

ERIN



*"If you have the words, there's always a chance that
you'll find the way."*

Seamus Heaney

MR. ALLEN DROPS RUSS, WES, AND ME off at the emergency room and then goes to park his car. The automatic sliding doors close behind us and I throw up in the waiting-room trash can.

It feels like I'm turning inside out.

When I come up for air, half the room is looking at me. There's maybe twenty or so sick, weary people sitting in chairs, and one homeless man pacing at the far end of the room, yelling, "Whenever I get help, I'm gonna be thankful! Whenever I get help, I'm gonna be thankful!" The other half is watching a show about sharks on the TV that hangs in the corner. I glance up just in time to see the massive jaws of a great white clamp down on a sea lion.

Russ puts his hand on my back and says, "You all right?"

I puke again and just look up at my teammates when I finish.

I don't know how I am.

"Listen," Wes says, "you're going to have to lie and say you're family, or they won't let you in. I know, because when my sister had her baby her friends tried to come in during the birth, and the hospital people said only immediate family could visit. So tell them you're Rod. They're probably not going to let Russ and me in, so you have to get yourself together."

Wes's hand is on my back now too. He says, "You need to be strong for Erin. Be a man. *Okay?*"

I nod because I'm supposed to, but I feel like I'm going to throw up again.

At the main information desk, Wes tells the woman that I'm Erin's brother and, just like he predicted, he and Russ are made to stay in the waiting room, while I'm led to what the check-in person calls the trauma center.

I stand in the doorway for a few seconds before I enter Erin's room.

It's like a nightmare.

Her left leg is in a soft cast and there's a plastic neck brace holding her chin in a very rigid position.

Her right arm's all wrapped up.

There are red bandages on her face that were once white.

The skin around her eyes is purple and black.

Her face is really puffy and shiny; it looks like someone smeared Vaseline under her eyes.

Mrs. Quinn's sitting next to the bed, which has wheels on it, so maybe it's not a bed. I don't know.

They're holding hands.

Erin's moaning and her cheeks are wet with tears.

"I'll leave you alone with your family," the nurse says.

I stand frozen for a long time, just watching, wondering if this can be real.

Erin looks ruined.

Mrs. Quinn's hair is all frizzy and wild and her eyes look small and scared. She's staring at the window even though the blinds have been pulled. Neither Erin nor her mother notices me at first.

I walk around to the far side of the bed and take Erin's other hand in mine. She doesn't squeeze.

When we make eye contact, it doesn't even look like her, because of the swelling, but I recognize the shamrock-green eyes.

She starts talking really quickly. "Finley, my leg's shattered. I'm never gonna play basketball again—*ever*. It's over. That's it. My season's ruined. My basketball career is over. No chance for a college scholarship now. When they hit me, they knew it. They saw my face. I flew up onto the hood of their car. I was thrown onto the street—and they just left me there like I was a dead animal. It seemed like they even sped up when—But that can't be true, right? Who would do something like that? And now I can't play basketball. *What am I going to do about college?* How are we going to get out of Belmont *now*? I should have made my decision and committed earlier. How could they leave me there? I don't want you to see me like this, Finley. I must look so ugly. Maybe you should leave. No, don't leave. And the paramedics cut through my brand-new sports bra too—I just got it two days ago—and that bra cost a lot of money, and—"

“Shhh,” Mrs. Quinn says. “You’re in shock, honey. You’ll be playing basketball in no time. We’ll get you a new sports bra. It’s going to be okay.”

So many thoughts are running through my head, but I can’t seem to make sense of any of them.

“It hurts, Finley. It hurts so much. I can’t move my leg.”

When Erin starts to sob, she looks like a little kid who’s been tortured to the point of exhaustion. I can see the pain tunneling its way through her face and body.

It hurts for her to even cry.

I want to tell her it’ll be okay—that she’ll be playing ball again soon.

I want to ask her how she got hit—what happened?

Will she ever be able to walk again, let alone play basketball?

I look to Erin’s mom for help.

“She can’t have painkillers until they rule out any possible head injuries. They’re going to scan her brain soon, and then—once they rule out brain damage—they’ll give her drugs,” Mrs. Quinn says. “You just have to hold on a little longer, Erin.”

“What about her leg?” I ask. “What did the doctor say about that?”

When Mrs. Quinn doesn’t answer my question, I study her face. She looks very scared herself. Suddenly, I understand that it’s probably worse than I initially thought.

“Finley,” Erin says.

Her eyes are red, but the green shines even now—even amid all the swelling and bruising—maybe even more so.

“Will you please be my boyfriend again?” she says. “I need you

to be my boyfriend now. I'm scared. I'm really scared. Please be my boyfriend again. I can't go through this alone. Please. Please."

I nod.

Of course I will.

"I need you to say it," she says, and her voice sounds tiny and childlike and so unlike Erin that I really start to worry.

"I'm your boyfriend again now," I say.

"Then talk to me. Tell me something else," she says.

"Like what?"

"Anything to take my mind off the pain."

"I just threw up before I came in here."

"Really? Are you okay?"

"Wes and Russ are in the lobby. Boy21 made us lie on his bedroom floor in the dark and listen to this jazz CD about using music to travel through outer space and then I was confused and suddenly I'm at the hospital and I was so worried about you that I just threw up. I puked twice. I puked yellow bile even."

"Very romantic. You really know how to make a girl feel special, Finley," she says, which makes me feel good because she smiles for a second. "I've missed you. Look what I have to do to get your attention."

She tries to laugh, but the attempt hurts her and she starts crying again.

I'm afraid that Erin might die, because she looks that bad. "It's going to be okay."

"No, it's *not*. It's really *not* going to be okay, Finley." Erin tries to laugh, but only starts to cry harder.

Her mom strokes her forehead and says, "Shhh. It *is* okay. Everything's fine."

Because I don't know what else to do, I start to pet Erin's hand like it's a cat or something. After a minute or so, she yells, "Just everyone stop touching me — *okay?*"

Mrs. Quinn flinches.

I try to make eye contact with Erin, but she's staring fiercely at the ceiling; I can tell that she doesn't want to look at me all of a sudden and that I should just be quiet.

We wait around silently for a long time, until they take Erin into a room where they will scan her brain.

Mrs. Quinn's allowed to accompany her, but a nurse tells me to stay behind.

Being alone in a hospital freaks me out so I return to the ER waiting room to see if Wes and Russ are still there.

I find them with Mr. Allen, watching a show about snakes. On the hanging TV a snake with a head as big as a football is in the process of swallowing what looks like a dog, although I can only see the hind legs sticking out of the snake's mouth. I wonder why they play these types of shows in the ER waiting room, where people are already feeling depressed about hurt loved ones. Couldn't they find more lighthearted programming?

Mr. Allen, Wes, and Russ stand when they see me. Russ is no longer wearing his cape.

"How's Erin?" Mr. Allen says.

I shake my head and say, "Not good."

"What's wrong with her?" Russ says.

"Her leg's shattered and she has bruises all over her face.

They're scanning her brain for damage now. She was rambling for a time and then she got really angry and started yelling at me like I did something wrong, when all I was doing was holding her hand."

"The girl's in shock," Mr. Allen says. "Won't last. She'll be back to normal soon."

"Sorry to hear that," Wes says. "Damn."

Boy21 says nothing.

I look up and the snake has finished swallowing. Its midsection is now the shape and size of the dog; it almost looks fake.

"I'm gonna stay here," I say. "You guys can leave. Thanks for waiting."

"You sure?" Wes says.

"Yeah. I can catch a ride home with the Quinns if I need to."

"Tell Erin we're pulling for her," Russ says.

"Yeah," Wes says, "please do."

"We'll pray for her tonight," Mr. Allen says.

"Thanks." I go back to the trauma center, but Erin and her mom are still in the brain-scanner room.

Alone in the hospital, I think about how fragile people are, how anyone can disappear in a second and be gone forever—how close I've come to losing Erin—and I start to remember things I don't want to remember, so I bite down on the triangle of skin between my left thumb and forefinger until it hurts enough to stop my brain from dredging up any of the garbage that sits at the bottom of my memory.

When Erin's wheeled back into the room, she has an IV drip in her arm and is semiconscious.

"Her brain's okay," Mrs. Quinn says. "She's on morphine now."

I pull up a chair and hold Erin's hand.

"I'm your boyfriend again," I tell her.

"That's good," she says, and then smiles once before she closes her eyes.

EVENTUALLY COACH SHOWS UP with the girls' coach, Mrs. Battle, a large squat serious lady who always wears a tracksuit. Tonight she has on a navy-blue number with three silver stripes running the length of her arms and legs. Erin's mother and father repeat all the information we know.

Hit-and-run.

Shattered leg.

Major reconstructive surgery.

After the Quinns explain the metal external fixator—a super-skeleton on the outside of Erin's leg that will hold the bones in place—there's silence.

What else is there to say, really?

Erin's season is over.

Coach shakes his head sadly.

Mrs. Battle frowns and says, "Tell Erin the team will visit," as if that will really help.

Everyone nods sort of dumbly and then Coach says, "Finley, I'll drive you home. Let's give the Quinns some time to themselves. Erin's drugged and out for the night. There's nothing for you to do here."

I look at the Quinns and see that the wrinkles around their eyes are pink and raw. It does look like they want to be alone, so I nod and follow Coach out of the hospital.

We say good-bye to Mrs. Battle in the parking lot and then get into Coach's truck.

The Bellmont streets silently pass by the passenger window. I see a man sleeping on the sidewalk. A small abandoned bonfire in an oil drum makes an alley glow. Hookers in wigs, short skirts, and fur coats are pacing under the overpass.

"I have to take care of my pop," I say, just to break the silence. "I have to put him to bed."

"I'm taking you home," Coach says, but that's it; he doesn't say anything else, which makes me feel sort of strange.

It's late, so Dad's already left for work.

