her three times, and she said that we're great parents and there's no reason for us to see her again. She's helped us *so much*. She says that *you* have abandonment issues from your father not seeing you all those years, and that we can be a family again. She said it's important for *you* to understand that you're not the only one who has suffered in all this." By the sound of her voice, it seemed that *Angry Cheryl* was tapping on *Concerned Cheryl's* shoulder and asking to rejoin the party.

I sat in that stiff-backed chair, bowed my head, folded my hands in my lap, and listened to Mom explain why I didn't have the right to be unhappy when I was living with her.

Angry Cheryl blasted, "You know, Ashley Nicole, you're not the only person in the world who had an imperfect childhood. Compared to Charlie's, *yours* was a luxury vacation. He's been through a hell of a lot worse than you can even imagine."

If she was waiting for me to say something like "Poor Charlie," she had a long wait ahead of her. I wished Dr. Matt were right next to me, giving Mom his penetrating blue-eyed stare and telling her she was *Fucked Up*.

Mom placed the tip of her finger under my chin and tilted it up so that I had to look her in the eyes. "You seem to forget, *Princess*, that Charlie and I have given you everything you ever asked for. Don't you remember how you needed a graphing calculator for math class, and we took you right out and bought you one? Other people's parents wouldn't have spent eighty-nine dollars on a calculator just

because their kid asked for one. Other people's parents would have said, "No."

"Yeah, plus I needed it for school," I muttered under my breath.

Cheryl jumped to her feet and stood over me. "What did you say to me?" She yelled back over her shoulder, "See what happens when you spoil a child by buying her everything new, David? She gets a smart mouth and doesn't appreciate anything. *Great job, Dad.*" She laughed cruelly.

David started toward her, but Frank put his hand on David's arm and spoke quietly. The only words I picked up were, "hang herself." David looked at his feet and blew out a giant breath as if he had been holding it for an hour.

I tried to figure out why the stuff Mom and Charlie bought for me and Charlie's rotten childhood were good excuses for his abusing me or for Mom doing the Big Nothing, but I remembered that Dr. Matt said that there is *never* any excuse for sexual abuse. I kept my mouth shut as a familiar weariness started at the top of my head and worked its way down my body.

Mom was on a roll, her arms crossed as she loomed over me, her words like bullets from a machine gun. "Charlie *admits* he had a problem, Ashley Nicole. I mean, he owned up to it when you told me what you *thought* he was doing with you. But I think you should be able to get over it and, really, don't you think you have exaggerated this whole thing just a little?"

What he did with me? What the almighty fuck? Wouldn't that mean that I *wanted* him to do that stuff, if I was doing it *with him*? I focused on an ant carrying what looked like a breadcrumb across the floor. Heat rose from my toes to the top of my head. I'm amazed there wasn't steam coming out of my ears, like in a cartoon.

Mom didn't notice the temperature change in me. "Charlie told our therapist, Rose, everything, and she said that she has never seen a person turn himself around as quickly as he has. It's very rare for

anyone to take complete responsibility and be so honest. Rose says it's a miracle, given the start he had in life."

Mom abruptly shifted from assaulting me with words to preaching them loudly. "I guess I can't say I'm surprised. After all, we *did* pray about it. God works in mysterious ways, Ashley Nicole. The Lord wants the three of us to be a family. We've even joined First Church North, where Rose is a Christian counselor."

My mother stopped talking and closed her eyes as if in prayer. The ceasing of her yammering startled me out of thinking about all the years I slept in my closet. She popped one eye open, saw me watching her, took her seat again, and plunged forward into Charlie's heartbreaking past.

"Charlie's mom died when he was only two years old, Ashley Nicole. Can you *imagine* being without a mother to protect you or care about what happens to you? Think about it, Ashley Nicole. You have really been very lucky."

I stared at a grease spot on the floor. I think she realized I wasn't going to gush over her being a great mother, but that didn't slow her down any. I was so distracted by "*Whoosh*" that I only heard a broken version of what she was saying.

". . . not long after his mother died ... lady who was very nice to him and his three ... at first ... favored her own four, to the point of not even letting Charlie and his brothers and sister have the same food as she gave her children ... a very violent temper; his father would beat the kids with rubber belts that he took off cars in his junk yard ... says there was sexual abuse going on in his home, and Rose told us that it is ... that he had these urges to do these things with you. But he's over that ... read a book about it and everything, and you *know* how much he hates to read ... only did those things with you because he wasn't thinking straight, or he would never have given into temptation. . . He's so sorry, Ashley Nicole, and he loves you so much ... wishes he hadn't told you to get out. And you know his back hurts. And he doesn't even remember what you said you

two *might* have done ... we both have to trust that you aren't making things up. So let's just move on. Go pack your things, and . . ."

My voice was a strangled whisper. "Do you know what all he did to me, Mom?"

Mom made a frustrated sound, kind of like a growl and a groan mixed together. "Well, *you* claimed that he fondled you, but, like I said, that's in the past, and I just want us to have a fresh start now, so—"

"You *need* to know what all he did to me, Mom. I mean, what I remember. I *need* you to know what he did to me." The lump in my throat barely allowed my words to escape.

She sounded defensive. "Well, I think I do know everything. I know as much as I need to know; what's the dif—"

"No. You *don't*. You . . . don't know what happened when you went to get the pizza." I was sure I was going to faint. My heart pounded in my ears.

"Pizza? What on earth are you talking about?" She leaned forward at the waist, hands on her hips, one knee straight and the other slightly bent. It was the same pose I'd seen girls take at my old school when they were about to have a knockdown drag-out catfight.

I struggled to speak around the knot in my throat. "When you went to get the pizza, Mom. After Charlie was squirting us with the water gun. The Friday night before I left. Where *were* you? Why did you . . . ?"

Mom peppered right back, "It's in the past, Ashley Nicole, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. You need to get over it and move on. I mean, my God, it's been a month since *you* told Charlie to get fucked and ran off to your friend's house. *We've* gotten over it, so *you* can let this other ugliness go. Stop rehashing it."

She flopped back into the recliner and crossed her arms as if just saying, "*Get over it*" could make it happen. And that *really* pissed me off.

It was as if I was jerked to my feet by invisible marionette strings.

"*Six years of my life?*" I shrieked. "Stop *rehashing* it? You *don't even know* what he did to me. Not *with me*, Mom. *To me!*" I was crying so hard that I started coughing, and I could barely see through my tears.

Mom sprang out of the recliner, put her face in mine, and spoke through gritted teeth, the way she did when I was little if I threw a fit in the grocery store. "Look. I am willing to overlook the way you acted with my husband. The way you'd parade around in your short-shorts, and the way you just couldn't wait to act like his little servant girl each night when he got home. The rest of this—*this*—" she motioned with both hands as if trying to shake them dry —"*situation* is your problem. You're just going to have to deal with it and forgive a man who was weak. He's sorry—"

"Don't talk to me about him!" I backed away from her and felt my spine curving in. I clenched my hands against my chest as the urge to make myself as small as possible felt as if it would swallow me up.

Her face had the slipping-off-the-skull look that it had on the day I told her my stepfather had been molesting me. She started to speak, but I didn't allow her to.

"*Don't tell me* how he feels. I don't *give a shit* how he feels!"

Mom blasted, "How dare you speak to me like that? Does your father allow you to talk like that? Well, I will put a stop to it right now! Sit down!"

"No! I won't sit down! And I won't listen to anymore about Charlie! I hate him. *I hate him*. Do you understand me? He *broke me*, Mom! I'm all fucked up now!"

Preacher Cheryl tapped in. "Ashley Nicole, it is a sin to say you hate someone. If you say you hate someone, it means that you wish death on them. I know you don't mean that you wish Charlie was dead."

I violently shook my head and backed away from her. I may as well have been speaking in tongues for all the sense I made, but I heard myself mutter, “You are out of your fucking mind, Mom.” I bent at the knees to try to catch my breath. When I looked up, David was standing to my right and a little in front of me.

Mom stepped around him and continued her verbal assault. “You were raised a Christian, Ashley Nicole. If there’s one thing I’ve learned by joining First Church North, it’s that Christians *forgive*. It’s what Jesus told us to do: forgive. You will not be allowed through the Gates of Heaven if you cannot forgive Charlie for something he has apologized about—not to you, since you ran off down here and all—but he apologized to me and told me to tell you. I am shocked and disappointed that you cannot find compassion in your heart for someone who had a much worse childhood than you can even imagine. Your grandparents have forgiven him. I’ve forgiven him. We’ve been worried that he might kill himself, he’s been so depressed without you at home!”

David took a step toward my mother. “Jesus Christ, Cheryl, give it a goddamn rest! When are you going to get it through your head that there’s no excuse for what that son of a bitch did to our daughter? When are you going to own *your* part in this?”

The shrill howl of a puppy made us all turn toward the sound. It came from Cheryl’s car.

“Oh! She’s awake!” David’s hard questions for her ignored or conveniently forgotten, Mom darted to her car and bent down through the open window on the passenger side. When she returned to the shop, she carried a pudgy Yellow Labrador puppy with a red fabric bow on its neck.

My heart melted at the sight, even though I’d sworn that I’d never let myself love another animal because it hurts too much when they die. Charlie made sure I *hurt* when he killed my rabbits.

Mom spoke in baby talk. “Look at her, Ashley Nicole! Put your face in hers, honey! She has puppy breath and everything!” She

shoved the furry baby into my arms. I looked into its soft brown eyes and wondered what the pup was thinking.

“You brought her a dog, Cheryl?” David’s voice was flat.

“Well, I brought the dog to show her. It’s *her* dog, David. But it stays at my house.”

The puppy already fit exactly right in my arms. She looked like she loved me. Already. Maybe she did. I kissed the top of her head, and the puppy licked my chin.

Then my mother’s words sank into my mind: *the puppy is mine, but it stays at my house*. Trapped again. I couldn’t go back there. Not for a puppy, not for a million dollars. I couldn’t!

Unless ...

“Mom, is Charlie still going to be living at your house? He would leave if I came back, right?”

Her eyes looked like lasers; her mouth was a straight line. “*Of course* he’s still living there. He’s my husband, and it’s *his* house. Why would he leave? He loves me—and you!”

I flashed back to the day in the kitchen when she told me we were all going to move on. “Mom, how *can* you?”

Shards of glass. I *was* shards of glass. I felt myself breaking apart again in the face of her denial. “*Whoosh*.”

I carefully handed the puppy to David and stepped back, crossed my arms, looked at my feet, and suddenly hated the painted ladybugs on my toes. *I’m stupid for liking the way they looked, and everyone else is laughing at me because they look so dumb*. I was tempted to kneel at that moment and peel the polish off.

I wanted a small, dark place to hide. I wanted to tear off the clothes that Bev bought me. *I look goofy in them. Why did I think I could be like everyone else for once?* I wanted to pull my hair out by the roots, to feel some kind of pain in the face of numbing disbelief. I was *nothing* to my mother.

Nothing.

I swayed on my feet and almost fell over as pizza night in May

scrolled through my mind like a fast-forwarding movie.

My body in the doorway.

On the floor in the guest room.

Bright red blood.

His voice at the door.

Where was my mother?

The flashback lasted mere seconds, and when I “popped” back into the shop, my mother looked disgusted.

Unable to stay out of it anymore, Frank, the only calm one among us, joined our standoff with my mother. “Cheryl, this is dirty pool. You bring Ashley this dog and let her know that she can only see it if she comes to your house? After *what happened* to her there? Woman, you are priceless. Truly priceless. Take your dog and go home. This is *not* how mothers act.”

“Well, what would you know about how mothers act, Frank? Your own mother couldn’t keep a roof over your heads, much less hang on to a husband. And David tells me that your *own* kid doesn’t even have a mother. Seems to me that you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Frank was not so easily baited. He smiled sadly, shook his head, and turned to David, who placed the puppy in my uncle’s outstretched arms. Frank started toward the driveway.

Mom stamped her foot and shrieked, “Where are you going with that dog? What are you doing? That dog’s not staying here, Frank! Ashley only gets the dog if she comes back with me! Charlie said so, she has to—” Mom stopped when she saw Frank lean into the passenger window of her car and gently set the puppy on the front seat. He gave the dog a little pat on the head then walked off toward his house.

The puppy immediately started crying and howling the “I’m lost and alone” S-O-S that frightened baby dogs send out.

Mom cooed, “Aw, she’s crying, Ashley Nicole. She wants you to hold her, baby. Don’t you want to hold her some more so that she

can get used to you? You’ve always wanted a dog like her. Remember when you used to ask for a puppy but Charlie always said no? He’s changed, Ashley Nicole. Isn’t this proof enough for you that he’s changed?”

She sounded far away, and I felt myself again checking out from where I was.

Mom talked fast. “The puppy doesn’t have a name yet. Charlie wanted me to wait and let you name it. The dog was his idea. Not mine, his! He’s the one who insisted we get her for you to make up for what happened, for the misunderstanding. So we can start over. Rose says we can be a family now. Are you listening, Ashley Nicole? Rose says we can be a family.”

I had to get away from her. I turned and walked briskly toward the open bay door. My mother rushed forward and grabbed my upper arm, her fingernails digging into my flesh.

“Don’t touch me!” I tore away as if her hands were on fire. “Let go of me! You don’t love me. You *must not* love me.” I jerked my arm free, her nails leaving long deep scratches when she would not willingly release me.

“Ashley, if you walk away from me now, you’re on your own! Don’t you dare walk away from me!”

“I already *am* on my own, thanks to you!” I wept as I picked up my pace. I wanted so much to run to her car, pick up the puppy, and keep going until I reached the Gulf Coast. I worried what kind of mother *my mother* would be to the puppy, for God’s sake! I glanced into her car as I passed it, and the pup’s crying ceased when she thought I was coming to get her. *Nope, baby-dog, I’m leaving you behind, just like everybody else. Sorry. I know how you feel.*

I pounded up the driveway to the black asphalt county road and hooked a left at the gate, heading in the opposite direction of the main road. I had never been past our driveway and had no idea where our road led, but, for once in my life, I wasn’t afraid. I let those ladybugs on my toes carry me right down the road, and,

although I sobbed uncontrollably, I felt free, as if I was flying. I felt alive, a flower turning toward the sun.

CHAPTER TEN

The ladybugs on my toes were too tired to carry me another step. I was so thirsty that I contemplated drinking out of the creek, and I was as lost as I could be. I couldn't even use landmarks to find my way home. All the trees looked the same, and most of the roads were unmarked.

I found a plastic milk crate on the side of the road, flipped it upside down, and sat on it to look at the blisters on the bottoms of my feet. I'd peeled back the skin on one and was examining the raw meat beneath it when I heard a truck and looked up to see David's old Ford heading my way.

He pulled beside me and rolled the window down. "Mm, boy, does the air conditioning in this truck feel good. You going my way, by chance?" He leaned over and popped the passenger door open.

I nodded gratefully and hobbled to the truck. "Thanks."

"Don't you want your milk crate?" He winked.

"Nah, I think I'll leave it there for the next lost person."

He frowned. "So you were lost, not just resting? Really?"

I cringed inwardly. My lack of an inner compass was one of Charlie's favorite weak spots to ridicule me about. "Well, I was resting, too, but yeah, I have no idea where I am."

"That's an easy problem to solve." David pulled paper and a pen out of his glove box. He drew a map right then and there so I could see where I had ended up in relation to where our house is.

Then he drove me home, which, it turns out, was less than a mile away. I'd been too out of my mind to realize I'd passed the same green metal barn countless times.

I got a huge drink of water and a long cold shower. I was getting dressed when there was a knock on my door.

David said, "Hey, come on out so that we can eat lunch together. Then I'd like us to talk about what happened this morning."

Oh, God, he wants to "have a talk." I knew how those worked with Charlie, and I felt punched in the gut as memories flooded back: sitting for hours on the sticky leather sofa and being told what a stupid worthless bitch I am.



We sat at the kitchen table and ate lunch. Steven begged Bev to let Ben and him blow up a few things with the M-80 firecrackers they'd stashed. "After all, the Fourth of July is next week. The fireworks stands are open, Aunt Bev. Everybody else is setting them off early!"

Bev shook her head. "No. You guys pull those firecrackers out of wherever you hid them, and you can forget about having any fireworks next week. I mean it!"

"Aw, why not? We're old enough to know what to do with them," Ben said through a mouthful of hot dog.

Bev was exasperated. "I know! That's what scares me. I want you to have adult supervision. You guys are way too creative thinkers when it comes to making things like mailboxes and wasp nests go *Boom!*"

Ben's eyes lit up. "Wasp nests! Hey, we hadn't even thought of that yet!" He watched for Bev's reaction.

"David! Talk to your son." Bev sighed and poured herself a glass of iced tea.

David paused with his hot dog halfway to his mouth. His face

and voice were absolutely solemn as he set the hot dog down on his plate, cleared his throat, took a deep breath in, then blew it out. I had learned to read that breathing thing as meaning *David's trying not to lose his temper.*

As if I wasn't already nervous enough about my dad telling he wanted to "talk to me about what happened," Ben had to go and get him really pissed off. *Thanks a lot, Ben.*

"Look, son, there will be no blowing up of wasp nests. They're not substantial enough to make a big *Splat!* anyway. Now, Uncle Frank has an old toilet out behind the shop, and I'm thinkin' ..." He explained a detailed plan for sending the toilet skyward.

Bev groaned in exasperation, although she smiled at the same time. "I'm surrounded by little boys! Ashley, I guess you and I will have to be the sensible ones in this house. We women must stick together."

"I don't know, Bev—I didn't use my head too well when I took myself on a road trip." I grimaced as I hobbled to the sink with my plate. I hadn't been able to eat much; there was no room for food with all the butterflies in my stomach.

"Speaking of that. . ." said David.

Frank took the cue. "Come on, guys. Bev's right, you know. You shouldn't set those M-80s off without David or me there. I mean, come on, don't you think we want to see the show, too? I guarantee it'll be worth the wait when you see that toilet shoot straight up, but maybe we can practice on some smaller things right now."

"Hang on, Uncle Frank!" Ben ran to the china cabinet, pulled open the bottom drawer, and retrieved a raggedy paper sack. "Here they are!"

"You got matches?" Steven asked his dad.

"Hell, we don't need matches, son. I got a blow torch'll work just fine."

Bev's jaw dropped. "You're kidding, right, Frank? *Frank?* You're kidding, right?"

Frank smiled and closed the front door as he and the boys left.

I sighed heavily, trying to stay calm. I hate not knowing what to expect.

“What’s wrong?” David leaned back in his chair and stretched out his long legs.

“I—I guess I’m nervous. I’ve heard you yell at my mom but not at me, and I’m wondering if you’re going to cuss at me as much as you do at . . . her.” I shook a little as I took my seat across the table from him.

David looked embarrassed. “Well, I’m not a monster, except, I guess, when it comes to your mother, but I’m working on getting that under control.”

“She makes me feel like screaming too, if it makes you feel any better.” I moved some crumbs around my placemat and wrote the word *No* again and again with my finger.

“Well, let’s just stick to what I need to tell you. I understand that your feelings are all mixed up as far as your mom goes, Ash, and I don’t blame you for being angry at her. But you punished *all* of us by running off down the road and us having no idea what you were thinking about doing. We were very worried about you, because you don’t seem to realize yet that you’re a worthy person. You are worthy of love, for the simple reason that you exist.”

I was shocked: *how does he know I hate myself?* He must have been reading my mind. What he said next convinced me of it.

“It’s the way you carry yourself, Ashley, like a whipped dog, afraid to make eye contact, certain that any minute somebody’s going to take after you with a rolled up newspaper. It looks to me like you’re the only person in this house who does not love you.”

Tears spilled down the sides of my nose.

David continued, “Now, I’m not trying to make you cry. I just want you to know that I’ve been paying attention to how you’re acting, and I was worried to death that you were going to do some-

thing impulsive to yourself when you took off.

“I want you to promise that you won’t do anything to hurt yourself, no matter how rough the road ahead of you is. Dr. Matthews told us that it’s not going to be easy, and it’s going to be a long haul. He also said that he has no doubt that you are tough enough to make it, because you are an unusually strong person. *Promise me, Ashley.*” His eyes were full of tears, and he looked like he might break down and sob like I already was.

I wasn’t sure I meant it at all, but I said it anyway: “I promise.”

“One more thing.” He handed me his napkin for my wet cheeks, since I’d already used mine and everybody else’s left behind on the table, and yet the tears would not stop flowing. “If you ever feel like you want to take off like that again, just tell one of us where you’re going and when you plan to be back, so we don’t worry about you quite as much as we did today. Okay?”

Bev, who sat silently in the rocking chair, plopped a big box of tissues on the table. David and I reached for them at the same time, then laughed at ourselves for doing that.

I never felt that he was yelling at me or that I was worthless. Instead, I felt cared about. I still couldn’t imagine how any of them could love me. They didn’t know me, so I guessed they hadn’t realized what a loser I thought I was.

Bev moved to sit next to me. “How are you doing as far as the things your mom said to you? David and Frank told me about what happened this morning. I’m sorry I wasn’t here to support you. If I’d known she was coming, I would have been.”

I didn’t have an answer for her. It hurt so badly that I couldn’t even talk about it. I shook my head and stared at the crumbs surrounded by teardrops on the placemat.

I could have these thoughts: *Why don’t I matter to my mother? Why doesn’t she even want to know what Charlie did to me? How can she expect me to forget everything and move on when it hasn’t*

been dealt with?

But I couldn't speak the words.

David sighed wearily. "Maybe that's something you need to talk to Dr. Matthews about, if you don't want to talk to us about it."

I felt cornered, like I was disappointing David and Bev because I didn't have words for the hurt. "It's not that I don't want to talk to you about my mom; it's because it all feels so big that I don't even know where to start. And it makes me feel like complete and utter shit about myself. So . . . I guess I try not to think about it."

"That's the thing about pain, Ash. You can either feel it now or feel it later, but eventually, it has to be felt." Bev reached for my hand.

I yanked my hand back, suddenly angry and not knowing why. "I don't want to feel it. I don't want to talk about it. And I don't want to be pressured to think about it, either. Leave me alone about my mom!"

She looked shocked, having never met this side of me before—what Bo Brewster, the main character in *Ironman*, calls "the monster inside."

"Okay, it's fine. No pressure. I'm sorry."

I immediately felt guilty for snapping at her. "No, *I'm* sorry. I am. I feel mixed up inside. I really need to be alone now." I rose and went to my room.

I lay my head on my pillow, stared at the whirring ceiling fan, and tried to make sense of my life. If I just came at it from the correct angle, maybe I'd be able to figure out how I'd ended up where I was. The harder I thought, the more confused I became, and I pictured my mind as the ceiling fan.

Spinning.

I envisioned myself being flung off my bed and far into outer space, where no one could touch me.

Blackness.

Cool, soft, blackness.



"Guys, I told you on the first day of summer school that Chris Crutcher is an author who is unafraid to write the truth. Through our study of the novel, *Ironman*, we're exploring the issues of honesty with oneself, anger, respect, fear, and responsibility. Right?" Bev sat on her desk, cross-legged. "Over the past four weeks, you've written three essays. Now it's time for the biggie: your last, most important essay. It will be worth fifty percent of your grade for this course. Any questions so far?"

Nobody raised their hand, and she continued.

"It's time for you to demonstrate that you have benefited from the numerous discussions we've had about the issues in the book and the way Mr. Crutcher explores them through characterization and plot development. You should be aware by now of what I expect in terms of the basic writing skills and the higher-level thinking I want to see in your work. I have emphasized the importance of being honest with yourself and owning what is true for you—like Bo Brewster learned to do in *Ironman*. Today, I am giving you the essay topics to choose from for your last assignment."

"It's about time," T.W. muttered.

"Ah, yes, T.W., I know that you have been chomping at the bit to dazzle me with your brilliance, and here's your chance!" Bev continued presenting the information as if she was a game show host. She hopped off her desk, placed a paper under the document camera, and passed out duplicates of it.

T.W. frowned at the topics. "Mrs. Asher, how will we know if we're writing a passing paper?"

"What do you mean?"

"I made Bs on the other essays I turned in. You kept telling me not to worry about it, because I could still make an A in the class. I haven't told my dad about the other essays, even though, believe me, he's been asking me every other day."

She replied patiently, “T.W., as far as I can remember, *B* is a passing grade.”

“Don’t you get it? I’m not *allowed* to make *Bs*. I can’t make a *B*! They’re unacceptable in my house. My dad will go nuts if I bring home anything less than an *A*!” T.W.’s eyes filled with tears.

Bev rolled her chair from behind her desk and stopped in front of him. She sat down, leaned forward, placed her palms on his desk, and spoke kindly though firmly. “T.W., the reason you made *Bs* on your other papers was that you kept telling me what you thought I wanted to hear, instead of what was true for you. Stop pandering to me and be your own person, for God’s sake. Tell me what you think, not what you think I want to read!”

“But . . . how did you know I wasn’t being myself?” he whispered into his desktop.

“We have been together four hours a day, five days a week, the past four weeks, sweetheart. I have listened to your opinions and refereed debates between you and your classmates. When I compare who you are when you think nobody’s watching to who you are when you are trying to suck up and get an *A*, it’s like night and day. Decide who you are and *be* that person.” Bev stood and rolled her chair back behind her desk.

“Oh. And if I do, I’ll get an *A*?” T.W.’s mood had done a complete one-eighty turnaround.

“Yes!” Bev sat heavily in her chair and put her head in her hands.



