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Here in the Real World

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are patted the two bricks stacked beside him on the pool deck, scored on the morning's ramble. Tomorrow he'd bash them into chips to build the ramparts of his castle, but tonight he had another use for them.

He swirled his legs through the water, turquoise in the twilight, and at exactly 7:56, he snapped on his goggles and adjusted them snug. "The boy began to prepare himself for the big event." He whispered the voice-over, in case anyone had their windows open, or the Twin Kings were lurking around.

The Twin Kings weren't twins, just two old men who dressed alike in plaid shorts and bucket hats. They weren't kings either, but they paraded around Sunset Palms Retirement Village like royal tyrants, making life miserable for anyone they encountered.

Ware had studied the Middle Ages in school. Back then, kings could be kind and wise, kings could be cruel and crazy. Luck of the draw: serf or knight, you lived with it.

The first time the Twin Kings had come across Ware, he'd been cheek down in the grass, watching a line of ants patiently climb up, then over, then down a rock, thinking about how much harder human life would be if people didn't know they could just go around some obstacles. "Space Man" they'd dubbed him, claiming they'd had to yell at him three times before he'd lifted his head.

Now, whenever they found him, they delivered some zinger they found so hilarious they had to double over and grab their knees. The comments were not hilarious, though. They were only mean.

Which was okay—people made fun of him for spacing out; he was used to it.

No, the mortifying thing was when Big Deal came out and sent the kings slinking away with a single glare. An eleven-and-a-half-year-old boy was supposed to protect his grandmother, not the other way around.

"Oh, they're harmless," Big Deal had said last night, laughing and making him feel even more ashamed. "They're deathly afraid of germs, so just tell them you're sick. Diarrhea works best."

As if he'd called them up by thinking of them, the Twin Kings rolled around the corner, hands clasped around their royal bellies. "Earth to Space Man!" the shorter one cackled. "Don't get your air hose caught in the drain down there!"

Ware glanced back at his grandmother's unit, then faced them. "Better stay away. I'm *sick*." He grabbed his belly and groaned in a convincing manner. The Twin Kings scuttled back around the corner.

Ware raised his eyes to the clock again: 7:58. He kicked off the seconds in the water.

At 7:59, he picked up the bricks. Then he slowly filled his lungs with the sunscreeny air—hot and sweet, as if someone was frying coconuts nearby—and slipped into the deep end. The bricks seemed to double in weight, sinking him softly to the bottom.

He'd never been on the bottom before, thanks to a certain amount of padding that functioned as an internal flotation device. "Baby fat," his mother called it. "It'll turn into muscle." Witnessing his bathing-suited self in his grandmother's mirror every day, he realized his mother had omitted a crucial detail: *how* it would turn into muscle. Probably exercise was involved. Maybe tomorrow.

Ware located the four huge date palms—each one anchoring a corner of the pool. Their chunky trunks staggered in the ripples like live gargoyles.

At eight, the twinkle lights winding up those trunks were set to come on. Tonight he would see it from the bottom of the pool. Okay, the big event was not exactly a dazzling spectacle, but he'd discovered that everything looked more interesting through water—mysteriously distorted, but somehow clearer, too. He could hold his breath for over a minute, so he'd have plenty of time to appreciate the effect.

Five seconds later, though—a surprise. The palm fronds began to flash red.

Ware understood right away: ambulance. Three times already in the weeks he'd been at Sunset Palms, he'd been awakened by strobing red lights—no shock in a retirement place. He knew the drill: the ambulance cut the siren at the entrance—no sense causing any extra

heart attacks. It parked between the buildings, and then a crew ran around poolside where the doors to the units were sliders, easier to roll the stretchers in, haul the people out.

Don't be afraid, he telegraphed to whoever lay on the stretcher, the way he had the other times. Scared people seemed like raw eggs to him, wobbling around without their shells. It hurt just to think about people being scared.

While he watched the date palms pulse, he thought about being happy instead. How happiness could sneak up on you, like, for instance, when your parents send you away for the summer to your grandmother's place, which you know you'll hate, but it turns out you love it there because for the first time in your life you have long hours free and alone. Well, except for maybe two old men so harmless they're afraid of germs.

An egret, as white and smooth as though carved from soap, glided through the purpling sky. In a movie, a single flying bird like that would let you know that the main character was starting out on a journey. Ware wished, the way he always did when he saw something wonderful, that he could share things like this. You see that? Wow. But

he didn't really know anyone besides his grandmother here, and she hadn't been feeling well today, had barely stepped out of—

Ware released the bricks, burst to the surface, snapped off his goggles, and saw: Big Deal's sliding glass doors gaping open like a gasp, two EMTs inside, bent over a stretcher.

A third EMT squinted toward the pool, her white coat flashing pink in the lights, as if her heart beat in neon. Mrs. Sauer from Unit 4 hovered behind her, bathrobe clutched to her chest, face clenched. She raised one bony arm like a rifle and aimed her finger right at Ware.

Ware shot over to the ladder, slapped the water from his left ear, his right, and as he scrambled out he heard, "That's her grandson. Off in his own world."

At eight exactly, the twinkle lights came on.



where he'd shivered, pool soaked and worried, until a nurse dropped a blanket over his shoulders; his mother charging in a few hours later, her jaw set like a rock. He flung off the sheets and got up.

Halfway downstairs, he heard his parents talking in the kitchen.

"Except that's not what you wanted," he heard his father say.

"I know, I know," his mother said. "I only wish . . . "

Ware hurried the rest of the way down. "What do you wish, Mom? Is Big Deal okay?"

His dad slid off the counter. "You all right? Tough night, yesterday."

"Mom. How's Big Deal?"

"She's awake," his mother answered, looking down into her coffee. "She'll be okay."

"Oh, good. So when am I going back?"
"Back?"

His mom's phone rang just then. She picked it up and gripped her forehead with the other hand as if she were afraid it might shatter, and marched into the bedroom.

His father watched her go with a worried expression.

Of course, worried was his dad's normal state. "It comes with the job," he often said, and he always sounded proud of it. Signaling airplanes down the runway meant thinking about every possible catastrophe.

But Ware grew worried then, too. His mother was the manager at the city's crisis center. She juggled twenty volunteers' schedules, talked people down from bridges, and got babies delivered. She *took control*, as if control were a package sitting on the doorstep with her name on it. She didn't grip her forehead as if it might shatter. "Dad. Big Deal's okay. Mom said. When's she getting out?"

"Well. She is okay, she just let her blood sugar get low yesterday. That's not good with her condition. They'll have to—"

"Her condition? Is Big Deal sick?"

"Oh. Well, it's . . . she's not young. But she fell, is—"

"Being old is a condition?"

"She fell, is the thing. They need to make sure she's all right."

"Oh. Okay, good. So what about the plan?"

"The plan?"

"I spend the summer there, so you and Mom can work double shifts, buy this house. The plan."

"Oh. Well, that was plan A," his dad agreed. He picked up a Summer Rec brochure from the counter. "Plan B might be a little different."



are stood at the kitchen door, forehead pressed to the screen, building his argument.

He could stay home alone, so no, he sure did not need to go to Rec again, if that's what they were thinking. Rec was another name for day care, with heat rash and humiliation thrown in free of charge.

The first time he'd gone to that program had been the summer after first grade, and the memory still hurt. "Go join in with the others," a teenaged counselor had urged.

"I am. Joined in with the others," he'd answered, bewildered.

"No. I mean inside the group. You're outside."

Ware had studied the situation, trying to see what the counselor saw. He saw something different. He saw a huge space with kids scattered all over. "The outside is part of the inside when it's people," he'd tried to explain, then felt his face burn when that counselor had leaned into another counselor and laughed.

In that precise moment he'd learned that the place that had always felt so right—standing enough apart from a situation that he could observe it, in the castle watchtower, as he'd come to think of it later—was wrong.

Afterward, Ware had tried to forget the embarrassing episode. And that was when he'd learned the cruel irony of memory: you could be *capable* of forgetting things—Ware himself, at six, routinely forgot to comb his hair or bring home his lunch box—but the harder you tried to erase something from your brain, the deeper it got engraved.

The other kids hadn't forgotten either. The *outside* label stuck to him summer after summer, invisible but undeniable, like a bad smell, and *outside* was where they left him.

Which was okay, although from then on, he made certain to appear to be part of the group if any grown-ups were watching. It wasn't hard—"joined in" was simply a matter of geography to grown-ups. A few steps one direction or another did the trick.

No matter. He wasn't going back. Not even for the week or two until he could return to Sunset Palms.

He'd been really happy there. The pool had been barely over his head and so narrow he could practically touch both walls at once. But the instant he'd slipped in, he'd always felt good. Really good. And something about it had worked like fertilizer on his imagination. He'd had dozens of great ideas drifting around that pool. Hundreds.

Even better, when he'd told his grandmother about his report, "Defending Medieval Castles," and how he wanted to actually build a model to see for himself how life had been for the knights, she'd shocked him by waving her hands over her dining table and saying, "Build it right here. We'll eat our meals at the counter, and that's that."

At Sunset Palms, he'd spent entire blissful days exploring the neighborhood, picking up things for his model. Whole nights happily building it. He'd been a little homesick, sure. But something that had been clenched tight inside him his whole life had loosened.

He stepped into the backyard, looking for something to convince his parents that he could keep busy for a week or so. The yard seemed to shrug in apology. "The boy surveyed a wasteland," he voice-overed—silently, of course.