Coach tells Pop about the hit-and-run — how Erin was walking home from practice and a car came around the corner just as Erin was crossing the street, hit her, and then sped away.

Pop just shakes his head, grabs onto the crucifix at the end of Grandmom's rosary beads, and says, "I hate this neighborhood."

I get the old man's diaper changed, carry him upstairs, and then put him to bed. When I turn out the lights, Pop says, "What did Erin tell you about the accident — anything that Coach left out?"

"Just what we told you."

"Nothing else? *You sure?*"

I think about it, replaying Erin's words in my mind. "She said they might have sped up before they hit her."

"That's what I thought." The old man shakes his head and blows air through his broken, jagged teeth.

"What?"

"Maybe this wasn't an accident."

"What are you saying, Pop?"

"You're not stupid, Finley. Stop pretending you don't understand what's going on."

I think about what the old man means and immediately dismiss his words as crazy. *Why would anyone want to break Erin's leg?*

Back in the living room, Coach has helped himself to one of Pop's beers and is sitting on the couch.

"Wanted to speak with you," he says.

Before I can think better of it, I say, "Do you think that maybe someone hit Erin intentionally to get back at Rod?"

Coach opens his eyes really wide. He looks at me for a moment, and then he says, "Don't know, and I don't *wanna* know, either. *You* don't wanna know that, Finley. Haven't you lived in this neighborhood for eighteen years? Don't go there. Useless information. Not a damn thing to do with thoughts like that. You hear me?" He takes a sip of Pop's beer and says, "Sit."

I sit.

"I'm real sorry about what happened to Erin. It's a shame. A damn shame." Coach looks down at his hands for a few moments, but when he looks up, he's smiling, which makes me feel very weird. "In other news, the cat's out of the bag. You don't have to keep Russ's secret anymore."

In other news? Did Coach really just make that transition?

"I'm already getting calls from top programs. Coach K phoned just this morning. Coach K himself. Duke basketball. Russ really has a shot to go far, and your helping him get through this tough period is commendable. I want you to know that I appreciate it very much and that you'll be getting your minutes, don't you worry. I know this is a tough night for you, Finley, and that's why I wanted to say I'm proud of you. You did a good thing, helping Russ. But the job's not done yet."

I just stare at Coach. I know that he's trying to make me feel better about losing my starting position, that he's thanking me, but with Erin in the hospital—with my having just seen how bad she was hurt and understanding that her hopes for a college scholarship are now over—this hardly seems like the appropriate time to be discussing Russ.

My hands are balled and I can feel my face getting hot.

"I just wanted to take that off your mind, in light of all you have to think about now, with Erin in the hospital," Coach says. "I'm not displeased with you. Quite the opposite. And the doctors will fix Erin's leg. Don't worry about the rest. You can't control the rest. So just forget about those questions you were asking earlier. Okay?"

I nod, because I don't want to continue this conversation.

Coach sips his beer once more before he places it on the coffee table and says good-bye. Then I'm alone.

I stretch out on the couch and wait for my father to come home so that he can advise me, but I fall asleep somewhere around three.

I sit up when I hear the front door open.

I blink.

"Finley?" Dad says. "Why are you sleeping on the couch?"

My face must look terrible, because Dad sits next to me and says, "What's wrong?"

After a minute or so of waking up and thinking and remembering, I tell him what happened.

Remembering is bad, but it feels even worse to say the words.

My stomach starts to churn.

I feel guilty, but I'm not sure why.

It's confusing.

Finally I say, "Do you think that someone hurt Erin because of who Rod is and what he does? Do you think that it might not have been an accident?"

Dad looks scared. His left eye is sort of twitching. "Someday you and Erin are going to leave this neighborhood and never come back. May that day come soon."

He didn't answer my question directly, but I know he's talking in code, the way people do around here. So he's confirmed my suspicion.

"Go get your pop ready for his day, and I'll put on breakfast."

And so I do.

BOY²¹ EMERGES FROM HIS grandfather's Cadillac looking very much like an Earthling. He's wearing dark jeans, a Polo rugby shirt with the huge oversize polo-player-on-a-horse symbol, and a cool leather jacket—no robe, cape, or helmet. Judging by the look on his face I don't think I'm going to hear anything about outer space today.

“Hey, Finley,” he says. “You okay?”

I nod.

“You hear anything more about Erin?”

I shake my head.

“My grandparents are praying for her.”

“Thanks,” I say, even though I'm not sure I believe in praying, mostly because Dad, Pop, and I stopped going to church when I was a kid.

“I'm sorry that Erin's hurt so bad and won't be playing basketball.”

"Me too."

"Do you want me to sit tonight's game out?"

I look at Russ and say, "Why would I want you to do that?"

"I don't know."

"I heard Coach K called about you."

"I've met Coach K a half-dozen times," Russ says, as if Coach K were just any old person and not the head of perhaps the best collegiate basketball program in the country. "At camps."

This means that Russ has been to summer invitation camps for the best high-school players in the nation. They get to go for free and meet all sorts of basketball celebrities.

"Why are you here?" I ask. "I mean, you could be anywhere. Any prep school in the country would take you. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to be near my grandparents," Russ says. "Besides... maybe I *need* to be in Bellmont."

"This hellhole? Why?"

"To be your friend," he says.

I don't understand why he would say that, so I just let it go.

I'm tired, and we've reached the high school. As we go through the metal detectors, people start asking me questions about Erin. I return to silent mode.

All day long I think about Erin and how strangers are operating on her leg, cutting it open, inserting pins or whatever to mend the bones. I worry that the surgeons won't get it right and Erin will have to walk with a limp, or even worse. I can't pay attention in any of my classes. And when I receive a slip that says to report to guidance during my lunch period, I don't even mind the fact

that I'll have to speak to Mr. Gore, because it means I won't be around Russ. He keeps asking me if I'm okay and it's getting really annoying.

When I sit down across from Mr. Gore I notice the Duke bumper sticker above his filing cabinet and start to get mad, although I'm not really sure why.

"You okay?" Mr. Gore says.

I shake my head.

"You want to talk about anything?" His Jheri curl is looking a little flat on the left side—like maybe he slept on it and didn't have time to do his hair this morning.

"I'm tired of Bellmont," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm tired of seeing graffiti every day. I'm tired of drug dealers. I'm tired of people pretending that they don't see what's going on in the neighborhood. I'm tired of good people getting hurt. I'm tired of basketball. I'm tired of doing nice things for people and being punished for it. I just want to get out of here. I just want to escape."

The words simply popped out, which surprises me. Mr. Gore seems surprised too, especially since I never talk to him about anything important. He's trying not to smile, but I can tell he thinks he's making progress with me. Maybe he is.

"Are you tired of Erin?" His eyes are all excited now.

"No."

"And yet you broke up with her for basketball."

"What does that have to do with her being in the hospital?"

"Absolutely nothing."

“Why did you call me down here?”

“Because I care about you.”

Mr. Gore’s leaning forward. His forehead is damp, like he’s nervous—or maybe like he really does care. When I look into his eyes, I see something that makes me feel as though maybe I was wrong about him all along. It’s hard to explain. It’s been a strange twenty-four hours, and I didn’t sleep much last night.

“You know, I played high-school basketball,” he says.

“Really?” I find it hard to believe, because Mr. Gore is very thin and fragile-looking, but he *is* tall.

“Played in college too, until I hurt my knee. I used to be able to dunk.”

I try to picture Mr. Gore dunking and the little movie I create in my mind makes me laugh.

“As a young man I dedicated my entire life to basketball, and you know what basketball does for me now?” he says.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I think about what I’ll be doing when I’m Mr. Gore’s age and I can’t see myself playing ball. Even if I went pro, I’d be done playing. For some stupid reason, I see myself with Erin—maybe we’re married. We’re all old and silly-looking—somewhere far from Bellmont, somewhere decent—but we’re still together. I wonder if we really will be.

“You don’t owe anything to Coach,” Mr. Gore says.

I just look at him for a second. He seems different to me, like he’s on my side. Maybe I’ve had him all wrong. And his saying that about Coach makes me feel better, for some reason.

"You look tired, Finley."

"I didn't sleep much last night."

"You want to catch a few z's in my office?"

"Are you serious?"

"I'm in meetings this afternoon. If you want to take a nap, you can do so here. I'll let your teachers know that you're with me. Just don't go telling anyone my office is a hotel." Mr. Gore shoots me a corny wink, and then adds, "We good?"

I don't know if I'll be able to sleep in his office, but I would like some time alone, so I say, "Thanks."

"No problem. I'll be in the conference room next door if you need me."

He pats my shoulder twice before he exits, and then I'm alone.

I stare out the window for two hours and think about Erin.

Halfway through the last period, I slip out of the building before Russ or anyone else can find me.

I WALK AROUND THE CRAPPY BELLMONT STREETS for a few hours before I return to the high school to watch our JV team play.

When I pass him in the stands, Terrell says, "How's your lil baby doin'?"

I stop and look into Terrell's eyes. "Don't call her my lil baby. You know she doesn't like that. She's told you hundreds of times. Show some respect," I say, hearing the anger in my voice. It surprises me.

"Okay, Finley," Terrell says. "*Damn.*"

Hakim and Sir exchange a glance, and then continue to watch the JV team play.

Terrell was just trying to be nice, and I feel a little guilty for yelling at him, but I'm also glad that he called me Finley and not White Rabbit, which seems important. So I add, "Don't ever call Erin my lil baby again. Okay?"

“Relax, Finley,” Terrell says. “Watch yourself.”

I know Terrell means I’m stepping out of line, that I’ve ignored the power structure here in Bellmont, that I should know my place or else I’ll be reminded, but I don’t really care about all that right now. First my starting position was taken from me, and now Erin. What else matters?

I sit down.

Russ slides toward me and says, “Where’d you disappear to during lunch?”