The friendship between Dub White and Kevin “Widetrack” Cooper had not been the same since Kevin told his parents about the spray paint cans he found in the bed of his truck and the orange road paint on Dub’s shoes that matched the words on Z.Z.’s front door. Mr. and Mrs. Cooper called the police, and Dub was arrested

for suspicion of a hate crime.



The night of his arrest was the worst Dub had ever lived through. It was even scarier than the night his father moved out, when, no matter what he did, he could not make his mother stop crying.

Hours passed slowly as Dub sat in the jail cell, wondering if Billy Ray was really going to let him take the rap for painting *Get Out Niggers* on the Freemans’ front door.

It would be different if Billy Ray hadn’t told me he did it, laughing his ass off about it the entire time. The cops said that painting the door was a hate crime, and the federal government might even get involved. Dub was scared to death. He didn’t know much about being in jail, but he had watched enough reruns of *Law and Order* to know that arrested people had the right to speak to a lawyer. He was just about to ask about that when an officer unlocked his cell and told him to go home.

The police had let him go when his youth pastor confirmed Dub’s alibi that he was at a church lock-in on the night of the vandalism. And thank God for Veronica Salazar. If he didn’t have it so bad for her, no way he ever would have attended that church lock-in. And it’s not like he had chances outside of youth group to see Veronica.

Billy Ray hated anyone who wasn’t white, Latinos included. When Dub thought about what his stepfather would do if he knew Dub had spent the whole night holding hands with a “*Beaner*”—that’s what Billy Ray called Latinos—well, the man would have a wall-eyed shit fit. But, boy, it had been worth the risk.

When he was with Veronica, Dub acted like less of a jerk and he knew it. He didn’t feel the need to put other people down. Something about the way Veronica saw him made Dub feel so good about himself, and then there was no need for him to act like an ass.



The hate crime case was in limbo. Not solved, but at least directed away from the Sublett home. Billy Ray had convincingly played the part of the hyper-concerned citizen who couldn't possibly do enough to help the police investigate Dub's connection to the words painted on the Freemans' door.

He wasn't surprised when they showed up with a search warrant. When the police detective called about Dub's arrest, Billy Ray shot right out to the shed and started scouring it for paint cans.

Anticipating their arrival with a search warrant, Billy Ray even made sure to be fully dressed instead of sitting around in his underwear until noon the way he usually did. Wanted to be able to get the door quickly. Didn't want them to get suspicious.

"Now, I don't think that our Wilbur would do such a thing to those fine people's home, Officer, but then, you never do know with these young people today, do you? They get all these wild ideas, playing them violent video games and all. Would you guys like a beer? I got long-necks iced down in the cooler on my racing mower out there."

"No, thank you, Mr. Sublett; we'll just let you read over this search warrant while we get started. Mind directing us to your shed?" The officer was all business. The Patience Police Department was aware that the FBI was closely monitoring the investigation, and they didn't want to embarrass themselves by screwing it up.

As he led them down the steps and around to the back of the trailer, Billy Ray hid his disappointment that the cops were not impressed about his racing lawnmower. The police found him to be the very picture of cooperation. No family loyalty here; in fact, Billy Ray seemed almost too willing to help them charge his stepson with the crime.

Until the officers made him step outside the shed so that they could conduct a proper search, Billy Ray was right there with them,

picking up boxes and relocating piles of mower parts, all in an effort to help the police search for evidence.

The officer asked for Dub's shoes, but they were missing. Billy Ray wondered aloud if the boy had thrown them in the lake, knowing full well that they had been burned up. He may not have wanted Dub to throw them away when he first saw him tossing them like footballs into the trash barrel, but he breathed a sigh of relief as the line of police cars pulled away, leaving dust clouds in their wake.

His relief turned to fury after the cops burned out of his driveway and he discovered his racing mower, Bubba's Dream, covered in a fine layer of sand. The race in Tyler coming up in just two days, and now he had to wash and wax his ticket to the big time, all over again. Damn.



Z.Z., Aurelia, Mr. Walden, and Bev had a meeting to discuss Z.Z.'s accusation of Dub vandalizing her home. Z.Z. agreed that until the police brought formal charges, she would refrain from accusing anyone of doing the deed.

Not content to leave it at that, Mr. Walden leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his chest. "Now, young lady, you can't just go around blaming innocent folks for painting ugly things on your front door. You're not the judge, jury, and executioner, and if I hear tell of you going after anybody else just because they have orange paint on their shoes, we're going to have a problem. Maybe going off and being all noisy and radical about things is the way you people did it back in Nacogdoches, but it's not the way we do it here in Patience."

"What do you mean, 'you people'?" Z.Z. leaned forward in her chair and put her elbows on his desk. "Do you mean black people, or *all* the people who got '*Get out Niggers*' painted on their front doors?"

“You know what I mean.” Mr. Walden stroked the ridiculous little puff of beard on his chin.

Aurelia spoke up. “No, I’m sure I do not know what you mean, Mr. Walden. Why don’t you tell me what you mean by ‘you people’?”

Mr. Walden squirmed, and his shiny head broke out in a sweat. “I simply meant people from Nacogdoches. Not you, er, *you* people, that is, um, *your* race in particular.”

Z.Z. sat back abruptly. “*Hmph*. Well, excuse me, then. I guess I’m just wondering why Mr. Dub White isn’t in this meeting too, seeing as how he called me an uppity nigger on the same day that I said he painted my granny’s door.”

The color drained from Walden’s face, and he grasped for a response. “Well. Uh, we all know that Dub didn’t mean anything by it. I can vouch for his family’s excellent character, because I’ve known his parents for years. In fact, I went to school right here with his daddy, Billy Ray Sublett. You can trust me when I tell you that Dub was talking out of school. He’s good people.”

Bev snapped, “Are you telling me that as long as you went to high school with a member of the family, it’s acceptable for one student to label another with a racial slur? If that’s your position as an administrator, I am going on record with you right now: I don’t care if Dub’s stepfather was one of the twelve apostles. *No one* gets to talk like that in my classroom. Zaquoiah has as much right as all the other kids to feel safe at school, and it’s perfectly reasonable that she was upset by the things some ignorant racists have been doing for kicks. Dub *did* have paint on his shoes that matched the paint on her door. He didn’t even try to explain it; he just let fly with the racial epithets.”

“This is a matter for the police to investigate, Mrs. Asher, and I don’t have any positions on anything, you know that. I mean, uh ...” He glanced at his watch and rose out of his chair. “I have an interview waiting to come in. This meeting is concluded. Close my

door on your way out.”

Aurelia, Z.Z., and Bev left his office and walked out into the empty waiting area.

“I am so sorry that my principal is such an ...” Bev tried to think of a word that would fall within the realm of professionalism, but she couldn’t. Instead, she shrugged and shook her head, hoping the sick look on her face would convey what she really wanted to say. She held open the front door for Aurelia and Z.Z. All three of them blinked in the sunshine.

Aurelia smiled ruefully and shook her head. “I know, honey. It’s nothing I haven’t lived with for the past eighty-odd years, and I expect it’ll keep on even after I’m gone.”

Sounding a lot younger than her fifteen years, Z.Z. whined, “But, Granny, you said we could change things around here with Ms. Mason’s money. You said she charged you with making Patience a better place and that we—our family—could be the ones to make it different for people coming after us.”

“Yes, sweet baby, I did, but change takes time. Money helps, but changing people’s hearts . . . it takes a long time,” Aurelia gently stroked the back of Z.Z.’s neck.

Bordering on hysteria, Z.Z. cried, “You mean, people are going to keep painting ‘*Get Out Niggers*’ on our door, trying to kill our dog, and making it so that Jasper can’t walk down the street no more without being afraid?”

“They might,” Aurelia stated matter-of-factly.

Z.Z.’s face crumpled and she squatted where she stood in the parking lot, hands over her face and sobbing. Bev knelt next to her and draped her arm over her shoulders.

“Z.Z., your granny’s right. That kind of stuff might continue, but you’ve got to remember that you’re not alone. There are plenty of us who care about you, who will stand up with you against the morons who do that kind of crap.”

“Zaquoiah Freeman, stand up,” Aurelia commanded.

Z.Z. didn't rise.

"I said, *stand up!*" Her tone yanked Z.Z.'s spine straight and brought her to her full height. Aurelia commanded, "Now look me in the eye, child."

Z.Z. obeyed.

"Don't you *never* let me see you with your back bowed because of this kind of foolishness, *ever again*. Hear?" Aurelia's ebony eyes shot sparks.

"Mm-hmm." Z.Z.'s shoulders temporarily slumped.

Aurelia put an arthritic hand on a bony hip and worked her neck. She practically yelled, "What did you say, Zaquoiah? I *asked* if you heard me tell you to never again let me see you all bent over and broke because of some fool's misguided sense of justice. Did you hear me? *Answer me* the way I raised you up!"

"Yes, ma'am," Z.Z. squared her shoulders and replied in a strong voice, an echo of Aurelia's.

"Now, that's what I want to hear! You are a strong, proud, powerful black woman, and don't you *never* let no foolishness make you cry." She nodded toward the front office and declared, "As far as that sad little man in there . . .? Ain't no man going to be sitting behind a desk, pat you on the head and say, 'Go away now, little black girl, and don't be reminding me of how far you've come.' Not *now*, when I'm alive, and not *later*, when I'm dead!"

"I'm not saying you don't got to respect people, Z.Z. But I *am* saying that you don't never have to be ashamed of standing up for who you are and *what* you are—and what you *ain't*. Now, we got things to do for the community center, so let's go."

"Yes, ma'am," Z.Z. said. Over her granny's shoulder, she saw Junior Alvarez back his blue Geo Storm into a parking spot.



Junior opened the back passenger door and gently removed

Three Alvarez from his car seat. Supporting his neck as he lifted him out of the car and into the sunshine, Junior spoke soothing words when the baby scrunched up his face in reaction to the sunshine.

He hoisted Three so the baby's head rested against his shoulder, then picked up his English folder and shoved it into the diaper bag. He slammed the car door with his foot and walked toward Bev, who was watching Z.Z. and Aurelia drive away.

"Hey, Junior, how's it going?" Bev said.

"Okay, Miss. This," he turned around so Bev could see his son's round little face, "is my son, Hector Alvarez the Third. We call him Three."

"Hi, Three," Bev said in the high voice that people automatically adopt when speaking to infants. "He's beautiful, Junior."

"Thanks, Miss," Hector radiated pride.

"What're you up to?" Bev walked with them toward the front door and smiled again as she gazed at the thick black hair covering Three's head and sticking out every which way.

"I came to turn in the third essay, like we talked about before. I was hoping we could talk about the book while I'm here."

"Sure we can. You know, I really liked your first two essays. You did a great job on them." She held the door for Hector to enter.

"Really, Miss? You think so?"

"Absolutely. You're a very good writer, Junior." She glanced toward the office. Mr. Walden was alone, talking on the phone at Marvella's desk. Bev caught his eye and he scowled.

"Thanks, Miss. I had my girlfriend, Moreyma, look at it before I turned it in. She's good at English. She was wondering, if she took this class next summer, if she could do like I've been doing since I have these two jobs and all."

"You mean, reading the book on your own and basically making this an independent study course?" Bev unlocked her classroom door.

“Yeah, I guess it’s what you call it.”

“Well, if she’s in the same sort of time crunch as you are next summer, and if I’m teaching this class, I guess we could talk about it then.” Bev held out her hands for Three and a grinning Hector handed him to her, slipped the diaper bag from his shoulder, and pulled his English II folder from it.

He slid into a desk and watched his teacher make googly eyes at his son for a minute or two before telling her, “I’ve learned a lot about myself from this class. From you. Thank you, Miss.”

Forcing herself to look away from Three’s beautiful eyes, she said, “It’s my pleasure, Junior. I admire what you’re trying so hard to do, and you do quality work, too. You have the ability to make it in college. I know you do. If you need a letter of recommendation for scholarships, I’d be honored if you’d ask me to write one for you.”

Three fussed a little and Bev turned him so that he could see his daddy. He stuck a fat little fist in his mouth when he saw Junior, then pulled it out and smiled at him. Junior stared into his son’s eyes and smiled. “I’m going to make it, Miss. I’m doing it the right way. For him.”



“What do you think he wants with me?” Roxanne asked Z.Z. and me. The three of us had become close friends, and Roxanne’s shyness was fading away.

“What do you mean?” Z.Z. asked.

“I mean, why do you think Kevin asked me to go with him to the fireworks show in Tyler?”

“Well, gee, Rox, maybe he doesn’t want to go by himself, and thought he might have a good time with you?” I was only half-listening. I had stayed up too late playing video games the night before. Well, I played the game while Ben told me what to do. I was improv-

ing steadily. My little brother was a patient teacher.

“You don’t get it, Ash. What do you think he wants with *me*? The day of the accident when my face was ripped open, my life stopped. I’ve watched other girls get boyfriends, but I’ve never had one. No boy wants to be seen with me.”

“But you’re great—” I told her.

Roxanne held up her hand. “No. Let me finish.” She choked up, covered her face with her hands for a moment, and took a deep breath. Finally, she continued in a small voice. “Last year, a boy—Dane Rice—asked me to the Homecoming dance. At first I didn’t think he meant it, but I was stupid enough to convince myself that he did, because he told me that he wanted to ask me before anyone else did. My aunt took off from her evening job and took me to the mall. We found a beautiful dress on sale. She had just enough money to buy it for me. I felt like a model in it.”

Z.Z. took one of Roxanne’s hands, and I held the other one.

“Dane never showed up. My aunt and uncle were at work, and I sat by the front door, waiting and waiting.” Tears began rolling down her cheeks. She let them flow instead of letting go of our hands.

“At ten o’clock, I finally turned off the porch light, took off the dress, and hung it in the back of my closet. I never told my aunt that I didn’t go. I lied to her and told her it was great. I couldn’t disappoint her. She was so proud of being able to buy me that dress.”

“Oh, Roxanne,” I whispered. I released her hand and wiped away a tear. “I’m so sorry.”

“You’re looking at this all wrong, girl,” Z.Z. said.

“What?” Roxanne shook her head.

“I *said*, you’re looking at this all wrong. That boy not showing up was about him, not *you*. You ask, why you?” Z.Z.’s voice grew louder. “A better question is, *why not* you?”

Roxanne ducked. “Keep your voice down!” She leaned around me to see if the guys were listening but they were oblivious, talking

about the football practice schedule Coach Griffin had posted that morning.

“Do I have to draw you a picture? I’ll just say it, okay?” Roxanne breathed in and out slowly and held her hands like horse blinders as she stared at her desktop.

“Okay,” Z.Z. and I said together.

“Look at me. Dub had it right the first day of school. I look like Dr. Frankenstein put me together. I could star in a horror movie and they wouldn’t even have to hire a makeup artist. I’ve never had anybody like Kevin pay attention to me! I mean, every day, he talks to me and wants to give me a ride home and acts like he likes me.” She moved her head side to side. “That’s why I want to know what he really wants with me.”

“Well, look at *him*,” Z.Z. said, doing the closest thing to a whisper that she was capable of. She cocked her head and assessed Kevin: “His head’s too small for the rest of his body; he already looks like he’s losing his hair, and he’s *still* carrying around all his baby fat.”

Roxanne’s hands flew from her face and slapped the desk. “That’s not true, Z.Z.! I don’t see Kevin that way at all!”

The low rumble of the boys’ sports talk abruptly stopped. I rushed to do damage control. “Really, Roxanne? Because I think that guy named Kevin... who wants to beat up Bo Brewster... isn’t a nice person. So you think he is a nice person—in the book we’re reading—in this class?”

Sports Talk resumed. Roxanne threw herself facedown on her desk and breathed a sigh of relief. Z.Z. shook her head and frowned at me. “Girl, you are *not* a smooth liar.”

I ignored her. “Well, Roxanne, if you can see him differently than Z.Z. sees him, don’t you think he could see you differently than you see yourself?” I used my finger to trace an invisible outline of a heart on my desktop. I added an invisible arrow right through the center, and looked up at Roxanne.

“Damn straight. And, girlfriend, stop talking about my friend Roxy like you was,” Z.Z. said to Roxanne. “We three are powerful, strong, amazing young ladies. We don’t need to be puttin’ ourselves down. The world got enough people already trying to do that. Hear?”

“He’s really sweet, isn’t he?” Roxanne smiled at Kevin.

Z.Z. and I high-fived. “I do believe somebody’s going to the Fourth of July Fireworks Extravaganza in Tyler, Miss Z.Z.!”

“Miss Ashley Asher, I do believe you are cor-rect!”

“Aw, you guys,” Roxanne blushed.



On the Fourth of July, Bev, Aurelia, Jewel, and Z.Z. set up a table near the entrance of the rodeo arena and handed out surveys designed to measure public interest and support for a community help center. Many people asked Aurelia how the investigation into the hate-crime incidents was going.

Jasper sat nearby, his bruises and scrapes nearly healed. He was decked out in a red, white, and blue basketball jersey and shorts, and wore his wide-brim cap low over his eyes. Aurelia had not allowed him to walk up and down Main Street alone anymore, and he spent most of his time since what they called “the accident” stroking his dog Buddy’s soft fur and hoping that if he loved him through it, Buddy would fully recover from his near-fatal poisoning.

Z.Z. stuck close to her grandmother and cousin. She told herself how strong, proud, and powerful she was, but the scowls on the faces of some passersby made her wonder, *Are you the one who painted our door? Did you drive the car that nearly killed my cousin?*

I had never been to a small-town Fourth of July like the one in Patience. The parade included Pee Wee football teams and their cheerleaders riding in truck beds, old people showing off their classic

cars, and rodeo clowns. David, Ben, and I wandered through the artists' booths that lined the square, but the heat was relentless by early afternoon and only getting worse. There was no breeze at all, and dark clouds were building on the horizon.

We decided to go home to cool off, then return in the evening for fireworks at the rodeo arena.



The phone rang as David unlocked the front door and carried in groceries we'd bought on the way home. "Can you get it, Ash?"

I picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Well, hello, Ashley Nicole," said Charlie. He sounded drunk.

My knees buckled and my heart pounded in my ears. "... Hi," I finally managed.

"Are you having a nice Independence Day?" he asked sweetly.

David placed the milk in the refrigerator, closed the door, and whispered to me, "Who is it?"

I didn't look at him—instead, I fixed my eyes on the countertop. My mind whispered, "*Whoosh.*"

"You know, Ashley, you've broken your mother's heart. She's not the same person. She'll never be happy again, and it's all your fault," Charlie said in the same low, whispery voice he used to tell me how sexy I was when I was eleven.

"I'm sorry." I didn't sound like myself to me.

David gently took the phone from my hand and listened. His face contorted until he didn't look at all like the David I'd started to feel I knew. It was like watching a movie where the mild-mannered guy turns into a werewolf. I felt my spine curving in and my body locking down. Between Charlie's voice and David's transformation into the *monster* my mother had spoken of, I was going into Survival Mode.

"Baker? You son of a bitch, don't you ever call my daughter

again. I'll kill you, do you hear me? I'll fucking kill you!"

David reared back his arm to throw the cordless phone across the room. Ben grabbed David's bicep, hanging on for dear life. "Dad! Don't! Mom will have a fit if you break another phone! We just got this one!" Ben bounced around like he was trying to harness a mechanical bull.

David started to shake Ben off but caught himself. He closed his eyes, inhaled and exhaled slowly, and lowered Ben to the ground. A moment later, he opened his eyes and sighed, "Thanks, Ben. I owe you one."

Ben stepped back and folded his arms across his chest, fixing David with Bev's big-eyed *teacher look*. "Dad, I've never seen you like this in my whole life. Ever since *she* moved in, you've yelled and screamed like I've never seen you do before. What's wrong?"

David looked ashamed. "I'm sorry, Ben ... Ash, where're you going?"

My head down, I walked quickly to my room, closed the door and locked it. I started for the wardrobe, but I knew it wouldn't help. I backed up to my door and slid to the floor, my head in my hands.

Nothing will help.

It was hopeless.

I was hopeless.

I melted into a puddle of despair and lay on my side against the door. I heard the low hum of David and Ben talking. I sat up and unlocked my door, then cracked it open slightly and watched them.

David sat down heavily on the barstool closest to the phone. Loki screeched and zoomed out of the seat, tearing around the corner and out of sight.

"Well, I sure know how to clear a room," David said.

"What's wrong, Dad? Why're you mad all the time?" Ben asked in a thick voice.

"You really think I'm mad all the time?" David looked at his hands.

“Well, when it comes to Ash or her mom, yeah. And that guy, Charlie, too.”

“You . . . know what happened to Ashley, right, Ben?” David slowly placed the phone back on the charger.

“Well, yeah, I mean, Uncle Frank talked to me, and Mom told me, too. She said she didn’t want us to have secrets from each other and that it was important for me to know what was going on.”

“That’s true. Do you have any questions about it?” It looked like David was having a hard time making eye contact with Ben.

“I guess I don’t get it. I mean, Ashley is a kid. Mom said that Charlie started doing creepy stuff to Ash when she was like nine years old. Right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“That’s just gross. I mean, what kind of a screwed-up person—a man!—I mean, what kind of guy’s got it bad for a little kid? That’s just fucked up, Dad.”

David raised his eyebrows but didn’t yell at Ben for swearing. “I couldn’t agree more, Ben. And that’s what makes it bad, what’s messed Ashley up so much.”

“I don’t get something else.” Ben climbed up onto the barstool next to David.

“What’s that?” David reached over and caressed the back of his son’s head.

“I don’t get why Ash’s mom didn’t do anything about it when she found out. And that’s *another* thing I don’t understand, Dad. Why didn’t Ashley tell her mom after it happened the first time? Why did Ashley keep it a secret all those years? Did she . . . like it or something?”

I didn’t even feel myself spring to my feet, but before I knew it, I was standing in the kitchen, and every cell in my body was exploding with rage. “No, I didn’t like it! I hated it. I hated him! But he told me he’d leave my mother if I told. He told me that my mother would be sad if I told, because he would leave her. I tried to make him stop,

and he killed my rabbits, my only friends. Well, guess what, Ben? My mother is sad that I told, but he didn’t leave! I told, and she didn’t do anything! You know why? Because *I don’t matter* to her! She doesn’t care what he did to me! She’d rather live a lie than believe the truth!”

I ran to the block of knives on the counter, grabbed one, and pressed its sharp point into the soft area just below my rib cage. “I want to die! I can’t do this anymore!”

David bolted off the stool and came within a foot of me. Ben was frozen, a look of shock on his face.

I backed up. “Stay away! Please. Let me die.” As if explaining it for the umpteenth time, I sobbed, “Don’t you understand, David? I’m not strong enough. I can’t do this. It’s too hard. It hurts too much. I can’t take it.”

I closed my eyes and pushed the knife handle until the blade made a slight cut in my skin. David lunged for it, grabbed my wrist with one hand and the knife with the other. I collapsed into him, sobbing. David wept as he held me. Ben wrapped his arms around us. We stood together and when the phone rang again, we all ignored it.



Dub White and Veronica Salazar thought they’d found the perfect place to make out—in the saddle and tack area behind the rodeo chutes. Suddenly Dub pulled Veronica behind one of the thick columns under the stands. Veronica tried to kiss him and he roughly turned her away and pushed her tightly against the column.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, but he clapped his hand over her mouth. He nodded toward the doorway and a tall bald man with a belly overhanging his belt walked by with a shorter version of himself. Both men wore orange and white *Team Bubba* t-shirts, and she could smell their drunkenness from where she stood.

“*Ssh!* Be quiet!” Dub whispered, his arms on either side of Veronica’s body.

She murmured, “Why are we hiding, Dub?”

“I can’t be seen with you!” His hoarse whisper was impatient, and she pushed him away and faced him.

“Are you ashamed of me or something?” she hissed.

“It’s—I’m not ashamed of you. That big guy’s my stepdad, and he hates ...” Dub couldn’t face her. “He hates Mexicans, Veronica.”

Her eyes grew huge, then just as quickly narrowed. “You mean your family doesn’t know about me? Because I’m *Mexican*?”

Dub looked at his feet, “Well, yeah. That’s right. I mean, it’s not right, it’s wrong, but it’s—it’s not me. I’m not like that. Veronica, I love—”

“*Pendejo!*” She knocked one of his arms aside. “Asshole!” She stomped away into the semi-darkness under the stands.

Dub started after her but froze when he heard a voice pleading, “Let go my arm. Let . . . go!”

Dub darted behind the column just as Gabe Brown pulled someone into the tack room. Dub squinted—wasn’t that Z.Z.’s cousin Jasper? He started to ask Gabe what he was doing, but stepped back and pressed himself tightly against the column when Billy Ray’s shadow filled the doorway, cloaking the small room in darkness.

Gabe gritted his teeth as Jasper fought back. “Just do what I tell you and then we’ll let you go. Now, come on, boy!”

Billy Ray kicked Jasper’s legs out from under him and Jasper fell facedown in the sawdust, hay, and manure-covered floor. Gabe’s eyes scanned the room and stopped at the column. Dub was sure he had been discovered.

“You can’t talk to them like they’re human, Gabe. They only understand brute force.”

Jasper pushed himself up on his elbows, coughing, spitting, and brushing the dust and dirt from his face. He shook his head and

looked around. . . directly into Dub’s eyes. Dub felt the color drain from his face and held his index finger to his lips. “*Ssh.*”

Jasper tilted his head, a look of bewilderment on his face. Dub shrank back even more and willed himself to be a part of the column, invisible.