"Wasteland" was an exaggeration, but not much. Mr. Shepard wasn't a spend-money-on-yard-maintenance kind of landlord, and his parents weren't the spend-time-working-on-a-lawn kind of parents, so the yard was barren. Besides an old shed crammed with junk abandoned when the previous tenants left a decade ago, there were only a couple of rusting lounge chairs and a listing picnic table. They seemed to be gasping for final breaths before the weeds drowned them. "Wasteland," he repeated.

Which was, he suddenly realized, exactly perfect.

He jumped off the step. A stunningly great idea had just sprung up, even without the imagination-boosting benefit of a pool.

When his parents bought this place at the end of the summer, they'd own the backyard, too. The lounge chairs could be broken down to make armor. The shed would work as a throne room. The picnic table could be a drawbridge once he sawed off the legs. He'd turn the narrow side yard into a barbicon, the courtyard of deathly obstacles for attackers. No boiling oil, obviously, but definitely

a catapult. He'd notch toeholds in the wooden fence and take running leaps to claim the top—mounting the ramparts, it was called. This last was such a satisfying image, he replayed it, this time in classic knight's stance: Chin up, chest out, advance boldly.

Ware dropped to the picnic table and stretched out. Sometimes he wished he lived back in the Middle Ages. Things were a lot simpler then, anyway, especially if you were a knight. Knights had a rule book—their code of chivalry—that covered everything: *Thou shalt always do this, thou shalt never be that*. If you were a knight, you knew where you stood.

Too often, Ware wasn't even sure he was standing. Sometimes he felt as if he was wafting, in fact. A little drifty.

His mother, like the knights, operated from a clear code, and she was always trying to share it with him. "If you aren't thinking three steps ahead," she would say, for example, "you're already four steps behind." The trouble was, Ware hadn't the faintest clue how to unravel an advice-puzzle like that.

His father lived by a code also, made up of sports sayings. It was equally undecipherable.

"Ware!" his dad called just then from the back door.

Given the level of irritation in his voice, Ware knew he'd called a few times already. He jumped up. "Sorry. What?"

"Inside. Team huddle."



are's mother sat at the kitchen table, still gripping her phone.

"What happened?"

His dad took a seat. He patted the chair between them.

Ware stayed standing. "What's wrong?"

"When she fell, your grandmother fractured her hips. Both hips!" His mother's voice was extremely cheerful and determined, but it had gone up into a strange new register. "She'll have to have them replaced."

"Replaced?" Images of things that got replaced presented themselves unhelpfully in his mind. Batteries, light bulbs, toothbrushes. A hip didn't fit.

"Artificial joints. Surgery. Nothing for a child to

be concerned with." His mother smiled hard, but she blinked her eyes quickly.

Ware felt the world collapse a little, as if it had suddenly remembered it was hollow at its core. Was his mother going to *cry*?

His dad seemed as shaken as Ware by those blinking eyes. He took over. "Hip replacement is a common operation, and your grandmother is pretty tough."

Pretty tough. Ware almost laughed at that. Big Deal was always asking piercing questions—*She's direct*, his mother explained in excuse—and she expected answers. Whenever they saw her—holidays mostly—she ran the visit like a military maneuver. Even the Thanksgiving turkey had seemed to salute when she walked by. He'd been kind of scared of her, actually.

But staying with her, he'd experienced the flip side of her toughness. Instead of holding it up against him, she'd wrapped it around him like a shield, the way she'd done with the Twin Kings.

"I'll help her out. Do stuff for her when I'm back there next week," he said.

His dad shook his head. "Both hips at the same time means a longer rehab. She won't be able to go home for a while. Probably not this summer. Which means . . . "

Ware's mom straightened. "Don't worry, Ware, I've got your summer all planned out."

Ware saw her brighten with the energizing pleasure schedules always brought her. "No, Mom, please," he tried. Schedules made him feel as if he were being sucked into a pit of tar.

"I'll drop you at the community center on my way to work. You'll take the three forty-five bus home. You'll bring lunch, because we're not paying for the junk they serve there. Now on weekends . . ."

The light seemed to dim over his head. Apparently the city wasn't content with ruining weekdays—they had weekend Rec, too. Weekend Wrecked, more like. His mother was just explaining dinners when he managed a gurgle from the tar pit. "No!"

"Excuse me? No, what?"

"Rec. I want to stay home. Vashon is around until August, and Mikayla is—"

"Ware. You'll go. Now, we'll both stop home for dinner most nights in between shifts, but—"

"I'm old enough to-"

"You're going to Rec. Now, sunscreen before you

leave. SPF eighty at minimum, hypoallergenic, I'll get a case, remember the tops of your ears. Stay hydrated. Now, by mid-July . . . "

Ware looked to his father. His mother made the rules, but sometimes . . .

His father's jaw hung open worshipfully. After fifteen years of marriage, he was still bedazzled by the way his wife could snap into action.

"Dad, please. I'm eleven and a half. Nobody goes that old."

His father tore himself away and refocused on Ware. "We'll make it up to you. How about a new bike? A basketball hoop? Whatever you want. Now, you'll take my big first aid kit—"

"What I want is not to go to Rec. Can I have that?" Ware tried to hide how surprised he was at what he'd just said. His skin felt too tight, as if it didn't fit the reckless version of himself he'd grown into in only three weeks away.

His mom looked pretty surprised, also. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. The news that her body would betray her like this seemed to bewilder her even more. Ware watched her go to the sink, squeeze out a sponge, and start wiping the counter, hard.

Then she stopped. She leaned her head against the side of the refrigerator. Ware could tell from the way her back moved that his crisis-center-manager mother, obeyed by babies and bridge jumpers alike, was having a hard time ordering air in and out of her lungs. The sight made Ware's own chest ache.

He got up and wrapped his arms around her waist. She tipped her head and looked down at him for a long time.

Her hair, which she always wore coiled into a tight bun, had come undone. A strand dangled over the toaster. The toaster wasn't on, and his mother's hair wasn't metal, of course, but Ware had inherited his father's worrying nature. That wet sponge . . .

He sneaked a hand out and unplugged the cord.

His mother gave him a puzzled look, as if she were trying to place him. Then she smiled as if maybe she remembered. "You," she said, in a voice so soft with compassion that for a second, Ware's hopes surged.

"I'm sorry," she sighed. "But with making sure your grandmother's okay and working double shifts, we can't be worrying about you, too. Being alone all day."

"Worrying about you being safe," his dad added.

"We need to know you're . . ." His mother picked up the Rec brochure and consulted it. "Spending your time having Meaningful Social Interaction with other kids." She clipped the brochure to the fridge with a click that sounded final. "Go get ready."



are hadn't spoken a word the whole ride to the community center.

Over the years, he'd argued the point too many times already: He had plenty of Meaningful Social Interaction at school. Truckloads full. He had friends—Vashon and Mikayla. And by the way, why did she always act as if two wasn't enough?

But sometimes he wanted to spend time alone. Sometimes he *needed* to. If that made him a disappointing son, well, couldn't his parents accept their bad luck, having a disappointing son?

But now, standing at the registration desk, Ware wished he'd fought a little. Or a lot. He wished, actually, that he'd opened the car door and rolled out—at slow

speed, onto soft grass, of course. He'd seen a kid do that in a movie once. The kid had broken her arm, but it had certainly gotten the mother's attention.

Ms. Sanchez, the Rec director, who always looked as tired as Ware suddenly felt, began reciting the rules. "The community center is not responsible for lost or damaged items; the staff will not administer medicines..."

Ware zoned out—five summers he'd heard these rules—and scanned the room.

Nothing had changed. The concrete walls, chipped paint the color of Band-Aids, were hung with the same curling posters: SAVE A LIFE—LEARN THE HEIMLICH!; IDENTIFY POISONOUS SNAKES IN FLORIDA; and oddly, HOW TO MAKE THE PERFECT CUP OF COFFEE.

The floor was marked for the basketball court it used to be, and a hoop still hung at one end, although the basketballs had long ago been replaced with Wiffle balls after some big-muscled kid managed to hurl one through a clerestory window. You could still pick glass out of the floorboards underneath.

In back was the Art Hut, doubly misnamed since it wasn't a hut at all and nothing close to art ever went on there, not if art was something you created yourself instead of "Trace your hand, add a red triangle."

The place sounded just the way he remembered, too: the high-pitched roar of kids establishing the day's alliances or battles.

Most discouraging, the air smelled exactly the same: feet, Lysol, and vaguely but insistently, vomit from legions of little kids staggering inside, tomatofaced after running around under a broiling Florida sun, heaving up lunch. Ware had done it himself. He felt his breakfast shift threateningly in his stomach as he remembered.

He saw only three other kids from his age group—they'd be Elevens this year—two boys and a girl. All three were the kind of kids who found the community center's cavernous space an irresistible acoustic challenge. One of the boys caught his eye and whooped. The other gulped and let out a thunderous burp.

Ware raised his hand to half-mast with a nod, but inside, he felt the familiar contracting retreat of the thing that lived deep in his chest, which must be his soul.

Two weeks into the program, everybody was already knotted up into groups. Only two kids stood alone.

One was a tall boy he'd never seen before, whose

neck rose out of his striped T-shirt like a periscope. After a full 360-degree scan of the room, the boy pretended to study the ant farm on a windowsill. Ware knew he was pretending because the ants had died off, probably out of boredom, a few years ago.

The other was a seven-year-old he thought of as Sad Girl. Sad Girl stood at the door and cried the whole first day she'd come two summers ago. Her silent tears had about killed Ware. Desperate to stop them, he'd swiped the prized unicorn puppet from a couple of older girls and brought it to her, but she'd only pressed it to her side and kept those streaming eyes glued on the door, her lashes clumped together and heavy.

