

BOY TOY

BY BARRY LYGA



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**Dedicated to Terry Davis,
for showing me that it was possible.**

Ten Things I Learned at the Age of Twelve

1. The Black Plague was transmitted by fleas that were carried throughout Europe by rats.
2. If you first paralyze it, you can cut open a frog and watch its lungs continue to inflate and deflate.
3. There are seven forms of the verb *to be*: *am*, *being*, *been*, *is*, *was*, *were*, and *are*.
4. In order to divide fractions, you invert the divisor to arrive at the reciprocal, which is then multiplied by the dividend. (Mixed fractions must first be converted to improper fractions.)
5. In Salem, the witches weren't burned at the stake—they were pressed to death under big rocks or hanged.
6. Islam was founded in the year 610. It is the third of three world religions worshipping the same God.
7. Each point on a "coordinate plane" (created by the joining of an x-axis and a y-axis) can be described by an ordered pair of numbers.
8. "Monotheism" is a belief system centered on a single deity, while "polytheism" subscribes to belief in multiple deities.
9. The area of a circle can be determined by using the formula πr^2 , where r is the radius of the circle.
10. How to please a woman.

Things That Happened After and Before

"LUCKY THIRTEEN," my dad said when I blew out the candles on my birthday cake, and my mom shot down his lame attempt at humor with a disgusted "Oh, Bill!"

But honestly, that's not the important part. Not at all.

The ending began and the beginning ended and the whole mess just got fucked up beyond belief at the party at Rachel Madison's house a few days later. A few days after

"Lucky thirteen"/"Oh, Bill!"

The party turned out to be little more than an excuse for Rachel and Michelle Jurgens and Zik Lorenz and me—the Four Musketeers—to hang out in Rachel's basement. Music videos on the TV and sodas and chips and some sort of hot potato casserole that Rachel announced she had made on her own. And three kids sitting around awkwardly trying to be coy with each other. Three kids and me.

It was like watching the mating rituals of retarded birds, clumsily stepping the wrong patterns around each other over and over again. I sat to one side on a brittle office chair and tried not to be bored.

"Something wrong?" Rachel asked at one point, kneeling down next to the chair. My mind flickered for a moment

—*dark room and then a light*—

and I adjusted my position in the chair.

"No. Why?"

She gestured to Michelle and Zik, who sat on the floor, leaning against the sofa. They were giggling at the TV, sharing a bowl of chips, their greasy fingers slipping against one another. "Well, you're just sitting over here by yourself..."

"You're here now."

Her face lit up. "Can I sit with you?"

"Well, I guess..." I looked doubtfully at the old chair, which had no room for a second party.

Rachel didn't wait; she planted herself on my lap. The chair squealed. My mind flickered again—

—*was—was—was*—

and I said, "This isn't a good idea, Rache."

"It can hold us."

She was my size, in a loose sleeveless top and a skirt worn low on her frame. Too skinny, to tell the truth; her skirt was tight enough to emphasize the lack of hips, low enough to expose her concave belly. Her hair was dirty blond and cut short, her face shining, sprayed with an even blast of freckles over the bridge of her nose. Luminous blue eyes. She twisted and put her arms around me. Flicker again

—*Was that what you wanted?*—

and then Rachel saying, "Is this OK? I need to steady myself."

The chair creaked again, louder, as if to say, "Hey! I really mean it!"

"I don't think this is a good idea, Rachel."

"Come on."

"I'm just worried about the chair."

She wiggled on my lap. I wasn't worried about the chair.

~~I couldn't let this continue. I struggled to move her off me, our bodies chafing against each other.~~ Her butt slipped and ground against my pelvis in a way that was almost pleasant, almost painful.

"Please"—and I managed to move her off me without dumping her onto the floor.

She fixed me with a glare and a pout at the same time. Rachel Madison was the first girl I noticed when I started noticing girls in fifth grade. Back then, she was a skinny little tomboy with no breasts and the best on-base percentage in Little League that season at .425.

By seventh grade, she'd grown out of the cute tomboy phase, though not much had happened in the chest department. Like so many girls, she emphasized the positive, though, with tight jeans and skirts designed to show off the legs and ass toned over months of beating the throw to first. Up top, she favored the loose blouses and shirts that hinted that maybe, *maybe*, something was starting to sprout under there.

She sauntered over to the snacks, hips swinging in a pathetic attempt to be older than thirteen.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she announced suddenly.

Michelle jumped up and the two girls trooped off to the bathroom together, leaving Zik and me to switch the channel to ESPN, where the Red Sox were clobbering our dear Orioles.

Moments later, the girls returned. Instead of resuming her make-out position with Zik, though, Michelle clapped her hands together and said, "Hey, guys, want to play a game?"

In no time at all, we were all sitting cross-legged on the floor across from each other, an empty Coke bottle between us.

