

# CHAPTER ONE

SEAN BENNING HAD PUT IN HIS TIME. HE COULDN'T RISK BEING caught in another conversation about ERB percentiles and after-school activities that cost more than he made in a month. Forty-five minutes was his limit. He downed the dregs of his second gin and tonic before ditching the glass on a mirrored tabletop, all the while clutching his jacket in the other hand. He cast a longing look at the front door, which glowed like a vision through a sudden parting in the overdressed crowd. He allowed himself to be pulled toward it, his pulse slowing with the knowledge that he'd be out soon.

"There you are," a voice growled. A tanned hand grabbed him by the arm, pulling him back. Jolted from his vision of escape, he spun around, almost slamming into a shiny white armoire that was camouflaged in the all-white room. Cheryl Eisner stood too close,

her dark eyes softer, drunker, than he'd seen them. "I've been looking for you," she said, her voice rising above the party chitchat.

He panicked. "The Annual Fund donations," he said, stalling. "They're not due yet, are they?" But he knew they'd been due last week. "I lost the form." Not that he was planning on giving the school a cent above the thirty-eight thousand dollars his in-laws were already paying. He couldn't fathom the income you'd need to live decently in New York, pay full freight for even one kid—though who had just one these days?—plus make a big donation to the school every year. But people did it. Lots of people.

Cheryl frowned and shooed away the topic with a graceful swat of the air. "Let's not talk about the Annual Fund. It's too boring." Her son, Marcus, was in Toby's class. Until tonight, Sean had only seen her in tight designer workout clothes at school pickup and drop-off. Now, she wore a fitted gold dress. With the heels, she must have been six-two, almost eye level. Looking a woman in the eye like this was rare, and strangely exciting. She focused on his jacket. "You're not going, are you?" She touched the bare skin just below her clavicle and above the two scoops of cleavage being offered on the gold tray of her dress.

It was almost distracting enough to make him forget the front door.

He tried not to stare as she stroked her own skin. "I was just heading out." Were they real? Fake? Toby's face popped into his head like a censored bar over her breasts. "My . . . the sitter . . . I've got to get back," he stumbled.

She gave him a strange smile and pulled him past the parents of Toby's classmates, who he barely recognized in their party attire, toward a table spread with caviar and blini. "First, you've got to try this," she said. Somehow he'd missed the food on his first sweep of the room. She plunged her index finger into the ornate crystal bowl and held a dripping fingerful of caviar in front of his lips. He was famished, but he pressed them closed instinctively. Marcus had

always been a nervous kid. He could see why. “Go ahead,” she cooed. “Let me in.”

If she hadn’t looked so determined, poised with fish eggs on her finger, he would have been sure this was all a joke. At every turn, parents gossiped, laughed, and shrieked at each others’ witty anecdotes. He hadn’t heard one witty anecdote the entire evening. The good news was that nobody seemed to be watching him. Still, what was he doing? Was she *actually* coming on to him?

Cheryl waited patiently.

Really, what choice did he have? He opened his mouth and she thrust her finger inside. The little black eggs exploded with sickeningly salty pops as he remembered he hated caviar. She ran her finger along the roof of his mouth and around his upper lip and by the time she removed it, he felt like he’d had some kind of internal exam.

She plucked two glasses from the bar. “Now we have to drink champagne.”

A waiter had handed him a drink the moment he walked through the door. A second drink had magically appeared shortly after that. He was comfortably numb. Any more alcohol would push him toward drunk. “I’m okay,” he said. Besides, why would he drink champagne with Marcus’s hot mother? Wasn’t that a bad idea?

“Come on.” She pressed the champagne glass into his hand. “I have a toast. Please?”

“Sure,” he said, charmed by the *please*. “What are we toasting?”

“To Wonder Dad,” she said with an ironic smile. “The man who does it all.”

“Trust me, I’m not—”

“Drink,” she demanded. “It’s *my* toast.”

He wasn’t Wonder Dad. Didn’t want to be Wonder Dad. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be toasting with Cheryl at all. But he drank nonetheless. The champagne tickled going down. “I’ll see you at school,” he said with an apologetic smile. “I’ve got to get back.”

He took a few steps toward the door before she dropped the bomb. “You’ve heard about the new teacher, right?”

He stopped. Turned. “They found a new teacher?”

She nodded in slow motion and didn’t let go of his gaze. She waited while he digested the information.