Today Sad Girl was looking mournfully at a lump of Play-Doh on her palm. It was the same pinkish beige as the walls, and even from the registration desk, Ware could see it was crusty. The girl looked up, right at him, as if she had sensed him watching her. She tipped her palm so the clay fell to the floor. Ware nodded in sympathy.

His mom tore out a check, handed it over. "That's for the full summer package—weekends, too."

Ms. Sanchez wrote SUMMER PKG after his name the

way Ware imagined a judge might write SENTENCE: DEATH. "Drop in any time you want. Just sign in at the door so we know the day's head count."

"Oh, he'll be here every—" his mother started to say, but the director had leaped up to pull a kid out of a trash can.

"How much does this cost, Mom?"

"Oh, now, that's not something for a child to worry about."

"I'm not worried. I'll pay you twice as much to let me stay home." This was his new reckless self talking, since there were only forty-six dollars in his shoe box at home, but he was desperate.

"I have to get to work, but I'll see you at dinner." His mother dug into her tote bag. She pulled out a bus pass. "For July. The bus stop is right out front." Then she came up with the first aid kit and a pack of antibacterial wipes. "If you touch anything . . ."

"Mom!"

She zipped the bag closed. "Try to have a good time, okay? Maybe you'll make a friend."

Ware gave up. He tightened his cheeks in something he hoped looked like a smile and nodded. Then he walked over to the cubbies and stuffed the first aid kit and the wipes deep into the back of one. He hung his backpack on a hook, feeling exhausted.

"Elevens!" Ms. Sanchez called from the side door. "Outside with Kyle for Rec-Trek. Tens, you too."

Rec-Trek. Ware had almost forgotten. A dozen times around the building, first walking, then marching and skipping, and finally running at faster and faster speeds, until your head pounded and sweat poured down your back, followed by five circuits of free movement, which wasn't free since you had to keep circling the building. Half an hour of mandatory exercise. A couple of years there'd been kids on crutches and once a boy in a wheel-chair—even they only got to go a little slower. Ware sighed and started for the door.

"This place should have a real playground," he complained as he passed the director. He was a little shocked he'd said it out loud, but she seemed too tired to take offense.

"This place should have a lot of things," she agreed with a shrug. "Tell it to my budget."



Outside, Ware positioned himself far enough apart from the others that he could study the situation, but close enough that an adult would assume he was enjoying Meaningful Social Interaction.

The tall-necked boy slouched out with the Tens. He scanned the scene, and when his gaze found Ware, he wormed his way over. "I'm Ben. I haven't seen you before. You new here, too?" he asked with an eagerness that reminded Ware of himself his first weeks here. He winced with the recognition.

"No," he answered. "I'm old here."

"Tens behind Elevens, single file," Kyle—this year's counselor—called, and the tall-necked boy drifted back.

Watching him go, Ware realized that he'd described

it exactly—he felt *old* here at the Rec. Until this very moment, he hadn't even known that old was a feeling, had thought it was just a wrinkled, faded way of appearing. But old was a feeling all right. Worn out.

He began to shuffle with the Elevens toward the giant oak at the corner of the property that marked the start of the circuits.

"Trek one, walk!"

Nothing had changed outside, either.

Over the side fence, he saw the pink bell tower of the Glory Alliance Church. Tuesdays, the odor of lasagna wafting out from their kitchen made Rec smell a lot better than usual. Friday afternoons, the air rang with choir practice. Ware liked to imagine that the thunderous hallelujah-ing was the soundtrack to a victory-against-all-odds movie, one that starred him surviving another week.

The Elevens turned the corner into the back parking lot. There, the Grotto Bar's neon sign loomed over the fence, promising IC OLD BEER in blue letters beside a pink flamingo endlessly dipping its beak into a golden mug. Ware had tasted beer, and he couldn't fathom why a human being, let alone a flamingo, would drink it, but

he liked that the bar was there, too. On rainy days, colorful streaks rivered down the windows in the Art Hut from that neon sign. You see that? Wow.

He stopped, squinting his eyes at the sign, trying to re-create the rain slide of electric colors, until the Tens passed him and he had to run to catch the end of the line.

Rec-Trek's third leg was alongside the city library. It would be to nice spend the day under those cool, dark ceilings, poring over book after book in the quiet. Medieval history had a whole shelf in there.

And then the line of kids, a dozen heads drooping in the heat already, trudged past the front of the community center, heading for the old oak again.

"Trek two, march!" Kyle yelled, like a warden to his prisoners.

The kids around Ware dutifully lifted their knees and surged forward.

But Ware stopped.

Because he was last in line, no one would notice if he slipped behind that tree, skipped a few circuits.

Ware's old obedient self argued with his new reckless self for a few seconds. Then he darted.

Wedged between the massive trunk and the fence,

watching the last of the Tens disappear around the corner, he felt giddy, electrified.

He gripped the limb above his head and swung himself up. Belly to the broad limb, he stretched his arms, his legs. Branching. He imagined sap rushing through his veins, fresh leaves unfurling from his fingers and toes.

He didn't feel old anymore.

Too soon, though, he heard the thud of footsteps coming back around the building. He shimmied out farther into the green, way over the fence now, and closed his eyes in ostrich-logic until they passed.

Then he looked out. And nearly fell from the tree. Someone had laid siege to the church.



Their tops looked like crenellated parapets—he'd learned the term researching for his castle report; it meant notched like a jawbone missing teeth.

Ware dropped from the branch and flew across the overgrown lawn to the front steps.

One of the massive wooden doors had been smashed to splinters, the other lay canted out like a drawbridge half raised. Above his head, an iron pole jutted from the wall. Shards of glass below told Ware that the pole had held a light, but now it cast a pointed shadow down toward the doorway, as if ordering him inside.

Before he obeyed, Ware climbed the front steps and studied the shadow. Castle designers incorporated sundials on south-facing walls like this, public timepieces for the villagers.

He calculated. His mother had left at eight forty-five, so it was about nine now. He had nothing to draw with, but he'd skinned his knee dropping from the tree. Carefully, dipping up blood with his finger, he painted an *I* and an *X* at the tip of the shadow.

Then he scrambled over heaps of wreckage to the bell tower. In the light streaming down from the gaping top, where the spire used to be, a steel stairway winked all the way up like a promise.

Before he could climb, he heard the clink of metal hitting something gritty.

He ducked and peered around.

Through the back doorway, he saw a scrawny girl squatting in the backyard of the church beside a squashed slide. Flat ribbons of yellow hair splayed out under a saggy straw hat. She raised a trowel and stabbed the ground.

In his report, he'd learned the value of observing intruders from above before they saw you. Battles were won and lost in the watchtower, he'd written, and Mrs. Sprague had stuck a smiling light-bulb sticker beside the sentence.

He edged back into the tower and reached for the railing to climb up. As he grasped it, a couple of uprights broke off and clanged down the steps.

He froze.

"Hey!"

Ware poked his head out.

The girl stood in the center of the parking area, her hands on her hips. Mirrored sunglasses flashed silver above cheeks smudged with dirt. "What are you doing here?"

Ware clambered over the rubble to the doorway. He put his hands on his hips, too. "Nothing."

"Well, this place is mine. You have to do nothing somewhere else."

"So . . ." Ware liked the word so. So bought you some time in situations like these. "So . . . you don't own this place. It's a church."

"Nuh-uh. Used to be. But now . . ." She swept her arm back over where she'd come from. "My garden."

And Ware noticed what he hadn't before: Dozens of big, squat tin cans with peeling labels, lined up among the smashed playground equipment. "A tin-can garden?"

The girl tipped her head toward the cans.

Ware walked down the steps to the parking area. He held himself tall as he passed the girl, and was relieved to see he had a couple of inches on her. Which was ridiculous—they weren't going to fight.

He crouched to study the cans. All were labeled *ChipNutz*. A knee-high plant sprouted out of each. The plants looked feathery and brave at the same time. Ware wanted to brush his fingers over their tips, but he didn't. He stood up. Beyond the cans were two rows of the same plants in the ground, chest high and sturdy.

"My garden," the girl called behind him. "See. This place is mine now."

It was the unfair way she claimed ownership that set Ware off. It made him want to claim something of his own. "Okay," he called over his shoulder. When he'd reached the foundation, he climbed the back steps and spread his arms over the ruins. "I'll take this."

The girl followed him to the steps. "A wrecked bornagain church? Who would want that?"

"If that smashed playground is your garden, then this wrecked church is my castle." His new recklessness scared him, but he kind of liked it, too.

"Trek seven!" Kyle's voice floated over the fence.

Ware startled. He didn't have much time left.

The girl smirked. "Oh, yeah. It's a castle all right. For sinners."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he called over his shoulder, and scrambled back up onto the ruins.



"Oh, I know what I'm talking about."

Unbelievable. The girl had followed him. She drew right up to him, sharp chin out, and grabbed his hand.

Ware was so stunned by the hand-grabbing that he let her pull him to the middle of the wreckage.

There, a big container clad in fake stones stood almost as tall as he was and twice as long. Ware wanted to climb those fake stones to look inside, but the girl was still holding his hand.

He didn't want her to be holding his hand, of course, but somehow he didn't feel he should take it back, either.

As a compromise, he rose on his toes to peer over the

top. The tub was full of wreckage, but through it, he saw that the interior was coated in glassy turquoise.

The girl dropped his hand and smacked the side of the vessel. "This here is a baptistery—a sinners' tub. People line up, begging please, oh please, could the preacher dunk them because they are suffering so from how bad they've been. Then the preacher dunks them, clothes and all, lifts them back up, and woo-hoo, they're born again, are all shiny and new, like pennies in Coke."