“I was with Mr. Gore,” I say, and then stare at the JV game. Our team is already losing by fifteen. Coach Watts calls time-out and is now screaming at his starters about running an offense. “Any offense!” he yells.

“You all right?” Wes says.

“Yeah,” I say. “I just wanna watch the game, okay?”

Wes and Russ glance at each other, and then they leave me alone. So does the rest of the varsity team.

When the JV squad finishes, we shoot around—I hit every shot I take—and then in the locker room Coach announces the starting lineup, leaving out my name. No one says anything to me about my demotion, and I really don’t care all that much.

During warm-up drills I see Pop and Dad in the stands, and I think about how Dad has his car with him. I could walk right over to him and say, “Let’s go to the hospital to check up on Erin.” He’d say I should play the game, that I made a commitment to the team. But he’d take me if I pressed him.

Russ gets the biggest roar by far when they announce the

starters. Terrell looks at his sneakers. Coach's talk about *the team* will sound a little different to Terrell now that he's no longer the number one option.

I'm standing behind Coach as he goes over the game plan — how to beat Brixton, tonight's opponent — but I'm not really listening at all.

Then I'm on the bench watching Wes win the jump ball, which he tips to Russ, who dribbles toward the basket. He dishes the ball to Hakim, who scores an easy layup.

"Red twenty-two," Coach yells, and the team drops into a 2-2-1 press.

I think about Mr. Gore saying basketball means nothing to him now. I suddenly realize I don't care whether we win this game, or if I even play. It's a game. Erin's in the hospital. *What am I doing here?*

I never dreamed I'd stop caring about basketball, but I really couldn't care less about it right now.

I stand and say, "I'm sorry, Coach. I have to go."

"What?" Coach says. "Where?"

I stride past the opposing team, right up to Pop and Dad.

"I should be at the hospital," I say. "I want to be there when Erin wakes up."

Coach Watts has followed me. "Finley, you best get your butt back on our bench."

Pop looks at Coach Watts and says, "He's got a lady in need."

"You know that there will be consequences," Dad says.

"Last chance, Finley," Coach Watts says.

All the people in the stands are staring at me like I'm a complete freak.

The opposing coach calls a time-out to set up a press break, and, as my teammates jog off the court, they stare at me too. I see concern on Russ's face.

"I should be at the hospital, Dad."

"Okay," Dad says.

I push Pop's wheelchair out of the gym and the night is more than refrigerator cold—it's freezer-cold now.

We get into the car and Dad drives.

"I'm proud of you," Pop says. "People are more important than games."

"I'm sorry," Dad says, because we all know my leaving means Coach has every right to never play me again. If I had simply asked to miss the game before it started, Coach would have probably let me go spend time with Erin, no problem. But leaving the bench in the first quarter is unheard of. Dad and Coach both know that it means I basically just quit the team.

"It's okay," I say, and then exit the car.

"Take this," Dad says, handing me a twenty-dollar bill. "Call me when you're ready to come home, but if it's after I go to work, take a cab."

We don't have a lot of money, so twenty bucks is a big deal. It's Dad's way of saying he's okay with my decision—that he supports me.

I tell the hospital people I'm Erin's brother and I'm allowed in, even though it's not regular visiting hours.

"Your parents are in the cafeteria," a woman says and then points me in the right direction.

I find Mr. and Mrs. Quinn staring at coffee cups.

They look up at me with tired eyes.

"Don't you have a game tonight?" Mr. Quinn says.

"Can I see Erin?"

They nod.

"Just try not to wake her if she's still sleeping," Mrs. Quinn says. "She needs her rest."

Mrs. Quinn gives me the room number and when I find Erin her eyes are closed.

Very quietly I stand next to her bed and watch her breathe.

The swelling in her face has gone down considerably.

The IV drip in her arm means she's heavily drugged.

Her bad leg is locked in a slightly bent position and—through the sheet fabric—I can see things poking through, which I imagine to be part of the metal skeleton that will hold her leg together as it mends. I don't want to see the damage just yet, so I don't peek.

I think about running with Erin, sprinting, climbing out onto my roof—her using her knee in all sorts of ways. Almost anything can be ruined. Everything is fragile. Temporary.

Because I can't help it, I lean down and kiss her forehead once, and I think I see her smile for a second in her sleep, but it's dark so I can't be sure.

"You shouldn't be in here," a nurse whispers from the doorway. "She needs her sleep."

I nod.

I kiss Erin's forehead once more. There's a notepad and pen on the table next to the bed, so I scribble a quick message:

I was here.

Love,

Finley

I follow the nurse, who says, "She's your classmate?"

"My girlfriend."

She nods once before she says, "You're a lucky man."

"I am."

I want to go sit with the Quinns, but for some reason I go to the waiting room instead, and watch all the people who have kids staying overnight at the hospital or who are waiting for loved ones to wake up from surgeries or whatever. They all look just as concerned as I probably do. I see a mom and a dad holding hands, comforting each other. An elderly woman talks to a priest for a while. And a little kid sleeps with a teddy bear in one arm and his thumb in his mouth. So many people with problems and hurting, sick family members.

Just before they make us all leave, I look in on Erin once more. She's sleeping comfortably, so I take a cab home.

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THE NEXT MORNING OVER EGGS and bacon, I ask Dad if I should skip school to check on Erin. Before he can answer, Pop says, "Yes."

"Have you missed a day of high school yet?" Dad asks.

"Nope. Perfect attendance. So what's one day?"

Dad looks at me and says, "You sure you don't want to talk to Coach?"

"I think the team will be just fine without me."

"Okay," Dad says. "I don't like you quitting anything, but under the circumstances...I just wanted to make sure you're okay with the consequences, that you won't regret the decision later. I mean, you love basketball, Finley."

"Erin's more important. Right?"

Pop pulls two bucks from his shirt pocket, holds the money out to me, and says, "Buy Erin some flowers, will ya? Tell her I'm looking forward to the next game of War."

"Thanks, I will," I say, even though flowers will cost more money. It's a nice gesture and I appreciate it. He's probably been holding on to those two bucks for years. My dad pays for everything around here, and Pop hasn't worked a day since he lost his legs.

On his way to school, Russ shows up at my front door, once again looking very terrestrial. It's like Boy21 really has left the planet.

"I'm going to the hospital today," I say. "Not going to school."

"I'm really sorry about how everything's turned out, Finley. Truly." He's cracking his knuckles one at a time.

"I have to help Erin now. Okay? Stick with Wes in school. He'll get you through."

"It's about more than getting through," Russ says. "Can we talk later tonight?"

"I don't know." I have no idea what will happen at the hospital. "I have to go. See you later, man."

Russ nods once and then heads for school. He looks lonely, walking all by himself, but there's nothing I can do about that now.

Dad drives me to the hospital and we buy flowers at the gift shop near the cafeteria. I pick out a single yellow rose in a plastic vase because I know Erin likes yellow and the arrangement is the cheapest they have. I use Pop's two bucks and Dad covers the rest.

We walk to the part of the hospital where Erin's recovering and tell the woman behind the desk that we're here to see my girlfriend. I don't have to lie about being Rod because there are visiting hours in this part of the hospital.

She looks at a chart briefly, runs down a list with the tip of her pen, and says, "Erin Quinn's not seeing visitors today."

"I'm her boyfriend," I say.

"Sorry," the woman says.

"Can you take this to her and let her know I'm here?" I ask.
"She'll want to see me. She'll tell you so. I swear."

"The patient has requested that no one except her parents be permitted access to her. Those are her wishes."

"She's not a patient," I say, fully realizing how ridiculous it sounds, because Erin *is* a patient. "She's my girlfriend."

"Maybe so. But she doesn't want to see you today. Come back tomorrow. Maybe she'll have changed her mind by then."

"Can we send her a note through you?" Dad asks.

"We can do that." The woman sighs as if we're asking her to do a hundred push-ups, or something equally insane.

"Do you have any paper?" I ask.

The woman stares at me for a second over her neon-green reading glasses, and then she slaps a pad of paper on the counter.

I hesitate but then say, "You wouldn't happen to have a pen, would you?"

She shakes her head with enough force to set her neck fat in motion, but she hands me a pen. I wonder why she's so angry, but then someone behind me says, "This is asinine! Why can't I go in to see my daughter? I'm tired of waiting here!"

The woman behind the desk probably has to listen to people yell all day.

I write:

Erin,

Pap sends you this flower. He's looking forward to the next game of War. I skipped school and am in the waiting room. Tell them to let me in and we'll talk.

Love,
Finley

I fold the note in half and stick it between the stem and the white cotton-looking plant they stuck in with the rose.

When the woman finishes speaking with the yelling man, she gestures to me and says, "Take a seat. When things slow down a little, I'll have one of the nurses deliver the flowers to your girlfriend. If she wants to see you, we'll let you know."

"How long will—"

"Don't know," she says without looking up from her lists and charts.

"Come on, Finley," Dad says, and we sit down in the waiting room, where a half-dozen people are watching *Good Morning America*. Some singer I don't know is performing outside in the streets of New York City. When she sings, you can see her breath. She doesn't look much older than me, and here she is on TV. How does that happen?

Dad falls asleep while we wait, and I wonder if Erin really doesn't want to see me. I start to worry. I feel confused. I can't imagine why I was denied access to her.

Finally, Mrs. Quinn appears, looking very tired and unshowered—probably because she spent the night at the hospital—and says, “I’m sorry, Finley, but Erin doesn’t want to see you today.”

“Why not?”

“She’s tired from the surgery, and she’s not looking very well either. You know how girls are about being seen without makeup.”

Mrs. Quinn is lying, trying to soften the news. Erin never wears makeup. She doesn’t even *own* makeup.

“It was nice of you to bring the rose. It really brightened the room.” She hands me a note, and then leaves.

It’s Erin’s handwriting.