Billy Ray walked toward Dub but turned at the last moment and retrieved a baseball bat from behind a bronc saddle on a stand. He yanked Jasper up by the neck of his shirt and threw him flat on his back.

“Wh—why you doing this to—to me?” Jasper sputtered and began to cry.

Billy Ray spat, “No questions, uppity nigger!” and raised the bat.

Jasper whimpered and put his arms up over his face, begged, “Please, no, sir. Please, no.”

Dub covered his eyes with his hands but parted his fingers, unable to stop watching.

“B.R., maybe we should, uh,” Gabe reached out and tugged on Billy Ray’s sleeve. “Maybe we should think about this.”

Dub’s hands lowered to his mouth.

Billy Ray turned on Gabe and shoved the rounded end of the bat into his ribcage.

Gabe bent at the waist, clutched his chest, and gasped for breath.

“What did you say to me?” Billy Ray snarled. “You want to join him in the horseshit?”

Gabe could only shake his head vigorously.

“That’s what I thought.” Billy Ray turned his attention again to Jasper.

He swung the bat; Dub closed his eyes and winced at the sound of the first blow. Jasper cried and begged him to stop, but Billy Ray was ruthless.

Dub knew what he needed to do: show himself and at least *try*

to save the helpless man from being beaten to death.

But he didn't.

He stayed behind the column and hid. The tack room filled with the sound of bone cracking and crunching.

Gabe jumped, boxer-like, around Jasper's body, trying to get Billy Ray's attention. He waved his arms furiously while trying to avoid the swings of the bat. "Hey, man! You're going too far! You said we was going to shake him up, not kill him! You hear me? I don't want to be no part of no killing, B.R. My mom'll kill *me*."

Gabe grabbed a pair of reins off a hook on the wall and whipped Billy Ray with them, slashing at his head, neck, across his back. "Stop, goddammit! Billy Ray, stop it before you kill him!" Billy Ray didn't even flinch, and Gabe at last stood helpless, the reins hanging limply in his hand.

Paralyzed with horror, Dub could not even lift his hands to wipe away the tears that streamed down his cheeks.

Billy Ray, his neck covered in purple stripes, suddenly stopped the beating and tossed the baseball bat aside. He wheezed, "There's—just—one more—thing to do. Roll him over, Gabe."

Gabe hesitated and looked from Billy Ray to Jasper and back to Billy Ray. Realization of his friend's true monstrous nature dawned on Gabe for the first time, and he was frozen with fear.

Billy Ray raised the bat threateningly. "Get to it, Gabe! Help me!"

Gabe snapped out of his terror-inspired fog then knelt and rolled Jasper onto his stomach. He watched as Billy Ray got down on one knee, withdrew an orange highlighter from his jeans pocket, and wrote the three words in big awkward letters across the back of Jasper's jersey.

"Y-you done now, B.R.? C-Can we get out of here before we get caught?" Gabe trembled from head to toe, but Billy Ray was calm and businesslike.

"Yeah, Gabe. I think this'll get it through their heads."

The men dragged Jasper face-down through the manure, rolled him over roughly, and pulled him into a sitting position so that he leaned crookedly against the half-wall behind the chutes.

"Jasper! Jasper, your granny's looking for you! Where are you?" The voices sounded close, and Gabe grabbed Billy's shirtsleeve like a little boy grabs his mama's pant leg in a crowd.

"Get your hands off me! What are you, some kind of queer?" Billy Ray popped Gabe on the side of the head with the back of his hand.

Voices could be heard close by. "Jasper, where are you? . . . What'd you say? Okay, thanks . . . Hey, somebody says they saw him coming back here with a guy in an orange t-shirt." A woman sounded like she was almost upon them. Dub thought he recognized one of them as Mrs. Asher.

Like roaches running for cover when the kitchen light comes on, Billy Ray and Gabe made for the doorway at the same time, temporarily becoming stuck. Billy Ray elbowed Gabe in the face and took off under the stands. Gabe rose in a cloud of dust, his hand over his nose, and staggered off in the opposite direction.

The woman's voice again: "Did you find him? Wait—I can't hear you. Hang on, I'll come to you." She never entered the darkened tack room.

Dub started to come out from behind the post but jumped back again when Billy Ray skidded into the room, a look of panic on his face.

He dug through the hay on the ground where the beating took place. "Got it!" He held up the bloodied baseball bat and taunted Jasper's slumped-over form. "Thought you'd outsmarted me, didn't you? Goddamned uppity nigger." He savagely kicked Jasper in the ribs, smiling in satisfaction at the sound of cracking bone. "Get," he said through gritted teeth, "Out," he kicked Jasper again, "Niggers!"

Jasper made a gurgling sound. Billy Ray snatched the wide-brim

cap from the ground nearby and used it to clean the bat of as much blood as he could. "Well, looky at your hat, boy. I'd think you'd take better care of a nice hat like that. You must not appreciate the finer things in life."

Billy Ray roughly pulled Jasper's head forward, shoved the cap down on his head, and snapped his head back so that it bounced off the wall. "*Now* you look like the uppity nigger we all know you are." He stopped and appeared to listen for the sound of footsteps on the walkway. Hearing none, he shoved the bat down the leg of his faded Levis and took off as quickly as he could, limping into the semi-darkness.

A lightning strike cut the power to the rodeo arena. The resulting clap of thunder shook the rafters all the way down into the column where Dub had pressed his face. He lifted it only when he was sure that Billy Ray wasn't coming back. He felt his way over to Jasper and patted his hands over the injured man's body until he found his neck. Relief flooded Dub's body when he felt a pulse, and the only thing that felt better than that was when Jasper's chest rose and fell under his palm.

Dub choked, "I'm ... I'm sorry, sir." He felt his way along the wall until he found the doorway, then made his way out of the arena as quickly as he could.



Four in the afternoon looked more like late evening as Dub emerged from the riders' entrance in the back of the arena and blended into the crowd of people who scurried to escape the intensifying storm.

He slowed his walk until he could breathe more normally, then casually approached the uniformed sheriff's deputy directing traffic. "Hey, y'all might want to check out this black guy in the saddle and tack room behind the chutes. He's all dressed up in a basketball

outfit, and ... I think he's drunk or passed out or something. He don't look too good." Then, before the officer could ask him for any more details, Dub chose to go against the tide of people fleeing the street fair. He could think of only one place to go. He headed straight into the storm.



The rain ended quickly, but there were more threatening clouds on the horizon. Bev, Aurelia, Jewel, and Z.Z. were frantic at their inability to find Jasper. Bev stopped a red-haired sheriff's deputy atop a chestnut horse. "Excuse me, Officer, could you please help us find a missing person? His name is Jasper Freeman. He's developmentally disabled, and we're very worried about him." She gave him a description of Jasper and what he was wearing.

"I wonder..." the officer paused to spit snuff juice to the side of the horse opposite from Bev.

"What?" Bev tried to hide her revulsion at the deputy's disgusting habit.

"Well, we found a guy that matches your description behind the chutes in the arena. We thought he was drunk, but it turns out that he's been severely beaten. Just might be your man." The deputy radioed his partner and listened to his response. He turned to Bev. "His name's Jasper, right?"

Bev nodded. Aurelia and Jewel locked arms as if to keep each other from falling over.

He reported, "Yeah, the medics have him in the ambulance by the riders' entrance in the back of the arena. If you hurry, you can catch them before they transport him to the hospital."

"Oh, my Lord," Aurelia gasped. Z.Z. grabbed her grandmother's other arm to keep her on her feet.

They made it to the rear of the rodeo arena just as the ambulance pulled away.

“Wait!” Aurelia cried.

A police officer approached her. He wore latex gloves and carried Jasper’s blood-soaked basketball jersey, which the medics had cut off.

Aurelia reached for it, but the cop held it away from her. “That’s my grandson’s shirt!”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but it’s evidence, ma’am. This was a hate crime.”

Bev blurted, “How do you know?”

He frowned and unfolded the jersey, then held it up so that they could see the words that Billy Ray had written.



Dub did not return home. Instead, he walked five miles out of town to Kevin’s house. No one was home, and he remembered that Kevin had taken Roxanne with his family to Tyler for the fireworks. He took shelter from the storm in a corner of Kevin’s porch and waited for the family to return home.

For nearly eight hours, Dub thought about the kind of person who could witness the scene in the tack room and do nothing to stop it. He wept, knowing he was that person.

The Coopers returned home around 11:30 to find Dub standing in their driveway, arms crossed, a determined expression on his face, and his body covered in mosquito bites.

“Hey, Kevin? Can I maybe talk to you?” he said.

Kevin nearly dropped the ice chest he carried. “Uh, yeah . . . sure. I guess.”

Kevin’s mom, Trini, wrapped an arm around Dub and ordered, “You get yourself in this house right now. You look like you’ve been through the wringer, my man. Are you hungry?”



Together, the boys finalized a plan, then shared it with Kevin’s parents, who assured Dub that he would have a place to live with them.

Kevin’s dad said, “Son, I really think you should just call 9-1-1 and tell the police what you saw today. And about that other stuff, too.”

“I would really appreciate it, sir, if you would allow me to handle this my way. For once in my life, I want my stepfather to know what I think of him. And I want to tell him to his face. I’ve been a chicken-shit long enough.” Dub hoped that he sounded braver than he felt on the inside.

While fireworks filled the sky outside the bedroom window, Dub was too tired to watch them. Stretched out on a pallet on the floor next to Kevin’s bed, Dub thumbed through Kevin’s copy of *Ironman*.

“Kevin, remember the scene when Bo talks to Mr. Nak about Fear? It’s when Mr. Nak tells Bo what to say to Fear.” He flipped through the pages, trying to find the scene he was talking about.

“Urgh.” Kevin was almost asleep.

“Here it is.” Dub read the words aloud: he needed to hear them for himself: “... *you tell your pain-in-the-butt cousin, Fear, that he can come along if he wants to, but you’re gonna take care of binniss once an’ for all, no matter what he says or does, because you’re by God fed up with gettin’ jerked around.*”

“Shut up, Fear,” Dub mumbled as he closed his eyes. “I’m by God tired of being jerked around.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It's an understatement to say I was pretty messed up. David, Bev, Ben, and I met with Dr. Matt and talked about my attempt to skewer myself on July 4. Ben hadn't really talked to me since that day in the kitchen.

Dr. Matt welcomed my family, then got down to business. "Ben, tell Ashley how you felt when she had the knife."

Ben's eyes filled with tears and his jaw quivered. He shook his head but didn't speak. David put his hand on his shoulder. "Go ahead, Ben. It's okay to be honest."

It took Ben some time to compose himself before he could say anything, but when he did, he let me have it. "You scared me, Ashley! You—I—You shouldn't have done that!"

I gritted my teeth as a wave of shame started at my head and worked down to my toes. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

"What's that? I don't think he heard you," Dr. Matt said roughly.

I took a deep breath and focused on the curved spindle armrest of my chair. I took a breath in and blew out my apology. "I'm sorry, okay?" My eyes filled with tears and my chest was tight.

"You scared me, too, Ashley," David said. "We're trying really hard to help you, and when you act like you're all alone in this, it feels like a slap in the face."

I chewed my lower lip and wished I could become part of the carpet.



After my family left his office, Dr. Matt let loose on me. "It's not cool to go off like you did in front of a little kid. What you did was despicable and selfish."

I sighed, slumped in my chair, and concentrated on the knothole on the surface of Dr. Matt's desk. *Wonder if I could to shrink down small enough to crawl into that knothole? ...Maybe it goes all the way to China. . .*

Dr. Matt continued, but he was more gentle. "It's not unusual to have suicidal feelings during recovery from sexual abuse. But that doesn't change the fact that what you did was selfish and low. Suicide is not about pain, Ashley. It's about anger."

I swallowed hard and focused on the sandbox on the floor. *No, the knothole idea is completely unrealistic. I think instead I'll shrink to dollhouse-size and bury myself in the sandbox with the toy tractor. Maybe I'll just stay there until I feel less ashamed of myself.*

Then he said something that pulled me out of my escape plot: "If you keep thinking up ways to kill yourself or threatening to do it, we're going to have to put you in a place where you don't get the chance to hurt yourself."

My head snapped up, and I'm sure my eyes were huge.

"Ah, something finally got your attention. Good."

I tried to talk but choked on my own spit. I tried again. "I . . . don't want to go to a mental hospital. Totally. Totally do not want to go there."

"Then you'd better work harder at staying out of the self-pity pit and moving forward on your journey to Alaska."

"My what?"

"Your journey. Recovery from sexual abuse is like walking barefoot from Texas to Alaska and back, with all the weather along the way. It's fucking *hard*, Ashley, which is why it's a good thing you're as strong as you are, because not everyone makes it."

“You think I will, though?” I whispered.

“I do. You’ve already survived much more than most people endure in a lifetime, and I believe you can make it—but suicidal thinking isn’t going to get you there. I think it’s also high time we set some boundaries with your mom and Charlie, since you’ve never had any with them before. It’s not okay for Charlie to call you like he did. Instead of being a victim, it’s important to tell them specifically what you want and what you will—and will not—accept.”

Dr. Matt helped me write a letter to Mom and Charlie. I sealed the envelope and he said, “Your homework is to not freak out after you mail it, or worry about what they think or feel about it. You have set your boundary. Now it’s your mom’s move.”

I placed the envelope on his desk and ran my hand over it, smoothing it flat again and again. “How long do you think it will be before my mom misses me so much that she’ll do anything, even be willing to know what I’ve been through, to have me back in her life?” I glanced at my shrink. He was giving me *The Look*, that intense blue-eyed stare of his, but said nothing.

I continued, “I mean—what if she *never* does? What if nothing I say or do is enough to make her realize she loves me so much that she’s willing to face everything—the whole truth—in order to have me in her life?”

Dr. Matt shrugged. “Love can overcome anything. I hope she comes around.”

Snippets of mental video began rolling: that day in David’s shop, when Mom shook her hands like she was drying them, and told me this is all my problem. I grimaced. “I don’t know, Dr. Matt. She’s pretty cold. You don’t know my mom very well.”

He said, “I don’t know her at all.”

I nodded. “Exactly.”



Dub made sure he packed his toothbrush, hairbrush, deodorant, and body wash. Veronica really liked the way it smelled. He held out hope that she might take him back, assuming he wasn’t dead after what he was about to do.

Two pairs of underwear, two pairs of socks, two pairs each of tightly rolled-up cargo shorts and his favorite Wrangler boot cut jeans; the denim western shirt that his real dad’s mom mailed him for his birthday, and his favorite black t-shirt. He slid his pocketknife into the outer pocket, then hugged his backpack tightly until he got it to zip. He pulled his bedroom door closed, knowing full well that he probably would not see it again. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and walked into the living room, where his mom and Billy Ray watched the replay of a lawnmower race on *The Outdoor Network*.

He hoped to God that confronting his stepdad would go according to the plan. He double-checked his position and made sure the front doorknob was in close reach. “I saw you, sir,” Dub announced.

“What? What’re you talking about?” Billy Ray muted a commercial for grass seed and glared at his stepson.

“I saw you, sir. You and Gabe. I was in the tack room when you beat that black man, sir. You nearly killed him, sir.” Dub had decided to state the facts, just the facts, and remain as calm and grown-up as possible. He wanted to do this like a man. And he really, really hoped he wouldn’t cry.

Billy Ray did not get out of his recliner. He glanced at his wife, Linda, then back at Dub. “Boy, what you been smoking?”

“Don’t lie, sir. I’m sick of your lies, sir. You even let me spend the night in jail when they arrested *me* for painting those words on the Freemans’ door. Sir.”

“Well, you’re not in jail now, are you?” Billy Ray pulled the lever on the recliner and sat up, his feet on the floor. He ran his hand over the stubble on his head, pulled his t-shirt down over his beer

belly, and leaned forward to rise from the chair. Dub twisted the doorknob so he would have a head start. He had nothing to lose at this point; he knew that when he saw what Billy Ray and Gabe did to Jasper. Dub didn't expect his mother to say or do anything in his defense: he had given up on her a long time ago.

Billy Ray casually walked around to the back of the recliner and leaned over it with his forearms across the headrest. The still-lightly-bloodstained baseball bat was against the wall behind the chair. He lowered his left hand behind the chair and gripped the bat's handle. "Dub, you're not thinking of telling anybody about what you saw, are you, boy? Because family don't do that to family. And we—your mama, me, and you—we make a family. I'm your daddy, Dub. Your real daddy's a faggot and can't be bothered with you. He's too busy with his boyfriend."

Linda moved to stand by Dub and touched his shoulder. "Where are you going, honey? Why do you have a bag packed?"

Dub ignored her. "You're not my father, sir, and my father might be gay, sir, but I'll bet he's never done the kind of repulsive shit that you have. I've learned a lot this summer, Billy Ray, and I don't hate my dad for being gay anymore. I might be pissed at him for never trying to see me, but I've grown up enough to know that it's a waste to hate somebody just because of who they love. Or their skin color. Sir. In fact, I'm in love with someone who isn't white, she's—"

"You're a nigger lover, ain't ya?" Billy Ray interrupted, laughing and coughing at the same time: his particular way of shutting Dub down. Usually it got to Dub and set him off, but Dub was prepared for anything.

"God, but you're so fucking predictable," Dub said. "You're so goddamned ignorant."

His mother slapped his face hard. "Don't you talk to him that way, Dub! You will show him the respect he deserves!"

"But he *doesn't* deserve my respect, Mom. Or yours. Don't you see who he is? You haven't always been this way. . . so lost, have

you? Shit!" Dub cursed the tears running down his cheeks. He bent his head to wipe his cheek on his shoulder.

Billy Ray made his move with the bat, but Dub opened the door all the way and backed out onto the trailer's front porch.

Linda screamed, "Billy Ray! No! Don't hurt him!" She lunged for the bat and Billy Ray sent her flying across the sofa.

Dub's instinct was to race to his mother to see if she was all right, but he had promised himself that he would no longer try to rescue his mother from the life she seemed content to have. Maybe she enjoyed being a victim, but Dub didn't. It was survival time, and he had to think of himself for once. He kept his eyes trained on the man with the baseball bat. He told Fear to shut up and watched every move Billy Ray made.

Billy Ray sauntered toward him, casually slapping the bat against his palm. "So, what're you going to do, Dub? You walk off my porch, and you're not welcome back. There will be nothing you can say or do that will make me allow you back in my home. What [SLAP] are you [SLAP] gonna do [SLAP], Wilbur?" Billy Ray faked a swing of the bat. When Dub cringed and ducked, Billy Ray laughed at him.

Dub recovered and stood up straight. His voice was shaking, but Dub never felt stronger. "What am I going to do, sir? I'm going to do what I should have done when I got arrested for something you did, sir. I'm going to tell the cops the truth about the nasty shit you did, sir. What you did was wrong, and you're going to pay for it, sir."

Billy Ray swung the bat at him, but Dub anticipated it. He hiked his backpack up on his shoulder, sprang over the porch rail, and ran down the dirt path to where Kevin waited with his truck backed against the ragged chain link fence.

Dub jumped the fence, tossed his backpack in the bed of the truck, and dove through the open passenger door. "Go! Go! Go!" he shouted.

Kevin gunned the engine and spun his back wheels in a deep

mud puddle. When at last they turned off the long dirt driveway and onto the paved county road, Billy Ray's prize riding mower was barely recognizable under reddish chunks of East Texas mud.



T.W. sat at his kitchen table for hours and worked on his final *Ironman* essay. He looked up at his father, who read over his shoulder.

Coach Dayton Griffin blinked rapidly, certain he read wrong. He scanned it again and gasped. Damned hippie English teacher and her "It's about learning, not grades" attitude. Mr. Walden wouldn't cross Beverly Asher right now—wouldn't say why—just said that there was no policy requiring teachers to give weekly progress reports during the regular school year, much less during summer school. Teachers cooperated with coaches during the football and basketball seasons, providing grades for the purpose of player eligibility, but it was unheard of for a coach to request updates on players when school hadn't even started for the year.

T.W. wasn't cooperating, either. Dayton Griffin's normally compliant son, his partner in achieving *The Dream* of being the youngest-ever football player for UT Austin, had lost the drive required to achieve such a lofty goal. And where was his work for this class? Hard to believe that just four essays were the basis for the entire course. No tests? No quizzes? No worksheets? What kind of teacher was this? Application of knowledge? *Please*. Dayton snorted aloud at the thought.



"T.W., what is the purpose of this paper?" Dayton read the prompt aloud: "*Adults deserve respect simply because they are adults. What are the truths and lies inherent in this way of thinking? . . . What*

is this shit, son? What kind of paper is this supposed to be?"

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"Well, isn't it obvious? *Of course* adults deserve respect just because they're adults. What the hell kind of lies could possibly be associated with a fact like that?" Dayton snatched the paperback from T.W.'s hands.

"See, in the book—" T.W. began.

"Yeah, about this book," Dayton said, flipping it over and looking at the back cover. I've never seen *Ironman* in a classroom before. I teach sophomore history, and I've never seen any sophomores with this book. Who's Chris Crutcher? Never heard of him, either."

"He's cool, Dad. He writes stories with sports in them—and the characters in his books talk like real people my age do. They have to deal with problems that happen to a lot of people. Miss Asher said he used to be a teacher and a therapist, so he's worked with all sorts of teenagers and people who have problems."

"Yeah, sounds great." Dayton rolled his eyes. He read the back cover, quoting aloud. "Let's see ... Bo Brewster ... at war with his father ... outbursts at his"—he couldn't believe his eyes—"football coach? ... cost him his spot on the team ... gets sent to ... Anger Management group ... with future serial killers and freeway snipers."

Wait a minute, Dayton thought. *This isn't funny. Not at all. There's something wrong with this book. War with his father? Angry outbursts at his football coach? Serial killers?* This book and that damned so-called teacher were poisoning his son's mind. No wonder T.W. wouldn't talk to him about how he was doing in the class. This book encouraged young men to rebel against their fathers. Now he understood why T.W.'s fiery passion for achieving their dream had cooled: he'd spent the summer reading about a kid who doesn't respect his football coach. And as for serial killers, well, that was damned ridiculous. T.W. was far too smart to waste his time reading slash-and-gore books when he could be reading classics like *To Kill*

a *Mockingbird*.

"This is trash, son." Dayton tossed the novel in the wastebasket to make his point.

"Dad, it's not my book! You can't just throw away Miss Asher's book!" T.W. glared at his father in a way he'd never seen.

"Are you telling me that you disagree with me?"

"Yeah!" T.W. retrieved the book from the trash, checking the cover to see if it was bent. "Dad, besides that it's not my book, I need it so that I can write my final essay. It's due on Tuesday."

"Speaking of essays—where are your other ones? You said you have to write your *final* essay. So you've written the first three, right? Four essays make up the course, correct? Have they been graded and returned to you yet?"

T.W. blushed and stammered, "Well, yeah, I've gotten them back."

"Where are they?" Dayton sat and drummed his fingers on the table.

T.W. talked fast. "I can still get an A in the class, Dad."

"Where are they? Let me see them." More finger drumming.

T.W. sighed, "O—kay," and walked to his room like he was facing a firing squad. He lifted his mattress and pulled the first three essays from atop his box spring. He trudged back to his finger-drumming father and handed them over.

"B? ... B? ... B? You made Bs on these essays? What the hell happened?" Dayton wadded the papers into balls and shot them, two-points, two-points, two-points, into the wastebasket.

"I wasn't being ... authentic." T.W. stared at his shoes.

"You what? What the hell does that mean?"

"Authentic, Dad. You know: real. I was telling Miss Asher what I thought she wanted to hear, instead of how I really felt about the book and my own life, and how my own life connects to the book. Miss Asher told me to stop pandering to her and, for God's sake, figure out who I am and be that person."

Dayton Griffin's jaw dropped. Obviously, his son had been brainwashed into a cult of some kind. He made a mental note to search T.W.'s room for fennel wreaths, tie-dyed t-shirts, hemp bracelets and incense—as soon as he finished calling every member of the school board.

"Son, we have a thing in this district called *curriculum*. The school board approved a certain curriculum, and the teachers are expected to use it. I have substituted in English classes now and then, and I can tell you this much: words like '*authentic*' and '*being your own person*' are not on the curriculum."

"But, Dad, I've learned so much this summer! Miss Asher teaches in a way that I really get. I understand what I'm reading and why and how the author chose to write it the way he did. I get deeper meaning, Dad. I actually care about it."

Ugh. Hearing his son talk about feelings made his skin crawl. Dayton tried to pull T.W. away from the *Dark Side*. "And you made Bs, because of the way this fruitcake teaches."

"Dad, the class is almost over. I promise you, I'll get an A in the class. Isn't that all you really care about? As?"

"What's going on?" Mrs. Griffin came in with an armload of groceries. "Are you working on your essay, son?"

"You *know* about this?" Dayton snatched the book from T.W. again.

"Well, yeah. . . I mean. . . What do you mean?" Chloe Griffin blinked behind her large round glasses.

"You *know* about this book he's reading?" Dayton crossed his arms across his chest.

"Of course. The one for English II, right?" She recited *The Dream*: "So that he can graduate high school early and be a UT Longhorn." Chloe pulled a package of hamburger meat from a bag and began crumbling it into a skillet.

"Yes, yes, yes, I'm not talking about that, dammit, I'm talking about what he's reading. Did you *know*...?" he held out *Ironman* to

T.W.'s mom so that she could read the back cover.

She scanned it. "I still don't get what you're upset about."

Dayton was incredulous. "It doesn't bother you at all? The main character is fighting with his dad and football coach. He goes to school with serial killers. You *approve* of T.W. reading this stuff?"