"Huh," Ware said. His hand was still warm from where she'd held it. It felt a little as if it might be glowing. "A magic tub."

"No. No magic tub. 'Cause the very next week, they're slinking into the Grotto, drinking the rent money, hitting their kids—same old stuff they used to do before they got dunked."

Ware sneaked a peek at his hand. It wasn't glowing, but it felt buzzy, as if it might be glowing inside. He put it into his pocket to preserve the feeling. "How do you know all this, anyway?"

"My aunt went here every Sunday till they gave up."
"Gave up?"

"Ran out of money. Quit paying, back in January. And the bank kicked them out."

"That's what happened? Why'd they knock it down?"

"Walter says so nobody could camp here, do drugs and stuff."

"Who's Walter?"

The girl hitched a shoulder toward the Grotto Bar. "Bartender."

"You know a bartender?" Ware gasped, before he could stop himself.

The girl grabbed her head and groaned.

Mortified, Ware changed the subject. "Wow. So, there must be a lot of great stuff in all this mess."

"Nuh-uh. The church people came before the wrecking crew. They took everything good."

"How do you know?"

"I watched. They took the cross out first, laid it down on a pickup truck. You notice a thing like that."

"Trek ten!"

Ware's head snapped up. He'd missed three more circuits.

The girl followed his gaze and then nodded. "You

have to go." She sounded pleased.

"I'm going." As he passed her, the oddest thing happened.

In her mirrored glasses, Ware saw himself reflected. Looking back was the most pathetic kid in the world. You know a bartender? Unbelievable.



His mom's car and his dad's truck were parked in the driveway.

Good. He would tell them both at once, get it over with. Chin up, chest out, advance boldly. "I tried it. It was terrible. I'm not going back," he practiced out loud on the front step.

A lizard jumped onto the last sun-warmed patch of cement beside him and began pumping its jerky little push-ups as if cheering his proclamation. Ware didn't particularly like lizards, with their suction-cup feet, but you had to admire them, thermodynamically at least. A lizard craved the sun, but it didn't need it. It ran just fine on hot or cold blood.

"I mean it. I'm not going back," he repeated for the lizard. He unlocked the door.

A hushed murmuring leaked down the hall from his parents' closed bedroom door.

Closed-door was their parenting style. He hadn't minded when he was little, but now, more and more, he wished his parents would just straight-out tell him whatever was going on.

He walked down the hall and raised his knuckles to knock. Looking at his fist, he remembered: the gardengirl had held his hand.

No, that wasn't accurate. She'd only *taken* his hand, not *held* it, and she'd seemed pretty mad at him the whole time. If he'd been wearing a leash around his neck, she'd probably have dragged him over by that.

He turned his attention back to the door.

And heard: ". . . one kid. And he turns out so antisocial. He offered to pay not to go!"

Ware dropped his hand. He leaned in.

"... now, with my mother sick. Why can't we have a normal kid?"

Ware reared back. His face flamed, but the thing in

his chest that felt like his soul shrank down cold, like the heart of a lizard deprived of its sun. He edged down the hall. In the kitchen, he sat at the counter and opened a game on the computer. The way a normal kid would do.

Finally, his parents emerged.

"What happened to your knee?" his father asked, his brows tented in worry.

"Nothing—it's fine." Ware stood. He cleared his throat.

"Was that a cough?" his father asked.

"No. Now, Rec."

His mother opened a drawer and started rooting around. She retrieved a lozenge, extra-strength honey lemon, and began to unwrap it.

"I'm eleven and a half, Mom." Ware groaned and pushed away the lozenge. He cleared his throat again. "So, Rec. I tried it. It was . . . "

His mother bit her bottom lip.

The sight of her anxiety hurt so much, he had to look away. "It was . . ."

He heard his mother gulp. The gulp undid him.

The terrible weight of it. The awful responsibility.

"It was . . . all right," he said, his voice quavering only slightly. He looked up.

"See?" His mother sighed, her face relaxing.

His father smiled. "You just needed to give it a chance."

And the thing in his chest uncurled just a little bit.



ext day, Ware waved to his mother from the dropoff space and took a couple of normal-kid steps toward the door. When she'd driven off, he stopped. Ms. Sanchez had said he could come in whenever he wanted, and he didn't want to just yet.

He walked casually over to the oak, waited until no one was around, then tucked his backpack into the crotch of a branch and swung himself up. Just to see.

The girl sat cross-legged in the shade of three queen palms, surrounded by ChipNutz cans. It looked as if she was telling her plants a story. The palms looked like skinny old ladies in green hats, leaning down to hear the story, too, as if it was a good one.

Ware glanced over toward the church. At the top of

the baptistery, a slice of turquoise flashed like a greeting.

Lying in bed, trying to forget what he'd overheard his mother say, he'd thought about that do-over tub a lot. He could really use a brand-new-self fresh start like that.

He dropped to the ground, strode over to the girl, stood in front of her. "How does it work? Getting born again?"

"I told you. Dunking." She stabbed her trowel down next to his sneaker, a warning.

Ware took a step back. "I mean . . . the people. They weren't trying to turn into babies again, so how is it supposed to work for them?"

The girl blew her bangs out of her eyes. "They get reborn on the inside, not the outside."

For the second time in as many days, Ware remembered the laughing counselor. No, I mean inside the group. You're outside.

He shook it off. The outside was part of the inside.

"Right. Is everything changed, or just the bad stuff?" "Just the bad."

"And people liked them better afterward, right?"

"Of course," the girl said. But she didn't sound quite as sure.

"Is the tub magic, or the water?"

"The water. Except it wasn't, remember? I told you it didn't work. People went right back to their old selves."

"Everybody? Nobody stayed shiny and new?"

The girl balanced her trowel on one sharp knee. She sat perfectly still except that her toes stretched in her pink flip-flops, as if they were reaching for the answer to his question. "I don't know," she admitted. "I guess I only know about one person that didn't stay born again."

"So it could work," Ware pressed. "It must work for some people, or else it wouldn't be a thing."

"Maybe." She picked up her trowel.

"Wait. The magic holy water. Was it holy to begin with, or did it get holy by being in the tub?"

"It has a regular faucet. I guess the preacher did something to it."

"What? What did they do?"

The girl blew her lips out so hard her bangs flew straight up. "Who cares? It's over! Whatever it was got packed up and left. Look around," she ordered. "There's no holy here. No magic."

Ware looked. Everything, everywhere, was broken.

Then his gaze fell upon the garden. On the plants in their rusted tin cans—feathery but brave at the same

time. At the bigger plants, sturdy in their row.

The girl saw where he was looking. "Nuh-uh. They're better than magic. You can count on them." She lifted her sunglasses and squinted at him. "Why are you so interested, anyway? I thought you said this was a castle. In case you didn't know it, castles don't have baptisteries."

"So... right. I know." Ware drew back. He suddenly felt protective about his do-over wish. As if it was feathery and brave at the same time. "But, um, ha-ha, they have moats," he joked. He added a shrug to show that he didn't really care, anyway.

"Well, far as I know, moats go *outside* a castle, not *inside*," she muttered.

And for the third time, Ware thought of that laughing counselor. He left the girl grumbling beside her plants, climbed the foundation, and headed to the do-over tub.



are climbed the steps he'd found at the back of the baptistery and sat on the rim. He imagined the tub full of water, imagined falling into it and then stepping out a less disappointing son whose report cards said, Ware is extremely social! And also, very normal!

What would a change like that feel like? Would it hurt to feel your old self being kicked out? What if his old self put up a fight, or refused to budge?

At a smack on the side of the tub, he opened his eyes.

The girl again. Unbelievable. She swept off her shades and glared up.

Ware was reminded of his report. Castle battlements were slotted with narrow openings called arrow slits, through which guards could shoot approaching enemies without being targets themselves. Ware got the impression that the girl's blue eyes functioned pretty much the same way.

She narrowed her arrow-slit eyes, but she was wearing a sly half smile. "How would you fill this thing?"

He gestured to the faucet.

"Nuh-uh. The city shut it off. So how would you get the water here?"

Ware looked over at the Rec Center and shuddered. Maybe the library would lend him some. "Oh, buckets," he tried in a casual tone. He tossed out a window screen.

"Nope. Hose, that's how. You got one?"

"Do I . . . ?"

"I got a hose. Fifty feet." She waved her sunglasses back toward the Grotto Bar.

"You live in a bar?"

"Above it. Fifty feet's not enough. It just reaches to the fence. You got a hose or not?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe? Well, you bring me enough hose to reach my garden and this tub, maybe I won't throw you out of here." She put on her glasses and settled them firmly on her nose. "Maybe you won't throw me . . . ?" Ware carefully straightened up to standing on the baptistery's rim. Height was an advantage in medieval warfare. "Who do you think you are, anyway?" his reckless self challenged.

The girl pursed her lips and tapped them with a grubby finger, pretending to think hard about whether to divulge this extremely important information. Then she shrugged. "Jolene."

The baptistery's rim was narrower than he'd realized. He came down a couple of steps. "Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"Okay, maybe I'll bring a hose tomorrow."

He walked past her and scooped up his backpack.

The girl followed him and jumped off the woodendoor drawbridge when he did. "Hey," she yelled as he took off for the big oak. "What's your name?"

Ware called it back to her and kept walking.

"Where? Here. What's your name here?"

Ware was used to this. On their first date, his parents had discovered they each had a great-great-great grandfather who'd fought at the Battle of Ware Bottom Church in the Civil War—on opposite sides. It hurt his head to think about his ancestors shooting at each other, having

no idea they'd share a great-great-great-great grandson—what if one of them had been a better aim?—but mostly he was glad his parents hadn't decided to commemorate the coincidence by naming their kid Bottom.