You shouldn't have left your game last night. You should be in school right now. Forget about me. Apologize to Coach and enjoy the rest of your basketball season. Don't come back to the hospital. I can't see you.

Erin

I keep reading Erin’s note over and over again, but it doesn’t make any sense. Just the other night, she practically begged me to be her boyfriend again, and now she says she can’t see me?

I start to feel sick to my stomach.

I don’t know what to do, so I just sit there waiting, hoping Mrs. Quinn will return with a smile on her face and say, “Just kidding!” But Mrs. Quinn doesn’t return.

Good Morning America ends. Some talk show begins and Dad snores through it all, right next to me.

He wakes up around lunchtime and says, "How's Erin?"

I show him the note.

"She's probably angry about what happened. She's not in shock anymore. She's feeling the full effect. But she'll come around."

"Do you mind if we stay here?" I say. "I'd like to stay, just in case she changes her mind."

"I can sleep anywhere," Dad says, and then shuts his eyes.

After school ends, Mrs. Battle and the girls' team come with balloons and cards, but they aren't allowed in either, which really makes me worry about Erin.

When I tell her Erin wouldn't see me, Mrs. Battle says, "Well, then, we might as well get back to the gym for a late practice."

Erin's teammates look sort of pissed off, which makes me angry, because it's not like Erin invited them to a party, right?

They leave all the get-well gear at the desk and file back out to the bus.

Dad and I eat dinner at the cafeteria.

"You know," Dad says, chewing a bite of hamburger, "Erin's family might be trying to protect you, Finley."

"What do you mean?"

"Whoever hit her, well, maybe they're watching," Dad says, and then he glances around the cafeteria carefully.

"I don't care about any of that. I'm done with that stuff, Dad."

"You can't just be done with it," he says. "It doesn't work like that."

"Erin and I didn't ask to be a part of that world."

"Neither did I," Dad says, which makes me feel bad, because Dad's life has been pretty bleak, and through no fault of his own. "All's I'm saying is to give it time, and don't do anything stupid. You and Erin can leave Bellmont someday. You can go far away. Like I should have done with your mother."

This is the first time Dad has mentioned Mom in years. "I thought we weren't supposed to talk about Mom."

"We're not." Dad finishes his hamburger, and the conversation ends, because I don't know what else to say.

There's a different nurse at the desk now, so I try one more time to see Erin. I'm denied access again, so I let Dad drive me home.

Pop's drinking a beer and watching the Sixers game. "How's Erin?"

"She refused to see us," Dad says.

"We sent a yellow rose in to her with a note," I say. "I told her the flower was from you, Pop, and that you wanted to play her in War."

"It's a lot to take in, a loss like that. She'll come around," Pop says. "Here's some strange news for you. Russ is up in your bedroom, Finley."

"What? Why?" I ask.

"Something about stars," Pop says, and turns his attention back to the TV.

Dad and I exchange a confused glance before I jog up the steps and into my room.

When I open my bedroom door, Russ is standing on my desk chair, with his hand in the air like the Statue of Liberty.

It takes a second to register, but then I realize he's in the process of turning my bedroom ceiling into a galaxy. He's already covered two-thirds of it with glow-in-the-dark stars.

"*Surprise?*" Russ says halfheartedly when he sees me.

"What are you doing?"

"I wanted to do something nice for you," Russ says. "So I bought you your own cosmos."

In spite of all that has happened, I smile. No one has ever purchased and arranged a galaxy for me before.

"Wanna help me finish?" Russ says.

I nod, and then we're taking turns standing on my chair, arranging constellations. It feels good just to have something to concentrate on. And when we've covered the entire ceiling, Russ shuts off the lights. We stretch out on the floor and bask in the weird green glow.

"So how's Erin?" Russ says.

"Not good," I say. "She wouldn't see me."

"Why?"

"Dunno."

"Give her a few days. Sometimes people need time and space."

For a few minutes, we just look at the weird constellations we made.

"Coach says you come to practice tomorrow, all will be forgiven," Russ says. "No questions asked. No punishment for missing today's practice or for leaving the game."

"Is that why you came tonight? To deliver Coach's message?"

"No," Russ says. "I came to put up the stars. I came to make you feel better."

"I don't know," I say. "I mean, thanks. I appreciate the kind words. But I feel like Erin needs me now. I wish there was something I could do for her."

"When I was in the group home a woman used to read to us at night. I would just sit and listen. I couldn't even tell you the names of the books, but it helped. I never told that woman I liked it when she read to us, but I did. Maybe you could read *Harry Potter* to Erin? Maybe she'd like to escape to Hogwarts?"

"Maybe," I say.

It feels nice to hang out with Russ—especially after all that's happened. It's almost like we can pretend we're still kids or something—and I wonder if that's also why we like reading kids' books like *Harry Potter*. I don't know.

I'm glad Russ came to my house.

I'm glad he made me a galaxy.

EVERY DAY DAD DRIVES ME to the hospital and I walk up to the desk with the first Harry Potter book in my hand, ready to take my girlfriend to Hogwarts. And every day the nurse says Erin doesn't want to see me. So I sit in the waiting room, frustrated and angry.

Mr. Gore says that if I keep going faithfully, eventually Erin will let me in. When I ask how he knows, he says, "True love always wins," which sounds corny, but I hope he's right.

I don't go to basketball practice, which means that I officially quit the team.

Coach doesn't come see me, nor does he send any messages through Russ, and I wonder if he's mad at me. Or maybe he's just happy to have Russ playing for him. Maybe in his eyes I already served my purpose. It's funny how one violent event can make you see the world so differently. When a mobster runs down your girlfriend with a car, basketball just doesn't seem so important

anymore. And Coach's talks about figuring out life on the court sound like so much bullshit now. Or maybe I did figure out life through basketball — people care about you if you can help them win, and they don't care about you if you can't.

After a week or so, the nurse says Erin has been moved to a different building for rehab. "What building? Where?" I ask. But they tell me it's confidential, which makes me mad enough to sprint back into the ward to see if they're lying to me.

"Erin?" I yell when I reach her old room, but there's an old lady sleeping in the bed where my girlfriend should be.

A huge security guard grabs me by the arm and says, "I suggest you exit the premises quietly and without incident." He escorts me to the door, saying, "Don't come back."

Because I have no cell phone, I walk across the street to the pay phone outside the Wawa, but of course someone has pulled the phone part off, so I have to wait outside the hospital in the freezing cold until Dad returns to pick me up.

I start hanging out across the street from the Quinns' house. I just stand on the sidewalk all afternoon, waiting for Mr. or Mrs. Quinn to come home, so that I can ask them where Erin is, but I don't see them for days. I even get up in the middle of the night and walk down the street just to see if their car is in the driveway. It isn't.

A week or so later, a FOR SALE sign pops up in front of their row home, and shortly after, large angry men start transporting the Quinns' furniture into a huge moving truck.

"Where are you taking all this stuff?" I ask the men.

"Can't say," says a guy with a spiderweb tattoo on his cheek.

Another guy with a thick red scar across his neck says, "You best move along. *Now.*"

Pop and Dad say that Erin is obviously being relocated, but by whom and why, no one knows.

I ask Mr. Gore if he's heard anything. He checks the computer system at school, which states that Erin is being taught by home tutors. He doesn't know anything else.

I go to the gym one day and confront Coach before practice is supposed to begin. "What do you know about Erin?" I say, because he knows almost everyone in the neighborhood and he hears things. "Do you know where she is?"

"How would *I* know anything?" Coach shakes his head, and then says, "I told you not to ask too many questions. Be careful, Finley. And I'm sorry things worked out the way they did, but you made your choice."

He turns his back on me, which lets me know he doesn't want any part of the Irish mob and won't be getting involved. He's done with me. After all I've done for Russ, I have to fight the urge to shove Coach. I feel so betrayed, even though I realize there's not much Coach could do to help me, even if he were willing to take the risk.

One night at four in the morning, when the neighborhood is asleep, I break into the Quinns' row home. There's no moon; I can't really see. They used to leave a key under the third brick in the garden, so I fumble around on my hands and knees, counting bricks and sifting dirt until I find that key.

All the blinds are pulled, so once I'm inside I can use a flashlight without being seen.

But there's nothing left — not even a piece of trash.

Nothing.

I shine the light on every inch of floor in every single room; I check every closet; I even look in the attic and basement.

No trace of the Quinns remains.

It's like they vanished.

I start to feel like I might puke again.

I stand in Erin's room, and it still smells like her. Peach shampoo. Her vanishing seems impossible. She would have contacted me if she were allowed, which means she probably *couldn't* contact me. I sit down on the pea-green carpet in the middle of four indented circles where the bedposts used to be. I hold my head in my hands.

Where could Erin be?

How did I lose the best part of my life?

I feel alone in the world.

When I leave, I keep the key, although I'm not sure why. Maybe just to have some part of Erin with me.

I walk around in a daze for a few days, not answering anyone's questions about how I'm holding up.

I can't think about anything but Erin.

I get so nervous about her whereabouts that I lose my head and barge into the Irish Pride Pub one afternoon after school. I don't consider the consequences; I just stride in. It's a last resort, and the only place I can think of where I might find Rod Quinn.

A half-dozen men in black leather jackets are sitting at the bar drinking beer.

I walk around the pool tables toward the men, and the bartender sees me first. He's got gray hair and a crooked nose. But he

has kind blue eyes that seem to be telling me to turn around and leave before the men on the stools see me.

"Excuse me," I say.

Everyone turns around. No one smiles.

"May I please speak to Rod Quinn? It's important."

The men squint at one another in a way that lets me know I shouldn't have mentioned that name.

The bartender says, "Hey, kid. Time to go."

"I'm looking for Rod's sister, Erin," I say. "She's my girlfriend."

"You shouldn't have come in here," one of the men says.

"Know your place, McManus. Don't be like your grandfather. Be like your dad."