"Whoever gets the bottle pointed at them," Michelle said, as if giving a book report, "gets to go into the coat closet with the person across from them."

That meant Rachel for me, Zik for Michelle. Coincidence? Of course not.

"Are you sure this is how you play spin-the-bottle?" I had never played before, but it didn't seem to jibe with the lore gleaned from older kids over the years.

"This is how my sister plays," Michelle said, and all argument stopped. Michelle's sister, Dina, was drop-dead gorgeous, famous for having had a man offer to leave his wife for her when she was in eighth grade. At least, that was the rumor. No one doubted it, though.

Rachel spun the bottle, giving it a weak little twist that sent it in a quarter-turn before the top of it pointed at me like a compass needle pointing north.

"You and Josh go into the closet," Michelle squealed.

"It didn't go all the way around," I said. "The bottle has to spin all the way around at least once. Otherwise it doesn't count."

Rachel pouted again, but went ahead and spun the bottle once more. It landed perfectly and squarely on me. Again.

"See?" Michelle said, as if something had been proven. She heaved herself to her feet and threw open the closet door. "Get in there, you two!"

Rachel slid in quickly. "How long are we supposed to be in there?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it," Michelle said. "I'm keeping time."

As the closet door closed, it occurred to me that Michelle would do nothing of the sort. She'd be getting her hands greasy with Zik again.

The closet was nearly empty. A thin sketch of light from under the door made it so that we weren't in complete darkness, but

I couldn't really see anything at all, except for those weird dancing color spots that drift in front of your eyes when it's dark.

"Sit down," Rachel whispered. I sat.

I couldn't see her, but I could feel her just ahead of me, sitting cross-legged. I closed my eyes to

new darkness. Flicker

—*turn on the lights if you want*—

and then back to the present.

I opened my eyes. Spots whirled and spun. The dark went to semidarkness. I thought I could see something in the far distance. It shifted.

Rachel changed position, going up to her knees. I felt more than saw her lean toward me in the dark. A sudden giggle penetrated the closet from outside: Michelle.

"Sounds like they're having fun," Rachel said, her breath clouded, warm, against my face. She was practically on top of me. I almost jerked out a hand in self-defense, but I held back.

"I guess so."

"Don't you want to have fun?"

Flicker

—*touch*—

"I guess so."

She giggled like Michelle. "I've been practicing spinning that bottle all week."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

She leaned in even closer; her blouse brushed against my hand. Then her lips pressed to my cheek. They were slippery with too much lipstick. She fumbled for a minute, adjusting, and eventually found my lips. More slimy lip action.

"Don't you like me?" she whispered.

—*touch*—

—*lick*—

—*OK*—

—*yes*—

"Sure." I could feel her trembling—*vibrating*—over me, supporting herself on her hands, elbows locked. Belly pressed to my knee. Blouse drifting against my hand.

"Kiss me," she said, and kissed my lips again, this time probing with her tongue.

I opened my mouth and she sighed deep in her throat when our tongues touched. It sounded familiar. Universal. I closed my eyes again and pretended. Pretended I wasn't in a closet in the Madisons' basement, with Zik and Michelle intertwining their fingers ten feet away through a cheap fiberboard door. Pretended I wasn't sitting cross-legged across from a flat-chested girl with freckles and a too-slutty skirt that looked wrong on her but would have looked so right on someone else.

Instead, I moved forward with my body and my tongue. I heard a familiar grunt of approval. I reached out to touch her

—*touch*—

—*yes*—

and slid my hands down to the bare skin between the blouse and the skirt. I crushed my face to hers, let my hands move the way they wanted, the way they knew...

And the next thing I knew, Rachel slammed my chest with both fists. She was too small to hurt me, but she managed to push me away, breaking the hold I had on her, jerking my hands away. "No! No!"

She shoved me, kicked out with her feet, and then the door was flung open and Rachel dashed out of the closet, wailing, tugging at her blouse and skirt, running for the stairs.

Michelle and Zik were sprawled on the sofa, fooling around. They looked over at me, lipstick-smearing, as Rachel charged up the stairs. I heard an adult voice call out. Then another, and then a babble of them—her father, her mother, her brother, home from college.

And that was how one part of my life ended. And another began.

~~Thirteen years old. Five years ago.~~

Strike One

CHAPTER 1

Roland Makes a Decision

COACH KALTENBACH SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID IT. He shouldn't have opened his big, fat, stupid mouth. Because if he hadn't said it, then I wouldn't have heard it. And I wouldn't have hit him so hard that his head left a dent on the lowest bleacher when he collapsed.

We were running laps in the gym—third straight day of April rain, so we couldn't practice outside. Mr. Kaltenbach, varsity baseball coach, was standing near the bleachers, yelling at us to "pick it up pick it up pick it up you goddamn girls!"

"Come on, move it, Lorenz!" he bellowed as Zik ran past him.