He took a few steps back. "Not *where*," he explained, whooshing the *h*. "Ware. With an A."

"Okay, Ware. Bring that hose. It doesn't mean you can have the church, though. I haven't decided." She pulled her hat out of a pocket and tugged it on.

Ware felt his jaw drop at the unfairness. He really hated unfairness. He wanted to say something stinging back at her, but before she'd tugged her hat down, her mirror glasses had pulled that trick again. And there he was, still the most pathetic kid in the world. He hadn't even thought about how he'd fill that do-over tub.

He started toward the Rec again, head down. "Wait," he heard. He waited.

"What's 'Ix'?"

He turned.

The girl was pointing up to the wall by the doorway. "Ix," she repeated. "What's it mean?"

"Not Ix. Nine. In Roman numerals."

"Why?"

He walked back. "They used Roman numerals back in the Middle Ages. And they put sundials on castle walls. See how the shadow is pointing toward the numerals? I made them at nine o'clock yesterday."

"Oh. So, here"—she tapped the wall—"this is ten o'clock?"

"Around there. But I'd have to be here at ten to make sure."

She cocked her head at the numerals. "Is that *blood*?" Ware nodded miserably.

"Huh," she said, frowning. She seemed to be trying hard to decide something—for real this time.

Ware took the opportunity to escape. He was nearly to the fence when she ran over to him.

"The parking lot is the boundary. Between my territory and yours. No crossing it. And you can't tell anyone about this place."

"What?"

"I decided. You can have the church."



The next morning after his mother drove away, Ware jumped up into the oak and concealed himself in a cloud of leaves, deep as a secret, because the first objective of medieval reconnaissance was to gather information about the enemy.

And in spite of the hand taking with the buzzy feeling, in spite of allowing him the church, that's what the garden girl was. She'd made that clear. What she didn't know was that Ware was an expert in castle defense. He'd gotten an A on his report.

The enemy was digging in the shade of the three queen palms. The palms looked like guards today, curving over Jolene protectively.

Ware noted how carefully she placed her foot on the

spade before jumping on it, probably so it wouldn't cut through her flip-flops. The enemy's inadequate footgear was a clear weakness.

Her trowel jutted out of a back pocket. Obviously gardening was a strength, but strengths, he reminded himself, could be useful as diversionary tactics.

He released his backpack, heavy with a hose he'd found in his shed, and dropped down after it.

Jolene turned at the thud. "The boundary," she yelled, waving a finger at the parking area.

Ware hoisted the hose like a white flag.

Jolene nodded permission and he crossed, dropped it in front of her. "What are you doing?"

She joggled her free hand through the air, as though hunting for the words to adequately express how deranged his question was.

"I mean, I see what you're doing. But why?"

Jolene kicked at a pile of dirt. "It's basically rock dust. I have to dig out a trench and fill it with good soil before I can put in my plants."

Ware took a step closer. "I mean, why are you doing all this work? What's so important about these plants?"

Jolene jumped on her shovel again, this time not so

carefully. Her hair flopped down like a curtain, but not before Ware had seen her face. She looked frightened.

His hand flew to his chest, the way it always did. The sight of people being frightened literally stole his breath, like a hundred-arrow volley to the lungs, thunk-thunk-thunk.

Mikayla was always stunned at how deeply Ware sensed other people's pain. "It's like your superpower," she said, "feeling what other people are feeling."

"Right. Captain Empathy," Ware had joked back. But he hadn't really thought it was funny. Superpowers weren't supposed to hurt.

Now he wanted to tell Jolene not to be afraid. But nowhere in his research for his report had he learned that a good castle defense was to tell the enemy not to be afraid.

He backed away and climbed onto the foundation to accomplish the second objective of reconnaissance: location assessment. Location assessment required height, so he picked his way over to the tower. Towers were excellent for getting the whole picture of a place.

The stairway, he noted as he climbed, spiraled the wrong way, at least for real medieval castles. Real castle

stairways wound up counter-clockwise so that the castle defenders, streaming down from the top, would have their right arms free to do battle with the ascending attackers, who would have their sword arms to the wall.

But Ware was left-handed. The clockwise spiral felt like a sign. This place was meant for him.

Which was crazy, of course.

From the top of the tower—which wasn't exactly towering, maybe twenty feet high—he did get the whole picture of the place.

The lot was almost as big as a football field, and protected from view all the way around, the way castles were protected by their outer curtain walls. The side boundaries—east and west—were six-foot board fences, while the north boundary in the back had even taller evergreen hedges. All of First Street was marked Glory Alliance Parking Only! and the bank had erected a tall chain-link fence covered in orange mesh and warning signs across the front lawn. The same construction fencing had gone up across the driveway in the back that led to the small parking area. Even the nosiest person pressing an eye to that fencing would have a hard time seeing what went on in the lot.

Ware looked down at Jolene. She was dabbing her trowel over each plant down the row, like a fairy god-mother bestowing blessings with her wand. And then he realized: She wasn't blessing her plants, she was counting them. As if they could have grown legs and escaped during the night.

When she picked up the hose and began to water them, it dawned on him: If he wanted to try out that do-over tub—and he did, although he'd have to keep it secret from her, of course—he had the upper hand now, thanks to that hose. She'd have to tell him whatever she knew about the holy water deal.

He hurried down the tower stairs, jumped off the back of the foundation. Chin up, chest out, he advanced boldly into her territory.



This good soil you need," Ware said, employing Jolene's strength as a diversionary tactic before sneaking into the holy water issue. "Where are you going to get it?"

Jolene nodded approvingly at the question. She twisted the hose nozzle off and waved toward three waist-high heaps he hadn't noticed before.

The piles were layered with food in various stages of rot. Banana peels, orange and watermelon rinds, some greenish stuff that must have once been vegetables. "Garbage?"

"It was," she agreed. "It's turning into compost."

Ware hitched his eyebrows into a look that he hoped conveyed sufficient wonder. "Compost. Great. Now, what did the preacher do to make the water holy?" She tipped her head to the fence behind the piles. "I go to the Greek Market next door and get the fruits and vegetables too old to sell. I shovel some dirt over them and the worms do the rest. Now, the Chinese were the first to compost, back in 2000 BC, and . . . "

Ware started to zone out, but when the sun pulled out of the queen palm fronds and hit her mirror glasses, it jolted him.

At his grandmother's place, Ware had gotten up at dawn to have the pool to himself. That early, the water would flash blindingly, like those glasses. No matter how hard he'd tried to peer down into it, he'd only seen his own face reflected back. Sometimes, yourself was exactly what you didn't want to see.

"Oh," he said, a little unnerved for a moment. "So . . . the preacher. Was it a spell?"

"Look. I only snuck in once. I heard some words that sounded important." Jolene pushed her hat up and studied his head for a thoughtful moment. "You look like you're rusting."

Ware rubbed his hair. He knew it was unusual—his mom's tight waves, his dad's dark copper color. But the summer sun bleached it bronze, and three weeks of

chlorine at Sunset Palms hadn't helped. "I know," he said. "But what about—"

Jolene flapped her trowel at him dismissively. "No offense. My freckles look greenish in the sun. Now, there are three piles because they're in different stages—"

They both turned at the shriek of a whistle.

The Rec kids were outside. They began to cheer.

"Rec-re-ation
On va-cation
We're fun-nation

Go, Rec, GO!"

Several times a day the campers were gathered in a circle to link arms for something called Rec Spirit. Ware hadn't liked the shouting, and he'd never understood the cheer.

At home after his first day, he'd asked his mother what recreation meant.

"Play. You know, things you do for fun. Not work."

None of those definitions applied to the day he'd just had. "How about funnation? What does that mean?"

"It's not a word," she'd said. "You must have heard it wrong."

He'd listened carefully the next day, and when he heard the word again, he'd unhooked an elbow and raised his hand. "Is it Fun Nation? Or fun-ation?" The counselor had just stared at him. "It's funnation," she'd said unhelpfully. "So it rhymes."

From then, he'd shouted the cheer along with everyone else, but it always left him feeling vaguely embarrassed.

"Hey, wake up." Jolene waggled her fingers toward the Rec. "You have to go. Bye."

"Not yet." Ware heard the words as if it had come from someone else. "First, I have something important to do."



Ware shoved the big wooden door over the side until it thudded to the ground. If he was going to have a castle, its drawbridge was going to welcome him.

Then, trip after trip, he hauled junk out of the baptistery and into the dumpsters at the back of the property. At the bottom, he discovered a problem: a massive brass bell. The wrecking ball must have knocked it out of the tower.

He needed some rope to haul out that bell. Somewhere in this mess there must be some rope.

He began the search in what used to be the kitchen. A long butcher-block table stood stolidly bearing its load of rubble, but most everything else had been crushed. He yanked open the few cupboards that were still accessible.

Plastic and paper supplies; burned pans and cracked dishes; a bottle of grape juice, furred with mold. Jolene was right: all the good stuff had been scooped.

Next to the kitchen had been a dining hall. It had probably held a flock of tables and chairs, but now only the collapsed roof furnished the space. At the far end, though, stood three closets, barely touched.

Ware clambered over the wreckage and cleared enough space to open the doors. The first was a janitor's closet—cleaning supplies, mops, buckets, and brooms.

The shelves of the next closet were empty except for some red-and-white-checkered vinyl tablecloths and a wooden box full of candle stubs with a lighter on top. More junk, no rope.

The last closet was full of art supplies—cases of glue, cartons of markers and crayons, jars of glitter and finger paint, a pile of Noah's ark coloring books.

He flipped through the top one and a memory surfaced.