"I just want to know where Erin is." I'm sweating now and my hands are shaking, but I don't care about what might happen to me. I need to find Erin.

One of the thinner and clean-shaven men grabs the back of my neck, marches me over to the pay phone on the wall, drops two quarters into the machine, and says, "Call your father and tell him where you are."

"Where's Erin?" I say.

"This isn't a game, kid."

"Where is she?"

He squeezes the back of my neck so hard that my knees buckle. "Call your father. I'm the nice one here. If those boys at the bar become interested in you, you'll be very sorry."

I punch in the number for my home and Pop answers.

"Pop, I need Dad to pick me up."

"Where are you?" Pop says.

When I hesitate, the man says, "Tell the old legless man where you are."

"I'm at the Irish Pride Pub."

"What the hell have you done, Finley?" Pop says.

"Can Dad come pick me up?"

The man takes the phone from me and says, "Come pick the kid up, and don't let this happen again." He hangs up and then pushes me outside, where he lights up a cigarette.

We stand on the sidewalk for a few minutes before I say, "Where is she?"

"You really got a thing for Rod's sister, huh?"

"I love her. She's my best friend."

"That's cute," he says. He flicks his butt into the street and lights up another cigarette. "If you want to see her again, I suggest you let things quiet down. Talk to your grandfather. He understands how these things work."

"Can I just talk to Rod? *Please.*"

"You really don't quit, do you?" he says. "You have no idea how lucky you are that I was sitting at that bar today."

My dad pulls up, gets out of the car, and says, "Lewis?"

"This one belong to you, Padric?"

Dad swallows once and nods.

"He busted into the joint and started making demands about his girlfriend, so I straightened him out before the others could. But had I not been around, this story doesn't end so happily."

"Thank you," Dad says, and then extends his hand. Lewis shakes and then pulls Dad in for a man hug. As he pats Dad's back once, Lewis whispers something into my father's ear.

"Get in the car, Finley," Dad tells me. As we pull away, he says, "What were you thinking?"

"What did he whisper in your ear?"

"That I now owe him a favor. Do you know what that means?"

I nod. It means that my father will have to do something for Lewis in the future.

"Lewis is an old friend. We grew up together. So you got damn lucky today. But you have to stop. You can't keep asking questions. You have to be patient."

I don't *want* to understand any of what he's saying. I'm just a kid. I'm not part of the Irish mob, or whatever they're calling themselves these days — or whatever they're *forbidding* people to call them.

When we get home, Pop's wheelchair is parked at the kitchen table. Grandmom's rosary beads are wound around his fist, but he's not drinking and looks sober. The old man is shaking his head at me. "Are you *crazy*?"

"I —"

"You can't know where Erin is right now!" Pop roars. "Are you fecking stupid, boy? Have you not been lookin' at these stumps of mine for a decade now? What's wrong with you? Those men you approached today would slit your throat for a dollar."

Pop's never cursed at me like this before. His voice is shaking. I've never seen him so angry. His accent's even coming out. *Feck*.

Dad puts his hand on Pop's shoulder and Pop lets out a terrible sigh.

"Listen, Finley," Pop says, calmer now. "Sometimes a guy can get out of the organization by doing something big. Something

that earns him a retirement. If Rod did something big, he might've made some powerful enemies that would require him and his family to disappear. Could be that they didn't disappear fast enough, which maybe explains Erin's accident. This is all speculation, Finley. Don't go repeating any of this. You have to be smart. I know Erin. She'll contact you when it's safe. But your going around asking questions only makes things difficult for everyone."

I look at my father and he nods. He thinks Pop's right.

"So I should just wait for Erin to contact me?" I say. "Do nothing?"

"That's your best play," Pop says.

"And your safest," Dad says. "*Our* safest."

How can I do nothing?

ONE MORNING, ON OUR WALK TO SCHOOL, Russ asks me to shoot around in my backyard—just the two of us. He says it could be “our thing.” I ask him why we need a “thing” and he says, “You seem different, distant—not yourself. Maybe shooting around once or twice a week would help?”

He stops by later that night after his practice and I tell him I don’t really want to shoot around with him. “I’m done with basketball,” I say.

“Just take ten shots and if you don’t feel like taking an eleventh, I’ll drop it forever, okay?”

I sigh.

“Come on,” Russ says. “Just ten shots.”

I follow him around the house and we find my ball in the garage.

“I feel bad about taking your position,” Russ says. “Especially

after what happened to Erin. Her accident — the way she disappeared... it really affected me. Sort of woke me up. I don't know why, but that night in the hospital something clicked in my mind, and then it was like I started moving forward again and you started moving backward. Now it feels like we're moving in opposite directions, and I miss having you around all the time. Everything got messed up for you, and yet things are going so well for me now, or better than I thought was possible at the start of the school year. It doesn't seem fair."

I don't know how to respond, so I don't. He's right, of course. I've been mulling over the unfairness of my situation for weeks, but hearing Russ state it so matter-of-factly hurts. Part of me is jealous. Part of me is simply defeated.

"The thing is — Coach was right," Russ says. "Playing basketball's been really good for me. I like the structure. I like playing. It takes my mind off what happened back in L.A. It's my future too. I want to thank you for seeing me through my transitional phase."

Is that what he's calling his outer-space act now? He's all but forgotten about being Boy21. It's like basketball was his cure — his return to sanity.

"I think that playing ball could help you too," Russ says. "I realize you're done with Coach, I get that — but maybe *you and I* could —"

"It's just a game. Maybe it's *your* ticket to fortune and fame — and I'm happy for you — but I don't care about basketball anymore. *I really don't.*"

"Just take ten shots. I bet you'll want to take an eleventh," Russ says, spinning the ball in his hands.

"Fine," I say, and then show a target. He hits me in the hands and I shoot. The ball goes in. Russ rebounds, passes to me, and I shoot again. We repeat the process, find a rhythm, and I start to feel my heart beating, my muscles loosening. I miss shots five and seven, and end up eight for ten.

"So?" Russ says.

I think about it. I understand why Russ needs to play ball. I understand that the game is going to provide him with many opportunities. I even understand why it's helping him mentally—keeping his mind off the bigger questions. But basketball isn't going to do the same for me. And shooting around is just a painful reminder that Erin's no longer here.

"Won't be taking an eleventh shot," I say.

"I'm sorry," Russ says. "I don't want basketball to be a sore spot between us."

"It's not."

"So what now?"

"I'm going to lie on the garage roof and stare up at the few stars I can see," I say.

"Can I join you?"

"Sure."

We use the fence to help us climb up onto the garage and then we look up at the three or so stars we can see through the light pollution and smog.

"You ever feel like you're not the person on the outside that you are on the inside?" Russ asks.

"All the time."

"Yeah, me too," he says.

We lie there in silence.

"I'm sorry basketball's ruined for you," Russ says.

"I'm glad it's helping you," I say, and I really am.

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THE DAYS PASS VERY SLOWLY and superfast at the same time.

Do you know what I mean?

Maybe it's like a dream where time takes on a new sort of meaning.

I don't know.

Life gets blurry, distorted, stretched out, balled up. It's hard to explain.

I go to school.

I do my schoolwork.

I talk to Pop, Dad, Russ, Mr. Gore.

Things happen, but nothing really sticks in my memory.

Nothing worth mentioning anyway.

I just feel numb all the time.

Empty.

Sad.

Sometimes angry.

Mostly sad.
Kind of pissed.
Hollow.
Tired.
Cheated.
Lonely.
I think about Erin constantly.
Where could she be?
Is she somewhere better?
Will she contact me?
Has she already forgotten about me?
What's going to happen?
It's hard not knowing.
It pretty much sucks.
Bellmont is like a prison to me.
I'm here walking around, breathing, existing, but it feels like
my life is somewhere else — someplace better.
Wherever Erin is.
I think about Erin every second of every day.
Erin.
Erin.
Erin.
Erin.
Erin.
Erin.
Erin.
Why hasn't she contacted me?
Why?

LATER IN THE BASKETBALL SEASON, Russ and I are sitting on my roof again, trying to look at stars, which is all we do anymore. He usually visits me after every game, although we never talk about b-ball. Sometimes we don't talk at all, but just look up at outer space. I've overheard my classmates talking trash about how well the team's doing. But I don't need to know anything more about it.

Russ says, "Okay. Now I'm *really* worried about you."

It's freezer-cold out, but I don't care. I enjoy the icy burn on my face and hands.

Russ is wrapped up in my comforter.

The sky is overcast, so there are no stars.

"Why?" I say, even though I know why. He's officially dropped the Boy21 charade for good, and has gone back to being Russ Allen, superstar basketball player. Since he's leading the conference in all categories, no one seems to mind that he was acting

bonkers for most of the school year. Coach was right. Russ needed to play basketball more than I did. It's almost like I absorbed all of his craziness, like I was his leech, because he seems absolutely fine now, while I walk around school every day like I'm living on another planet.

"You've been angry and depressed. You seem to be getting worse."

"So you're going to Duke?" I say, trying to change the subject.

There was an official press conference last week. News reporters came and videotaped Russ signing the agreement, accepting a scholarship. Everyone in the world knows he's going to Duke, so it was a stupid question to ask.

Russ nods. "No word from Erin?"

"Nope."

"Hasn't been that long."

"It's been more than two months."

"Already?"

The worst part is that no one else seems to notice Erin's not around. Her basketball team didn't win many games without her, and there were whispers at first, but the school keeps on going, as does everything else in Bellmont. It's like none of us really matter. Anyone could disappear and nothing would change too much. It's like our lives don't count.

"I hate Bellmont," I say. "I really hate it here."

"Then leave. The world's a big place, Finley," says Russ, sounding like Mr. Gore for a moment. "There are many good places in the world. I should know. I traveled around a lot, before I came here."

"How am I going to leave?"

"Someday an opportunity will come. Think about Harry Potter. His life is terrible, but then a letter arrives, he gets on a train, and everything is different for him afterward. Better. Magical."