A real teacher could turn everything around for Toby. He retraced his steps on the white shag carpet. “Who is she? When does she start?”

“It’s a little loud out here,” Cheryl said, and walked away from him. After a moment, she looked back to summon him with a side-ways glance. Like a dog chasing a bone, he followed her past a mixed media installation that looked an awful lot like the one he’d seen last year at the Whitney. This wasn’t a living room, it was an *Architectural Digest* spread. How could you raise kids in an all-white room? What about crayons, ketchup, barf?

He rounded the corner and when he didn’t see her, he panicked that he’d lost his line to the only piece of gossip he cared about.

A stage whisper hit him from the guest bathroom. “In here.”

Against his better judgment, he followed her voice into the room that blazed with tiny spotlights suspended from thin wires. She locked the door behind him and propped her ass against the sink. “Much quieter,” she said.

He couldn’t help laughing at that one. “It is a quiet room.” A candle on a glass shelf made the bathroom smell like pumpkin pie. He liked pumpkin pie. Still, it was weird. He leaned against a monogrammed towel. “So.” He looked at her and wondered if he was really going to go through with this.

She kicked off her heels and rubbed his calf with her foot. “So what?”

“So what do you know about the new teacher?”

“She’s not from New York.” Cheryl hooked her finger through his belt loop and tugged. Subtlety was not Cheryl’s forte. But she had other qualities.

He took a step toward her. “What’s her name?” Turning the banal conversation into something like foreplay was easier than he’d anticipated.

“Jessica Harper.” She pushed him away an arm’s length and cast her brown eyes down. Not to the ground. “She starts Monday.” She pulled him close again, running her hands down his chest and around his back. It had been a long time since someone had touched him like this. Touched him at all. He hadn’t realized how much he missed it. Soon, her hands traveled down to his ass, which she began to massage. Almost as soon as she did, it began vibrating.

“Answer it,” she said, running both hands down the backs of his thighs. “It might be Toby.”

Toby was probably fine. Almost definitely fine. “I can call him back . . .”

She slid the phone out of his back pocket and opened it, holding it to his ear. *Say hello*, she mouthed, and traced her finger down his chest.

“Hello?” he said, locking eyes with her and wondering when his life had become this strange.

“Why aren’t you calling me back?” Ellie’s voice hit him like a bucket of cold water. He must have backed away from Cheryl, because she tightened her hold on him. Undeterred, she teased her hand under his shirt.

“We need to talk about this medication thing,” Ellie was saying.

“I can’t talk right now. This isn’t a good time—”

“There’s never a good time,” Ellie snapped. “This is our child’s health.”

“Look, Ellie, I’m never putting him on that stuff. Never.” He’d been louder than he meant to be and made an effort to bring down the volume. “Conversation’s over.”

“Grow up, Sean.” Ellie’s voice condescended through the phone from wherever she was. “Dr. Shineman’s email said he might need to

be on Ritalin. You can't just ignore that. Get him evaluated. Jesus. It's a no-brainer. See what a doctor has to say, then we make the decision."

Cheryl pinched his nipples, which would have felt great if Ellie hadn't been yelling in his ear. "The no-brainer," he said, "is that you have no say in this. You gave that up when you disappeared." Cheryl lifted his shirt and started biting at his abs. The game was kind of fun. He tried to stay on point. "I really have to go. You caught me right in the middle of something."

"Don't you dare hang up on—"

He flipped the phone closed and threw it on the fluffy bathmat.

"Trouble on the ranch?" Cheryl asked between kisses that seemed to be heading south along his abdomen.

He wasn't going to let Ellie mess up whatever this was. She'd messed up too much already. "Wrong number," he said, and Cheryl seemed to appreciate the absurdity of the lie.

"I hate when that happens."

"Very inconvenient," he said, and tried to blot out Ellie's voice, their conversation, the image of her that was now lodged in his mind. "So . . . where were we?"

"The new teacher." Cheryl's smile came off as a challenge.

"Right. The new teacher." He leaned against the basin, his face inches from hers. "So. What kind of credentials does she have?"

"Excellent," Cheryl said, breathily. "They're excellent." He wondered if all parent socials were this social and if it had been a good idea to let Ellie come to these alone for so many years. He now had a clear view down Cheryl's dress. There they were again. He fought the urge to squeeze them.