T.W.'s mother stirred the sizzling meat. "Oh, I kind of read that part about serial killers as tongue-in-cheek." She looked up and smiled until she noticed that her husband was on the verge of a melt-down. Her voice high, she squeaked, "Honey, why don't you read the book if you're concerned about it?"

T.W. blurted, "Jeez, Mom, the class is almost over!"

Chloe slammed her spatula on the meat, spattering grease all over the teddy bear on her shirt that read, *Jesus Loves You Beary Much*. "Watch your mouth, young man! 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!'"

T.W. spat, "Well, it is! My final essay is due on Tuesday, and I know I can get an A in the class."

Chloe Griffin raised her eyebrows. "He's right, dear. If he can get an A, well ..."

Dayton popped the top off a root beer and tossed the lid in the sink. "I don't have time to read the damned book, Chloe. You read it. If *you* think it's okay, I'll shut up and hope that T.W. has not been completely corrupted. I'm going to the field house." He slammed the door on his way out.



Zaquoiah's eyes grew huge when she walked into Aurelia's dining room and saw the long table covered end to end with the surveys that Aurelia, Jewel, and Bev had collected on July Fourth. She picked up a stack of unsorted surveys and skimmed the *Wants and Needs*. "Hmmpf," she snorted, and tossed them aside.

"What's your problem?" Jewel mumbled, barely pausing in her

paper shuffling.

"How can you still work on this community center when this community hates us?" Z.Z. demanded.

"What you mean, girl?" Jewel asked wearily from her chair at the opposite end of the table.

"What part didn't you get, Auntie Jewel? Let me ask you something: are there more whites or blacks in this stupid little town?" Z.Z. pulled the chain on the ceiling fan so that it began to rotate, creating a twister of papers.

"No! Z.Z., no! Turn it off, turn it off!" Jewel bent at the waist and lay over the papers that hadn't yet blown off the table.

"Oops... I'm sorry," Z.Z. said sarcastically. She pulled the chain again to stop the fan. She began gathering displaced papers and trying to put them back where they belonged.

"You did that on purpose!" Jewel slammed her palm on the table and sprang to her feet.

Z. Z. paused in trying to right her mistake and dragged her arm across the table, creating a blob-shaped pile of papers, all the while looking Jewel in the eye.

Z.Z. stood up straight, squared her shoulders, and blasted, "I didn't mean to mess up your precious surveys before, but now I sure did. So what? What difference does it make? Am I the only one in this house who saw what Jasper looked like after they beat the hell out of him?"

"I think you know the answer to your own question, Z.Z.," Aurelia said from the doorway. She placed two glasses of iced tea on the side table then stood between Jewel and Z.Z.

"What?" Z.Z. had forgotten all about it.

Jewel spat, "Your question. About the number of blacks to whites in Patience. The important thing you had to know *right now*, coming in here and undoing what it's taken me all day to do!"

"Well, I don't get it. Why you wasting your time trying to do something to help these people, when they don't want our help? They

hate us. Can't you read? '*Get Out Niggers!*'"

She was unprepared for the sting of her grandmother's hand on her cheek.

"That is enough, Zaqoiah!" Aurelia said. "I will *not* have you speaking that word in my presence!"

"But you don't care if they write it on our door? Or on Jasper's back?" Z. Z. 's voice was high and tears ran down her cheeks.

"Are you crazy?" Jewel said, hands on her hips. "Of course we care. It's evil. Pure unrefined evil. But it's not everyone. . . Girl, you've got so much growing up to do."

"I don't think it's a matter of Z.Z. growing up, Jewel. I think it's that she just ain't met enough of the good people in this place yet to recognize that there are more good people than bad ones."

Aurelia leaned toward Z.Z. and took her chin in her gnarled hands. "Eula Mason saw something in me that she saw in herself. Do you know what it was?"

"No, ma'am." Z.Z. slowly sat down in one of the dining room chairs, tears still running down her face and off her chin.

"She and I shared the gift of being able to see when people's hearts are good or bad. You, Z.Z., you've got a good heart. Your friend Ashley, she's got a good heart, too. Now, is Ashley white or black, Z.Z.?" Aurelia eased herself into the chair opposite Z.Z.

"You know she's white, Granny," Z.Z. replied very softly.

"Well, if I go along the way you're telling me I need to go along, then I'm not going to see anybody's good heart, unless they're black. Is that what you see when you see Ashley, Z.Z.? Do you just see a white person? Or do you see her heart?" Aurelia tilted her head and watched Z.Z., then reached out and gently lifted her chin so that Z.Z. had to meet her eyes.

"I ... I see Ashley. She's just Ashley. She's white, and she has a good heart. But Ashley's different, Granny; she don't see me as just a black girl. She sees me as her friend."

"Well, baby, everybody deserves the same chance to be seen

with a good heart, unless they show you that they got a bad heart. No matter what color their outsides are. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but—"

"No *but*s, Z.Z. Now, I understand that you're mad and hurt that some bad-hearted people done some evil things to us. But that's not what we—our family—are about. All right?"

"Yes ma'am," Z.Z. said, rising to go.

"Don't you need to be working on some homework? Mrs. Asher was telling me about the book you've been reading this summer, and how proud she is that you all understood what she was hoping you would. Said you have a paper due Tuesday. Do you know what it's going be about, hon?"

"I think I'm going to write about what happened to Jasper and how sometimes people set out to test us, but we don't have to act out the same way back at them. Anger doesn't have to rule how we act."

"You're right, Z.Z. Maybe you're more grown up than I thought you were," said Jewel. "After you help me make all these piles again, you'll be good and ready to write that paper."



Kevin Cooper's mother, Trini, was as kind as she could possibly be when Dub's mother called her at work to inquire about Dub's whereabouts.

"He's with us," Trini replied, "and he's welcome to stay with us permanently if that'll make things run more smoothly at your house."

"Well, that's very generous of you and it's probably be a good idea because Billy Ray told Dub that he couldn't come back home if he left last night."

Trini hadn't planned on it, but she blurted, "Linda, why do you stay with a man who beats you? How can you live with the man

who nearly killed Jasper Freeman just because he's black?"

Linda's voice was frosty. "I don't know what you're talking about! Billy Ray loves me, and he loves Dub, too. He just. . .has a hard time showing it. Tell Dub to call me sometime," she said and hung up.

Trini hung up the phone and turned back to her computer monitor, rereading the headline for the front-page story she was readying for the next edition of *The Patience Press*:

"Police Say Arrest Imminent in Racially Motivated Beating"



They met in the Young Adult room, a tiny portable building with no air conditioning, behind First Church Patience. All fifteen members of *Purify Patience* were not present, but their names were in the five-subject spiral right under the goals of their organization.

Reverend Langley had his Brain Trust, and that's all he really needed: Billy Ray Sublett, Gabe Brown, Rudy Fortenberry, and Dennis Hardgrave. *Purify Patience* needed to come out of the shadows to give it legitimacy and an air of credibility and goodness, if it was going to grow the way they needed it to.

Langley emphasized again and again that they were doing God's work. "It's in the Bible, boys. Genesis Chapter nine, verses 18-27. *Noah cursed his son, and that son was the ancestor of all the slaves.* Dark-skinned folks are supposed to serve whites. All we're doing is making sure the Scripture is alive."

He didn't tell his Brain Trust that no one had interpreted the Bible that way since the nineteenth century, and they didn't question his expertise.



"We have a problem, dear." Chloe Griffin wrinkled her nose to hike up her glasses as she wiped the crumbs from the kitchen table.

"What's that?" Dayton answered from their living room.

"This book, this *Ironman*. . . Is it on the list of approved novels for the district?"

"I doubt it. Beverly Asher's teaching the class. Have you ever seen her car, Chloe? She has this strange bumper sticker that spells out *Coexist* with a Star of David, a cross, peace signs, and other weirdo stuff. I think she was raised in a commune. I'll bet she doesn't even shave her legs. Or under her arms."

"Well, be that as it may, dear, but this book is not appropriate for the children of Patience to read." Chloe sat down heavily in the recliner next to her husband's matching one and raised the footrest.

"Yeah? Why not?" Dayton picked up the remote and paused the ESPN show he was watching that replayed gruesome sports injuries in slow motion.

"The language! Oh, my goodness, the language alone is shocking! And the things this writer, this Chris . . . Crutchfield? No, that's not it." Chloe reached over to the end table and picked up the copy of *Ironman* and the spiral with notes that she had made in preparation for this discussion with Dayton. "Crutcher. Chris Crutcher. He talks about sex, for one thing. There are teenagers talking about sex in this book, and our son read it! At his age."

"What do you mean, sex?" Dayton held out his hand for the book. She handed it to him. "Uh, what page is the sex on?"

"Well, they don't actually *have* sex, dear, they talk about it."

"Oh." Dayton sounded disappointed. He handed the book back to Chloe and unpaused the TV just in time to see and hear multiple replays of Joe Theismann's leg snapping. "Damn! I'll never forget watching that. It was 1985, and I was in—"

Chloe snatched the remote, turned off the show, and got to her

feet in front of Dayton. “I don’t want T.W. thinking about sex or talking about sex. My goodness, he’s only fourteen! He’s too young!”

Dayton sighed and flopped back in his chair.

“And that’s not even the worst part! There’s a homosexual character in the book: a teacher, and he admits to his student, the Bo Brewster character, that he’s homosexual, *and* he has a partner. Well, he calls him a roommate, but *you know* what’s going on behind those closed doors.”

“You’re kidding me. The book has a faggot in it? Jesus Christ.” *Had T.W. lost interest in The Dream because he decided to be gay, too?*

The sharp intake of Chloe’s breath at his swearing reminded him that he wasn’t in the locker room. “Sorry, honey. I’m sorry,” he called to the ceiling. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. . . He—” she rolled her eyes heavenward, “—thanks you, too, I’m sure.” Everything square with God again, she continued. “Honey, our quiet little town has enough problems without bringing the homosexuals here. If they find out they’re welcome in the books our kids read, they’ll think they can just move in here and live among us, too!

“This is bigger than us. We need to get Pastor Langley involved. I think he would be interested to know that this filth is being taught in our schools. We, as Christians, cannot possibly allow this to continue. What would Jesus think of us remaining silent while our child is exposed to rebels and outcasts? What about the children? What about those children whose parents don’t go to First Church, and therefore don’t know The Right Way?”

Leaning forward in his chair and a little to the left, Dayton tried to direct the remote around Chloe to see if he could get the TV to come on. No luck. He scowled and snapped, “Chloe, I honestly don’t think it’s that widespread. I think it’s just an isolated thing.” He tried leaning to the right instead of the left. “It’s one renegade teacher who

slipped a bad book under the radar.”

Chloe stomped to the TV and stood in front of the remote sensor so that Dayton had no choice but to listen to and see her. Her voice shook. “You asked me to read this book and let you know what I thought of it. You asked me for my opinion. Now, either you value my opinion or you don’t. As head of the household, appointed by God to lead our family, you, Dayton, should appreciate that I did what you told me to do. I submitted unto your will. And this is the thanks I get?”

Her glasses teetered on the tip of her nose and nearly slid off her face. She savagely shoved them back up and stood before him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Dayton had heard it all before, usually when he didn’t feel like dealing with something and delegated it to Chloe. Then when it came to the dirty work, she pulled out chapter and verse, telling him how it was his job to lead the family, *yada yada yada*. And now he’d done it: given his wife a cause, and it was apparent she was hell-bent on pursuing it in a big way.

Oh, well, what harm could come of it? Maybe a little public pressure would rein in a certain rebellious teacher who thought that learning was more about application of knowledge than grades. He snorted aloud at the thought, then spent the next thirty minutes trying to convince Chloe that his snort was not directed at her. By the time T.W. returned from the movies, his father was just starting a long night of sleeping in his recliner.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Saturday morning, Marvella Brown was tidying her living room when she found a five-subject spiral notebook beneath the middle sofa cushion. When she began thumbing through the pages, she found a mission statement detailing the formation and membership of a secret organization called Purify Patience. Her eyes nearly rolled back in her head when she deciphered Gabe's chicken-scratch handwriting. The group intended to "return Patience to the good old days, when the town was all white, women knew their place, Christian values were taught in school, and everyone had plenty of money."

The name topping the list of members was Reverend Andrew Langley. The name below it was Billy Ray Sublett. The vice-president of the school board was there, too: Rudy Fortenberry, as was another school board member's husband: Dennis Hardgrave.

Scanning over the fifteen or so names, Marvella didn't know whether to laugh or cry at their ignorance. When she saw her son's squiggly signature at the bottom of the list, she felt a betrayal unlike any she had ever experienced in her life. And the shame of having raised a racist felt as if it would smother her.

Marvella, whose father was black and whose mother was white, came from Deep East Texas. She didn't have indoor plumbing until she was fifteen years old. A teenage parent, she scraped and fought to finish high school and to support her one and only child.

How dare Gabe disrespect her in this way?

"Calm down," she told herself. "He's so naïve, he probably

doesn't even realize what he's done."

Gabe's whiny voice interrupted her thoughts. "Mama, are you going to wash my clothes? I need a clean shirt." He stood in the hallway in his underwear.

Marvella held up the spiral notebook. "Come here, Gabriel. We need to talk."



By the time Marvella got through with Gabe, they'd called the county prosecutor and told him everything. He thanked them and told Gabe that as long as he followed through with sworn testimony, he could likely avoid prison, although he would still face felony charges.

"You've at least started to make it right with the Freemans, Gabe," Marvella said. "But now you're going to make it right with me."

When he gave her lip about it, she nearly twisted his ear off.



Local Lawnmower Racer Arrested for Hate Crime

by Trini Cooper, Staff Reporter for The Press

Billy Ray Sublett, 39, a rookie lawnmower racer most recently employed by the Texas Department of Highways, was arrested July 6 for the beating of a mentally disabled man, Jasper D. Freeman. Gabriel Lonnie Brown, 21, has admitted to being present when the beating took place. In return for his testimony, the district attorney is considering probation for Mr. Brown.

In addition to the beating of Mr. Freeman on July Fourth on the rodeo grounds, Mr. Sublett is under investigation for the poisoning of the Freeman's dog, painting a racial epithet on their front door,

and the attempted hit-and-run of Jasper Freeman.

Mr. Sublett's stepson, a minor, was initially arrested for the crimes committed during the week of June 10. He was released when police could not link physical evidence of the crime to him and he was able to account for his whereabouts at the time the Freeman's door was vandalized. As of press time, Mr. Sublett had not entered a plea. Mr. Sublett's wife, contacted at her home, had no comment.



Our English II class was winding down. We worked on our essays, putting finishing touches on them before Tuesday's due date, and what Bev called "After the End." We would role-play different characters' parts and speculate on what happened after the novel ended.

Then Mr. Walden came to the door and said that he needed to see Bev—now. She gave us a funny look, shrugged her shoulders, and said she'd be back in a minute, so keep working.

That minute turned into an hour. After a while, we started talking.

"I need to say something, y'all." Dub stepped up onto his chair. Kevin stood and looked him in the eye.

"Well, stand up, man. Say what you have to say. Oh, that *is* your full height? Sorry."

We all laughed—everyone except Z.Z., that is. Everybody knew about Billy Ray's arrest, but she hadn't been able to overcome the awkwardness of talking to Dub. She also had not forgotten what he'd said to her, regardless of who did the actual crimes against her family.

Dub held up his hand, shook his head, and tried not to smile. "Come on, guys, this is serious. I need to say something to Z.Z., but I want you all to hear it, seeing as how you all heard what I said to her—" he blushed— "before, um, now."

Z.Z. suddenly seemed very intent on reloading her mechanical pencil with lead.

Dub took a big deep breath in and exhaled all at once, "Z.Z., I am very, very sorry for the horrible things I said to you on the day you saw the paint on my shoes." He looked her way, but she kept her eyes down.

"I'm also..." his voice thickened, "I'm so ashamed of myself because. . ." his voice lowered to a whisper, "I was there when Jasper was nearly killed on July Fourth."

"What?!" Roxanne exclaimed. "Then why are you here? Why aren't you in jail?"

"Roxy, please." Kevin took her hand. "Let him finish. It's not what you think." Kevin moved to stand behind Dub and put his hands on his friend's shoulders. "Go ahead, man. You can do it. I'm right here behind you. I got your back."

Dub closed his eyes and tilted his head side to side. The bones in his neck cracked. "I saw it happen. And I hid, and I didn't come out until Billy Ray left Jasper leaning against the chute. The lights had gone out by then because of the storm."

He told of feeling his way over to Jasper and checking to see if he had a pulse, and of telling the cop where to find Jasper before taking off from the arena. "I'm not trying to get you to forgive me just because I told the cops about him, Z.Z. I don't deserve anything but your hatred." His kept his gaze locked on the floor, and when he finally forced himself to look in Z.Z.'s direction again, her gaze was icy, her mouth a straight line.

Dub's voice cracked. "I know it doesn't matter; I know that I can never make it up to you for being a chickenshit pussy while my stepfather. . .tried to . . ." He broke down and sobbed, and Kevin eased him into his seat.

The room was silent except for Dub's weeping and Kevin's voice, low and soothing. "You did good, man. You owned it, and that's what's most important." Kevin rubbed Dub's back and patted him

for a long time before leaving him alone. I don't think there was one of us who wasn't crying by then. Not even Z.Z.

She slid out of her desk and silently approached Dub, who had gotten to that point in crying where his shoulders involuntarily shuddered once in a while. He had his head down on his desk.

Z.Z. placed her hand on his back and Dub jerked away. His voice was shaky from the surface of his desk. "Come on, Kev, could you lay off?"

"It's me, Dub," Z.Z. said softly.

His shoulders collapsed under the weight of her hand and he sobbed, "Oh, God, I'm so sorry, Z.Z."

"Hey." She rubbed his back a little harder, then pulled his shoulder back. "Hey, Dub. Please. Sit up, okay? I'm not mad at you, all right?"

He lifted his head slightly and pulled up the neck of his t-shirt to wipe his tears.

Z.Z. waited a few beats, then slid into the desk in front of Dub so she could see his face. Reaching up, she brushed a tear from his cheek then smeared it on her own. With her other hand, she caught one of her own tears on the tip of her finger and ran it down Dub's other cheek.

His eyes locked on hers, then widened in surprise at what she said next. "I owe you an apology too, Dub." He started to speak, but she shook her head and he stopped. "I accused you of doing those terrible things, and that was wrong. I shouldn't have done that, and I'm sorry."

"But, Z.Z., if I had been you and seen paint on my shoes, I would've thought the same thing, too, especially after everything I... said." The importance of the moment was such that he *had* to make sure she knew: "Z.Z., I didn't mean that stuff I said to you. It was ignorant and evil and—"

"I know. I *know*. I see your heart, now, Dub, and it's a good one." She stood and held her arms out to him. He rose and they

hugged. Then she walked back to her desk, her flower-topped flip-flops seeming to float above the floor. When Dub went to go wash his face, he didn't look to be touching ground, either.



An hour passed and Bev still wasn't back from Mr. Walden's office. Kevin goaded Dub into telling us about his reunion with Veronica. "Go ahead, Dub. Tell it. *Tell it!* You don't want me to make up my own version, do you?"

Blushing and smiling, Dub said, "Okay, well, Kevin went to talk to Veronica for me, to tell her about how I—"

"—How he risked getting his fucking head knocked off by Billy Ray," Kevin interrupted, "—and, and Dub, are you going to tell it or what?"

Dub rolled his eyes. "I *told* Billy Ray, or at least I tried to tell him, but the asshole interrupted me, that I'm—"

Kevin stood and punched his fist toward the ceiling. "That he's got it bad for Veronica, who just happens to be Mexican."

"Yeah, yeah, we know. Don't give the jerk any more airtime than necessary. He doesn't deserve it. Billy Ray, I mean," said T.W.

"Now, what was it she said to you, when she found out about that? . . . Say it! Do you want *me* to say it?"

Dub's face was crimson. "She said it was the bravest thing she'd ever heard in her entire life and... then she stuck her tongue down my throat. So. . .obviously, we're, uh, we're back together."

The classroom erupted in applause.

We were getting pretty silly by the time Bev came back mid-morning. "T.W., will you close my door, please?"

Uh-oh. That's usually a bad sign. She either needed to tell us something that she didn't want people in the hallway to hear, or she was going to chew us out about something.

"There's a problem." Bev looked so serious that I immediately

thought it had something to do with my mom. Was she making me move back in with her? I started to panic, then I thought, *Wait a minute, why would she be telling the whole class?* Then I felt ashamed for making it all about me.

Bev leaned against the edge of her desk with her arms folded across her chest and her eyes locked on the floor. “There are some people who don’t like the book I’ve used to teach you to write responsibly to literature. They object to certain elements of *Ironman*.”

“Oh. My. God.” T.W. did a face-plant on his desk. We all turned to look at him. He lifted his head, and his face was so red that it looked purple.

“What’s wrong, T.W.?” asked Z.Z.

T.W. looked at Bev. “Miss Asher?”

Bev avoided his eyes. “... Yes?”

“Is it—is it my parents?” he asked.

She still wouldn’t look at him. “T.W., it would be unprofessional of me to reveal who—”

“Dammit, I *knew* they were going to do this! I begged them not to, and I tried to talk some sense into them, and they told me not to worry about it.” He stared at the wall and tried to blink away the tears in his eyes.

“What are you guys *talking* about?” Dub sat on a desktop with his feet in a chair, a couple of seats behind T.W.

“Yeah,” Kevin said. “I don’t get what’s going on here. Who wouldn’t like *Ironman*? It’s the best book—hell, it’s the *only* book I’ve ever read. I identified with that guy, Bo Brewster. I’m even thinkin’ about doing triathlons myself. Might help me lose some of my baby fat.”

Roxanne gushed, “Oh, Kevin, you’re not fat! You’re just perfect. . . to me.”

The room was eerily silent.

Roxanne’s voice was small: “Sorry.” She smiled at Kevin.

Bev looked at the ceiling and bit her lip.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “I mean, did you get fired?”

“No, no, I still have a job. I’m shaken up, but not fired.” She shook her head and looked out the window as if Mr. Sanchez’s longhorns in the pasture next door were suddenly super-interesting.

“So, what’s the problem, Miss Asher?” Z.Z. said. “We already read the book. It’s like that teacher guy in the book says, ‘Once you know something, you can’t un-know it.’” She sat back in her desk and folded her arms, as if that settled everything.

Bev brushed away a tear. “Well, there are some people who think there’s stuff in the book that you wouldn’t have known about if I hadn’t assigned it to you.”

Dub demanded, “What planet are they living on? I didn’t discover any shocking news by reading this book. . . except that I actually *liked* reading a book, which never happened before.”

“Do whoever these people are who are making trouble think that Patience is a Utopia or something?” Roxanne asked.

“I can’t speak for the people who are upset. For right now, though, Mr. Walden told me to have you stop working on your essays.”

“But I’m almost finished with mine!” T.W.’s eyes blazed. Good luck to anyone who gets between T.W. Griffin and an A.

“Mr. Walden wants you to stop working on your essays so that no further damage is done,” Bev said flatly. She walked behind her desk, pulled out her chair, and sat down.

“That’s crazy,” I said. “How can writing my own thoughts and words on paper hurt me or anyone else?”

“If any of you feel that you were damaged by reading this book, I apologize.” Bev put her head in her hands.

Dub stood in his chair and yelled, “It’s bullshit, Miss Asher!”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what it is! Bullshit!” Kevin joined Dub in chair-standing, punched his fist skyward, and knocked a ceiling tile

out of place. He looked up. “Oops.”

Bev’s voice was quiet behind spread fingers. “Guys, what I really don’t need right now is for my boss to walk by and hear you swearing. Profanity is one of the big complaints about the book.”

Kevin paused in straightening the ceiling tile. “Well, then, it’s donkey shit!”

“Dude, *think* about what you’re saying, man.” Dub shook his head.

Kevin looked confused. “What?. . . Oh. . . Yeah.”

T.W.’s voice was small. “Are a lot of people upset, Miss Asher? I mean, I know that my parents started it. I’m sorry, everybody.”

“It’s not you, T., it’s your folks. You’re good people,” Z.Z. said.

“Well, I mean, it’s *not* like my mom and dad are evil or something. . . they just don’t realize what life is like for people our age. They have this image of what the perfect Christian life looks like: it’s a cross between a some lame reality TV family that never yells and *Veggie Tales*, where all the problems can be solved with the world’s most polite butt-chewing by Dad, or a cucumber singing a Bible verse.”

I picked up the remote and turned on Bev’s projector. “Okay, let’s get this out in the open. Exactly what’s the problem?”

“There’s an entire list,” said Bev. “I’m *not* sure this is a good idea—”

“May I see that, please?” T.W. snatched the list from Bev and glanced at it for a second then handed it back to her. “Dammit!”

“What?” Roxanne asked.

“I just needed to see it for myself. That’s my mother’s handwriting.” He walked back to his desk, his head hung low.

Z.Z. patted him as he walked by. “It’s not you. It’s *not!*” she told him.

I held out my hand and Bev shook her head but gave me the paper. I placed the list under the document camera and projected it

on the screen.

Language—prolific usage of curse words

Sexual intercourse (discussion of)

Homosexuality is treated as if it’s acceptable

Lack of respect for authority figures, including parents and teachers

Sexual abuse is mentioned

Character in and out of foster homes because of violent nature; same character also exhibits decidedly unladylike mannerisms

Racial slurs, particularly the use of the word, “Nigger”

The Lord’s name is taken in vain

Divorce—and the main character’s parents actually celebrated it!