"That's just a story."

"So are we—we're stories too," Russ says.

"What do you mean?"

"There're probably people who wouldn't think our lives are real either, if we wrote exactly what happened to us in a book."

"I'm sorry I haven't come to watch you play ball. But I just can't."

"No problem. Wes is a little pissed about your blowing off the book club, though."

I shrug. I feel bad about blowing off Wes, but he hasn't exactly been friendly since Erin's accident. Everyone in school knows that the Irish mob moved Erin, and, because I'm the last remaining connection Erin has to Bellmont, people are afraid to be around me. Wes has been distant. I don't blame him.

"I'd like to take you somewhere once basketball season is over," Russ says. "Somewhere special."

"Where?"

"It's a surprise."

"Does it have anything to do with Erin?"

"No. It has to do with the cosmos. I think you'll like it."

I'm surprised he brought up outer space, because it's been a while since he's mentioned *the cosmos*. "Do you think that Erin will contact me?"

"Yeah, I do. *Eventually*."

"Why hasn't she contacted me yet?"

"Don't know. We don't get to know why a lot in life. My therapist told me that."

"Are you *better* now?"

Russ looks up at the gray sky.

"I mean, you don't call yourself Boy21 anymore," I say. "You don't talk about your parents flying around outer space in a rocket ship. You don't talk about leaving the planet. And you stopped wearing crazy costumes."

"I wouldn't say I'm better. I'd say I don't need to hide right now."

"Because things are going so well with basketball?"

"Because I'm moving on."

"So it was all just a game. The outer-space stuff. You just made it up to keep people from asking you questions about what happened?"

"Sort of like you pretending that you don't talk?"

"That's not the same thing. I didn't lie to people. It was hard for me to talk — *too hard*."

"Maybe so. And it was hard for me to be an Earthling too. You've been talking a lot more lately. More than you did when I met you, anyway. Does that mean you're better?"

I think about what he's implying, and maybe he's right. Maybe we were both playing roles just to get by.

"So what happened to your parents?" I ask.

"What happened to your mom?"

I'm not ready to talk about that, and it seems like Russ isn't either, because we sit on my roof silently for a long time before

his grandfather pulls up in front of my home and Russ says, "To be continued."

I remain on the roof for a few more hours, and then I lie in bed looking up at the weird green glow of the galaxy Russ gave me.

THE TEAM LOSES THE STATE CHAMPIONSHIP game by one point. I hear Terrell missed the last shot. Russ—and everyone else—mourns the loss for a few weeks, students walking around the hallways with their heads down, teachers frowning, the entire school seeming depressed. But then life goes on and Russ remembers that he wants to show me something.

About a month or so after the big loss, on a Saturday, Russ and Mr. Allen pick me up.

“You ready for your surprise?” Russ asks.

“Sure.”

I climb into the back of the Cadillac and watch Bellmont’s ugliness slide across the window past my reflection.

Russ reads directions off a piece of paper and his grandfather makes the necessary turns.

After an hour or so of highway driving, we’re on a road with many trees, passing horses and cows even. I see cornstalks, fields

of plants I can't identify, long stretches where there are no houses or streetlights or anything man-made at all.

I've never been to a place like this before, and it makes me sit up and swivel my head right and left so I don't miss anything.

The wind coming in through the window is warm and full of scents that seem so alive it almost hurts to breathe it all in.

"Manure," Mr. Allen says as we drive through an awful smell.

"What's that?" I say.

"Cow shit," Russ says.

"Fertilizer," Mr. Allen says. "Helps the crops grow."

Even the manure smell is okay with me, because it's unlike anything I've experienced before—different than the smell of Bellmont's sewer system. To be clear, I don't like the manure smell, but I like being in the countryside.

We take a bumpy dirt road through the woods and I get a little nervous, because if we break down out here, there's nothing around for miles.

But then I spot what looks like a gas station. A sign outside reads STAR WATCHER'S PARADISE! There's actually an exclamation point, which makes this place seem extra exciting. We pull up to the gas pump. Mr. Allen fills the tank and I follow Russ inside, where there's a worn wooden floor and a few aisles of food and camping supplies. A large red-faced man sits behind the counter.

"Howdy," he says, and shows us his pink palm.

"We have a reservation," Russ says. "It's under Allen."

"Sure thing! You picked a beautiful night. No clouds at all. Your eyes are in for a feast!"

"We've been checking the weather all week," Russ says.

"How's viewing station number twelve sound?"

"Fine," Russ says.

Mr. Allen enters the store and stands next to us.

The man writes something down on a piece of paper and then hands us each a brochure. "These are our viewing rules. Unless it's an emergency, do not turn your car on until first light. You must pull the blackout shades in your station if you have a light on inside. Absolutely no flashlights or lights of any kind may be used outside of your station. Once the sun goes down, library voices are mandatory, which means you need to whisper. You'll be asked to leave if you hoot and holler. Other than that, just enjoy the show. I'll need you each to sign the rules brochure to verify that you agree to the terms."

Mr. Allen gives the man a credit card. We all sign the papers, receive complimentary star charts, and then get back into the car.

"What *is* this place?" I say. "What's the show?"

"You'll see," Russ answers.

We drive down the dirt road and pass numbered wooden signs marking unpaved driveways that bend and disappear into the woods.

When we find number twelve, Mr. Allen makes a left and we drive on a dirt road so narrow, branches whack the car. "I better not see any scratches on my Cadillac, or someone named Russ is going to be waxing and buffing all day tomorrow," says Mr. Allen.

The road curves off to the right and then we come upon a strange-looking structure that sort of looks like a cross between a tree house and a lighthouse. It's an eight-sided tower that rises up

and out of the woods. A huge bucket sits on top. The building reminds me of that piece in chess that looks like a castle.

"Well, I'll be," Mr. Allen says, but he's smiling.

"Come on," Russ says.

We enter through a door on the ground and then climb a spiral staircase to the center of a room with four beds and two windows that have heavy curtains—the blackout shades, I assume. There's a small bathroom too. Just a sink and a toilet—no shower.

Russ keeps climbing and I follow until we have to push up what looks like a trapdoor in the ceiling. It opens to the sky and we climb onto a viewing deck that has a tall wooden railing, so that it seems like we're standing in a gigantic wooden cup. The floor is covered with what feels like a wrestling mat. My feet sink an inch or so into it.

"This is where we'll sleep tonight," Russ says. "The beds inside are for the old man."

I look around and see nothing but new green leaves of early spring trees and the tops of the dozen or so other viewing towers, which are spaced maybe one hundred yards apart and form a circle.

"This is amazing," I say.

"What have I been telling you?" Russ says. "There's more to the world than Bellmont, right?"

We race down the steps and carry the cooler and other supplies up into the sleeping room.

It takes Mr. Allen a long time to climb the steps, but when he reaches the top, he looks around and says, "I've never seen so many trees."

"Who knew that you could drive two hours and be somewhere like this?" I say.

Russ smiles proudly.

We eat the tuna fish sandwiches Mrs. Allen packed for us and drink root beer as the sunset shoots fire across the treetops.

"I don't want to be climbing steps in the dark, so I'm going to settle in downstairs with my book. You two have fun, and don't get too close to the edge, you hear?" Mr. Allen says, and then he disappears into the hatch.

It's getting cooler up here; there's a stiff breeze and the trees are making a lot of noise.

"Do you hear the leaves hissing?" I say.

"Cool, huh? Almost time for 'library voices,'" Russ says, making air quotes. "I bet sound really carries up here."

We both lie down on our backs and my shoulder blades sink into the mat.

"This place is truly awesome," I say. "Thanks for bringing me."

He nods and then we watch the western sky glow an orange-pink.

We lie there in silence for fifteen minutes or so, and then, out of nowhere, Russ says, "Tell me what happened to your mother and I'll tell you what happened to my parents."

"Why?"

"Because that's what friends do—they talk to each other and listen."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does."

"I'm not supposed to talk about it."

"Don't you trust me?" Russ asks.

"I do."

"Well, then. Just me and trees around."

"Is that why you brought me out here?"

"It's part of the reason. And I'd prefer to talk before the show begins."

"The stars?"

"Yeah."

"We look at stars on my roof all the time."

"This is different. You'll see," he says. "Let's talk about what happened to our parents. I really think it might help. I talk to my therapist all the time. You should probably be talking to a therapist too."

"I've been talking to Mr. Gore."

"That's good. Talk to me."

"It's a depressing story."

"So's mine."

"I don't know."

"We'll use library voices, so it won't really count anyway."

I smile. *Library voices*. I want to know Russ's story, and I don't really care anymore about keeping Pop's secrets, especially since Erin's gone missing. Maybe that's why the bad stuff happens in neighborhoods like mine, because no one talks. But even so, I'm surprised when I hear myself using the library voice—when I hear myself telling the story for the first time.

I tell Russ about how my grandfather stole money from the thugs he worked for so he could take my grandmother back to Ireland. She had terminal cancer and wanted to die in her home-

land. They were born in County Cork—we still have family there—but they were always too poor to make the trip back. I’ve never been to Ireland, but returning before she died was very important to my grandmother. So, out of desperation and grief, Pop stole the money and took her, thinking they’d be safe once they were out of America. The only problem—the rest of his family was still in Bellmont. My pop underestimated the ruthlessness of his coworkers. The thugs Pop worked for took me to get to my grandfather—to get him to come back from Ireland.

“What do you mean they *took you*?” Russ says, using his library voice.

I allow myself to remember. Remembering makes me feel like someone’s jabbing a finger into my throat. I begin to feel sweaty.

“My grandfather was mixed up with bad men—men like Erin’s brother, Rod. Probably hard for you to imagine.”

“So they *kidnapped* you?”

I swallow. “I haven’t talked about this with anyone—not even Erin.”

“It’s good to talk. You can trust me.”