"Get the lead out!" he bawled when Jon Blevins ran by.

"Do I have to call the girls' softball team in here to show you how this is done?" he screamed to no one in particular.

As I approached Kaltenbach, his mouth opened and his eyes gleamed, and I waited for the insult. And then he said it.

Truth be told, I don't even remember deciding to hit him. You'd think that hitting a coach and a teacher would be something that you'd ponder. You'd weigh the pros and cons. You'd really consider before doing it. Especially if you're me, if you're praying for a scholarship, a scholarship to take you out of this little town that knows far, far too much.

But I didn't think about it. I just stopped dead in my tracks, pivoted on my right foot, and smashed my fist into his jaw.

Kaltenbach made a sound like "Hut!" and staggered backwards, arms pinwheeling, his clipboard dropping to the floor. There was no way he was going to keep his balance; he went over backwards, landed on his flabby ass (good news for him), and then the top half of his body kept on going and he fetched up against the bottom bleacher with the back of his head. *Whonk! Crack!*

I wasn't sure what had cracked—the bleacher, or Coach's head. I didn't really care, either.

Behind me, the sound of running feet squeaked to a stop on the gym floor. Someone said, "Holy shit," loud enough for it to echo.

Zik was at my side in an instant.

"Dude. What the fuck?" He was breathing hard. On the other hand, I was breathing regularly. I touched my fingers to my neck; my pulse was normal.

Kaltenbach groaned from the floor and rolled to one side.

"Oh, man," Zik moaned. "Why did you *do* that?"

Kaltenbach winced as he sat up, probing the back of his head. I think he wanted to say something or get up and get tough with me, but I just stared at him and clenched my fists by my sides. He was so out of line and he knew it.

If it had just been the two of us, he would have let it slide. But there were witnesses.

"Office," he said, then hissed in a breath as he touched something tender where he'd fallen.

Which is how I ended up in the office of (according to his desk plaque) Roland A. Sperling, Assistant Principal. Known to students far and wide as "The Spermling."

"Joshua, Joshua, Joshua," he says, sighing as he squeezes into his chair. "Joshua."

"Roland, Roland, Roland," I mimic, right down to the sigh. "Roland."

"We've talked about that before. You need to show proper respect."

"Calling you Roland is better than what the other kids call you, isn't it? And at least I do it to your face."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Sure he does. "If you say so, Roland."

The Spermling is a fat slug of a man. He goes beyond obese and into "generates his own gravity territory. I'd say he's a black hole, but black holes are *small*.

The Spermling is more like a Jupiter-class gas giant, bloated and round.

On his desk near one sausage-y hand lies my student file—I recognize it instantly from the sheer bulk. It's at least twice as thick as any other I've ever seen. He taps it with his pen and looks at me thoughtfully. "I thought you liked baseball, Josh."

"I do."

"You won't go very far in the game if you punch your coach."

I bite my lip. It's been twenty minutes since I decked Kaltenbach, and my knuckles still hurt. They throb. But that's OK. It's a good kind of throbbing because I know where it came from. It's a justice-throbbing.

"I won't be playing my whole life. I'm not planning on going pro or anything. I just like the game."

"Discipline and respect aren't just about baseball," he tells me. "Or even just about assistant principals. When you're out there in college or in the real world—"

"I know. I won't be allowed to punch people."

He starts tapping his pen again, this time against the plastic Rolodex. "Did he say something to upset you? It's been a while since you've lashed out so ... physically. He tells me he was goading you boys to run faster."

For a moment, I'm back in the gym. Been like this for years—I get these weird full-body flashbacks that last maybe a second, maybe two. I call them "flickers." So for a second, I'm back in the gym, just as Kaltenbach says *it*.

And then back in the Spermling's office.

"I don't want to talk about it. Just go ahead and punish me."

The Spermling leans back in his chair, finding a new target for his pen tapping: the computer keyboard. "Josh, I don't like punishing you. You're a bright kid, and I think you've got a bright future waiting for you, if you settle down long enough to take it. I've cut you a lot of slack because of your history and because your grades are, quite frankly, better than any other three students' combined."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, Roland." I get up to leave. "I'll be seeing you, then."

"Sit down." His chair howls in protest as he leans forward against the desk. "We're not finished. Assaulting a teacher is serious business. You could get in a lot of trouble. *Legal* trouble. I don't think you want to be in a courtroom—" He cuts himself off here, as if something has caught in his throat. What the hell?

Oh, I get it. "*Again*." He was about to say, "I don't think you want to be in a courtroom *again*," but he stopped himself.

I say it for him. "You're right. I don't want to be in a courtroom again. Wasn't much fun the first time."

Tap-tap-taptaptaptap. The pen goes crazy on the desk. "Mr. Kaltenbach doesn't want to press charges. Says he knows how things can get heated during a practice."