Mental illness—a student with mental illness is mainstreamed with the rest of the students, forcing them to deal with his problems.

I stopped at ten. The rest of the list was a breakdown of the exact number of times each curse word was used, for example, “Asshole: 28 times.” I imagined going through *Ironman* and circling the curse words. Who has so much time on their hands?

Bev said, “According to Mr. Walden—and Reverend Langley, a minister, the stuff on that list is so out of the realm of real life for all of you that simply *reading* about it might make you more prone to, for example, have sex or be gay. That’s what I got out of the discussion, anyway.”

Bev hopped up on her desk and sat cross-legged to lead our discussion, just like she had all summer. “I guess the thing that upsets me so much is, I know it’s quality literature, and I have watched each of you grow and know yourselves better by reading it, to say nothing of the way you have learned to write in response to a theme in literature. And to me, those things are a big part of what my job is.

“Reverend Langley and the other people who are up in arms about this are trying to censor what you read, but it’s more than that. They’re saying that because they disagree with the content, nobody should be allowed to read the book, and it sucks, guys. It completely sucks. It’s not what this country is about. They’re trying to say that because of their beliefs, *no* student should be allowed to read *Ironman* in a school setting.”

“Well, what are we going to do about it, Miss Asher?” asked Kevin.

“I don’t know yet, guys. I need to think about this,” Bev said. “Sorry I missed so much of our class today. Unfortunately, it’s time for y’all to go.”



On our way home from school, Bev’s eyes filled with tears. She tried to hide them from me, but I knew.

I touched her shoulder. “It’ll be okay, right? Summer school’s almost over.”

We stopped at a traffic light. Bev gripped the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. Her voice was thick when she spoke. “Mr. Walden said that it’s possible I’ll be removed from the classroom for this.”

“But you said you didn’t get fired!”

“No, they know I would have grounds to sue for breach of contract. But they have the right to reassign me anywhere they want. They just have to provide me with a job, but it doesn’t have to be something I necessarily like. They could put me in charge of grounds keeping if they want.” She shook her head. “These people think I’m a threat to my students! I—I felt as if I was about to be tied to a stake and set on fire for being a witch! They asked me if I go to church. . . if I’m a Christian. . . as if that has anything to do with how well I do my job!”

I squeaked, “They can ask that stuff?”

“It’s not legal, but. . . they did.” She said flatly, “Reverend Langley even inquired as to how long your dad and I have been married and how old Ben is. I could see the wheels turning in that tiny little mind of his. When he asked if David is Ben’s dad, I got up and walked out.” She swiped at a gnat. “All this shit, because of a novel!”

“But what about the freedom to teach what you want? Didn’t Mr. Walden say you could—?”

Bev hit the steering wheel, and I jumped a foot. The traffic light changed to green, but we didn’t move.

“It’s not about the book, Ashley! It’s just *not*. Whether the Grif-fins like it or not, the things they’re complaining about *exist* in the world. It’s not like Chris Crutcher made them up just so he could sell more books. If they’d read *Ironman* with an open mind, they’d see that the theme of the book is being true with yourself and others; of living authentically .”

A car horn sounded behind us. Bev glanced in the rearview mirror and scowled with such intensity that I looked back, expecting Mr. Walden or the preacher guy to be behind us. She accelerated and we moved through the intersection, but pulled into the gas station parking lot.

Bev put her head against the seat and closed her eyes. “Reverend Langley and his hysterical flock of *sheeples* may not agree with me, but I believe that truth is the *only* way to freedom.” She inhaled deeply and let it go, turned to meet my eyes. “That’s a concept that applies to your situation with your mom, too.”

“Yeah. . . Dr. Matt told me that someday, maybe I’ll get to where I can see my mom the way she really is—like, she’s a broken little girl—and I’ll be able to just *know* that, without being covered up in pain about her. He says that even if I can’t imagine it now, someday, I might even be able to have feelings of mercy and forgiveness for her. He says it’ll mean I’m free when I can do that.”

“Can you picture that happening, maybe?” Bev asked.

I shrugged. "At this second? . . .Nope."



We had our final class on Tuesday, but instead of acting out "After the End," Bev took us to the computer lab and we spent the morning researching censorship issues. We went to Chris Crutcher's website and found out that he's up to his eyeballs in battling censorship. His books are regularly challenged by parents like T.W.'s and church leaders like Reverend Langley. We were charged up about reading his other books after that. Somehow, I doubt that would please the church crowd, but we didn't care. Bev said that she'd order them for us to pass around our little group.

When we returned to Bev's classroom, there was an envelope on her desk. She opened it and announced, "The school board is holding an emergency meeting Thursday night. I'm in the hot seat at 7 P.M."



If Bev was worried about the school board meeting, she did a great job of not showing it. It was like anger took over for hurt, and she didn't seem afraid at all. I found myself increasingly tense as the *Hour of Doom* approached. Bev told me to stop calling it that, but that's how it felt to me.

David wasn't nervous. He was pissed and ready to kick some major ass. Bev told him that it wasn't going to help her be treated like a professional if he threw a shit-fit in the middle of a school board meeting, so if he didn't think he could control himself, he should just stay home. She also told Ben that under no circumstances could he bring his hockey stick to the meeting. Or stink bombs. Or any extra M-80s he might have hidden somewhere. Or water balloons. Or the chicken snake he and Steven had in an aquarium in

the corner of the shop.

"Aw, Mom! What are you, a mind-reader?" he grumbled.

"Don't help, Ben." Bev said.

He huffed, "If you're not going to let me bring any of that stuff, I'm staying home."

Bev sighed. "Probably a good idea. I'll already have my hands full with your father."



**Editorial: Crutcher's Book Has Merit; Complaints Against Asher
Are Trite**

by Trini Cooper, Special Contributor to *The Patience Press*

Tonight at the Patience Independent School District Administration Building, a meeting will be held to decide whether to remove Beverly Asher, a talented, dedicated teacher, from her classroom.

This is a travesty and a waste of time, too. Why? The English II summer school class ended Tuesday, the kids have already read the book, and Ms. Asher has already, as she puts it, "stretched their minds," through study of the themes and topics in Chris Crutcher's book, Ironman. Was the book on the district's "approved novel" list? No. Should it be? Absolutely.

The people who agreed on the approved novel list left out an important consideration, as far as my sports-loving, struggling reader, 16-year-old-son is concerned: relevancy. My son could relate to Bo Brewster, the protagonist in Ironman. And guess what, reading fans? Because of my son's newly developed ability to evaluate literature, his chances of passing the dreaded standardized test are greatly improved.

Please do not allow the narrow agenda of a short-sighted outspoken few dictate what is best for the majority. Those of you who live in the real world know that Patience is a diverse community of

many layers, and you can see the long-term societal impact that skilled teachers have on kids. Instead of chastising her for thinking outside the box, let's applaud a teacher who tries to reach kids on their own terms. Please show up and make your voices heard.

It's up to you.



There were no parking spaces left at the school district administration building. It was obvious that Reverend Langley brought his flock: every third or fourth person held a Bible.

I wished I could lose my extreme anxiety so that I wasn't drowning in nervousness. I wasn't even in the "hot seat," but confrontation makes me nervous. Bev was angry but calm. What would it be like to be that brave, instead of wishing for a small, dark space to hide in?

The side door of the boardroom opened, and in walked Z.Z., Aurelia, carrying her own Bible, and Jewel and Jasper, who was limping and still pretty raw-looking. They sat in the front row and ignored the stares of people around them, although Z.Z. did come over and ask us if we were ready for the show.

I didn't get what she meant by that, but I nodded anyway.

I turned to see Kevin's mom and dad. They thanked Bev for everything she had done for Kevin. Trini had tears in her eyes when she said she never thought she'd see the day her son Kevin would love to read any book, or have a girlfriend as special as Roxanne.

"I think I can only take credit for the book," Bev laughed.

"No, no, something happened in your classroom, Bev. Something special. Good luck. We're on your side" Trini told her.

Mr. Cooper shook hands with David and clapped him on the shoulder, then leaned in and whispered something in David's ear.

"Yeah, let's hope it doesn't come to that," David said, grinning.

"Just let me know, Dave. From what I hear, that tar spreads easily enough to cover Reverend Langley from head to toe. And, my brother has a chicken farm in Arkansas. Feathers are *not* in short supply."

"Where's Kevin, Roxanne, and Dub?" I asked.

"Oh, they'll be here in a minute," Trini said.

I felt someone's eyes on me and turned around. T.W. rolled his eyes and smirked. He was wearing a suit, sitting between his parents, and looking like he wished he could be anywhere else.

A man with greased back strawberry-blonde hair and a seriously ugly tie paced back and forth in front of the church-goers' section. I whispered to Bev, "Is that Reverend Langley?"

She nodded.

The cry of a baby caught my attention, and I saw Junior Alvarez, a girl I guessed was Moreyma, and their baby, Three. Junior nodded and smiled at Bev. They met in the aisle.

Bev hugged him. "I can't believe you're taking the tiny amount of time you have off to be here, Junior!"

"Z.Z. called me and told me what's up, Miss. This is wrong, Miss. You went above and beyond for me, and I figure the least I can do is return the favor." He was interrupted by the pounding of a gavel. He gave Bev a little wave and steered Moreyma and the baby to the back of the room.

"Call the meeting to order, please. Those of you who are standing will please refrain from blocking the aisles. Fire marshal says we have to keep those walkways clear. I'm the school board president, Ernest Page. This emergency meeting has been called to address the use of an objectionable novel in the English II summer school session."

David stood. "I object."

"Excuse me, sir? This is not a trial, so you can't object. Sit down," said Rudy Fortenberry, the school board vice-president.

"Well, that's just too damn bad, because I *object* to this novel

being referred to as ‘objectionable.’ That’s one person’s opinion, not fact.”

Reverend Langley stood and cleared his throat. “Uh, may I please the court,” he smiled smugly at his own joke, “but there are plenty of people present who would identify this putrid filth, *Ironman*, as objectionable.”

Louise Hardgrave snapped, “Y’all, we’re going to be here all night if y’all keep pretending we’re in a court of law. My TiVo’s broken and I don’t want to miss my stories on the soap opera channel, so let’s get on with it,”

“Okay, Louise, keep your hat on.” Ernest Page banged the gavel again. “We’re here to allow the public to express their views about this book. We called Mrs. Asher before the board because we want to hear what was so compelling about this book that she felt justified to ignore the approved novels list.”

“Fire that Pagan!” a man shouted. I jumped at the outburst and instinctively curled in on myself.

“She’s unfit to teach our children!” yelled a woman to the right of the board members. I opened my eyes, not even realizing I had closed them. I looked around, embarrassed at the way I must have looked: all hunched up, like a white lump with brown hair.

The man with the greasy hair strode to the front of the room, his back to the school board. His right hand raised, he lowered it and silenced the crowd. He turned to the board and addressed them in a booming voice. “We Christians know it is unholy and downright unsavory to introduce literature into children’s minds which espouses. . .” Reverend Langley read from Mrs. Griffin’s list of complaints and finished up with, “Would you like to know how many times the word ‘asshole’ is used in this book, Mr. President?”

Mr. Page’s jaw dropped. “Er, no, Reverend, that will not be necessary.”

The school board revealed pretty quickly that they didn’t have a plan for finding out the truth. Instead, the meeting felt like a game

show as one speaker after another tried to out-holy the last one. Who could quote the longest scripture and name the chapter and verse? I half-expected to hear, “I’ll take Leviticus for five hundred, Ernest.”

David, arms crossed over his chest and scowling, stepped up to the microphone. “This meeting is a sham. The questions my wife has been asked about her personal life through the course of this investigation are out of line. You people were elected to do your jobs and let Beverly do hers.”

Bev put her hand on his arm. “Thank you, honey. I love you, too. Now please sit down.” David handed her the microphone, kissed her, and returned to his seat.

“I’m Beverly Asher. You asked me here tonight because you wanted to talk to me about why I chose to use *Ironman* in my classroom. Remember? You invited me here to hear *my* side, too?”

She paused, making eye contact with each of the school board members. “Look: I *am* passionate about my job. Sometimes my passion leads me to see so much value in a book’s storytelling and message that I lose sight of the possible objectionable aspect of the language. I’ve sat here tonight and I’ve heard person after person come up to this microphone and declare his or her love of truth. At least, I think I’ve heard each person say what the truth is, for him or herself.”

A woman shrieked, “*‘He who practices deceit shall not dwell within my house; He who speaks falsehood shall not maintain his position before me!’* Psalm 101, verse 7!”

I turned and saw T.W. trying to make his mom sit down. He looked furious. Coach Griffin didn’t look too thrilled at what Mrs. Griffin was doing, either, which surprised me, since he’d been one of the main hell-raisers about the book.

I wondered if Bev was nervous yet.

“Fire her! Fire her! Fire her!” the Multitude chanted. David rushed to Bev and stood with his arm protectively around her. I

stayed where I was. Frozen.

Ernest Page rose, banged his gavel, and sternly announced, “Ladies and Gentlemen! You will control yourselves! Silence!” He waited a moment before continuing. “The issue of Mrs. Asher’s continuing employment with the district is moot. She signed a contract for the coming year this past spring. Mrs. Asher has been teaching in our district for many years. Texas Education Law states that a district must have good cause to terminate a teacher—”

Reverend Langley cut him off. “And you do not consider this to be good cause? Proverbs 27, verse 19: *‘As water reflects a face, so a man’s heart reflects the man.’* Clearly, Mrs. Asher’s heart is unworthy.”

David started to rush Reverend Langley, but Bev blocked him. She pulled his face down into her own and appeared to be begging him, pointing to our seats. At last David nodded but made a point of walking by the preacher, who took a few steps back.

Mr. Page continued, “The board has come to the conclusion that the costs to terminate her contract could be extensive. However, it is possible that we will reassign Mrs. Asher from the high school to some other position within the district—one in which she would have no contact with children.”

Reverend Langley’s followers cheered.

“But I love my job!” Bev cried. “You can’t take me away from my kids!” Her outburst silenced the room, and she looked surprised. She removed the microphone from its stand and turned to face the crowd. She closed her eyes a moment and when she opened them again, she was calmer.

“Please, please just listen to me. Let me try to explain why I taught this novel. Reverend Langley mentioned aspects of the plot of *Ironman* that included things like divorce, and sexual abuse, and kids not getting along with their parents or teachers—and those are real issues for today’s teenagers. They have been issues for kids for years. They were issues for every one of us in this room, I’ll bet. Even

if your parents didn’t divorce or you never had a conflict with a teacher, I’m sure everyone in here knows someone who has experienced those things. I’ll bet that at least ten people in here are related to someone who is gay.”

“Now, you’re just wrong there,” Louise Hardgrave said.

Bev ignored her. “Our kids, yours and mine; your grandkids, nieces and nephews, your friends’ children—all of our kids are growing up in a world that’s sometimes very messy, and they have a lot to deal with.”

“That’s what church is for, Mrs. Asher,” Reverend Langley said patronizingly.

Bev shook her head. “*Ironman* includes some of those painful aspects of life—but did any of you who read the book recognize the healing that occurs? I assume that *none* of you would be here if you hadn’t read the book, correct?”

Most of the people wouldn’t look at Bev when she asked that question.

Bev continued. “Surely you recognized aspects of the story that balanced the painful stuff, didn’t you? Loyalty. Self-control. Facing the truth even when it’s hard. Seeing parents as humans instead of as one-dimensional beings. If you are as committed to truth as you claim to be, then you must be willing to see what is *wholly true* about the book, and not only what applies to your agenda.”

Ernest Page banged the gavel, and I jumped out of my skin. “Mrs. Asher, your time is up. Do we have others who would like to speak on the use of this objectionable book?”

Bev stood straight but sounded tired. “Thank you for giving me the chance to be heard.” Kevin, Dub, Z.Z., Junior, and Roxanne passed her as she walked back to her seat. My classmates presented the school board with papers.

“What’s this?” Ernest Page asked.

Junior was their spokesperson. “Our essays: the ones that Mr. Walden said that we weren’t allowed to finish because it could do

more damage than *Ironman* did.”

Dub coughed, “Horseshit!”

Louise Hardgrave’s eyes were huge. “*Excuse me?*”

Junior ignored her. “We want you to read them so that you can see for yourselves that Mrs. Asher is a kick-ass teacher.”

Mr. Fortenberry snapped, “Watch your mouth, young man!”

Kevin spoke up. “If you ever need someone to teach you swear words, this is your guy.” He gestured to Dub, who grinned from ear to ear.

The five of them turned from the School Board and started up the center aisle, but Dub spun on his heel. “I want to make sure you know that I didn’t learn any new swear words by reading *Ironman*. For example, I learned the word ‘asshole’ by living with my stepfather, who is one.”

Ernest Page banged the gavel. “That will do, young man!”

“Sit down, T.W.!” Coach Griffin said. But T.W. shook his father’s hand off his arm and stepped over the legs of the people in his row. He tripped over a woman’s large straw bag but caught himself before falling. He regained his balance, straightened his coat and tie, and shot a dirty look at the lady with the bag.

The church folks applauded, but T.W. ignored them. Mr. and Mrs. Griffin tried to get them to stop clapping.

He stepped up to the microphone. “My name is T.W. Griffin, and it’s my fault you’re all here.” If T.W. was nervous, he gave no indication at all. His voice was clear and strong, and he acted thrilled to be standing where he was.

“I won’t take a lot of your time. I think I’d rather use this opportunity to talk to my parents.” T.W. removed the microphone from its base and turned to face his parents. Even when they looked away, he would not.

“Dad, the reason I liked *Ironman* so much is that the main character, Bo Brewster, has the courage to leave football behind when the coach questions his manhood because he won’t go along with a

questionable decision. I wish I had Bo’s courage, Dad, because at least he had the guts to tell his dad and coach what I wish I could tell you: football is not everything to me.”

Coach Griffin stood and started to walk toward T.W. “Son, *please*. Let’s just talk about this at home.”

T.W. held up his hand. “Sit down, Dad. You and Mom are responsible for what’s happening here. Haven’t you always told me to take the consequences of my actions like a man?” He returned his father’s glare until the coach, shaking his head, returned to his seat.

“I am more than football. I know it’s your dream for me, but it’s not mine. I’m not a loser, Dad, even if I don’t play ball, and even if I’m not the youngest player to ever play at UT Austin. You’re always telling me that if I don’t make your dreams come true, your disappointment in me will be worse than if you beat the living daylight out of me.”

Coach Griffin gasped. “What? I never—”

“You never say it out loud, Dad. You don’t have to. It’s in the way you look at me, and the way you pick at me about my grades.”

Reverend Langley boomed, “‘*Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you.*’ Deuteronomy Chapter 5, verse 16.”

T.W. gave him a dirty look. “I’ll get to you in a minute, Reverend. Dad, the only reason we’re all here is that you didn’t get your way. I was ashamed of making *Bs* in class, so I didn’t tell you about my grades. You couldn’t control Mrs. Asher, either. You couldn’t intimidate her into being at your beck and call, so here we all are. Is it what you expected? Are you proud of yourself now? Because I’m damn sure you’re not proud of me anymore.”

Coach Griffin commanded, “Son, sit *down!*”

But T.W. wouldn’t stop. “Here’s something to help you sleep, Dad: I *did* get an *A* in the class. That’s all that matters to you, right?

The first letter of the alphabet. Not that you care, but I learned literary analysis, too, which will help me no matter where I go to college. In fact, I think I may even major in English and become an English teacher like Mrs. Asher. If I can teach like she does, I know I'll make a lot more of a difference in the world than being able to run fast while I'm carrying a football. I'm going to live my own life, Dad. I'm going to make my own dreams now, and I hope you'll be cheering me on when I figure out what they are."

Coach Griffin rose and left the board room, leaving his wife sitting by herself. Chloe Griffin's shoulders slumped as she wept quietly.

"Mom, I'm sorry you're upset. I wish you'd look at me. Please, Mom? Look at me. On second thought, you might want to keep hiding your face, because you're not going to like what I'm about to tell you. You told me that there's stuff in *Ironman* that I'm too young to read. Like sex."

It felt like the whole room inhaled at once, but Mrs. Griffin choked back a sob.

"Mom, I'm not a little boy anymore. There's not one thing in *Ironman* that I hadn't thought up on my own, *at least* two or three years ago. I'm not gay, but if I was, I'd have been born that way. Reading about a gay character in the book does not make people gay. That's not how it works. I still love you, Mom, even if you're as disappointed in me as Dad is."

T.W. turned an icy gaze to the pastor. "Reverend, you disgust me. I'll never step foot in your church again. You're an insincere, judgmental, disingenuous fake. But—" T.W. shook his head— "that has nothing to do with *Ironman*, either." He fumbled with the microphone a little when he put it back in its stand, then followed his father out the door.

I *wanted* to get up and defend Bev, too. Inside, I was saying, *You think sexual abuse exists only in books? You think it's unrealistic for a person with mental problems to be in a regular classroom? I*

hide in a fucking closet, people! I held myself hostage with a knife, and if my mother writes me a letter, there's no telling how self-destructive I'll get. Don't get too comfy, thinking there's no freaky people living in Patience. I was this way long before I read some book. Censoring what I read will not keep the ugly reality away, but knowing I'm not alone can really help.

But. . . I couldn't make the words come out. I couldn't make myself brave enough to get up and speak for Bev, even though she had done so much for me; loved me even without really knowing me. I just sat there like a mute lump, while Louise Hardgrave glared at the crowd, daring anyone to get up and make her miss another minute of her soap operas.

Ernest Page struck the desk three times with his gavel. "We'll take into account what we learned about Mrs. Asher's choice of reading material in her classroom. Of course, we are always willing to hear from the public regarding curriculum concerns. However, I would like to read these students' essays, as well as the book, before making a decision. At this time, I retract labeling the book as 'objectionable.' I would like to decide that for myself."

Louise Hardgrave snapped, "Don't you think we should have done that before making me miss Luke and Laura's reunion on *General Hospital*?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hardgrave. I believe you're right," he told her.

We rose to leave, and I couldn't even look at Bev. I was too ashamed of my cowardice.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bev laced up her shoes, stretched out her legs, drank some water, and reached to open the front door, ready to hit the road before the summer sun heated the moist air to the thickness of soup. “Come on, Ash, before it gets too stuffy to breathe out there.”

I hurried to finish tying my left shoe. Ever since what I called my “road trip,” *and* after my blisters healed enough, I started joining Bev on her early morning runs. She taught me how to maintain proper posture, as if a string suspended me by the top of my head. She showed me how to run with my shoulders square, hips forward, and how to do pick-ups, which are short segments of running faster, then backing off again into the previous steady pace. Bev ran half-marathons a few times a year, but her running wasn’t about speed. It was about distance and stress relief.

Our feet lightly touched down in rhythm along the black asphalt road bordered by shade trees, evergreens, and littered with pine cones. We used our runs to get to know one another more deeply, bonded by the staccato conversations we carried over four miles: two miles to the end of our road and two miles back.

My favorite part of our route was the short wooden bridge about a half-mile from our driveway. I liked the way the trees arching over the bridge kept the place in permanent cool semi-darkness. A narrow creek ran under the bridge, but it usually dried up in the summer.

I panted, “Frank—says—people—dump—animals—down—

here—a—lot—in—the—spring and—summer.”

Bev had a much easier time breathing than I did. “Yeah, they do. The animals sometimes wander up—to our house—if the coyotes don’t get them—before they gather their wits enough to get up out of the creek.”

“People who—dump—animals—suck,” I said.

“People are amazingly cruel sometimes.” Bev jumped over a pothole. “Watch out for that on our way back, Ashley.”

“Yeah, people pretty much—suck,” I said darkly.

“That’s a sad generalization. . . I think people can also be amazingly brave and strong.” Bev gave me a sideways look. “What are you thinking about, Ash?”

I ignored her question, my eyebrows furrowed. “I *guess* that’s true—about people.”

“I *know* it’s true. Look at you, Ashley.”

I stopped in my tracks. My heart pounded so hard that I felt it would explode out of my chest. “Are you being sarcastic?”

Bev stopped, then marched in place and walked around me in a wide circle. “Keep walking, Ash. You shouldn’t stop suddenly. You need to let your heart rate come down gradually. What do you mean, am I being sarcastic?”

I imitated Bev’s quick walk, the two of us circling one another. I wished I hadn’t opened my mouth. I frowned, embarrassed at my quick temper.

Bev arched an eyebrow. “Well? Come on, spit it out, Ash.”

“It’s that—didn’t you notice that someone was missing at the school board meeting last week?” I walked slowly in an intentional figure eight as I visualized blue dashed lines on the road and focused on the imaginary lines instead of my dread.

“You’ve lost me.”

I stopped moving except to stamp my foot in frustration. “Out of all the students in your class, only *one* person didn’t have the guts to stand up for you.” I crossed my arms tight across my chest and

dug my fingernails into my biceps.

Bev stopped, hands on her hips. She bit her lip and squinted at the road as if in deep concentration. “I still don’t get it, Ash.”

I exploded, “Me! I didn’t go up there for you. I wanted to. I wanted to tell all those closed-minded freaks that there *was* a crazy person in your class: me. The other students were exposed to me, like Bo’s anger management group had Hudgie: a crazy kid. And I’m like the—the *poster child* for sexual abuse.”

Bev cut me off. “Stop it! I can’t believe you’re stuck on this. You’ve managed to make the entire evening about *you*, instead of focusing on how cool it was that your classmates stood up—not for *me*, not so much, anyway—but for themselves and their right to read a book and process it themselves, instead of having people who haven’t even read it decide for them.”