The first summer, after a trip to the zoo, the Rec kids had been marched into the Art Hut to draw an animal they'd seen.

"What's this?" the counselor had asked, holding up

Ware's drawing—dramatic blazes of black and orange spiraling into a joyful scribble of green.

"The tiger." Ware had been so proud, he'd raised his voice so all the kids could hear—this would make up for the inside/outside thing. "It's escaping. Remember, its face was sad?"

"Well, that's okay," the counselor had said, "not everyone can be an artist." She'd moved away, pinning up the drawings the other kids had done by tracing lions and elephants and bears. Ware had crumpled his drawing and stuffed it in the trash.

He shook off the memory. He was about to leave when he spied a fresh pack of Play-Doh at the back.

He split the cellophane and peeled up the lids. The weird chemical vanilla smell made his fingers ache to plunge into the smooth mounds, but he thought about Sad Girl and snapped the lids back on. Clay was only perfect once.

The room at the corner must have been an office. Wooden bookshelves collapsed against the broken walls, their shelves bare except for a bag of black plastic letters and numbers and a cardboard box.

The box was damp and smelled defeated, like mold.

He opened the lid and lifted out a framed photograph: a brown-toned picture of the church, its roof only a skeleton of beams, surrounded by men raising hammers and saws. The year 1951 was written in faded ink on the back.

He flipped through other pictures. Weddings and funerals; young men in soldiers' uniforms; beaming women holding pies in gloved hands; children in bathrobes adoring baby dolls in mangers.

The pictures reminded Ware of the tapestries that royal ladies wove for their castles. Those tapestries kept out the winter drafts, but their true purpose was much more important. People passing by learned the stories of the castle from the panels hanging outside—births and deaths, battles and unions, acts of heroism or mystic encounters.

These pictures weren't so different from those tapestries, he realized. They weren't different at all.

He held up another. In it, a stained-glass window was being installed in the west wall.

He carried the photo to the spot and tossed away junk until he found the remains: a thousand shards of colored glass glittering through the debris. He picked some out and cradled them in his palm—ruby, sapphire, emerald, and amber. They shone like doomed jewels.

He propped up the photograph to tell its story—Once, a window glowed here—and made his way back.

He re-covered the box and pushed it deeper under the shelf so rain wouldn't ruin it. A folder that had been underneath fell to the floor.

Ware picked it up. The question on its cover—ARE YOU LEADING A PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE?—electrified him as if a switch had been thrown.

What was a purpose-driven life? What purpose could drive his? These seemed like exactly the kinds of things a person trying to get himself reborn should ask.

He flipped open the cover in tremendous excitement.

The folder was empty.

Ware slumped against the bookcase.

Are you leading a purpose-driven life?

What a question.



are found his parents splayed across the living room couch as if they'd been blown there by cannon, too exhausted to even look shocked about it. The pregame was on with no sound—his dad believed announcers ruined baseball—and a pizza box sat on the coffee table.

His mother shook her head as if to clear it. "Hey, there. You have a good day?"

Guilt over ditching Rec coated Ware like grime. He'd meant to go. He'd actually made it to the door and reached for the bar handle. But inside, they were shouting again. His soul had retreated and his arm had fallen back to his side. Whatever funnation was, he wasn't. He'd placed the Play-Doh on the step and bolted back to the lot.

Jolene had vanished, so Ware climbed the tower and ate his lunch surveying his kingdom.

His kingdom, he'd seen from there, was a mess.

So he'd come down, gotten a push broom, and started clearing the floor around the baptistery. When a blister on his palm made that too painful, he located a window screen and some glue and set them on the kitchen work table. He gathered all the broken pieces of stained glass big enough to salvage and began sticking them to the screen—an explosion of smashed gems, come to life again.

He'd had a great day.

Now he considered the possible answers to his mother's question. His parents had been working double shifts for nearly a month. They might be too tired to care if he admitted he hadn't gone to Rec. "I had a *really* good day," he began cautiously.

Before he could go on, his mother sighed with dramatic relief. "Oh, thank goodness. We're so glad you're making it work."

Ware winced. "Dad . . . "

"We both appreciate it, son." He pointed at the TV screen, where players were running around the bases. "Think of it like that. A sacrifice fly. Not great for the

player, but best for the team. There's no 'I' in team, you know."

"Or think of it as your job this summer," his mother chimed in. "To help us buy this house."

"My job is going to Rec?"

"No, your job is making sure we don't worry about you. And don't forget, we owe you something nice at the end. Do you know what you want?"

Ware shook his head. He just wanted summer to be over.

"Now, what is it you did today that was so much fun?"

"So . . ." He turned to the television. "Just, you know, normal stuff." He pushed the word *normal* a little extra, then risked a glance to see how it had gone over.

His mother smiled and pushed the pizza box toward him along with a stack of napkins.

Ware sat on the rug and took a slice, although he'd just lost his appetite.

Just then, his mother's phone rang. "Your grand-mother's hospital," she announced. She left to take the call in the bedroom, closed-door style.

When she came back, she was trailing a suitcase.

"Eight tomorrow morning for the surgery. I'll go down tonight, after work. I'll stay until she can be moved."

Ware put down his slice. "Is she scared?"

"What? No." His mother looked puzzled. "I mean, maybe. I don't know."

"Tell her I'll come see her. Can I?"

"It's 'may,' not 'can.' And yes. She'll be at a rehab place nearby." She shouldered her pocketbook. "I almost forgot. Uncle Cy is coming. He'll stay with us a few days."

"Oh, good." Ware's uncle wasn't like other grownups. When Uncle Cy asked you a question, he actually listened to the answer. But he worked for a news organization, filming documentaries all over the world, and the few times he came to the States, it was usually to Los Angeles or New York.

His mom studied him, hand on a hip. "I don't know what it is, but you remind me of him at your age." She grabbed her suitcase, kissed the top of his head, and pointed to the kitchen. "I left you a schedule."

Ware sighed. Of course she did.



The schedule was three pages long.

Ware sighed again. Beside him, his father sighed, too. His father's sigh was admiring and Ware's was despairing, but both were heartfelt.

"She needed to tell me when to put on sunscreen?"

His father leaned in for a closer look. "Every four hours," he confirmed. "And look. She's labeled the tubes. One for each week."

None of it surprised Ware. His mother was a walking daily planner. She had an infallible internal clock and a memory that archived every appointment time for eternity.

Once, while shopping, she'd passed a big digital

display that read 2:55. "Oh," she said wistfully, "two fifty-five! First Monday of every month, I'd leave the office at two fifty-five. Pick you up from school at seven past three, have you at your orthodontist at three twenty-five. We'd sit in the car for exactly four minutes while you complained about having braces and then we'd walk in right on time. Remember?"

His braces had come off six months ago. He remembered the fruity cleaning-supplies smell of the office, the way the orthodontist's hairs had sprouted out of his nose, and how sharply the braces bit each time they were tightened. But no, he did not remember the time.

"Think of it this way," his father interrupted Ware's thoughts. "It's fourth down, fourth quarter, a minute to go and we're behind. The quarterback, your mother, calls for a *Red Right Thirty Pull Trap*. The touchdown depends on every player being exactly where he's supposed to be, doing exactly what he's supposed to do exactly when he's supposed to do it. You get it?"

Ware nodded vigorously, as if he *totally* got it. He stared hard at the schedule, pretending to ponder the advice deeply.

Moments like this, he always felt lonely, as if sports were a planet his father lived on, a planet he could never travel to.

Worse, Ware knew his dad felt lonely at these times, too. Sometimes he would look at his son with a baffled expression, the kind of expression someone getting ready to dig into a big steak might wear when he realized there were only a couple of cotton balls next to the plate instead of a knife and a fork. What am I supposed to do with this? the expression asked.

Ware didn't want to see that expression right now, so he nodded some more.

Beside him, Ware's dad stretched out his arm. He eyed his watch, then took it off.

"What are you doing?" Ware asked, shocked. Unlike his mother, his father didn't have an infallible internal clock, and he worried about forgetting some important appointment, such as watching a ball game. To prevent this tragedy, he wore a wristwatch able to maintain several alarms at once.

His father clasped the watch around Ware's wrist.

"But you need this, Dad."

"Not as much as you do," he said with another deep sigh. Then he headed back to the couch.

Ware put the schedule back on the fridge next to the Rec brochure. The only appointment he didn't want to miss was with the three forty-five bus home. He set the watch for three thirty, then chose a birdcall for the alarm.

Birds symbolized freedom. Which he would never have.



seventeen

Ware smiled at the sight of his hose curled beside Jolene like a faithful dog. Today, he'd haul out the bell with the rope he'd found in his shed, then fill the baptistery and get himself born again. A penny in Coke.

He dropped from the branch and ran over to Jolene.

"Nuh-uh. Boundaries."

"We don't need boundaries," Ware said. He had thought about this all night. People defending castles needed to work together. That's why they held games and festivals—to practice their cooperation, enhance their loyalty. "The lot is ours, together. We're on the same team."

Jolene sat back on her heels, a wary look on her face.

"Think of it like football," he tried. "A pull trap.

Red. For the touchdown."

Jolene just stared.

"Never mind." He sighed. He pointed to the hose. "It's my turn."

"Your turn?"

"With the hose. Remember?"

Jolene dropped her trowel and trekked over to the Grotto Bar—side fence. Her left flip-flop flashed the dull silver of duct tape with every step. She bent to the hose coupling. It looked as if she was disconnecting her hose from his.

She was disconnecting hers from his.

She walked back and pointed to his hose. "Okay. You can take it now."

"What do you mean? It's not going to work now. It's got no water!"