Then he thought: Why? Ellie had walked out on him. He and Cheryl were adults who happened to be primed for sex and conveniently locked in this fancy bathroom for exactly that reason.

This kind of thing didn't happen every day. In fact, nothing like this had ever happened to him. Not to mention it had been a hell of a long time since he'd had sex. He missed it—craved it. Forget everything else that was messed up with Ellie being gone—not being able to have sex was by far the worst. He deserved this random encounter. He should push away all the doubt and just go with it. Liking Cheryl was not required. And she was making it so easy. There was no room for misinterpretation, just a clear and straightforward invitation—verging on an order—to screw her.

She yanked on his belt buckle and a laser-like flash blinded him. When he got his vision back, he realized that the gumball-size rock on her finger was reflecting the overhead lights into rainbow beams. Kind of like a superhero ring. He'd never seen Cheryl's husband and now he was forced to wonder how big the guy was and if he could throw a punch. Then he remembered she was married to a famous neurosurgeon who traveled around the world saving lives. A guy like that would never risk messing up his hands.

"He doesn't care," she said. She was a mind reader, too, apparently. "We have an understanding."

An understanding sounded complicated. Or very simple. Who was he to argue with an understanding? He helped her undo his jeans and she pressed herself against him. She slid her tongue into his mouth and for the second time in fifteen minutes he felt like he was being probed.

His body wanted to plunge ahead, but his brain kept nagging at him. He could still walk away. He could walk away from this incredibly hot woman who wanted him. But he was a single father now, he reminded himself. It was hard to meet women. Besides, he might not have a chance like this again anytime soon if he didn't jump on it—jump on Cheryl—right now.

It turned out he didn't even need to make the decision. Cheryl was already sinking to her knees. He watched the top of her head tilt as she lowered her glossed lips onto him.

He couldn't help letting out a groan. It had been four months since anyone had touched, much less handled, him with such authority. And to think, he'd almost ditched the party. He'd remembered to prepare Toby's dinner. He'd gotten Toby in the shower early, but he'd completely forgotten about hiring a babysitter.

"Oh well," he'd told Toby only two hours ago. "Guess I'll have to skip it."

"Call Gloria in 6A," he'd countered. "She's always free."

"Why don't we play Monopoly instead? You can win."

"It's how Mom used to get me playdates," Toby said, reasonably. "You have to go."

Life was so unfair when you were a grownup and so simple when you were an eight-year-old kid. Sean had dialed Gloria's number, which Toby had written down for him on a Famiglia Pizza napkin that had come with his dinner. He'd go, but he wouldn't like it. The whole thing had sounded like a gigantic waste of time, not to mention boring.

So he'd been wrong on that last point. Cheryl's mouth was now vibrating with encouraging moans. She really didn't need to be so encouraging. In fact, he realized, panicking, everything was moving too fast. He thought of dead puppies, Toby's tutoring bills. His in-laws. None of it was working. He was dangerously close. He had to stall. He pulled away, hoisted her onto the speckled stone counter that surrounded the sunken basin of the sink and unzipped her dress. He was not going to leave the parent social without knowing if they were real. It would also buy him recovery time. If he was going to make the monumental mistake he was about to make, he was sure as hell going to make it last.

He'd always assumed silicone would be a turnoff. How wrong he'd been. They were dense, fun to play with—a little like water balloons but softer and they stood up all by themselves.

Condoms. It had been years since he'd needed a condom. But he needed one now, and fast. He couldn't imagine anyone keeping

condoms in their mansion's guest bathroom. He reached past her toward the medicine cabinet, on the off chance.

"I got it," she said. She put his hand back on the water balloon, then leaned over and grabbed her gold bag from the toilet seat. She pulled out a condom wrapped in matching gold foil that she tore expertly with her teeth and rolled onto him with the speed and precision of a Nascar crew at a pit stop.

He reached between her legs and pushed aside a sliver of silky fabric that counted as her underwear. Her muscular thighs wrapped around his waist and before he knew it, he was in.

Then he remembered his mandate, the reason he was here in the first place. "Does Marcus want to have a playdate with Toby sometime?"

He wasn't sure if the *yes* she gasped had to do with the playdate or the thrusting. Soon, she was clawing his skin with her red nails and arching her double-jointed back. He realized, with a whole new level of respect for Pilates or whatever exercise classes she seemed to take all day, every day, that Cheryl's workouts had even toned her muscles in *there*. There was no doubt about it, he wasn't going to last long.