I blushed and wanted to melt into the pavement. I had gotten over feeling self-conscious with Bev; had assumed that I could say anything to her. Bev had never spoken to me roughly, and I was filled with confusion and shame from head to toe. Real tears washed away the imaginary blue lines on the road.

Bev took a step toward me. I turned away and looked down. She stepped closer, placed a hand on my shoulder, and asked gently, “How long are you going to stay like this, Ashley? How long are you going to allow that rotten bastard to control you by keeping you afraid to speak up for yourself?”

A hiccupy sob escaped my throat, and I squeezed my eyes tightly closed. *How fast would I have to run to get away from someone who’s been doing it five days a week, for years? Just to disappear. That’s what would be good right now.*

“Please, sweetie, look at me.” Bev applied a little pressure to my shoulder to turn me around.

Head down and arms locked across my chest, I allowed her to turn me to face her. My nails still dug like spikes into my upper arms. I was not bleeding, but blood pooled in little half-moons beneath

the skin’s surface.

Bev gently massaged my hands until they relaxed, then took them into her own and held them, prayer-like. “I need you to hear me. I’m not criticizing you for the side-effects of the abuse. You’re always going to have to deal with it, I’m afraid. It’s kind of like when a cancer patient has chemotherapy, and has good days and bad days.”

I jerked my hands away and staggered back from her, suddenly enraged that anyone would claim to know what it’s like to have to live inside my head. “How do you know? What would you know about it?” I shouted at her. No longer whimpering like a scared puppy, my anger roared.

Bev blasted, “I may not know what it’s like to be raped, but I know what it’s like to grow up in a house that feels like a war zone!” She lowered her voice, took a deep breath, and let it out. “My father was a drunk who treated us so terribly that on the day he dropped dead during a fight with my mom, I didn’t know whether to feel relieved or sad.” She shook her head and said softly, “Come on out of yourself and realize that you don’t have the corner on the tragedy market, would you?”

We stood in the center of the black asphalt road. Suddenly we became aware of the *putt putt* of an engine and realized that the rural mail carrier’s truck was right behind us. No telling how long the old man had been watching us.

We glared at him. He closed his wide-open mouth, nodded slightly, and pulled around us.

Bev watched him go, then turned back to me and softly said, “I had to get help to move on with my life, too, Ashley.”

“You—you did? But you’re so strong!”

“Yeah, I am, but who I am now was hard-won. I was like you for a long time—stuck, like a little kid on the inside. I also grew up thinking that I had to take care of my mom, because she was like a child, too.”

“Are you saying I act like a brat?” This day was going from bad worse.

“No, Ashley. It’s like this: when children are first abused, they kind of freeze emotionally. It’s a way of blocking out what’s happening to you. It’s not your fault; it’s nothing to be ashamed of. You also shouldn’t be ashamed of trying to take care of your mom’s feelings all those years by not telling her about what Charlie was doing. You never knew anything different. Have you noticed that we’ve been pointing out to you when we do things that parents are supposed to take care of, not children? You have a right to be a kid. Did you know that?”

We walked in silence until we reached the shaded bridge. Bev took a seat on the edge, her legs dangling over the miniscule stream below. I put my hand on her shoulder for balance then sat down next to her, our legs touching. “So, what was it like for you, growing up?” I asked her.

Bev shrugged. “My parents fought constantly. My mom would throw fits and lock herself in her room, and I was the one who had to coax her out so she’d help me take care of my sisters. My dad drank a case of beer a day all by himself, then came home at night and switched to whiskey. We never knew what mood he’d be in or if something we said was going to set him off.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know exactly what that’s like.”

“Most people whose parents are alcoholics do. He’d throw things—dishes, his keys, shoes... me, my sisters, my mom, the dog... He’d tell us he wished we were all dead and sometimes he threatened to kill us, too.” A light breeze filtered through the greenness around us. Bev lifted her arms and closed her eyes, enjoying the coolness.

“So when you were growing up, were you jealous of people with normal families?” I leaned back on my elbows and stared up into the arching canopy of trees. A dewdrop from above landed on my forehead and I left it there.

Beverly sighed. “Yeah, but what’s normal, really?” She leaned

back on her elbows and closed her eyes.

“Damn, Bev, your family’s fucked up, too.”

She smiled, opened her eyes, and turned to me. “People like to pretend that families are always good things to be a part of, but that’s not always true. It’s so much less messy for people to pretend that everything’s okay. The thing is, pretending has a high cost.”

I sat up abruptly. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. I was embarrassed. . . Because I know you’re right about me. I’m a chickenshit, and I’m afraid to stand up for myself. And I... hate that about myself.”

I offered my hand to her and pulled her up. “It’s okay, Ash.” She smoothed my hair and brushed my bangs out of my eyes.

“Does my dad ever scare you when he gets really mad?” I asked her.

She considered her answer. “I’ll admit that little sirens go off in my head when I’m around angry people. I’m very sensitive to other people’s moods—but I remind myself that it’s not about me, it’s about them. Your dad had already dealt with his anger issues and stopped drinking long before we met. I never would have dated him if he hadn’t.”

“How did you get to where you didn’t feel like hiding? I mean, you hid when you were a kid, right?”

Bev nodded. “Sometimes I did. And...I still have moments that I feel like hiding, like you will, even when you’ve put a lot of time and space between your history and the life you’ve made for yourself.”

I threw her arms around her and held her tightly. “I love you, Bev.”

Bev kissed the top of my head and murmured, “I love you too, honey.”

Holding hands, we walked back home.

We turned onto our driveway. “Do you think my mom will ever stop pretending?”

Bev looked away. She seemed to be trying to choose just the

right words. “I don’t know, Ash. I can tell you this, though: for her to do that would take guts. Unimaginable guts. She would have to let go of her fear of facing the truth and see the world as it is.”

We stepped up onto the front porch and stood beneath the ceiling fan whirring above the front door. “That’s a very freeing thing, isn’t it? Seeing things as they are?”

Bev reached for the doorknob, then stopped and pulled me close in a sideways hug. “Yeah. When you no longer believe that others have supreme power over you, and you’re no longer afraid that you’ll die without other people’s approval or presence in your life, that’s when you’ll find freedom.”



I still couldn’t picture Bev being abused, too. I mean, I believed her, but it was hard to imagine: the strong, amazingly confident woman she is now ever having been anyone’s victim. I tried to envision Bev huddled in a ball inside a piece of furniture, or with a long flannel nightgown wrapped around her feet to hide her presence in a closet. Nope. Couldn’t do it. It kind of gave me hope. Maybe someday I could get to where she is now.



I told Dr. Matt about my conversation with Bev. He said that my own mother might have been abused as well, given her tolerance for living in hell with Charlie and all. There was something inside my mom, like there is, at this point in me, that says we don’t deserve respect of our boundaries.

Not that we have any boundaries in the first place. It’s a sense of worthlessness and emptiness, like being a cup with a crack in it. No matter how many times the cup was filled with the love that David and Bev showed me, it leaked out, because I didn’t love myself

yet. I wasn’t willing to fight for me, and it came out in torrents of rage.



It rained twenty-four hours a day for several days—unusual for late July in Texas, so I was excited when I finally got to run again. By the time the showers stopped on the last rainy day, it was almost noon. Bev had gone to Tyler to a writing workshop, and Ben was at Scout camp.

I borrowed Bev’s old iPod for my run. I don’t handle silence well. The thoughts inside my head get too loud when my mind is allowed to roam. It ventures into dark memories that make me feel like shit. I was afraid of my mind having that much free time.

Her iPod was loaded with a mix of songs that made me naturally speed up with the tempo, and I discovered that I love the feeling of my whole body being under my control. I rest more completely at night, and, of course, it also helps that no one except Loki creeps around my room.

I ran four miles and returned home, got a tall glass of iced tea, and returned to sit on the front porch swing, enjoying the milder weather and the feeling of being spent. I leaned back, closed my eyes and breathed deeply. I opened my eyes, and standing before me was the most pathetic-looking dog I’d ever seen.

She was a withered skeleton of a dog, with a thin white coat and random light brown spots resembling freckles. I could count her vertebrae and ribs, and her ears were thick with grey, blood-swollen ticks. She had sad brown eyes, and her tail curled up slightly at the end. She shook herself and gave me that “Please help me” look.

I sat up straight, and the sudden movement made her jump away from me. Something about her was so familiar to me.

I said, “Wait right here,” and ran in the house to get her something to eat. David and Bev’s old dog had died the year before, so

they didn't have any dog food. I gave her what I could find in the fridge, some ham. I filled a bowl with water and set it before her. She inhaled the ham and gulped the water, so I gave her more ham and refilled the bowl.

I sat on the swing and the dog and I stared at each other a while. It was hard not to pet her, but with all those ticks—yuck. I remembered being at Lisa's one time when their dog had a tick. She'd removed it with a pair of tweezers and dropped it in a jar of alcohol. I had the tweezers in my bathroom but couldn't find any alcohol, so I filled an old mason jar with some cooking wine I found in the back of the pantry.

"Okay, let's see what we can do for you," I said soothingly. She looked at me with those big brown eyes, so trusting, and I fell in love with her.

An hour later, the ticks were in the jar of wine. I screwed the lid on and put it in the trash. Then, unable to bear the idea of ever again using the tweezers on my eyebrows, I threw them away, too.

She still looked pretty pathetic, so I went and got my shampoo and conditioner and worked up so many suds that she looked filled out like a normal dog. I rinsed her off and marveled at how white she was. A lot of her "spots" had washed right off.

About that time, the turkeys and ducks—the world's simplest security system—sounded off, announcing David's arrival. He sauntered down the short hill and jumped off the retaining wall onto the grass. The dog was so scared of him, she tangled herself and me in the rope I was using to keep her close for her bath.

David smiled and began unwinding me from the rope. "What is *that*?"

"She came up to me when I was on the porch."

"Ugh. That is one sad-looking dog, Ash." He shook his head but his eyes were smiling.

"You should have seen her before I pulled all her ticks off and gave her a bath!"

"Well, what are you going to do with her? She doesn't look like she belongs to anybody. If she does, her owner should be shot." Hands on his hips, he looked skeptical.

"I—I was thinking about asking you if I could maybe keep her?" I kept my eyes on the dog, who I had already decided to name Emma.

"Hmmm. I don't know. We'll have to talk to Bev. You know, Ash, if we do keep her, it doesn't mean we'll be able to keep every animal that wanders up here."

"I know." Little bubbles of hope were building inside me.

". . . And I don't know if Bev will let her stay in the house or not, although our dog, Annie, did."

This is a good sign: he's already thinking about where she'd live. Bigger bubbles of hope rose to the surface. "Okay," I said.

". . . And she'd have to have a check-up, shots, and be spayed, which costs money. If we keep her—if she's your dog, you're going to have to earn the money to pay for her vet bills."

All the bubbles burst at once. It was hopeless. How would I earn money? I was too young for anyone to hire me, and I didn't know anybody I could baby-sit for.

David continued, "Of course, you *could* work in my shop. My tools haven't been cleaned in forever."

Annnnd we have a resurrection of the hope bubbles! Yesssss! "I could do that! Want me to start now?"

He laughed. "Let's wait and talk to Bev to see if she's okay with her staying."



Bev's heart melted when she saw the dog, and she agreed with me that Emma was a perfect name for her. I don't know why it fit her, but it just did. She wasn't a Yellow Lab, and she was too old to have puppy breath, but she seemed to need me as much as I needed

her. Strange as it seems, Emma's showing up out of the blue, brutalized by life and scared of sudden movements, reminded me of myself.

Between us, there was hope. Maybe together we could become as strong as Bev.



Bev's strength was tested the first week in August, when a *Letter to the Editor* appeared in *The Patience Press*:

To the Editor:

Recent events in the life of our community revealed a tolerance for sinfulness that must be stopped! I am referring, of course, to the school board meeting in which members of the Christian community objected to the salacious novel used by high school teacher Beverly Asher and school board members neglected to take much-needed action.

Purify Patience, a newly formed Christian leadership group, is leading the charge for all believers to come together in prayer to rally against profanity, promiscuity, and parent-bashing pedagogy. I invite all concerned citizens to gather in the Patience High School football stadium at 2 P.M. on Saturday. A catfish fry, best dessert contest, and book burning will immediately follow the rally.

*Andrew Langley, Pastor
First Church of Patience*



Just as Bev finished reading Reverend Langley's letter aloud to us, the phone rang. It was Marvella Brown, and she had a plan.



The mood was festive, and the home team side of the stadium applauded and whistled as Reverend Langley ascended the steps to the platform. Gospel music blared from the football stadium speakers, and many people stood with their eyes closed, hands in the air, palms facing up, trying to reach straight up into Heaven to pull the Lord into the stadium with them.

"Thank you for coming," Reverend Langley's voice echoed through the stadium. "Today we have gathered to Purify Patience!" He shot his fist into the air, and his followers rose to their feet as their deafening roar shook the stands.

The minister adjusted his cordless mike and raised both of his arms like a magician levitating his assistant. "Our little organization," he paused for the crowd's response, "has decided to take the devil by the horns!" Wild cheering drowned him out, and he waited for it to fade. "We resolve to get the filth out of our schools! If the school board will not take action, we as a concerned community must fight back against this evil!"

Courtesy of Kevin's reporter mom, Trini Cooper, we watched the show from the press box atop the stadium. Marvella Brown, seated behind us with Gabe, gave him a shove. "It's time for you to make it right, boy. Get up there *now*, Gabriel!"

"Yes, ma'am," Gabe moaned. He took his seat in front of the microphone. Kevin's dad pushed a couple of buttons, and high-pitched feedback filled the stadium.

Gabe held a paper in his shaking hands and tried to speak, but his voice refused to cooperate. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Ex-excuse me. Uh, ladies and gentlemen, I have an important announcement for ... for you." He turned and looked at Marvella, his eyes pleading. She made a twisting motion at his ear and he shuddered.

Reverend Langley discovered that his cordless mic no longer

worked. He removed the power box from his belt, shook it, and tried speaking again. He gave the crowd a reassuring smile, clasped his hands behind his back, and looked up at the press box, trying to see us.

Marvella warned through gritted teeth, “Gabriel Lonnie Brown, you’d better start talking!”

“My announcement is that, uh, earlier this summer, a group of ... of people met at Reverend Langley’s church. We formed a group called Purify Patience.”

At this, Reverend Langley smiled, clapped, and turned his palms to the sky as if receiving the Holy Spirit.

Gabe continued. “I’d like to read the names of the founding members of Purify Patience. Some of you know them already, but, well ... here we,” he gulped, “go.”

He began the list: Reverend Andrew Langley, Rudy Fortenberry, Dennis Hardgrave. After each name was read, he paused for the explosion of applause, whistles, and cheers. Gabe continued with, “Billy Ray Sublett.” A collective gasp filled the stadium

“And I—I am Gabriel Brown.”

Dead Silence.

Gabe turned back to Marvella and shook his head. She gave him the evil eye, and he continued. “As you may have—have heard, I—I was there when Billy Ray Sublett nearly killed, um, Jasper Brown...because he’s, you know...black.” Gabe’s voice cracked and he begged, “Mama, *please* don’t make me do this.”

Marvella heaved herself forward and smacked Gabe on the side of the head. He yelped. She crooked her finger and he leaned into her. She whispered what must have been some pretty big threats, because he pulled himself together and turned back to the microphone, sniffing slightly.

“Wh—what you all should know is—Purify Patience isn’t ... it’s not about this book that Miss Asher taught. We—I mean—the group has four goals. The first one is to return Patience to the good old

days, when the town was 100% white.”

Reverend Langley looked around wildly, then grabbed his cordless mic again and tapped it furiously, trying to get it to work. We could see his mouth moving at the same time Gabe announced, “The second goal is for women to know their place, like they used to, when they couldn’t vote.”

The wives of Purify Patience’s founders were seated behind their husbands in a reserved section of the stadium. Not one of those men would turn around and look at his wife. Their spines seemed to collapse as they slid down into their seats.

“Boy, I wouldn’t want to be them tonight,” Frank murmured.

“No shit,” said David.

The roar of women drowned out the remainder of Gabe’s scripted speech, but that was nothing compared to the crowd’s reaction when a bunch of police officers and guys wearing F.B.I. vests emerged from the field house and arrested the leaders of Purify Patience on the spot.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The arrest of a White Power group in the tiny town of Patience made the news in a big way for about a week, but the out-of-town reporters left for Austin when the sixteen-year-old daughter of a Texas state senator accused him of sexual abuse. The senator denied it, and one congressman after another made statements in his support.

Then, he admitted to molesting his daughter, blamed it all on alcohol, and announced that he was headed to rehab. His wife—the mother of his daughter—stood by his side. They were filmed holding hands and smiling, their heads held high.

The story struck me to my core. Where was the girl now? Who was taking care of *her*? Did these people who defended him have any idea what kind of courage it took for her to speak up? Did her father threaten her if she told, too?

Dr. Matt and I talked about it, because I couldn't stop thinking about her story and wondering how she felt. I fell into a bad mood and stayed there, like when I was younger and Mom threatened to make me live with David. When I thought about what the girl was going through, I had to stifle a scream that would have started in the soles of my feet and blown off the top of my head if I let it out.

"You're still hiding in that closet," Dr. Matt told me. "But you're hiding from *yourself*. Know how I know?"

I ran my finger along the edge of his desk and shook my head.

"It's still easier for you to be pissed off about somebody else being abused than it is for you to own the truth that you've kept inside yourself. You're afraid that if you acknowledge how bad it was, you won't know what to do with your rage. You're terrified of claiming your right to not be abused, because you feel as if you don't deserve that right."

He leaned back in his chair and gave me *The Look* that I knew so well after nearly three months.

I mumbled, "Well, what do I do? How am I supposed to get brave, just snap my fingers or something?"

He leaned forward and blasted, "Come out of the fucking closet!"



Easier said than done. I doubted that Dr. Matt had ever been chased down and tackled by a man two-and-a-half times his size. I told myself that I was doing the best I could, but I didn't know if that was really true or not. I'm an expert at feeling sorry for myself. It was easier to stay pissed, reading every story about the senator's daughter that I could find.

On Dr. Matt's advice, Bev took her laptop from me and hid the TV remote so that I couldn't wallow and obsess about her.

Distraction from my anger came in hanging out with Emma and getting ready for the new school year. It had only been about a month since she'd showed up, but Emma already looked like a different dog. Her backbone was still slightly visible, but not nearly like it had been that first day. She was so smart, too! She seemed to understand everything I said to her.

Bev was easygoing about having animals in the house, which was good, seeing as how the first time Emma came in, she stretched out on the sofa with her head on a pillow and took a nap.

She slept snuggled up right next to me all night long, her body

aligned with mine,. If I thought I slept well when I was tired out from running, that sleep was restless compared to how solidly I was able to relax with Emma there.

She was still a little skittish around David, and came completely undone if strange men came to the door looking for him. She ran and hid in my bathroom—jumped right up into the tub and hid behind the curtains. “Oh, come on, you wuss,” I said softly, understanding completely how she felt.

I had come far enough, scary-thoughts-of-stuff-to-do-to-myself-wise, that I was allowed to stay by myself when David was up the hill working in his shop. Bev was at the high school, since her teacher preparation workdays had already started. Ben and Steven were determined to use every last minute of their summer vacation, and were building a fort in the woods made out of salvaged materials.

I didn’t mind being alone. God knows I had enough practice at it when I lived in Northside with Mom and Charlie. I’d started writing a book about my life since I moved to Patience. I wasn’t sure if I’d actually do anything with it as far as trying to have it published, but I thought that if I did, it might help other people like me to know they’re not as alone as they probably think they are. I mean, I’m not an expert or anything, and I have a long way to go, but I figured it couldn’t hurt to record the journey.

Even though I was proud of the baby steps I was making by being able to write down what happened to me and not feeling like throwing up every time I reread what I’d written, I was glad when Z.Z. called and invited me to go to the Tyler Mall with her and Roxanne to go shopping for school clothes. Jewel offered to take us.



I was surprised when I returned home from shopping to find no one home. It was six o’clock, and I expected my family—that still

sounds so funny to me to say!—to be there. I called the shop and got the answering machine. I tried David’s, Bev’s, and Frank’s cell phones, and it was the same story. Ben usually came in from the woods around four, but I figured he and Steven might be trying to finish up the fort.

By seven o’clock, I was getting worried, and Emma and I looked in the woods for the boys. There was a chainsaw and some tools on the ground, and it looked like the site had been abandoned in a hurry.

“Mmm, you guys are lucky your dads don’t know you left that stuff out,” I said aloud. I tried calling Ben and Steven, but heard no response.

Coming back into the house alone, the familiar feeling of being dumped knotted up in my stomach. I told myself that I was being ridiculous. *Like they’d really leave me with the house. Stupid.*

The phone rang. It was David.

“Hey, Ash, I’m at the emergency room. Ben and Steven were using the chain saw in the woods, and it kicked back on them.”

“Oh, my God!” I said.

“They’re going to be fine—they’re getting stitched up now. I was going to leave you a note, but I forgot to do it in all the craziness—”

“That’s okay,” I breathed, filled with relief at not being dumped again. “Where’s Bev?”

“She’s here—Frank, too. It’s going to be dark soon, baby. Lock the door and turn on the porch light.”

“I think I may go for a short run. It’s still pretty light outside, and the air feels cooler than it did this morning.” I was already stretching out my legs.

“Okay, well, don’t go too far. Remember, there are no streetlights. It’ll be pitch black out there once the sun sets.”

I hung up the phone. “Let’s go, Em.”



Emma trotted alongside me as we crossed my favorite spot, the bridge. The sun had set faster than I thought it would—either that, or I was getting slower at this whole running thing. I told myself that there was nothing to be afraid of. Taking a right and jogging up our driveway, I discovered that I was wrong.

Before my mind registered seeing my mother's car in our driveway, I heard the voice of the devil.

"Hello, Ash-Hole."

My entire body jumped involuntarily and I sprawled, face first, onto the gravel. Emma, frightened by my fall, darted into the brushy undergrowth by the driveway. At least that's where I think she went. I always close my eyes when I have the shit shocked out of me.

"Oh, did I scare you?" Charlie was sitting on a big rock on the inside of the first wide driveway curve. "What a shame." He threw an empty beer bottle at my head. I covered my head when the glass shattered near my face. "Nice to see that some things haven't changed. You're still a spineless little thing, aren't you? Hmph."

"Get up, Ashley Nicole," my mother ordered. I opened my eyes and saw her long toes in her sandals on the gravel in front of my face. Hoping it was all a bad dream, I closed my eyes and prayed that when I opened them, I would be in my bed next to Emma.

Charlie rose from the rock and shuffled over to me, sending tiny shards of rock and sharp pieces of glass my way. I could feel warm stickiness on my mouth and chin from my fall. I timidly touched my tongue against the inside of my lips. Dirt and blood. At least there were no broken teeth.

Charlie stood and looked down at me, then held his beer over my head and poured some out.

I moved my head slightly to the right. I could see the outline of Emma's white body hunkered down in the weeds. I sensed her brown eyes watching me anxiously.

From behind me, I heard Charlie's voice: "Get up, Ash-Hole." I heard what I guessed was a bottle cap plinking on the ground. Still spread-eagle on the gravel driveway, my instincts told me to curl up in a tight ball and put my body on lock-down. I was slipping into freeze-mode, even though I knew it was the worst thing I could do.

"I said, 'Get up,' you little bitch!" Knowing he was behind me, flashes of what happened last May in the doorway of my old bedroom sent me into flight. The gravel dug into my palms and knees, and I slipped and fell back onto my stomach.

Mom was impatient. "Hurry up, Ashley Nicole! Charlie, she's just being stubborn. I told you, they've spoiled her rotten."

I tried again to get to my knees. Charlie stepped to my side and savagely jerked me to my feet by my arm. I groaned in pain and brought my free hand up to my mouth. My lips were opened up and caked all over with dirt, and what felt like tiny pebbles were embedded in my skin. Even after I was on my feet, he didn't let me go. I heard Emma's low growl from the underbrush, but apparently I was the only one who heard it, because Charlie and my mom said nothing.

"Wh—what are you doing here?" I didn't even try to stop my body from curving in on itself.

"We've come to take you home," Mom said. "I talked to your father earlier today, and he agreed that it's time for you to leave. He's had all he can stand of you."

I shook my head rapidly. "I don't believe you. David loves me. He would have told me himself if he felt that way. I'm staying here." I tried to jerk my arm free.

"You think so, huh? And just who the hell are you to tell us what you're going to do?" Charlie's grip tightened as he pulled me toward the front steps, and he twisted my arm so viciously that I was afraid it would break.

"Charlie's right, Ashley Nicole." Mom withdrew a bundle of

papers from her purse. “This is the custody agreement. Your father didn’t even fight for visitation rights when you were a baby. I’ve talked to a lawyer. Your father has no right to keep you here. I have full custody, and I intend to keep it.” She opened the driver’s side door of her little green car and tossed her purse onto the driver’s seat.

“But what about C.P.S.? What about. . . *what happened?*” My head filled with a sound I hadn’t heard in weeks: “*Whoosh.*” I felt myself beginning to mentally leave where I was, although I stood in the driveway in the darkness.

My mother slammed the car door and laughed at me. “What about it? There were no charges. You lied and it didn’t work. Lots of kids do that, Ashley. They get into trouble, so they make up some crazy accusation. It got you attention for a while, but it didn’t work, and now you’re going to have to face reality.”