Goddamn *right* he doesn't want to press charges. Because then I would tell everyone what he said.

"Given your history, I think the best thing is for you to talk to Dr. Pierce."

The school shrink? "Aw, Christ, no! Come on, Roland!"

He spreads his hands in front of him as if to encompass the panoply of options in the world.

"What would you prefer? What would you do in my situation?"

~~What would I do, Roland? I'd ask the question you don't want to ask: not "Did Coach Kaltenbach say something to make you upset?" but "What did he say?" But no. Not you, Roland. You'd rather just avoid that and play "bad boy" with me, wouldn't you?~~

"I sure as hell wouldn't send me to Pierce. She doesn't know what she's talking about. Let me call Dr. Kennedy instead."

He considers that. Dr. Kennedy is my usual shrink, the guy I used to see twice a week. Now I'm down to once a month.

The Spermling nods slowly, as if this whole idea were his, as if he somehow manipulated me into this. He doesn't realize I was going to see Kennedy this week anyway.

"That's acceptable," he announces with all the import and gravity of Moses handing down the Ten Commandments. "Make the call here."

I go ahead and call Dr. Kennedy's office. The receptionist recognizes my voice right off the bat and says, "Confirming tomorrow's four o'clock?"

"Tomorrow at four o'clock." I make it sound like I'm requesting, not confirming.

After she hangs up, I vamp a bit—"Tell Dr. Kennedy I appreciate him fitting me in"—before putting the phone down.

The Spermling grunts. "It's almost last bell, so I want you to get ready and go home. I have to suspend you for a couple of days." Before I can protest, he holds up a hand to stop me. "I know, I know. And I really *don't* want to punish you, but I can't let you hit a teacher and get away with it. Don't worry—I'll make sure your teachers let you make up the work. Come back on Monday. Things should be smoothed over by then."

"This sucks, Roland." I get up to leave. The Spermling is putting my file away, replacing it on his desk with one that's even bigger. I've never seen *that* before.

"Well, suck or not, it is what it is," he says without sympathy. "You've got six weeks of school left, Josh. Try to get by. And try to respect me."

"I'll work on it, Roland."

CHAPTER 2

Releasing Eve

ZIK LORENZ IS MY BEST FRIEND in the world because he's never asked about it. He's never said, "What was it like?" or "Are you OK?" or "Do you ever think about her?" Zik's cool. Which is amazing, because the rest of his family is complete and utter shit. His big brother, Mike, is a real Cro-Magnon type. Played lacrosse and football for all four years before graduating and then flunked out of community college, where he now serves as some sort of coach's assistant, making sure the water bottles are stocked and getting towels for guys his own age. Loser.

Zik's dad is like a grown-up version of Mike, and his mother is hardly ever around. She's always off at yard sales and garage sales and flea markets, buying crappy reproduction furniture that she swears she's going to refinish. She's also so insane that she named Zik "Isaac," with every intention of calling him "Ike" his whole life. Yes, that's right: the woman named her kids Mike and Ike, after the *candy*. It's a miracle Zik hasn't killed someone yet.

I give him a ride home, as usual. He doesn't have a car yet, so he chips in for gas and I drive him to and from school so that he can avoid the indignity of being a senior on the school bus. It also means he can play baseball—he would have no way of getting home or to games otherwise.

"Twelve times one-forty-four," Zik says.

"One thousand seven hundred twenty-eight," I tell him, without even thinking about it. "Cut it out."

"The square root of fifty-two," he says, warming up.

I can't help myself: "Um, seven-point-two-one-one ... C'mon, Zik, I'm not your personal calculator."

"Distance from Neptune to Venus. In inches."

"Zik! Goddamn it!" Sometimes I hate him. "That depends on each planet's position at the time. Right now, for example, Venus is on the other side of the sun from—"

"In inches," he says again.

"Christ. OK. *Right now*, it's, like, a hundred and ... eighty-five trillion inches. Jesus."

"How long to get from home to Uranus?"

"You're not going to my anus anytime soon, so stop it."

Having tested my math/astro skillz to his satisfaction (as if he would know if I just pulled the answers out of my ass ... which I didn't), Zik chortles and kicks back to enjoy the ride. I gun the engine on Route 54, heading to south Brookdale. Zik waits until we're about five minutes from his house before asking, "What happened, man?"

"I hit Coach."

"No shit. I saw that, dumb-ass. What did the Spermling do to you?"

"Oh. That." I watch for the turn into Zik's development. "Three-day suspension."

"That sucks."

"I do 'em on my head. Don't worry."

"Why'd you hit him, J?"

I've been dreading this question. From Zik in particular. Because if I tell Zik what Kaltenbach said, then that means I bring the whole mess from five years ago back into the light. And Zik has never once made me tell him about it. So do I drag that rotting carcass into the bright, sunny clearing of our friendship, or do I just piss off my best friend?