Jolene looked back to the separated ends. "Correct. No water now."

"But the deal. Remember? I bring a hose, we hook it up to yours, and we both get to use them."

Jolene tapped a grubby finger to her lip and scrunched her face. "Nuh-uh, that wasn't the deal," she said after a thoughtful moment. "The deal was: you bring me your hose, I wouldn't kick you out of here. Which I didn't." "That's not fair!" Ware really, really hated unfairness.

Jolene's jaw fell open. A happily startled expression lit her face. "Wha . . . ?" she gasped, looking around the lot. "Is this Magic Fairness Land???" Then her shoulders drooped. "Nope, darn. Still here in the real world." She picked up her trowel.

Ware felt his jaw clench again. "So, you . . . you're seriously going to cheat me?"

Jolene clapped a hand to her chest, as though deeply wounded. "Of course not. We're going to make a new deal is all. You dig me some new trench today, I'll let you use my hose."

She pointed to a spade leaning against the fence and smiled brightly.

Ware lifted his chin and thrust out his chest, as if he was not quite the most pathetic kid in the world. "Fine," he conceded boldly. "But the new deal is also this: no more boundaries."



"The Greeks were on it," Jolene said, speaking in the kind of awed tone people usually reserved for superheroes. "In 500 BC they ruled that garbage had to be buried at least a mile from the city."

Ware's palms burned and his shoulders ached. Sweat rolled in currents down his back. He gritted his teeth as the lecture dragged on.

"In Britain, everybody was croaking left and right from the Black Plague because the streets were piled with garbage and rats and all. So they invented a job where men called rakers raked the trash off the streets."

Ware had to admit that part was kind of interesting. The Black Plague hadn't killed as many people in castles as in cities, because castles had cats and dogs to keep the rats out of the grain stores. Still, he wished he could go back in time and tell those knights, *Thou shalt pick up the trash*.

"The ancient Romans used their urine for lots of things," Jolene went on. "Growing juicier pomegranates, whitening their teeth, cleaning their clothes."

"Castle defenders threw pots of it at invaders trying to climb over the walls," Ware countered. "It was a weapon. Urine!"

Jolene nodded approvingly. "Repurposing." Then she moved on to papayas. "Two hundred thirty-six seeds I got out of that single rotten papaya she gave me," she marveled.

Ware figured he should act as if he was listening until he got his hands on the hose, so he asked, "Who?"

"Mrs. Stavros. She owns the Greek Market. I told you: she gives me stuff for my compost." She raised a palm to the seedlings. "I only have forty-seven cans, so that's all the seeds I could plant this time. I could have had two hundred thirty-six plants right now if I'd had enough cans."

"Too bad," Ware said, secretly relieved there'd been only forty-seven. He wiped at the sweat pouring down his face. "You sure must love papayas." "Oh, I love them, all right. A papaya will give you fruit in just ten months. These first ones will start ripening in October. Like, fifty on a plant! A hundred plants could give you five thousand fruits. If each of those had two hundred thirty-six seeds . . . Anyway, the point is, we need to do a lot more digging."

Jolene stabbed her shovel into the hard dirt and threw a load over her shoulder.

A clod hit Ware in the ear and clumped onto his sweaty neck. He brushed it off and was weighing the odds Jolene would let him wash up with her hose when he heard a rustling.

He leaned away from Jolene's furious digging and listened.

Someone was inside the lot.



An older girl, fourteen at least, emerged from the bushes at the corner of the foundation and marched down the handicapped ramp. Her shorts were knife crisp and so white they hurt Ware's eyes.

At the bottom, the girl scanned the parking area and frowned. She began taking careful leaping steps along its curb, like a gymnast on a beam. She held her arms out, pointer fingers extended as if warning the world not to mess with her balance. A neat ponytail flicked up behind her at each leap. Ware liked the look of that ponytail, slick and black and acting all surprised.

Without taking his eyes off the intruder, he tapped Jolene's back.

"What-"

"Shhh."

Jolene straightened. For a moment, she watched with her mouth agape, as if she couldn't believe what her eyes were telling her. "Hey!" she yelled.

The girl brushed a cool glance over them, then began leaping again. She stopped at the corner, pulled out a phone, and took a picture of the asphalt. Then she began pacing the curb with the same gymnast steps.

Jolene came to life. Her hat flew off as she charged, legs pumping like pistons, still wielding the trowel. "Hey. This is our place!"

Ware dropped his shovel. He hated fights, fights made his soul retreat to a tiny kernel, but he hurried after her. Jolene had just called the lot *their place*. *Theirs*, together. Just like that. It was a thrilling development.

Drawing up, Ware could see the girl was even older than he'd thought. Fifteen at least. He dragged his fingers through his hair, sticky with sweat, and reseated his cap.

"First of all," the girl said to Jolene, "this is *not* your place. This is parcel number 788, owned by Sun Shores Bank."

Jolene leaned in. "You work for a bank? They let a kid work for a bank? I want to talk to someone there!"

The girl laughed and shook her head. "I want to talk to someone there, too. Or whoever buys this place at auction. But it's definitely not your—"

"Auction? What auction?" Jolene was glowering over the rims of her sunglasses, but just for an instant Ware had seen it again: the look of fear on her face. The look that pierced his heart, thunk-thunk-thunk.

The girl stepped back. "Um . . . it's foreclosed? That's what happens. Anyway—"

"When?" Jolene demanded.

The girl threw her hands up. "I don't know! Forget it. I don't work for a bank, remember?" She took out her phone again, snapped another picture over Jolene's shoulder, and tapped a few keys.

Then she turned to Ware. "Look, I'm finished now. You two can get on with your . . . um, mud fight?"

Ware ducked his face into the neck of his tee and swiped, wishing he'd gotten to the hose. He heard Jolene mutter, "Don't come back."

The girl shrugged. "I won't."

Jolene headed up to her plants as if she'd won something.

Ware wasn't so sure. He caught up with the girl at

the rear of the foundation. "Wait. You said you weren't coming back, but somebody else is, right?"

"Actually, a lot of somebodies? The bank people, whoever they get to put up security lights. I'll let the Audubon Society know—"

"No! Nobody can come here!"

At his shout, Jolene shot up and came tearing back over.

"Someone's coming here?" she sputtered. "Who?"

The girl tipped her head to the sky, as if she were deciding something. "Okay, whatever," she said after a moment. "Here's the deal."



The new girl climbed the back steps, sat primly at the top, and looked down at them like a teacher waiting for her class to settle.

Jolene planted herself at the base of the steps, arms crossed.

Ware perched on the railing. He was still feeling a little dizzy. *Their* lot.

"In low light," the girl began, "wet pavement can look like water to waterfowl. Geese, ducks, cranes."

"Who's coming here?" Jolene demanded. "And by the way, they can't."

The girl arched a single dark eyebrow and began again calmly. "Wet pavement, in low light? They think it's water, try to land on it, and they break their legs."

"Even if that's true," Jolene interrupted, "what's it got to do with our lot?"

"Um, again . . . your lot?" The girl rolled her eyes.

Again, their lot.

Jolene ignored the eye roll. "So, what? You're afraid some geese are going to crash down here?"

"Not geese." The girl pointed straight up. "This is a sandhill crane flyway. Every fall, thousands of them migrate right over this place. This exact place, which now, with the church moved out, is unlit. I just measured the parking lot: about ninety feet by fifty. That's a big enough patch of pavement to be a problem. Plus, see how the driveway curves into it? Like a river. If it's wet and dark when they fly over . . ."

Ware looked back at the parking lot. He couldn't help picturing it covered with crashed birds, hurt and scared.

He groaned.

"Exactly. A sandhill crane weighs ten pounds. That's a lot of bird landing on two skinny legs." She rose and brushed off her shorts, which had remained miraculously spotless. "But not on my watch."

As she passed, Ware caught the crisp scent of apple shampoo. He wished again he'd run that hose over his face.

"What are you going to do?" Jolene asked. "Send the bird police? Set up detour signs?"

"Hilarious. Sandhill cranes have been doing this for millions of years, so neither of those would even work. Those birds are *coming*. I'm making a list of all the danger spots in the city. My father's a city councilman. I'm going to have him order the owners to light them up. I'll also bring the Audubon people here, see what they can do."

Jolene shot her palms out. "Nope!"

"Nope!" Ware dropped from the railing.

The girl looked from one to the other. "Um...yes?" She pulled her ponytail over her shoulder and twirled the end. "My father will get it done. He's already agreed."

"Well, make him unagree then," Jolene said. "No bringing those bank people. No bringing those bird people."

The girl looked them over again. "What is it with you two? What've you got going on here?"



"Tell me about your day."

Ware looked up at his father, stretched out on the couch, and considered. He really did want to tell someone about his day. He'd called his friends, but Mikayla had gone up north with a friend and Vashon was at basketball camp.

He fixed his gaze on the silent ball game and began. "That empty lot beside the community center. Apparently it's on a migration flyway. Thousands of cranes fly over. Tens of thousands."

His dad settled deeper into the couch. "Mm-hmm."

"Remember I told you the church was gone? A wrecking ball did it. They took out most of the stuff, but they left anything too heavy, or bolted down. Like,

the pews. You could sit on them if you cleared off the wreckage."

Ware paused, sure his dad would ask how he knew all this: Wasn't he in Rec? At best, he'd definitely warn him about trespassing or rusty nails.

But his dad remained quiet, his eyes closed as if waiting for more. Ware relaxed a little. It felt good to be listened to.

"They left the baptistery behind. I didn't know what it was, but another kid told me."