Charlie bent my forearm backwards toward my elbow as far as it would go without snapping and put his face right up to mine so that I inhaled his beer-soaked breath. Through clenched teeth, he said, “Things are going to go a lot easier for you if you stop fighting. Now get whatever clothes your father got you to buy you off, and get in the goddamn car.” He released my forearm and shoved me hard toward the front door of the cabin, and that’s when it happened.

Maybe it’s because I’d been away from him long enough for the edge on my fear to get a little dull, or maybe it was the way the Bo Brewster character from *Ironman* inspired me. Was it courage or desperation? Who knows, but at that moment, I realized that if I did what he told me to do, my life was over. I would be returned to a life of hiding, and I didn’t want to hide anymore.

Once you know something, you can’t unknow it—no matter how much others want you to act as if you can. I had lived free of being terrorized for nearly three months. Tasting freedom and living in truth, I couldn’t go back into the prison of my closet and a life of lies.

I tried to make a run for the retaining wall. I knew the gate and pasture so well, I was sure I could get away. Charlie must still have the ability to read my mind, because he grabbed for any part of me that he could hold onto.

I went wild—slapping, punching, kicking, even trying to bite at his hold on me. At last he snagged my right arm and folded it behind my back.

I screamed, “No! I’m not letting you two abuse me anymore. I won’t go back with you!”

He brutally wrenched my arm, and the sound was like wood splintering. I screamed, fell to my knees, and curled into myself, instinctively cradling my injured arm with my good one.

My mother ran toward us, screaming, “Now look what you’ve done! Get up! Come with us, Ashley Nicole. Now!”

Charlie growled, “Shut the fuck up, Cheryl!” He bent low and muttered, “Want me to break your other arm, you little slut? Don’t you *ever* talk to me like that again! *I own you.*”

Through gritted teeth I sobbed, “Fuck you, Charlie! You’ll have to kill me. That’s the only way I’ll go back with you!”

Charlie stepped back unsteadily and reared back on one leg as if he was going to kick me. I closed my eyes, turned my head to the side, and braced for the blow.

Suddenly, a vicious snarl filled the air; it sounded like a pack of wild dogs had descended on us. Emma landed lightly on her feet and stood over me, an unceasing whirl of snapping and biting at both Charlie and my mother.

“What. . . the. . .?” Charlie stumbled back and nearly fell. Emma stayed on him, biting at his legs and growling savagely.

Suddenly, we were all bathed in David’s and Bev’s headlights. David lurched to a stop, jumped out of his truck, and roared into Charlie like a tidal wave, easily knocking him down. He punched Charlie again and again, and Emma continuously tore at Charlie’s legs and snapped at my mother when she tried to intervene.

David pulled back when Bev's and Cheryl's screams to stop broke through the fog of his rage. Even then, Emma resisted their attempts to pull her away from Charlie. She stopped only when I called her to me.



"Y'all are back?" the emergency room attendant said to David. "That's some chainsaw, huh?"

"She didn't break her arm using the—never mind. Can we please see a doctor as soon as possible? I think her lip may need stitching, too."

We sat down in plastic chairs to wait our turn. David helped me so that I didn't bump my arm, then handed me the ice pack I had been holding against my lip. I took it from him, but held it away from my mouth so I could ask him what I'd been dying to know. "Mom told me that she talked to you earlier today, and that you were ready for me to leave. She said you've had all of me you can stand."

He shook his head, a little smile on lips. "Well, that's partially true."

My face must have fallen because he hastened to add, "She *did* call me. She told me that she'd spoken to a lawyer, and that since there were no rape charges filed, she expected you to come back home immediately."

". . . Oh." The pain in my chest at that moment trumped all my other injuries. Even though a deputy had taken Charlie away in handcuffs to be charged with injury to a child and trespassing, I figured Mom and Charlie would still get their way and I'd have to go back to Northside. I looked down and to the side so that David wouldn't see my face crumpling.

My father gently brushed a finger against my cheek. "I told your mother that she was out of her mind to think I would ever let you return to Hell. I told her that *I love you*, and it's my job as your dad

to protect you. That's what parents *do*, Ashley: they love their children and keep them safe. I told you before that I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you for failing you before. I'm afraid you're stuck with me, darlin'."

I sniffed, took a shuddery breath, and met my dad's soft eyes. "So. . . now what?"

"We'll wait and see if your mom still wants to fight me for custody. But don't worry, sweetheart. I called my lawyer, and he told me that there's no way you'd be returned to her. And that was *before* Charlie broke your arm tonight."

"Ashley. . . Asher?" the E.R. nurse called. She frowned and rechecked the form on her clipboard. "Wait a minute. . . weren't you here earlier today?"

David helped me up, and I walked toward the nurse. "That was my brother and cousin." I smiled at David. "I'm his daughter."



Dr. Matt smiled. "I'm really proud of you for standing up for yourself, Ashley."

"Oh. Thanks. I mean, I didn't really think about it, I just did what I had to do."

"How did it feel when you told Charlie that you wouldn't go back with him and your mom?" He gave me *The Look*.

"I don't remember. I just did it. . . Hey! I did it without even thinking about it! That's pretty cool!" If my arm wasn't broken and my whole body wasn't one big bruise, I probably would have jumped up and hugged Dr. Matt on the spot.

I raised one hand, though, and he gave me a high-five. "Sure is. What you did took guts. By speaking up for yourself, you broke Charlie's power over you. You get that, don't you?"

"In spite of the fact that I ended up on my knees with a broken arm?"

“Yep. Consider it a war wound. You fought for yourself, and that’s the important thing. It takes courage to do that. That’s a big step forward on your journey.”

It was my turn to give him *The Look*. I searched my mind for the right words, because I sensed that I was getting the tiniest understanding of the reason that my mother turns her back on me again and again and again. It didn’t excuse anything Charlie put me through or that she allowed me to be put through, and it didn’t even start to resemble forgiveness or mercy. I can’t imagine when or if *that* will happen. But somewhere, in the deepest, darkest, most hidden depths of my mental closet, I saw light around the edges of the door.

I felt myself being freed of the cocooning blankets of confusion, shame, and certainty of my worthlessness.

And for the first time in my life, I sensed that there was a reason that my mother didn’t do her job, and it had nothing to do with me. She’s gutless. A gutless wonder.

“So is that what’s missing from my mom, Dr. Matt? Guts?”

“Maybe. Probably. What do you think of your mom, Ash?”

“I’ll have to think about it. But I’ll let you know.”

A NOTE TO THE READER

If someone in your life is abusing you, please tell. You do not have to suffer in silence. If you are in an abusive relationship or know someone who is, there are people who want to help you. Tell a teacher, a friend’s parent, a school counselor, a police officer, a social worker, a minister. If the first person you tell does not listen or act on your outcry, KEEP TELLING. There is a way out of Hell. But you’re going to have to start by telling.

These online resources can refer you to someone nearby who will listen to you and help:

Domestic abuse: The National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), <http://www.thehotline.org>.

Sexual abuse: Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN): 1-800-656-HOPE, <http://rainn.org>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In addition to writing Young Adult Contemporary Fiction, Beth Fehlbaum is an experienced English teacher who frequently draws on her experience as an educator to write her books. She has a B.A. in English, Minor in Secondary Education, and an M.Ed. in Reading.

Beth is the award-winning author of *The Patience Trilogy: Courage in Patience (Book 1), Hope in Patience (Book 2), and Truth in Patience (Book 3)*, and *Big Fat Disaster*. She is the founder of UncommonYA, a group website whose authors write gritty YA Fiction.

Beth has a following in the young adult literature world and also among survivors of sexual abuse because of her work with victims' advocacy groups. She has been the keynote speaker at the National Crime Victims' Week Commemoration Ceremony at the Hall of State in Dallas, Texas and a presenter for Greater Texas Community Partners, where she addressed a group of social workers and foster children on the subject of "Hope."

Beth is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, like Ashley in *The Patience Trilogy*, and the day-to-day manager of an eating disorder much like Colby's in *Big Fat Disaster*. These life experiences give her a unique perspective, and she writes her characters' stories in a way meant to inspire hope.

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Hope in Patience
Book 2 in The Patience Trilogy
A YALSA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers



When I first came to Patience, I wasn't that nervous about starting at a new school, seeing as how Bev's a teacher there. By the time fall came, I already had friends from summer school, and having spent so much time there already, I knew the layout of the school. What I wasn't prepared for was being repeatedly asked, "How'd you break your arm?"

If I told people the truth, it would lead to even more questions. I felt awkward enough already, without having everybody and their brother knowing about what had happened to me. So instead I deflected them; I just answered their questions with more questions.

"How'd you break your arm?"

"Where's the bathroom?"

"How'd you break your arm?"

"I'm so lost. Where's the cafeteria?"

"How'd you break your arm?"

"Do you know where Coach Griffin's room is?"

It generally did the trick.



In spite of the questions, I was still glad to be back in the routine of school again. I nearly went crazy the week after my arm was broken. That happened on August 10, and school didn't start until the 28th. I had to lie still with my arm elevated for the first week; that wasn't a good thing because I kept thinking about my mom and it hurts so much to do that. And I wanted to start running with Bev again—she got me started on distance running this past July, and it really helps me relax and cope with all this shit—but I had to wait until X rays showed that my bones were fusing and healing.

After that was confirmed, I got the go-ahead from the doctor to start running again, arm in a cast and all. It was cool because I'd

signed up for cross-country and practice started before school reopened. I was slow at first and my arm ached, but that didn't really matter because I'm a slow runner anyway and I was pretty much covered in pain, both inside and out. To me, the world seemed so full of darkness that I was always surprised when the sun came up every day.

There was one thing I looked forward to every day, though: seeing Joshua Brandt. He's sixteen, a junior, and he went to the state finals in cross-country last year. He's about four inches taller than me and has a killer set of dimples. He's lean, but his legs are very muscular. The thing I like most about him is that he seems like a really nice person. I don't think he knows I exist, though, and that may be a good thing because I don't know what I'd do if he ever asked me out.

I can imagine going out with a guy, and I like hearing other girls talk about what it's like to have guys pay attention to them. But actually being out with a boy and taking a chance on being touched? Jeez, it just wigs me out. My heart starts racing, and I end up with my shoulders slammed against my earlobes, with every muscle in my body wanting to go on lockdown. The words *Leave me alone! Leave me alone!* go scrolling through my mind at warp speed.

I wanted to hurry up and heal from what had happened to me—all of it. I wanted my arm to mend overnight so I could get the cast off and be able to forget it all: everything that happened that night when Charlie broke my arm—and what he did to me in the six years before that. I longed to be able to scratch the dry, itchy skin inside the cast in the same way that I ached for a new start, one where all my pain about my mom and my scaredy-cat nature would just disappear.

It's so bad that sometimes I wish the reason she isn't there for me is because she's dead, instead of the way it really is. Sometimes I wish that I *had* been with guys my own age before what happened with Charlie. Then at least it would mean that I'd been able to *choose*

to be with somebody in a physical way, instead of being forced. If I could, I'd just cut off those parts of myself—but I wouldn't even know where to start with the blade.



I finally got my wish to get rid of the cast when the second week in October rolled around. David and I were just walking out the door to leave for my doctor's appointment to remove it when the phone rang.

"This is David. Who? And who are you with?" David turned his back to me, then glanced back over his shoulder to see whether I was listening. "Ashley, could you excuse me just a sec?"

I walked out of the kitchen but stopped just beyond it in the hallway and listened.

"No, I am not interested in a meeting between the Bakers and Ashley. . . . Counseling? Yes, she sees a counselor, a psychologist. Why? No, she does not need to see your— No, I will not ask her to do that. She's fifteen years old, Mr. Sanger. She's still a child, although I know that didn't matter to your client. You're filing a motion to do what? Are you kidding me? Look, you need to speak to Alejandro Guzman, the Anderson County prosecutor. No, there's no way we'll consider asking him to drop the charges. All right, then, you do whatever you think you have to do, but— Right. I guess we'll see you in court."

I stepped into my bedroom doorway, then came out of it as if I hadn't been eavesdropping. "Who was that, David?"

David sat down heavily on one of the bar stools, and a horrible screech filled the room. He jumped up, and Loki, our habitually angry cat, shot out from beneath him, a gray streak of indignation.

"Damn cat," David sighed, shaking his head. "He comes out of hiding once in a blue moon, spits and hisses at me, then disappears again." David was looking at me, but he seemed to be staring right

through me.

“David? Who was that on the phone?”

He didn’t answer at first, but then he opened his arms to me. I moved closer to him, but I didn’t enter his embrace. He reached out, put his hands on my shoulders, and pulled me closer. I crossed my arms over my breasts and looked at my feet. It’s just a habit now; I picked it up to deflect Charlie.

After a few moments, he explained, “That was Charlie’s lawyer, Ash. Charlie’s insisting on havin’ a trial. He’s not going to plead out like we’d hoped. They’re tryin’ to get us to drop the charges.”

I felt my body tighten up, my spine curving in. I stepped back from David. “So . . . I’m going to have to see him again?” My voice went higher than normal.

“Yeah, I guess so.” He sighed and then asked, “Do you—you don’t want to drop the charges against him, do you, Ashley?”

“If I do, does that mean I don’t have to see him again?” I asked, surprised at how much I sounded like a little kid. I felt like I was about four years old.

“Well, yeah, I guess. But . . . is that the right thing to do?”

“I don’t know, David. All I can think of right now is how much I don’t want to see him again. I’m . . . scared. I’m scared of him.” My throat was getting tight, and I held my breath.

“I know, sweetie, but—”

Whoosh . . . the noise whispered in my head. I hadn’t heard that in a few weeks. I couldn’t meet David’s eyes, and it felt like my chin was Super Glued to my chest.

“Ash, look at me. Will you try to look at me, please?” I shook my head, and a tear ran down my cheek. David gently pulled me a little closer to him, then leaned down to try to get me to look at him. “Are you in there, Ashley?” He gave me a hopeful smile.

I forced myself to meet his gaze and tried to smile back, but I couldn’t. Feeling my body relax a little, I allowed him to pull me closer in a hug and laid my head on his shoulder.

Barely above a whisper, David said, “Ashley, honey, I know you’re afraid, but he won’t be able to touch you any more, he—”

“It’s not just that, David,” I breathed into his shoulder, then inhaled his scent, a mixture of Right Guard deodorant and fabric softener. I exhaled a shuddery breath and wiped my cheeks and nose against his shirt, then laid my head on his shoulder again. He gathered up my legs and held me in his lap, rocking me back and forth like a little kid. It felt so good. It was like being covered in warmth and love. And it wasn’t sick, like when Charlie made me sit in his lap and held me tight so he could touch me wherever he wanted.

“What is it, baby?” he said into my hair.

It took me a little while to be able to put it into words. “It hurt so much last time I saw my mom, David. She—she’s really mad at me for . . . telling—”

David abruptly stopped rocking me, and his voice was angry when he spoke. “I need you to hear me when I tell you this, so please listen. Are you listening? Are you?” He held my arms and shook me a little. I took in a breath but didn’t let it out. “Look at me!” he said.

I forced myself to look, and his eyes were like black coals.

“Ashley Nicole Asher, you are the best thing that ever happened to your mother. And if she can’t see that, *fuck her*. You matter, honey. You matter to all of us who love you, and don’t you ever forget that. If your mom is so selfish and fucked up that she can’t see that you’re the best thing in her life, then that’s her loss. *Her* loss. Are you listening? Do you hear what I’m sayin’ to you?”

“Let me go, David. Please,” I said, trying to get my arms loose and sliding my legs out of his lap, my old “run like hell” instinct kicking in.

He abruptly let go. “Ashley, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you—”

“Let’s—let’s just go, okay? We’re going to be late,” I said, going out the front door. “I’ll be in the truck.”

CHAPTER TWO

HUMAN Ecology is usually my favorite class, besides English III. The first six weeks of school, we learned how babies are made. I mean, I think we all know *how* babies are made. What we actually studied was how they grow from a couple of cells at conception into an infant. Ms. Manos is a cool teacher. Some kids say she's *crunchy*. I'm not totally sure what that means, but I think it has something to do with her love of Bob Dylan's songs, the T-shirts she wears that say things like "Green is the New Black," and her obsession with recycling everything.

Ms. Manos is tall and thin, with hazel eyes and brown hair bobbed to chin length. The first day of class, she told us that we could ask her anything we wanted and she'd always tell us the truth. Dub White, who was in my summer school class, jumped right in and asked, "How old are you?"

She answered, "Thirty-four. Anything else?"

Dub asked, "Are you married?"

"No. Does anyone else have a question?"

Dub blurted, "Is it true that this class is a blow-off, and we won't have any homework?"

Ms. Manos replied, "Is that the only reason you took it?"

"Does this truth thing work both ways?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"If I tell you the truth, are you going to be mad?"

"No," she said, but I wondered if she meant it.

"Then yeah, I took this class 'cause I thought Mrs. Ray was still

gonna be teaching it, and she showed Disney movies once a week."

Ms. Manos studied Dub for a second or two, then said, "Hmm. Anything else? Or preferably, *anyone* else?"

Dub said, "You didn't answer my question."

Smiling, she said, "I guess you'll just have to stick around to find out, won't you?"



It's Ms. Manos's first year as a teacher and her first year in Patience. She'd been a neonatal nurse in Santa Fe, New Mexico, until a baby died in her arms. She told us about it on the first day of school: "My heart broke that day, and I knew I didn't have it in me to continue being a nurse. But I learned a lot from the experience. Sometimes you just have to start fresh. So I packed up my stuff and moved from Santa Fe to Patience. My sister lives here, and I wanted to try out small-town life."

"You came to the right place," Z.Z. Freeman told her. Her full name's Zaquoiah Freeman, who moved to Patience this past summer from Nacogdoches, a college town of about 30,000 people in Deep East Texas. Jasper Freeman, the man who was beaten on the Fourth of July, is her cousin. They live with Aurelia, their granny, and their Auntie Jewel. Z.Z. and I met in English II and became best friends over the summer.

According to the sign at the city limits, Patience has about 3,000 residents. That number seems really high to me, though. I'd say half the kids I go to school with have never even been to Dallas, and it's only two hours away. Around here, Saturday night cruising means the kids get all spruced up and roam the aisles of the Wal-Mart in Six Shooter City, looking for somebody to go out with. But about the only place to actually go out is the Sonic drive-in in Cedar Points, the next town over. When I first got here, a rumor was going around that a Chili's restaurant was moving into Patience, but it never happened.

Cedar Points has a movie theater, but it has just two screens and the owners show only films they don't find offensive. When all the current release movies are too sexy for them, they show old stuff like *Cool Hand Luke* or *Walking Tall*. I've heard that they loop *The Greatest Story Ever Told* continuously from noon Good Friday until midnight Easter Sunday and that every show sells out.

I was already in mental shock when I first moved here, but when school started in the fall, I went into culture shock, too. Here, I met kids who actually hunt and eat possum and squirrel. When Travis Hager told about killing a coyote, eating it, and making a hat out of its head and a rug out of its skin, I watched Ms. Manos's face carefully to see whether she was ready to head back to Santa Fe. But she just said, "Wow, Travis, that must have been some weekend."



Six weeks later, Ms. Manos passed back our first major test. Kevin Cooper was a nervous wreck. It's not that he doesn't try; he's just not the brightest crayon in the box. Kevin's a linebacker on the football team, six feet, four inches tall, with a baby face, big blue eyes, and a heart of gold. He was in my summer school class, too, and he's one of the first friends I made in Patience.

"Kevin, remember when Dub asked me on the first day of school whether this class was a blow-off?" She placed his test face-down on his desk.

He looked up at her. "Uh . . . yeah."

"Look at your grade, and tell me whether or not it's a blow-off class." She wasn't smiling.

He turned the paper over. "72! Yessssssss!"

Ms. Manos patted him on the shoulder and said, "I know it wasn't easy for you to learn all that vocabulary, and I'm proud of you for working so hard."

"You mean you're *happy* with that grade?" T.W. Griffin, another

kid from summer school, asked him incredulously. T.W.'s parents, the people who started the brouhaha over *Ironman*, expect him to get A's in everything. His dad is the head football coach at Patience High School, and he's my history teacher. His mom is the secretary at First Church Patience. T.W. pissed off his dad by quitting the football team this year, and I think Coach Griffin blames Bev.

Dub, Kevin's best friend, came to his defense. "That was a hard test, T.W. All that stuff with embarrayos and umbrellacal cords and contraptions and—"

Pam Littlejohn sighed loudly and shook her head at them. "Do us all a favor, you two. Try not to spread your intellectually inferior seed."

Kevin looked perplexed, but Dub understood what she meant. "Why do you think we're takin' this class? Kevin's *mom* wanted us to."

Ms. Manos placed Moreyma Rangel's test on her desk and strode back up the aisle to stand between Dub's and Kevin's desks. Hands on her hips, she looked from one boy to the other. "You're taking this class to avoid becoming parents? Dub, you said you took it because you thought I'd show movies every week."

Dub shrugged, but Kevin blushed and volunteered, "My mom said she wanted us to know how much work kids are, so we wouldn't be in a hurry to make one any time soon."

I looked back at Moreyma, who held her test up in front of her face and seemed to be hiding behind it. Moreyma is fifteen years old and has a three-month-old baby boy, Hector Alvarez III, who they call Three. He's named after his father, Hector "Junior" Alvarez. Junior was in the summer school class with me, and he's also on my cross-country team.

I guess Ms. Manos noticed Moreyma's behavior, because she changed the subject. "Okay. Well, class, if your grade on the first marking period's test wasn't what you wanted it to be, then you need to figure out what you need to do differently as far as studying. I'm

always available to help if you have any questions. Today, we're starting our study of the family unit. This could be a touchy subject for some of you. I hope you'll keep an open mind."

"Are you going to talk about sex?" asked Pam Littlejohn. All the boys sat up a little straighter, and Travis Hager howled like a coyote.

Ms. Manos didn't bat an eye. "The subject of sex will come up. We'll cover intimacy, and uniting sexually *is* a defining reason that many partnerships stay together."

"Why do you say it like that: *partnerships*?" Pam asked as she flipped to the back of a spiral notebook. "Don't you mean *marriages*?"

Ms. Manos shrugged. "Not all couples are in marriages. Some are, of course, but some partnerships are civil unions. Culture defines what a marriage is or is not, and that definition is no longer limited to a man and a woman. Let's start with the basics. I want to know what *family* means to you. Tell me in a statement of twenty-five words or less. It's due by the end of class."

My stomach clenched. I wrote my heading and the title "What Family Means to Me." Then I stared at it. My eyes filled with tears as thoughts of my mother zoomed through my mind. I thought about David, Bev, and Ben and how I came to even know them. Less than six months ago, I lived in a whole different family, and even though it was awful sometimes—a lot, actually—it was the only family I had ever known. Asking me to write about *family* felt like asking me to write about what it feels like to be run over by a steamroller, and I'm sure my mom would be driving it. My insides churned, and I, who can usually come up with a poem in fifteen minutes flat, was wordless.

"Ashley? The bell rang," Ms. Manos said. I jumped at the sound of her voice, then looked around and saw that everyone was gone.

"Oh. Sorry," I said as I picked up my things to leave.

"Did you finish your statement?"

"Huh?" I said.

"The "What Family Means to Me" statement," she said. "Twenty-five words or less?" she reminded me, then raised her eyebrows and smiled kindly as she came around her desk to me.

"Oh. Um, no. Sorry," I said. I started walking toward the door, ducked my head to hide the tears, and hoped I didn't sound as choked up to her as I did to myself.

She reached out and gently touched my upper arm. "Are you okay, Ash?"

"Yeah! I'm great! See ya later," I said, trying to smile.

"You sure?"

I nodded at the floor, and she released my arm. I went into the bathroom to wash my face and see whether I could get control of myself, so I was late to my remedial math class. Luckily for me, Mrs. Bogowitz isn't a hard-ass.

Mrs. Bogowitz retired from teaching college math and, for some reason, decided she'd try to help clueless people like me learn how to solve equations. It wasn't always like this for me—the mathematically challenged part, that is. I was in the middle of fourth grade and a strong student in math when Charlie and my mom got married. Then we moved from LaSalle to Baileyville and he started molesting me.

At my old school in LaSalle, we were still learning to multiply big numbers. But in Baileyville, fourth-grade students were already doing long division. Shortly after I arrived, the teacher threw decimals into the mix. I really didn't get all that tenths place and hundredths place stuff; I had no idea where to move the decimal or why it was supposed to be moved or when to move the damned thing, anyway. My mind was blown by what was happening at home, and finding myself in math hell at school didn't help the situation. I was too shy and too eaten up with shame to speak up and ask for math help, especially when everyone else around me seemed to be catching on so easily. I fell behind and never caught up.

Mrs. Bogowitz is the first math teacher I've had who figured out what I knew at the start of the school year (answer: not much). She works with me from where I am instead of expecting me to automatically know stuff, like how to move decimals around, just because I'm fifteen years old and should have learned that a long time ago.

Oh, and just from being in her class, I've learned another weirdo thing about myself. (Sometimes the list seems endless.) She figured out that I get hard math problems right and easy ones wrong. But she didn't tell me, "Jeez, Ashley, you make such stupid mistakes on easy problems!" Instead, in this gentle way that reminded me of how Nanny used to talk to me before she decided I'm a liar, she said, "Ashley Asher, somebody told you that you weren't good at math and you believed them. And that's a big reason you make the mistakes you do. It's because you're so afraid of making a mistake."