Just then—it's really embarrassing—I flicker

—*slide my hand up her skirt*—

and come back to the present. Weird. That was Rachel, in the flicker. From the closet, five years ago. I don't get any sort of erotic charge out of it, but then again, I barely felt anything erotic at the time I was doing it, either.

Zik doesn't know about the flickers. "If you don't want to talk about it, fine. I just want to stay off your shit list. I don't want to piss you off like that."

Not a chance. Zik would never in a million years say to me what Kaltenbach said.

Pick it up, Mendel! You never—

Not quite a flicker. But enough of a pause that Zik just grunts and opens the door. "See you tomorrow—Oh, wait. Never mind. I'll ride the bus."

"No way. I'll still drive you."

"Come on, J. I can't ask you to—"

"You're not asking, dickweed. I'm telling. I'll pick you up same time."

He hovers in the doorway for a moment. "What about practice?" he asks, with the air of a poor kid pushing for one more present from Santa Claus.

"I'll get you. Don't worry."

He hesitates again; he wants to accept the offer, but some polite part of him (welling up from a DNA source long recessive in the Lorenz genotype, but active in Zik) feels like he should decline. I don't give him a chance to act on his better instincts—I inch the car forward enough to knock him out of it, then lean over and close the door. He hops in the rain for a second, keeps his balance, then flips me off with a grin as he dashes toward the house.

All's right in the world.

I was hoping for some peace and quiet at home so that I could gather my thoughts and assemble choice phrases for my diatribe on the injustice of my latest suspension, but strangely enough Mom and Dad's cars are both in the driveway when I pull up.

Inside, I hear voices—Mom is upset, Dad is calm. Can't quite make out what they're talking about. The usual scenario.

My mother seems like those moms you see on the commercials—the ones who are cool and collected, who launch flotillas of children from battleship-size SUVs and have a ready jug of sweetened fruit punch on deck at all times. She works as a research assistant to one of the professors at Lake Eliot College. She lives for facts.

Dad, though, is one of those guys you see on the really bad sitcoms where you think, *How did he end up married to the hottie?* He works in marketing, and his slogan is "Convincing the world it's wrong, one product at a time." He deals in fantasy. And he wallows in it.

So it's not particularly out of the ordinary to hear Mom arguing and Dad grunting occasionally at the near-silent partner. What is weird is having them both home so early in the day.

They're in the kitchen as I come in. Mom standing by the counter, leaning on it for support, Dad at the table, the newspaper spread out before him.

"Who are you people and what have you done with my parents?" I demand, trying to break the ice. It hits me almost as the words leave my mouth: the school called them. Good old Roland decided to bend me over and screw me in advance.

Mom gives Dad a look that says, "Well?" but Dad just shrugs. Mom sighs. "We have to talk to you."

"I'm sure." Before I can launch into my defense, though, she goes on:

"This is very serious, Josh. This is difficult for us."

This can't be about my suspension. I've been suspended before.

~~Letters came from the Holy Trinity? That could be it. I didn't check the mail, so maybe one of them did and this is it. My future's been decided.~~

She starts to talk, then bites her lip. She's been crying. Her arms shake, bearing her weight as she leans into the counter. Mom's slim and ageless, but she looks a hundred right now.

"I can't believe this. I can't believe it."

"What, Mom? Tell me."

She nods and stands up straight, then takes my hand the way she used to when I was a kid. "We wanted you to hear it from us. That's why we came home. They're letting her out, Joshua. They're letting that woman out of prison." Mom's voice goes from reedy to boiling over by the time she hits the word "prison."

She doesn't have to tell me who she is

—*tongue tracing a line of cool heat up*—

and I blink, actually jerking my head at the power of it. Mom thinks I'm upset—she pulls at me, and I'm disoriented enough to let her do it. Suddenly I'm being hugged by my mom for the first time in years. It's a weird feeling; these days, I'm five inches taller than she is. I go to put my arms around her in return, but I end up crushing her to me, flattening her breasts against my chest, too aware of them, letting go—

Mom won't let go. I let her hug me, my arms lamely akimbo. She's sobbing.

"Mom, it's ... It's OK..." I look to Dad for help again. He's strumming his fingers on the table.

"She's a sick woman." He says it very calmly, and at first I think he means Mom.

She breaks away from me and screams, "Then they should leave her where she is!"

"She has to see a shrink twice a week," he says, again very calmly. I think of my sessions with Dr. Kennedy. I started out at twice a week, too. I wonder who Eve will be seeing. Wouldn't it be bizarre if it ended up being Dr. Kennedy? Could that even happen? Are there laws about that?

"She didn't even serve half her sentence!" Mom rants.

"Hell, these days we're lucky she was in that long." Dad taps his pen against his upper teeth for a second, turning into the Spermling for that brief moment. "You OK with this, Josh? You want to talk about it?"