I search the sky above for early stars, see none, and then tell him what I remember.

I remember men in ski masks taking me in the middle of the night, my parents screaming, and the sound of my father being beaten.

I remember being thrown into a car trunk—my hands tied behind my back, an awful sock in my mouth, tape around my head.

I remember being in a dark room for a long time, peeing in

my pants because I was so scared, smelling only dried urine and dust for what seemed like weeks, being hungry and thirsty, and then suddenly I was with my father again, only it was at my mother's funeral and my pop no longer had legs.

I remember my father's eyes were so red—like raw-hamburger red—and his face was still bruised purple and yellow. I remember Dad telling me that my mother went to the police and tried to rescue me, but that was why she was dead, and then he told me that I could never tell anyone about what happened—ever. I was never allowed to tell a single person, or else we *all* might end up dead.

"He told me not to snitch, and so I didn't. I was just a little kid. And I was so afraid of saying the wrong thing—losing my dad and pop too."

"So that's when you stopped talking?" Russ says.

"Yeah. It's also when I started playing basketball."

"Damn."

"I can't remember what my mother looks like," I say. "We have photos, but I can't see her anymore outside of the picture frames. Do you know what I mean?"

"Sometimes I feel like I'm forgetting the sound of my father's voice," Russ says. "What my mother smelled like. So many things."

"What happened to them?"

It's like the western trees are lined with pink neon now. This is the last of today's light.

Russ takes a deep breath, and then says, "Carjacking. Mom and Dad went to see a friend play saxophone at a bar in a shady neighborhood. Some crackheads shot both my parents in the

head and then ran off with a few hundred bucks, my mom's jewelry, and my dad's watch. Completely random act of violence. Completely unfair. Stupid. Enough to make you want to check out for a while and tell people you're from outer space."

"What do you see," I ask, not really sure *why* I'm asking, "when you try to remember your parents together? What's your best memory?"

He thinks for a few minutes. "This one time I went to see my father play with a throwback old-time-style big band, and half-way through the set the leader asked my mom to join him onstage to sing a song. I was surprised because I didn't even know my mom could sing.

"She didn't want to get up, but the audience started to clap for her, so she took the stage and said, 'You boys know my song.' My father switched to trumpet, because he could play any instrument. He played the opening notes, and then my mother sang Ella Fitzgerald's 'I'm Beginning to See the Light.' My father stood next to her and they sort of communicated with music.

"Mom was singing. Dad was playing trumpet. But their eyes were locked the whole time and I could tell they were so in love. The crowd clapped for five minutes straight when they finished, which embarrassed my mom. I could tell because she kept shaking her head and wouldn't make eye contact with anyone.

"'You sing?' I remember asking her when she sat down next to me. And she said, 'I used to, a long time ago.'

"As we watched the rest of the show, I remember wondering how many other things I didn't know about my parents. You only get to know so much."

When it's clear that Russ is done talking, I say, "That's a beautiful memory."

"Do you have one like that of your parents together?"

I think hard for a minute. "No. Not like that one."

Russ doesn't say anything in response, so I worry that he feels bad about sharing his good memory when I don't have one to match his. I don't want him to feel bad, so I say, "But someday, I might tell someone about stargazing with the NBA's best point guard, Russ Allen, back before he was famous."

"Let's not talk about basketball, okay?" Russ doesn't say anything else, which makes me think that it was really hard for him to talk about his parents.

The sky goes from navy to black. And then all of a sudden millions of stars blink above us, and Russ whispers, "I think the show has begun."

It's almost like someone flicked a switch, because there were only a few stars here and there, and now there's an endless supply—like a huge diamond exploded in the sky.

"It's so beautiful," I say, because I've never seen anything like it before.

"Whenever I think the world is ugly—that life has no meaning at all—I remind myself that this is here, always waiting for me," Russ says. "I can always look up at the cosmos and marvel, no matter what happens. And when I look up at it, I feel as though my problems are small. I don't know why, but it always makes me feel better."

"And that's enough?" I ask. "Just looking at stars?"

"It can be," Russ says.

I expect Russ to begin naming all the constellations, but he doesn't.

We lie silently under outer space, taking in all those pinpricks of light, and I too feel dwarfed by the massive universe.

I wonder if Erin is also looking up at stars tonight, maybe sitting on some roof somewhere, thinking about me.

I wonder if my mom's up there in heaven or simply up there *somewhere*—maybe even on some after-death spaceship or something, like Boy21 had imagined.

"Why do you think we met?" I ask. "Do you think I was supposed to help you return to basketball? Was it fate?"

"It's because my parents were murdered by crackheads," he says. "I'd be in L.A. if my parents were still alive. Other than that, I don't know."

"But you're here somehow," I whisper.

"And so are you," Russ whispers back.

We lie next to each other in silence all night, looking up at the impossible mind-blowing awesomeness of the universe, and I don't think either of us sleeps a minute.

ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF MY MOTHER'S MURDER, just like every other year, Dad, Pop, and I lay flowers on her grave—Cathy McManus.

June sun.

Blue skies.

No one else is in the graveyard.

Standing there, gazing at the endless rows of headstones, it feels like we're the only three people left in the world.

As far as my eyes can see, white and gray grave markers line the earth, each with a tiny bit of information. Name, years lived, maybe a nice quote. But not enough to really let you know who these people were. I wonder if each marker has a story just as complicated as my mom's.

Like every other year, I remember the kidnapping, think about the courage it took for my mother to go to the police, and wish I'd gotten the chance to know her better.

In his wheelchair, in front of the grave, Pop talks to my mom and says he's sorry over and over again, cries a lot, and is a guilty mess.

"When you get your chance to leave Bellmont," Dad says to me, "take it."

His face is tense. Wrinkles shoot out from the corners of his eyes. He's staring at Pop in this really weird way. It's like he loves and hates the old man simultaneously.

"You hear me?" Dad asks.

"Yeah."

When I was little, I used to think that we visited my mom's grave because she was somehow there — like we were really going to spend time with her ghost or something like that. Now I realize we go so Pop can repent.

I wonder about my mom.

This might sound dumb, but the only thing I really remember was that she loved green Life Savers, which she called the Irish Life Savers. She used to buy a roll almost every day and feed me as many as it took to get to the first green one, which she'd eat.

This was our little ritual.

We'd walk to the corner store in search of her daily green Irish Life Saver.

It's a stupid thing to remember, but it's what I have.

And the truth is, I've always gotten very nervous whenever I see someone eating Life Savers, or if I see a roll in the store. I worry that if I look too closely I'll discover that green Life Savers don't exist. I'm terrified of maybe realizing that I made up the only detail about my mom I own, and then I'll have absolutely nothing left.

Maybe that's a dumb thing to worry about, but it's just who I am — what life has given me.

Dad never talks about Mom anymore — ever.

And Dad never eats Life Savers either — at least I've never seen him eat one.

When we leave the cemetery, Dad spends the rest of the day with Pop. I spend it alone on the roof, hoping that Erin will crawl through my bedroom window and snuggle up to me, like she did so many times before. But Erin doesn't show up.

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THE MORNING BEFORE my high-school graduation ceremony, while we're eating our eggs and bacon in the kitchen, Pop hands me a plain white envelope.

"What's this?"

"Open it," Dad says.

I tear it open and pull out the contents. There's some sort of ticket that reads AMTRAK.

"Amtrak?" I ask.

"It's a train. You do know what trains are, right?" Pop asks.

"Why are you giving me a train ticket?"

"Graduation present," Dad says.

"To where?"

"Read the ticket," Pop says.

"New Hampshire? Why did you buy me a ticket to New Hampshire?"

"We didn't buy it," Pop says.

"Read the letter," Dad says.

I unfold the paper and immediately recognize Erin's handwriting. My heart nearly explodes and I start to sweat. *Erin!* I stand and walk into the living room.

"Where you going?" Pop says, and I can hear laughter in his voice.

Fintex,

You don't know how much I've missed you. You can't imagine how much I wanted to contact you in the past six months. It's been torture. I hope you don't think I didn't want to see you back at the hospital. I didn't have a choice. I wasn't calling the shots, which I'm sure you've figured out by now.

I can't say much in this letter. I'm not allowed.

I'm somewhere very unlike Bellmont. It's beautiful. People are nice to each other. You can walk the streets alone at night. Everything is so clean! You could eat off the sidewalk. So many stars! Trees everywhere! I have my own tiny apartment, if you can believe that. And I'm already enrolled at a small liberal arts college and set to begin this fall, although I won't be playing basketball. Things have been taken care of. That's all I can say in this letter. Oh, and I'm going by Katie Reidy now. Do you like the name? Can you get used to it?

Do you want to come live with me?

I'm serious. Seems like your family still has some friends left because it's been taken care of, as they say.

You can't tell anyone where you're going and you'll have to change your name. I'm thinking we'll call you Lucas Williams. How about that? Do you like it? It has a nice ring, doesn't it?

I have enough money for us to live a decent life. You could apply to the college and who knows? Or you can get a job.

I'll explain everything if you come. I hope you will come. I love you. Please get on the train. Just come. Trust me. Please.

Love,

The Girlfriend Formerly Known As Erin

I run back into the kitchen and say, "What is this? Is this for real?"

"It's a chance to get out of here and start fresh," Dad says. "Free and clear of your family history. It's a chance at life."

"Where did this note come from?" I ask.

"Don't ask questions," Pop says. "This is the real deal. A true chance. No strings attached."

"How do we know it's not a trap?"

"A trap? You've been watching too many movies," Pop says. "If they wanted to hurt you, they'd come to the house and hurt you. They wouldn't buy you a train ticket and hurt you in New Hampshire."

"What did you have to do to make this happen?" I ask.

"Nothing," Dad says. "Except promise silence."

"I'm not stupid," I say.

Dad and Pop look at each other.