I felt like crying when she said that—because it was true. Charlie used to throw my math book at me and yell, "You're not just crazy, you're stupid, too!" That was in seventh grade, when I told my mother about "somebody" coming in my room at night and doing things to me, and she said that I imagined the entire thing because I couldn't tell my dreams from reality.

It was spooky, the way Mrs. Bogowitz could tell so much about me just from seeing how I worked math problems. She looked at me as if she could see into my head and said, "You're probably a very good reader and writer. I have a feeling you're wired to be a creative person and that you think abstractly." I wasn't sure what she meant by *abstractly*, but she pegged me on the reading and writing. Just knowing that Mrs. Bogowitz doesn't think I'm stupid, I'm able to stay calm instead of freaking out when I don't understand how to solve a math problem.

She handed back our first tests of the year, and I got an 85 on mine. She wrote, "I knew you could do it!" across the top of the paper in great big purple letters.

See? I said to myself. *Things are going to be better now.*

Then I remembered that I was going to have to see Charlie and Mom soon, and the good feelings all fell away.



I've been to Piney Woods Psychological so often that I don't even notice the music that plays softly in the waiting room any more. It's the practice of husband-and-wife psychologists Scott "Dr. Matt" Matthews and Leslie Trevino, and not only does the place look like somebody's living room when you walk in, but it feels like home to me, too.

But it doesn't mean I'm never nervous before my appointments, because sometimes I am. Especially when I'm feeling more like a little kid than a fifteen-year-old. Dr. Matt told me a long time ago that the age you are when you start being abused is the age you kind of freeze at on the inside. Because I was nine when Charlie started abusing me, I stopped emotionally developing at that age and stayed stuck there in a lot of ways until I started getting better. I know it sounds bizarre, but it makes sense. And it also helps me feel a little less wacko when I don't handle things as well as I should. Dr. Matt says that I'm supposed to be patient with myself and to remember that I'm working on getting better as fast as I can, and that beating myself up about it doesn't do me any good.

David went in and talked to Dr. Matt before my appointment started. That's the way it works; first, they talk privately about how things have been going, and then I go in. Sometimes at the end, David (or Bev, if she brought me) comes in again and we talk about a plan for the coming week.

Besides being a little kid in a lot of ways, I startle easily and have intense nightmares. I have flashbacks to when Charlie did things to me, and the flashbacks are set off by things or events called *triggers*. It's part of having post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

You usually hear about PTSD when people talk about war veterans who went through horrible things on the battlefield. It's the same thing for people who were abused. When something really painful happens to us, emotionally or physically, sometimes our mind protects us from it. It's like there's a switch that senses "Uh-oh, this is some really intense shit, so I'm just not going to remember it right now."

Later on, a smell, a sound, or even a song, a movie, or reading something can trigger something that's buried deep inside and it's like I'm back in that place. It even *feels* like it's happening again, and it totally sucks. Ever since I found out I'm going to have to see my mom and Charlie again soon, the PTSD has been kicking up big time. I've been so restless in my sleep lately and crying out so much that poor Emma has been leaving my room to sleep on the living room sofa, where it's quiet.



"Come in, Ashley." Dr. Matt closed the door behind me and knelt on the floor, scooping up scattered Legos with a small dustpan and dumping them into a plastic box. He snapped the lid closed, then stood. "I forgot to put away my toys," he said, smiling.

Dr. Matt is average height and kind of stocky. He has very short, straight hair and pale blue eyes that seem to see right into my soul. He always wears crew-neck T-shirts in dark solid colors, black or blue Wranglers, a black woven leather belt, and cowboy boots. He looks like he should be working outside instead of sitting in a chair in a psychologist's office.

"How's it going?" he asked. That's the way he usually starts our therapy sessions.

"Okay," I lied.

"Really? Relax your shoulders, then."

Man, he knows me so well. "I . . . can't."

"Don't say you can't. Have you been remembering to breathe?"

I ran my finger along his finished oak desk, in the same place I always do; there's a green smudge on the wood from a marker. I rubbed at it, hard.

"Ashley. Breathe," he commanded. "Take a deep breath in."

I inhaled. It was difficult to obey this simple direction, and my chest shuddered. I stared at the green smudge and rubbed it harder with my index finger. I wanted to make it disappear. *I* wanted to disappear, to run out of his office. The problem was, I would have passed out. Because I couldn't breathe. Wouldn't breathe. Not much, anyway.

He badgered me about breathing until I took a few deep breaths in and out, sighing loudly on the last exhale.

"Good sigh," he said.

"Thank you," I murmured, feeling foolish for being complimented on such a simple thing.

"I don't know how you do it, Ashley. This is what you look like." Dr. Matt pulled his shoulders up to his earlobes, wrapped his arms tightly about his body, scooted his chair closer to his desk, and began rubbing furiously at the edge of it. "No, wait—wait, let me see if I can complete the picture." He wrapped one straightened leg around the other, or tried to. "No, I don't think I can actually *do* that one. Will you *please* try to relax, before you break your legs, tying yourself up in knots like that?"

He wasn't smiling at me, and he was using his no-nonsense voice.

I glared at him, and he gave me The Look, which is this penetrating blue-eyed stare. Sometime, I'll have to closely examine the diplomas he has on his wall, because I'm sure that one of them is a Ph.D. in staring. It's not a like a "scary teacher" stare; it's more of an "I can read your mind and you're not fooling me for a minute" stare.

I looked down, breathed in and out deeply, and sighed again. I

peeked at him. No compliment this time. He was just waiting. And staring. Clearly, he was serious about this relaxation requirement.

Finally, I closed my eyes, made myself breathe (no sigh this time), and willed my body to relax. It's a lot harder than it sounds when I'm this tense. One time, I asked Dr. Matt why I hold my breath so much. He said, "It's the same response as hiding in your closet. You got in the habit of trying to be invisible."

When I'd lowered my shoulders, unlocked my arms, untwisted my legs, and sighed a few more times, Dr. Matt said, "Talk to me about the phone call David got earlier this week."

"Didn't he already tell you?"

"I want to hear it from you, Ashley."

"Well, I don't want to talk about it. Didn't you even notice I got my cast off?" I demonstrated by straightening and bending my arm a few times, then deliberately crossed my arms and silently dared him to tell me to uncross them.

"What does that have to do with anything?" he asked in a flat voice.

"What do you mean? It's a really big deal!"

"Why is that? You were able to do everything you needed to do, even with the cast on, right?"

I felt myself blushing. "Well, I mean—things are—different now."

"What do you mean, Ashley? How are things different?" He took a sip of water, leaned back in his chair, and crossed his arms.

I raised my arms over my head and flapped them like wings. "Can't you see, Dr. Matt? I'm free now! I don't have that nasty cast on my arm any more! Now people can't tell that—" I stopped, realizing I'd said more than I meant to say.

He uncrossed his arms and leaned forward in his chair. "Finish your sentence, please."

I suddenly felt foolish for flapping my arms and acting like a goof. "They . . . can't tell that my arm was broken. That's all."

"I don't think that's what you meant, Ashley. What did you mean?" When I didn't answer, he prompted, "People can't tell by looking that . . . what? By the way, it's been at least one minute since you've taken a breath, so breathe, please."

I forced myself to take a breath and let it out in a sigh. "Good sigh," he said. "Now, finish your sentence, Ashley."

I bit my lip and closed my eyes.

"Breathe," he commanded.

I balled up both my hands into fists and slammed them down on his desk, nearly coming out of my chair. Hot tears ran down my cheeks. I took a deep breath in and blew it out angrily.

"Why are you fighting this so much, Ashley? Say it! Just say it!"

"Fine! Without the cast, people won't be able to tell that Charlie broke my arm! Now nobody will know that anything ever happened to me!" I hit his desk again and again, then lowered my head into my hands and wept.

"Do you really think anyone can tell you were raped because you had an arm cast?" he asked softly.

"Don't say it like that!" I cried.

"Don't say that you were raped?" He rolled his chair closer to me. "What's wrong with saying that?"

"I'm not thinking about that any more! I got my cast off, so I don't have to be reminded of Charlie every time I look at my arm!"

Dr. Matt looked thoughtful. "Hmm. But you're reminded of him every time you look in the mirror. Aren't you?"

"No! I don't have to think about him any more at all! It's over! It's all over, and I can just start over now! I don't have to deal with it any more!"

"But you do, Ashley. It won't go away on its own."

"Stop it!" I screamed.

"You know it's true, darlin'. And I know, and David and Bev

know, and—”

“I want to forget! Can’t you just let me forget?” I begged.

Shaking his head, he said, “It doesn’t work that way.”

I wanted to throw myself on his floor, kicking and screaming. I looked wildly around his office for something to hurt myself with. I stood up. “I’ve got to go.”

Dr. Matt remained seated. “That is *not* a good idea. Let’s work through this, Ashley. Running out the door is not going to make it go away.”

“But I don’t want to talk about it! I don’t want to work on it! I don’t want to do this any more. It’s too hard!” I put my hand on the doorknob but didn’t turn it.

“I’m not going to hold you here, Ashley. David told me what happened after Charlie’s lawyer called. He told me that you freaked out when he shook you.”

“That’s not what’s got me freaked out,” I whispered, leaning my head against the door.

“Please sit down and tell me what’s going on with you,” Dr. Matt said. “Let me help you.”

I released the doorknob and sat back down, my elbows on my knees and my chin in my hands. I stared at the floor between my feet until the carpet and my shoes blurred. Dr. Matt rolled his chair closer to me, and I saw his boots enter my field of vision. “I’m going to take your hand, okay?”

I nodded. He took my hand and held it. “Ashley, you spent your childhood having to deal with Charlie and your mom on your own. You didn’t have anybody holding your hand. But things are different now. You’re not alone. You have an excellent support system in your dad, Bev, and Ben.”

“And Uncle Frank and Steven,” I added. The “What Family Means to Me” assignment flashed through my mind, and I felt a pang of shame at having such a hard time writing it. *It’s the telling the whole story—the truth and the details—that makes it so hard.*

Dr. Matt’s voice pulled me back.

“Right, Uncle Frank and Steven,” he repeated. “And me. You have all of us to support you now.”

I looked at him, then looked at his hand holding mine.

“But even with all of us holding your hand, there are steps on your journey to recovery that you have to take for yourself. And one of those things is being able to accept that some really terrible stuff happened to you, so that you can start to get past it. You’ve gotta accept that it’s a part of who you are. It’s a scar that will last a lifetime.” He released my hand and rolled his chair back.

“I don’t want to be that person. I’m not strong enough,” I said.

Dr. Matt shook his head at me. “Ashley, you’ve already managed to live through much worse things than most people ever experience in their lives. You *are* strong enough. The fact that you’re here at all, that you keep at it, is a testament to your strength.”

“You really believe that, Dr. Matt?”

“It’s five o’clock,” the talking alarm clock said, indicating the end of our session.

“Absolutely,” Dr. Matt said, rising to open his door for me.

“And you don’t bullshit people, so—”

He smiled at me. “See you next time, Ashley.”



Every Thursday, our cross-country team runs distance challenges. Coach Morrison chooses a course and marks off four, six, and eight miles. He drops each of us off at the distance we picked to run and returns to the starting point. Then it’s back to his truck we go. It really sucks to be the last person back. Seems like I’m always that person.

Coach was standing next to his old Chevy truck—he calls it Old Blue, even though it’s black—and he was smiling so big, his eyes

were slits. He did his usual Thursday routine, asking each of us, “So? How far can you run today?” Our answer is our ticket to climb up into the bed of the truck for the ride out to the course.

Up until that day, I had only answered “Six” once, and I thought I was gonna die when I ran it. This time, I mumbled, “Four.”

“Ya sure, Ashley? Don’t wanna try for six this time? Your endurance has probably improved since you got your cast off. I bet you’ll do better this time. You might even be able to complete the run without throwing up.”

I heard somebody snort and knew without looking that it was Pam Littlejohn.

“Come on, Ashley, don’t you wanna go to state?” Z.Z. asked from right behind me. Through clenched teeth, she said, “Remember—our plan?”



At the end of our first distance challenge of the year, Pam, who is also a sophomore, announced that she planned on winning our school’s prized track and field scholarship, which is awarded to the girl who medals at state the most times during her high school career. “Shouldn’t be hard; it’s not like there’s any competition,” Pam said, looking at Z.Z. I didn’t hear her say it because I was throwing up on my running shoes at the time.

That’s all it took for Z.Z. to set her sights on beating Pam for the scholarship. “That stuck-up, know-it-all, whiny-ass bitch don’t get to announce that she’s the only one with what it takes. No way. We’re gonna show her what’s what, Ashley. You hear me? Ashley?”

“Mm-hmm,” I said, then bent down to throw up some more.



Nearly three months later, Z.Z. had not lost her zeal for showing Pam what’s what. But I had other things on my mind.

“I’m going to state, so I’m going for eight,” Pam announced as she elbowed her way past Z.Z. and glided onto the lowered tailgate as if lifted by invisible wires. Z.Z. shoved me in the shoulder, and I stumbled forward into Coach Morrison.

“Whoa!” he said, catching me by the elbow. “Steady, there! So? Do you have what it takes to make it all the way, Ash? Gonna push for six?”

A voice in my head said *Yes*, and then I realized I’d actually said it aloud.

“Well, all righty, then,” Coach said, offering me his hand. I looked at it but didn’t take it. Then I crab-crawled up onto the tailgate and awkwardly stood up, finding my balance just before Z.Z. bumped into me and we both ended up sprawled on the truck bed. I scrambled up on my hands and knees and crawled over the pine needles that littered the floor, then sat behind the cab.

Z.Z. picked herself up pretty easily for a person who describes herself as “bountiful, bodacious, and beautiful.” She perched atop a wheel well opposite Pam, looked down at me, and mouthed, “Are you okay?”

I just shrugged.

Coach Morrison slammed the tailgate closed and whistled toward the entrance of the gym. Joshua, Dub, and Junior tumbled through the door and raced full speed toward the truck. Joshua and Junior looked like flying reindeer when they jumped up into the back as if the tailgate were a hurdle. Dub, who stands just a hair taller than I am—and I’m pretty short—took a split second longer to make the leap.

Josh knelt on one knee next to me. He brushed some pine needles away, then sat down. I could feel the heat from his body, even though we weren’t touching. My stomach did little flip-flops, as if the butterflies inside it were electrified.

“Hey,” he said. Not “Hey, how are you?” Just “Hey.”

Yet I answered, “I . . . uh . . . f-fine,” then choked on my own spit. I did this—why? Because I’m an idiot.

“Come on, Coach! Let’s get this show on the road!” yelled Junior. He and Dub stood on either side of Josh and me. I studied the pattern the pine needles made in the space between my feet until the truck heaved to a stop next to an orange cone marked “6.”

Coach Morrison slid open the window behind his head and yelled, “Everybody but Pam—out!”

“But what about Josh? He’s supposed to run eight with me,” Pam said. She tried to take Joshua’s hand but he pulled it away from her.

Coach Morrison ignored Pam and addressed Joshua instead. “Nope, I want you to work your way back up to eight. I need that ankle of yours to be a hundred percent. A sprain is nothing to sneeze at.” He smiled and said in a thick Southern drawl, “So git out, y’all.”

Dub, Josh, and Junior all sprang over the sides of the pickup bed and began running immediately, whooping and hollering. I took my time getting to my feet, and by the time I hit the grass, Z.Z. was running in place with an intense look on her face.

I bent down and tied my shoe. “You don’t have to wait for me, Z.Z.,” I said.

“Couldn’t you have done that in the truck, Ash?” Z.Z. said, hands on her sizeable hips. Z.Z. may be a big girl, but she’s solid rock.

“Go on without me if you want,” I murmured to my shoe. She bent down and squeezed my shoulder, then waited silently until I looked up at her.

“Hey. I know you’re scared about the trial tomorrow. But you’re strong. You’ll be fine. We’ve practiced what you’re gonna say, remember?” As if that settled the matter, Z.Z. stood up straight and stretched her arms over her head, inhaled deeply, exhaled, then shook

her shoulders loose. Her long beaded braids sounded like a rattle-snake’s warning. She smiled and said, “Come on!”

The knot on my left shoe didn’t match the one on my right, so I untied both shoes and started over. “Just go on, Z.Z. I’ll catch up.”

Without saying a word, Z.Z. hooked her hand around my left arm and pulled me up. I looked down and to the side, trying to hide the tears in my eyes. But Z.Z. knows me too well, and I didn’t get away with it.

“Oh, girl,” she said, hugging me tight, then rubbing my back. Z.Z. smelled like cocoa butter. “It’s gonna be ooooo-kaaay,” she said soothingly. She took a step back, her fingers still kneading my biceps. “You’re gonna feel a lot better when you feelin’ all your muscles, and you know that. Right?”

I nodded, my head down.

Z.Z. released my arms, stepped back, arched her eyebrow, and worked her neck at me. She started our routine, the way we got ourselves charged up to try, try again to finish anywhere but at the back of the pack. “Now, *why* do you like to run, Ashley?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled, looking down at a fire ant mound by Z.Z.’s foot. By the way, this wasn’t the way our routine usually went. But Z.Z. ignored my less-than-enthusiastic participation.

“Unh!” She clucked her tongue and said, “’Scuse me? *Why* do you like to run?”

I shrugged. “There’s an ant on your shoe, Z.Z.”

Imitating her nearly eighty-year-old granny, Z.Z. made her voice crackle and wagged a finger at me. “Answer me, child! Why do you *need* to run?”

“’Cause . . . I feel strong when I run,” I mumbled, swiping at a tear on my cheek.

Z.Z. began jogging in place and sounded like a Marine drill instructor. “I CAN’T HEAR YOUUUUUUUU!. Tell me why you NEEEEEEEEED to RUUUUUUUUUUUUN?”

“Because I feel strong when I run.” I crossed my arms, sighed, and rolled my eyes at her.

Z.Z. nodded vigorously and brought her knees up higher as she ran in place. She raised her hands to the sky, like someone receiving the Holy Spirit, and shouted, “And WHHHHHHHYYYYY do you need to feel strong?”

I finally started jogging in place. My feet felt like bricks. “Because only the strong survive,” I said in a monotone.

Z.Z. continued to ignore my loser attitude. She nodded vigorously, pivoted gracefully, and took off running. She looked like a chunky gazelle. “What did you SAAAAAAAAAAAY?” she screamed from about ten yards ahead of me.

I realized I was facing six miles of solitude and didn’t want to be alone with the thoughts in my head, so I began to run after her. “Only the strong survive,” I called out.

“I can’t hear YOOOOOOOUUUUU!” she yelled, increasing her speed.

I ran harder to catch up to her, screaming as if my life depended on it: “ONLY THE STRONG SURVIVE! ONLY THE STRONG SURVIVE! ONLY THE STRONG SURVIVE!”



Even though I was exhausted after the distance challenge (last place as usual; I’m nothing if not consistent), I couldn’t sleep that night. I’d counted down the weeks and days; the trial was starting in just seven hours.

I had no photo of my mother, and I kept remembering how haggard she’d looked when she showed up unannounced that day in July. She stuck her face in mine and told me, shaking her hands like she was trying to dry them, “This whole—this whole thing is your problem, Ashley.”

She looked so awful that day. I felt like it was my fault she was

so beaten down and worn out. Now, my mom never goes *anywhere* without putting on makeup and doing her hair. When I was ten and the school called because I broke my arm in P.E., she still took the time to get herself ready, including makeup and curling-ironed hair, before she came to get me. If I hadn’t been so slow on the uptake, I’d have realized then that I was low on her list of priorities. But the things she said to me that day last July hurt so bad, I took off running and got myself lost. David found me sitting on a tree stump by the side of the road, examining my blister-covered bare feet.

A few weeks later, Charlie and my mother showed up one night when I was at the house alone. As the trial neared, I kept replaying the night again and again in my head. My thoughts churned like a squirrel on speed, running continuously on a track. Dr. Matt calls this *spinning*.

The night Charlie broke my arm, he looked like his normal scary self: six feet tall, bronzed skin, a mammoth of a man with huge, muscular shoulders from working construction all his life. His bushy auburn hair looked wind-blown even on a calm day. He had almost clear gray eyes, a shiny gold front tooth, and a sizeable beer gut. He always wore sagging blue jeans and a western shirt with only the bottom few snap buttons fastened, and his normal after-work accessory was a 7-11 Big Gulp cup, filled with Wild Turkey bourbon and a splash of Diet Pepsi.

When he and my mom turned up in my dad’s driveway in the dark, they gave me the shock of my life. That night, Charlie’s drink of choice was Lone Star beer in a long-neck bottle. I remember that because some shards of the glass bottle he threw at me got stuck in my chin and I still have the scars from it.

Standing there, facing each other in the humid East Texas night, when Mom told me she and Charlie wanted to take me back to Northside with them, I asked, “But—but what about CPS, Mom? What about what—happened?”

My mother slammed the car door, laughed at me, and said in

an acidic voice, “What about it? There were no charges. You lied, and it didn’t work. Lots of kids do that, Ashley. They get into trouble, so they make up some crazy accusation. It got you some attention for a while, but it didn’t work. And now you’re going to have to face reality.”

That’s when Charlie bent my forearm backward toward my elbow as far as it would go without breaking, and he put his face so close to mine that I was inhaling his beer-soaked breath. Through clenched teeth, he said, “Things are going to go a lot easier for you if you stop fighting. Now get whatever clothes your father got you to buy you off, and get in the goddamn car.” He released my forearm and shoved me hard toward the front door of the cabin, and that’s when I realized that if I did what he told me to do, my life was over. I’d be returned to a life of hiding, and I didn’t want to hide any more. Once you know something, you can’t unknow it—no matter how much someone else may want you to act like you can. Tasting freedom and living in truth, I couldn’t go back into the prison of my closet and a life of lies.

I tried to make a run for the retaining wall that lines our front yard and leads up a short hill to a gate. I knew the gate and the pasture beyond it so well, I was sure I could get away and hide in the darkened woods surrounding the pasture.

Charlie must have read my mind, though, because he grabbed for any part of me that he could catch hold of. I went wild, fighting him with my arms and legs, even trying to bite him. But then he snagged my right arm and folded it behind my back.

I screamed, “No! I’m not letting you two abuse me any more. I won’t go back with you!”

That’s when he brutally wrenched my arm and I heard it snap. I screamed, fell to my knees, and curled my body into itself, cradling my broken arm with the good one. My mother ran toward me, wiggling out, just screaming, “Now look what you’ve done! Get up! Come with us, Ashley Nicole. *Now!*”

Charlie said, “Shut the fuck up, Cheryl!” then bent low and muttered, “Want me to break your other arm, you little slut? Don’t you ever talk to me like that again! I own you.”

Through gritted teeth, I sobbed, “Fuck you, Charlie! You’ll have to kill me. That’s the only way I’ll go back with you!”

Charlie stepped back from me as if he was going to kick me. I closed my eyes, turned my head to the side, and braced for the blow. But suddenly, Emma was there. Her vicious snarls sounded like a pack of dogs had descended on us, and she landed lightly on her feet and stood over me, protectively snapping and biting at Charlie and my mother.

“What the fuck?” Charlie said as he stumbled back.

At once, we were all bathed in David’s headlights. David lurched to a stop, jumped out of his truck, and roared into Charlie like a tidal wave, easily knocking him down. He punched Charlie again and again, until Bev’s and Cheryl’s screams to stop before he killed Charlie broke through the fog of his rage.



When I told Charlie and Mom that I wouldn’t go back with them to Northside and that they didn’t get to abuse me any more, it was the first time in my life I had ever spoken up for myself. Dr. Matt told me that by doing that, I had broken Charlie’s power over me and taken a big step forward on my journey toward recovery.

I was starting to understand, in a way, that the reason my mother turns her back on me again and again has nothing to do with me. It’s because she’s gutless—a gutless wonder. She cannot bear to live in the light of truth, even if it means she has to lose me in order to keep living a lie. And when I realized that, it was like I could see light around the edges of the closet door—the door of the dark closet I’d been hiding in, inside my mind.

But those strong moments didn’t last long, and I’d think, *My*

mother doesn't love me, so why the hell should any part of life go on as usual? Then I'd pull the covers over my head and *wallow in self-pity*. That's what Dr. Matt calls it when I fall into my self-pity pit.

I envision it as a dark, deep hole in the ground. There are claw marks carved into the walls of my pit, where I've pulled myself up and out of it before. It takes an incredible amount of work and a lot of time, anywhere from several days to several weeks, to reach the surface again. You'd think that knowing how hard it is to climb up out of that pit, I'd work even harder than I do to stay clear of it. But I'm an expert at feeling sorry for myself and only a beginner at avoiding the pit.

Dr. Matt calls me on it every time, though. "Self-pity is only going to make you weak, Ashley, and you need all the strength you can muster to get through recovery." That's what he keeps telling me.

The emotional pain reminds me of one of those shows on the Learning Channel where a lady is having a baby and she's screaming at the nurse, "I can't do this! I can't do this!"

The nurse always tells the lady, "You don't have a choice. Your baby is coming out, no matter what. Now I know you're tired, sweetheart, but you have to keep going."

Dr. Matt told me once that recovery from sexual abuse is like walking barefoot from Texas to Alaska—and back home to Texas again. "It just stands to reason that on a journey like that, you're gonna run into stuff like thunderstorms, mountain trails that lead nowhere, and searing hot roads. But that doesn't mean you give up," he said.

David, Bev, and Dr. Matt are always telling me how strong and brave I am. But there are times when I feel like lying down on the side of the road and letting the vultures pick apart my flesh.

Proof