Mom fixes Dad with a glare like something from an abstract comic book: hate vision, instead of heat vision.

"I'm seeing Dr. Kennedy tomorrow."

He nods. Mom seems mollified. A bit.

I assure them I'm all right and I do my best to keep my legs from shaking as I head to my room. Eve. Eve is getting

—*do you like*—

out of prison. When? I forgot to ask. I should have

—*move over like that and*—

asked them when, but I didn't even think to

—*guuuhhh! Ohhhhhh!*—

ask and the flickers are strobing as I make it to my room and collapse on the bed, as I flip back and forth between the present and multiple pasts, and I realize I never even told them I was suspended.

Session Transcript: #214

Dr. Kennedy: Still worried about college?

J. Mendel: Yeah. Still haven't heard from the Holy Trinity.

Kennedy: You've already been accepted to Georgia Tech and College Park and Clemson, right?

Mendel: Yeah, but those were my safety schools. MIT, Yale, and Stanford are the ones I'm really waiting on. It's like, every day I run to the mailbox, but ... nothing. It's tough because the money at those schools is, you know, a lot. My parents don't have a lot of money. I don't know how it's going to work out.

Kennedy: It's natural that you're going to be anxious about this. I'm not going to tell you to relax about it, but I do want you to try to remember that three good schools have already accepted you and you can afford to attend each of them. Just remember that, OK?

Mendel: Yeah.

Kennedy: Now. Why did you hit your coach?

Mendel: You ever do any sports, doc?

Kennedy: I rowed crew in college.

Mendel: Then you know—sometimes coaches just need to be hit.

Kennedy: Be that as it may—

Mendel: I love that expression.

Kennedy: Glad to brighten your day. Be that as it may, was it worth a three-day suspension? Was it worth the possible legal ramifications?

Mendel: There won't be any legal ramifications.

Kennedy: For hitting a teacher? That seems pretty serious. They usually don't let things like that slide. Not these days.

Mendel: If they make a big deal out of it, they'll have to take it to court, right? And if they take it to court, then I'll testify as to what he said. Believe me, he doesn't want that to get out.

Kennedy: See, now we're getting somewhere. You hit him because he said something to you. You didn't mention that before.

Mendel: You didn't ask.

Kennedy: We've been doing this too long for games. You know damn well I asked why you hit him. So what did he say, Josh? What ticked you off?

Mendel: We were running laps and the little prick was goading us on and when I ran past him, he dropped his voice so that I was the only one who could hear him, and he said, "Pick it up, Mendel! You never slept with me, so I ain't about to take it easy on you!"

Kennedy: He said that? He actually said that to you? Well, you were right: He needed to be hit. What a piece of shit.

Mendel: My sentiments exactly.

Kennedy: You can't let this stand. You should report what he said.

Mendel: Why bother? It'll just open up the whole thing again. And at least now I know what everyone's thinking. I have confirmation.

Kennedy: Confirmation of what you've always expected?

Mendel: Yeah.

Kennedy: Do you think *everyone* at your school thinks like Coach Kaltenbach?

Mendel: I don't know. I see the looks I get sometimes. Especially from the female teachers. It's like they're afraid of me. Like they have to avoid touching me or they'll catch the molester virus.

Kennedy: You haven't molested anyone. You are the victim... the target of molestation.

Mendel: Once you've been touched—

Kennedy: You said the female teachers in particular. Why them?

Mendel: I don't know.

Kennedy: Until you punched out your coach, you've never harmed a teacher, right? So why would they be afraid of you?

Mendel: Maybe they don't want to spend five years in jail like, y'know. Like...

Kennedy: Like Mrs. Sherman. Hmm?

Mendel: I guess.

Kennedy: What do *you* have to do with that? She chose you, Josh. Not the other way around.

Mendel: I guess.

Kennedy: Do you think there's a teacher at the school who's interested in you? Sexually?

Mendel: No! No.

Kennedy: It's not uncommon for a sexual predator to latch on to a previous—

Mendel: No. No one. It's me. They're afraid of me.

Kennedy: That just doesn't make sense. I think you're projecting something onto them.

Mendel: Oh, God. Psychobabble bullshit. You're not supposed to—

Kennedy: I know, I broke the rule. Here's a dollar. But look, clearly there's still some residual worry about Mrs. Sherman and about what she did. It's perfectly natural for you to fear the same reaction from women in similar positions. Are any of these teachers young? Attractive?

Mendel: Every school's got at least one like that. You're not listening to me. But I appreciate the buc

Kennedy: Josh, don't be obtuse. I know how bright you are. Think about it: What are the odds you're so concerned about this just as Mrs. Sherman is being released from prison? How do you feel about that? Scared? It's OK to be scared.

Mendel: I'm not scared.