Ware paused again, thinking about "another kid." He could still feel the moment Jolene had taken his hand, how it had stayed warm. He couldn't remember another time someone had held his hand, although his parents must have when he was little. He leaned back and rested his head very softly against his father's knee. His dad didn't move.

"People get dunked in the water," he added, edging up to the important part. "And they get born again."

Ware waited. Again, his dad said nothing.

"I was thinking that might be good for me. This time, I could try to be more like you and Mom."

Ware held himself perfectly still. He had said it. Out

loud. Oh, no. We don't want you to change a bit! his dad might answer. Or, That would be terrific, son!

Ware didn't know which response he'd like better. Or which response would make him feel worse.

Just then, his dad's arm dropped off the couch and clocked him on the cheek. Ware panicked for a second—eyes closed, mouth slack, his father looked too much like the people rolling by on gurneys at the hospital the other night. But then he let out a shuddering snore and Ware breathed again.

He picked up his dad's arm and tucked it gently back on the cushion.

He nudged up the volume until he could hear the announcer. It wasn't much, but when his dad woke up, at least Ware could give him the play-by-play.



A fter a good five minutes of pulling with the rope, Ware finally heard the bell budge with a crunching groan. He ran back and peered over the edge.

The news was bad. The bell had busted a crater in the bottom of the baptistery.

The thing in his chest that must be his soul took the news hard. He collapsed onto a step.

The do-over tub would never hold water.

He would never be reborn.

For the rest of his life, he would be the same not-normal, outside-the-inside, antisocial disappointment of a son to his parents. A kid whose every report card would say *Ware needs to participate more in class!* when by "participate" they meant shout out answers

without taking time to consider them. Or Ware is very bright, but keeps this hidden! Or, once, Sometimes I forget Ware is in my class!

What kind of a teacher forgets about a kid just because he's quiet?

Just then, a lizard hopped onto the step beside him and blew out its scarlet neck flap. "I'm not looking for a fight," Ware assured it, hands up.

The old church was littered with lizards, baking on the hot concrete rubble. Ware didn't begrudge them the space, but they always reminded him of the day he'd heard his mother say she wished her son was normal. It would have been better if he'd seen a different animal that day. Something less common, like the luna moth he'd found out there once trembling on the screen door: pale milky green, big as his hand.

"Go away," he told the lizard beside him now.

The lizard blinked.

Ware bent for a closer look. Lizards, like cats and camels and aardvarks, he remembered, had an extra, translucent eyelid—a nictitating membrane that they could draw across their eyes vertically like drawing the curtains, like saying, No, thanks very much, I'm enjoying

some private time right now.

The lizard had some antisocial eyelids. Maybe it was the right animal to have seen after all. Maybe he *should* keep remembering what a disappointment he was.

His eyes pricked with tears and his throat stung. He pressed his head between his knees, glad no one was around.

After a minute, he heard the sound of metal scraping on the pavement below. He peeked over the rim of the baptistery.

Jolene was dragging a caveman hammer across the parking area. Leather gloves swamped her elbows and a pair of safety glasses hung from her neck. Her face wore the most purpose-driven expression Ware had ever seen.

He climbed out and stood in the back doorway. She was actually going to try it.

Yesterday, she'd driven the girl—Ashley, it turned out her name was—out of the lot by promising to get rid of the bird-bone-breaking pavement. "Presto: no pavement, no problem. So no bank people, no bird people, no lights, and no *you*!"

Ashley had snorted. But Jolene shot her a look of such smoking rage, she'd scrambled over the chain-link fence and hopped on her bike. "Whatever," she'd called before speeding off. "I'll come back next week, see if you've really done it."

Ware figured Jolene had been bluffing, because afterward, she'd refused to talk about it. She just checked the sun the way she had the day before, then hid her tools in the hedge, pulled out a black garbage bag, and left with it.

But now here she was. She drew a foot-long spike from her belt, crouched, and worked it into a crack in the pavement. Then she stood up, snapped on the glasses, hoisted the hammer, and slammed it down with a ringing smash.

Jolene looked up at him and pointed down.

Ware shook his head. Her crazy promise was her crazy promise.

She continued pointing.

He walked down the stairs and ambled over. Just to see.

A wedge of asphalt had split off.

"Haul it away."

Ware looked up toward the useless baptistery. His throat tightened again. "No. I don't care who comes. I'm done here. Sorry, Jolene." He started to walk toward the Rec. His legs felt like stone.

"Well, sorry yourself, Ware. You're still helping move this pavement."

Ware kept walking. "No, I'm not. Goodbye, Jolene." "Yeah-huh, you are. Because . . ."

There was a pause. Then he heard, "I need you." The quaver in Jolene's voice rang like an alarm.

He turned and the arrow volley struck him: thunk-thunk, all one hundred arrows landing true. He ran back, hand to his chest.

Jolene blinked back her tears, stood up straighter. "Mrs. Stavros at the Greek Market will sell whatever I grow." She sniffed. "It's a lot of bunny. Which I need."

"A lot of bunny?"

Jolene sniffed again. "Money. I said money."

"Oh. But . . . but you can't do it, Jolene. You just can't chop up a parking lot and carry it away."

"Well, I have to. Otherwise that rich girl is going to bring all those nosy people here and I'm going to lose this place." She lost her fight with the tears. They spilled down her cheeks. "I can't lose this place."

Those tears.

"Okay, okay, wait," he said. "Let me think."

He looked around, as if an answer might be floating in the air, and saw the watchtower. Watchtowers were excellent for getting the whole picture. For seeing things clearly.

"Stay here," he said. "Don't be afraid." Then he climbed.

From the top, he got the whole picture all right. He saw things clearly.

And his heart lifted. It actually lifted, just like in books, and hope flooded into the space created.

The bird-bone-breaking pavement—walkways front and sides, and the back parking lot—circled the church like a moat.

Like a moat.



Ware pointed to the inner corner of the parking area, where a couple of inches of water had pooled. "That's from last night's rain. The drain is clogged with building junk. We'll clog up the other drains, too."

"What about, you know, gravity?" Jolene blurted beside him, wiping her cheeks.

"Gravity?"

Jolene waved her arms over the outer sides of the parking area. "What's going to hold the water in over there? And all around?" Her arms kept up the waving, almost hysterically.

Ware waved his own arms toward the foundation. "There must be a million concrete blocks up there. We'll build a wall. All the way around. We're making a moat."

Jolene's arms dropped as though they were too stunned to hold themselves up. "Could we really do that?"

Ware imagined it. Water stretching into an immense pool, three feet deep at the back, guarding his castle. You see that? Wow.

The queen palms seemed to be nodding encouragement, as if hoping to see themselves reflected in the water's surface.

Two kids build a moat, Ware voice-overed in his head. Can they do it?

"Okay, yeah, I guess we have to," Jolene said.

Ware froze. Had he spoken it aloud?

And then an even more shocking thought struck him. It wasn't just a bird-protecting moat they'd be making.

It was a giant get-born-again, penny-in-Coke, doover tub.

Holy water—whatever it was—he was sure going to need a lot of it.



The problem was that the wrecking ball hadn't knocked the walls down into nice clean individual concrete blocks. Ware lugged out maybe a dozen singles before running out. There were a few two- and three-block chunks, but the rest were mortared together in big slabs, some the size of cars, with twisted metal rods spiking out of them.

Ware bent to a five-block hunk and pulled with everything he had. The hunk did not budge. It seemed to be smirking. "Can we crack it apart up here?"

"Better not," Jolene decided. "That front opening is pretty big. We can't let anyone see. Down in the parking lot."

Ware retrieved his rope and tied it around the hunk.

After five minutes of pulling together, they managed to drag it to the back doorway. After another mighty tug, it smashed down into the parking area.

Ware followed, staggered to a patch of grass, and collapsed. He wished he'd played a sport, any sport, and grown some muscles.

Jolene snapped her safety glasses down and wedged her spike into a crack in the center. When it was upright, she hoisted the sledgehammer. For a moment it waggled above her head on her spaghetti arms. But then she got control and the hammer smashed down true. The chunk split in half.

"You look . . . ," Ware began, then searched for a word up to the task. "Heroic" came up and that word was right, but his shocked mouth refused to utter it.

"I know what I look like," Jolene grumbled. She stretched the glasses off her face and scowled at them, then let them snap onto the top of her head. "But Mrs. Stavros says if I don't wear them, she'll take back her tools. Plus she says I'll never get another rotten banana from her."

"What? Who?" Ware asked, still dazed that he'd nearly called this grubby girl heroic.

"Mrs. Stavros, remember? The lady that gives me all the rotten fruit."

Ware corrected her absently, "Who."

"Mrs. Stavros. I already told you about her."

"No, I mean it's 'who,' not 'that."

The instant he said the words, he regretted them—it irritated him when his mother corrected his grammar. But Jolene was staring at him for an explanation, and there was no exit sign in that stare.

"'Who' is for people and 'that' is for things. So it's 'Mrs. Stavros is the lady who,' not 'the lady that."

Jolene dropped her hammer and fell back on her butt.

"Sorry," Ware said. "It doesn't matter." He walked over to the broken chunk of wall and grabbed hold of the smaller piece—a double block. He risked a glance at her, still on the ground.

Her knuckles whitened around the spike. "No one ever told me that rule."

"For real, it doesn't matter. Lots of people make that mistake." Ware locked his knees and hoisted the chunk to his shins. Before he could attempt a step, his legs started shaking. He dropped the chunk and wiped his brow.

"It's a good rule." Jolene fumed as if he hadn't spoken,

as if he weren't even there. "Because people aren't things. You can throw things away. Usually you shouldn't. But sometimes, things are trash. But people are never trash. So it's good that people get a different word. I am a person who knows that."