"Let's just say," Pop says, "some of the older guys still feel bad about what happened to you when you were a kid, but they respected the fact that we kept our mouths shut when the cops came asking questions all those years ago. There are rules, but we're not all monsters. Most guys do what they can when they can."

"The train leaves in two hours, so you have to make your decision now," Dad says. "If you go, you can't come back to Bellmont. Ever. And you'll have to be careful about contacting us. They'll explain the rules to you and you'll have no choice but to obey every one."

"Why?"

"Those are the terms. We don't get to ask why."

I remember what Russ said about not being able to know why.

I sit at the table opposite Pop and Dad and notice that their physical similarities are striking. I wonder if they're thinking I look like a younger version of them. Three generations of McManuses.

"So I'm going away on mob money?" I say quietly.

"You're going away," Pop says. "You're not going to be taken care of for life. You're just getting a ticket out of here and a chance to start over someplace better."

I think about it and wonder about ethics. Do I really want to accept mob money, even if it's only a little to help me relocate? Could I live with myself? After all they've done to my family, am I owed this?

"And if I don't go?" I say.

Dad shrugs. "Then you go to community college and live in Belmont for another two years, minimum. And maybe you lose your best friend forever. This is most likely a one-shot chance here."

"Will Rod be up there? Mr. and Mrs. Quinn?"

"Don't know," Pop says.

I absolutely want to see Erin. But I don't know about the rest. How can I choose between the two men who raised me—the only family I have—and the girl who's been at my side since elementary school? It's easy to choose between Belmont and anywhere else, because I don't want to end up alone rotting away in a row home drinking myself to death. I definitely want out of this town, but I don't want to leave Pop and Dad behind.

"What do you think I should do?"

They look at their hands. Their eyes are welling up. They've already decided what I should do, which is why they gave me the envelope. But the final choice is mine alone.

The doorbell rings.

"That's Russ," I say.

"Don't tell him anything," Dad says.

I cross the living room, pinching myself to make sure I'm not dreaming.

When I open the door, Russ peers through the screen and says, "What's up?"

"I'm not going to school today," I say. "Not gonna walk in graduation."

"Why not? You sick?"

I don't want to lie to Russ, especially since I know this might be the last time I ever speak with him.

"What's going on, man?" he says. "You all right?"

I think about what I can say to make him understand, and when I have it, I smile. "I just got a ticket to Hogwarts."

"What?"

"Might be taking a train ride to a magical place that's much better than here. Don't tell any Muggles, okay? But I want you to know I'll be all right."

Russ squints through the screen for a moment before he returns my smile and says, "She finally contacted you."

"I can neither confirm nor deny that statement."

"I have no idea what's going on, but I feel like I should hug you."

"We can do that." I step outside the house.

Russ and I hug. A real hug. Four arms. Big squeeze to say all the things we can't or maybe won't.

"I'm not going to ever see you again, am I?" Russ says.

"Dunno."

"Be good to yourself, Finley. I wish you a beautiful life."

"I wish you a beautiful life too—many clear starry nights, and a few collegiate basketball records," I say.

Russ looks into my eyes the way he did when he first came to Belmont—like he's communicating with me—then smiles sadly and walks away.

I watch him stride down the street and he throws a few sky punches, which I take as a sign of approval, like he's happy for me, so I return to the kitchen.

"You going to get on the train?" Dad says.

I'm scared to leave my family. It's hard for me to think of being anywhere but Bellmont. Then I remember the night I spent with Russ in the country, how there are other places in the world, better places, and I say, "I'd really like to see Erin."

Pop nods once and then looks out the window. I'm surprised when he closes his eyes, fingers Grandmom's rosary beads, and starts to mouth words. I've never seen Pop pray before.

Dad and I go upstairs and pack up my belongings, which aren't much. I stuff clothes and jackets and shoes into a duffel bag. Peel a few stars off the ceiling and slip those in too. I grab my framed picture of Mom and Dad and me, from back in the day, and then I find my basketball in the garage, because maybe Erin will want to shoot around.

Pop and Dad drive me to Thirtieth Street Station in Philadelphia, and on the way there they explain that a man will meet me in New Hampshire and that I am to ask no questions—none whatsoever. He will drive me to Erin, but he won't say anything to me at all. I'll know who he is, because he'll call me Lucas.

"This seems crazy," I say. "I'm a little freaked out."

"You'll be fine," Dad says.

"You've already been through the worst part of your life," Pop says. "Go be with Erin. She's a good woman who loves you—the key to your happiness. Trust me. I know, because your grandmother was an even better woman. I would do anything to be with her now. *Anything*."

We park outside of a huge white building. Cars, taxis, and people are everywhere.

"Finley," Pop says, just before I get out of the car. I turn around and am surprised to see the old man trembling. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Pop."

"Your grandmother would have wanted you to have this." Pop pulls her rosary beads over his head and then extends his arm toward me so that the black crucifix is dangling right in front of my face. "Maybe it will bring you luck."

"I can't take that." I don't even know what the rosary means, which prayers go with which beads, and they've been around Pop's neck or fist ever since my grandmother died.

"You *will* take it, Finley. Put it around your neck, under your shirt. If you only wear it one day in your life, let it be today. And then pass it down to your children when the time comes."

I put the necklace on and open the back car door to give Pop a hug. His cheek is wet when it brushes against mine.

Dad carries my bag and basketball. I follow him into the building, through what seems to be a food court, and into a beautiful room with a high ceiling and great columns. It reminds me a little of the Franklin Institute, where I saw that IMAX movie about stars and repairing the Hubble Space Telescope. I remember how Boy21 freaked out and left when he saw the space shuttle. How I wanted to follow him but wasn't allowed.

Dad and I check the departure times on a board that changes by flipping numbers and making this ticking noise.

"That's your train," Dad says, pointing.

We walk to the right staircase and I get in line with my ticket and Erin's letter in my hand.

"I really feel like I'm going to Hogwarts," I say.

"What's Hogwarts?"

"Never mind." I suddenly wish I'd told Dad about Harry Potter, but this isn't the time. Maybe I'll send him a copy in the mail.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to give you a better childhood, Finley."

Dad's eyelids are trembling now too, and in front of all these strangers. I really hope he doesn't cry. I won't be able to get on the train if he cries.

"Dad," I say, but nothing else comes.

"Whenever you get to missing us — if you do —"

"I will definitely —"

"Think about your old man collecting tolls at three in the morning and your legless pop drinking beer all day, wearing a diaper. Go get yourself a better life. Do whatever it takes to make a good life for you and Erin. Irish people have been leaving their homes in search of better lives for many, many years. We're very good at it. So go make the Irish proud."

I hug Dad and start to feel the finality of what's happening. I start to feel the tears coming.

But then the line starts moving and it's time to board.

"Erin will let you know the best way to contact us, but don't *worry* about us, okay?" Dad says. "Be a good man."

"Love you, Dad."

"We love you too." Dad sticks his hand in my pocket, but before I can check to see what he put in there he's handing me my bag and basketball, the ticket man is asking to see my ticket, and

then I'm halfway down the stairs, looking over my shoulder at Dad, who is crying now and waving good-bye from above.

The platform is full of hot sticky air, and I'm surprised that my train is air-conditioned.

After seeing other people do it, I shove my bag into the space above my seat, and then sit down.

My heart's pounding.

I've never been on a train before.

I wonder if I'll meet friends during the ride, like Harry Potter did. I start to look around, but all I see are tired and grumpy-looking adults.

I settle into the seat, reread Erin's letter, and try to feel hopeful for the future. I wonder if New Hampshire is as beautiful as the Star Watcher's Paradise. Erin was and is beautiful enough to make even Bellmont tolerable, so I close my eyes and imagine her face.

The train lurches forward and we pull out of Thirtieth Street Station.

A woman wearing a special train hat comes and inspects my ticket, which is sort of fun.

I watch Philadelphia and then so many towns I can't name pass by my reflection in the window.

So much had to happen to land me on this train—thinking about that makes it feel like someone's kicking in my skull, and then, suddenly, I'm thinking about the unfathomable stars Russ and I saw from the viewing station in the woods. We really don't get to understand *why* most of the time. It's true.

I reach into my pocket and pull out five one-hundred-dollar

bills, which is more money than I have ever held in my hand, and may very well be Dad's life savings. I think about Dad and Pop living alone without me. Who will help Pop in the bathroom and put him to bed? *Why didn't I think about that before?* They loved having Erin and me around. The house will be so quiet now. Pop will probably drink even more. I start to feel guilty about leaving, like I might even cry. I grasp a handful of shirt and the four points of my grandmother's crucifix dig into my palm.

"Where you going?" the woman across the aisle says. She's a big lady wearing a purple dress and a little hat that matches.

"New Hampshire," I say, before I remember that I'm not supposed to tell anyone my destination.

"Pretty country up there."

"Hope so."

"First time?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You going to play basketball?" she says, eyeing my ball on the seat next to me.

"I hope so — with my girlfriend."

"You sure do hope a lot."

I smile at her.

"Nothing wrong with hoping," she says, and then looks out her window.

Suddenly, the reality of what's happened hits me. Everything's swirling in my chest. I'm so nervous. I already miss Pop and Dad. It's hard to wrap my mind around this moment. Life can change so quickly. Maybe this is how Russ felt when he first came to Bellmont? No wonder he invented Boy21.

I don't want to cry on the train, so I close my eyes and visualize playing basketball against Erin, and we're little kids again in my backyard, silently shooting on the old adjustable rim.

It's a good image, but I force my mind to see the future, what will happen when I arrive in New Hampshire.

It takes some imagining, but finally I see myself playing H.O.R.S.E. with Erin as the sun sets through the trees and the stars poke through the endless sky above. I see us holding hands, getting older through the years, even raising kids in a nice neighborhood where they won't have to worry about the things we had to worry about. And then Erin and I are kissing on a new roof, under the same endless unknowable space above, and somehow we're okay.