Kennedy: There's already a protective order in place. She's not allowed within a hundred yards of yo

Mendel: Why? What's she going to do to me? I'm not twelve anymore. I'm six-one. I outweigh her by a hundred pounds. I could—

Kennedy: What? What could you do? Hurt her? Is that it? Did you want to hit her? Is that why you h your coach? He was there and she wasn't.

Mendel: No. I don't want to hurt her. I hit Kaltenbach because he was a fucking douchebag, OK?

Kennedy: There's no doubt in my mind that Kaltenbach is a fucking douchebag. But you have every right to be angry at Evelyn Sherman. Every right to want to hurt her. I don't want you to *act* on that anger, but I want you to know that it's OK, that it's understandable.

Mendel: [unintelligible]

Kennedy: What's that?

Mendel: I said—I said, she liked to be called "Eve." Not Evelyn. Eve.

CHAPTER 3

Tell Me

AFTER MY SESSION WITH DR. KENNEDY, I head over to South Brook High and wait in the parking lot for Zik, who comes running up from behind the building—the rain ended last night, so practice was outside. He spots me, waves.

"Watch the mud," I tell him when he opens the passenger-side door. I drive a crappy little Escor from before the Pre-cambrian era, but I like to keep it clean. Zik's cleats are caked with mud and grass. Kaltenbach's an idiot for having outdoor practice without waiting for the field to dry.

"No fear," Zik says. He leans against the car and pries off his shoes, then dumps them into a plastic bag. We've done this routine before.

"Dinner?" I ask him, once he's strapped in and ready for takeoff. It's a rhetorical question. Zik would be up for driving to the moon if I asked—it would keep him out of his house.

"Yeah, let's hit the Narc."

"I don't want to."

"Oh, come on, man! They've got the best fried chicken!"

The Narc is a big local grocery store off 54 on the north side of Brookdale. It's actually called "Nat's Market," but at some point in teen history that got shortened and corrupted to "the Narc." Har-har. Its defining characteristic is the ancient lunch counter tucked away in the back, open from noon to midnight. Throwback to a rumored time when such things were common. The only other time I've seen a lunch counter is in old footage of the civil rights movement.

But I have a rule about the Narc: I don't go there before midnight.

"You want Narc fried chicken, I'll sit in the car while you go get it."

"Man ... Never mind. Drive-through anything's fine. Except for Taco Smell."

I drive aimlessly for a while. No rush. I like being in the car, as long as traffic isn't too bad. Cars are little privacy cocoons that we take with us. If you could refuel while driving you could, theoretically, stay moving forever.

Zik's usually a chatterbox, but he's saying nothing right now, so I figure it's on me.

"So, how was dickhead at practice today?"

Zik snorts laughter. "You gave him a black eye."

"No shit!" Score one for me!

"And he was wearing his cap different. Forward, you know? Like this?" Zik demonstrates with his own ball cap, tilting it forward at an odd angle. It's just right to avoid brushing, say, a big ol' goos egg on the back of your head. I can't help it—I giggle like a five-year-old who just heard someone say "poop."

"Then it was all worth it. My sacrifice has not been in vain."

"Yeah, speaking of..." Zik stops to point out the drive-through for Lake Side, a pretentious local joint with fries to die for. I agree with a shrug. "Speaking of sacrifice, man—how'd your parents take the news?"

Eve. My heart jackhammers for a second, and I think a flicker's coming on. "The news?"

"Getting suspended?"

Oh. That. "They're OK with it."

He shakes his head. "You've got the coolest parents in the world."

It's our turn at the window, so I get to avoid responding to that. The truth of the matter is that by

the time I decided to go tell them last night, Mom and Dad were in the middle of a fight, and next thing I knew Mom was out the door and backing out of the driveway. That's her usual response to the fights—flight. I figured that wasn't the best time to tell Dad. In the morning, while he was eating breakfast, I told him, including what Kaltenbach had said to set me off.

"He really said that? You're sure you didn't misunderstand him?"

"Yeah, Dad."

He shook his head sadly. "You're seeing Kennedy today, right?"

"Right."

"OK. Good."

And, mission accomplished. If Mom had been home, there'd have been a scene.

The girl at the drive-through window hands me our change and two bags of food. We keep going north up 54. Route 54 is the main road through Brookdale, bisecting the town into east and west halves almost perfectly. Go north far enough and you end up in Canterstown, which is such a small hick town that even people in Brookdale make fun of it. The Canterstown Sledgehammers, though, are a kick-ass ball team. They've beaten us ten times out of the last ten games, and four out of five before that. Kinda sucks to get your ass kicked by shit-kickers.

Zik dives into his bag, and the smell of perfectly fried fries makes my mouth water. I drive with one hand and stuff my face with the other. As we enter Canterstown, Zik rolls down the window and hurls his soda at the sign that says "Welcome to Canterstown, Home of the Mighty Sledgehammers!" He can't help it—you can never *completely* escape your DNA.

"You're pretty quiet, man." Zik rolls up the window. "Usually you've got something to say."

He's right. But entering Canterstown has sparked a memory. Not a flicker; a memory. Eve—Mrs. Sherman—whatever—brought me here to a little family restaurant once. Late in the day, right after school. The waitress thought I was Eve's little brother, and Eve didn't say anything to disabuse her of the notion.

Awesome restaurant. Best turkey pot pie I've ever had in my life, and the strawberry pie for dessert was made with fresh strawberries that they picked from a patch a half-mile away...

"...the newspaper," Zik's saying.

"Huh? Sorry, man, I missed that."

He sucks in his breath. "I said I—I saw the article. The one in the newspaper. About her."

"Oh." *Former teacher released from jail.* That was the headline in this morning's edition. Simple and to the point. Buried on page seven.

"I'm just saying, that's all." He's dancing close to the edge here. We've never talked about it. Not once. Not even about what happened at Rachel's that night five years ago; he was ten feet away and he never asked me. But I bet he asked Rachel. Or Michelle told him. Flicker

—*little bastard!*—

"Shit!" Zik shouts, as I twist at the last second to avoid the kid on the bike.

My breath comes fast. "Little fucker! Shot out at me like that!"

"Dude, I saw him coming. He fucking *signaled*. It's like you wanted to plow him down."

Is that true? Is that what happened? Did I miss something while in the flicker?

"I better take you home." The dash clock says it's not even seven yet, and I hate to dump Zik at home while his parents will still be up.

He's morose, but he understands. Or at least he pretends to understand, which is good enough for me. Sometimes that's the mark of a best friend—someone who puts up with your shit and pretends it doesn't bother him.

Former teacher released from jail.

That's it. My name's nowhere in the article, of course. I'm "a local minor male." I was a minor, so my name was out of the papers, but everyone still knew. After Rachel's closet, how could everyone not know?

According to the article, her family was there in the courtroom, but said nothing. I guess that was her brother and her mother, then. Her father's dead. I wonder if her husband was there? Are they still married?

—*fucking little perv!*—

—*you maniac!*—

I pull over to the side of the road amid honking horns. Hit the hazard lights. I just need a second to collect myself. Just a

—*listen to me!*—

—*fucking ruined my life!*—

Just a second.

CHAPTER 4

Walking Backwards

WITHOUT REALIZING WHAT I'M DOING, I drive to her apartment.

I have the address memorized: 1033 Fire Station Road, Apt. B. There's no fire station there—there used to be, back when Brookdale was founded, but now it's a collection of apartment complexes and condos. I remember the address from the subscription to *Electronic Gaming*.

I pull up at around eight. It's dark by now, dark enough to need headlights, dark enough for streetlamps to glow.

Former teacher released from jail.

Why wasn't I there? Shouldn't someone from my family have been there? Isn't that how it works with parole?

I find a parking spot and sit there for a while. So this is *déjà vu*, huh? Not like the flickers at all. The flickers are real, like sci-fi time travel, only for a second. This *déjà vu* is just ... creepy. Creepy as hell.

It's imperfect, though, because this place isn't the same as five or six years ago. There's a little island of grass between the parking lot and Fire Station Road—six years ago, they had just planted these spindly bushes there, and now it's like a green barrier of thorns.

Other things have changed, too. The retaining wall on the south end of the complex has been freshly painted a cheerful blue—it used to be naked gray cinderblock. The yellow stripes on the parking lot tarmac are bright and straight.

—not much, is it—

Potted plants line the walkways. They weren't there before. I'm *on* the walkway. I somehow got out of the car without realizing. God, am I losing my mind?

OK, so, potted plants. The big crack in the sidewalk, the one I used to jump over, is gone.

She used to hold my hand as we walked from the car, and every time I would come to that crack I'd jump over it as if it were an endless chasm...

She used to hold my hand...

My fingers twitch. There's a brick archway that leads into a little outdoor alcove with a row of steel mailboxes. Beyond, through another archway, are the stairs, concrete risers that go up for six steps to a landing, then a half-turn, six more steps to the first floor. Twelve steps in total. I know because I counted them and the number was the same as my age—

Don't go so fast. I'm an old lady.

You're not old, Mrs. Sherman.

That's sweet of you, Joshua.

—and when I turned thirteen, I started counting the landing, too, and then a couple of days later, in the closet with Rachel...

It's like I'm walking backwards through time, propelled by memory, receiving the occasional rocket boost from a particularly powerful flicker.

I lean against the alcove wall. There's a new security light that shines directly on the mailboxes, and a bulb of opaque glass suspended from a corner, way up high. Camera. I stand there awhile until I catch my breath, then scan the mailboxes.

Unit B.

The little black tape from a label maker spells out: Maguire, S.

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