He tried, futilely, to hang on, but at a certain point it was impossible.

"No," Cheryl ordered, through heavy breathing. "Not yet." She was just gearing up. But there was no turning back. It was all about release. No more than five seconds later, the whole thing was over. He crumpled onto her, spent and relieved. But the relief lasted about as long as he had.

"Don't worry about it," Cheryl said, nudging him off her and snapping her underwear into place. She ran her hand along the side of his face, shook her head with a wistful sigh, and let herself out of the bathroom.

He slid to the floor and thumped his head repeatedly against the shiny tiles. Though most of the blood had left his brain, he was able

to focus on the fact that he'd have to see Cheryl every day, twice a day—reliving the mortification of this very moment—until Toby was old enough to take himself to and from school. It would be years. Years of remembering how he'd failed at this basic act. He realized with horror that she might tell the other mothers.

He was deflating quickly, until the condom hung sadly between his legs. He peeled it off. Given a second chance, he'd definitely last longer. He toyed with the idea of getting her back on the sink to prove it to her but soon abandoned the idea. He'd had enough humiliation for one night. It was time to go home.

## CHAPTER TWO

HE'D FALLEN, TRIPPED OVER A PIECE OF FURNITURE HE COULDN'T see in the all-white room. The third grade parents circled him. They were throwing canapés and kicking him. "Get up," they shouted. "Get up!" He curled into a fetal position, pulling his knees to his chest.

"Dad, get up!"

It was weird that the third grade parents were calling him Dad. Then he realized: there were no third grade parents. Toby was jabbing him in the ribs and yanking his pillow from under his head. He peeled open his eyes. The light hurt. A dull ache throbbed in his temples.

"It's Thursday." Toby pulled at his arm but couldn't budge him. "We can't be late."

The night rushed back: the disastrous bathroom sex, skulking home, then Toby crawling into his bed sometime around three. Toby never used to wake up at night. But since Ellie left he'd been creeping in four or five times a week and flailing around next to him all night.

"Five more minutes," he mumbled. "Tired."

When Toby pulled the comforter off the bed, letting cold air into the warm cocoon, Sean's reflexes kicked in. His arm shot out to grab it back.

"Ow!" Toby yelped. "Ow!"

Sean sat up, forced his eyes open. Toby was hunched over, clutching his chest. "Jesus. I'm sorry Tobe. I didn't know you were there. I didn't mean to—"

"You hit me!" His eyes were brimming over.

Sean was far from Wonder Dad. He was Hulking Brute Dad. Monster Dad. He rubbed Toby's back. "I didn't mean to, I was just . . ." He rolled up Toby's pajama top. "Let's take a look." It was red. Looked like he'd been hit. "It'll be okay. Really."

Toby nodded and wiped his eyes.

"Okay. Get dressed, I'll meet you in the kitchen for breakfast."

Sean turned up the hot water in the shower until he felt his skin burn. By the time he was out, Toby had poured cereal into two bowls and was rooting around in the fridge.

"Dad," Toby said, drawing out the word into two syllables. "Milk."

Milk was on his list. The list in his head that he never remembered to check. "Do we have half-and-half? You could use that."

"I used that up yesterday."

There were too many things to remember. It was impossible to get it all right. "I'll get some on the way home." He took inventory of what they did have left. "How about some toast?"

"Mom never ran out of milk. Ever."

"Yeah, well *I* never ran out on *you*," he shot back. As soon as he said it, Toby looked stricken. Sean had hit him where it hurt—for the

second time this morning. “I didn’t mean it, Tobe,” he said. “God, I’m sorry.”

“Mom’s coming back.” His voice was small.

“Okay.” He wished he could press delete, start the morning over. Toby had been excited about starting the day. Before he’d been beaten physically and emotionally. “Hey,” he tried to lighten his tone. “We have an art class to get to. We don’t want to be late.”

A chocolate croissant from the Hungarian Pastry Shop helped lift the mood for the bus ride. By the time they got to Ninety-sixth and Fifth, Toby was sugared up and ready for the day. He sprinted ahead on the Upper East Side pavement, weaving through the morning migration of well-groomed kids and their parents on the way to school.

Sean had to admit he was looking forward to seeing what went on during a regular school day. Parent-teacher conferences and class parties had nothing to do with Toby’s daily life at The Bradley School. Sean was familiar with the black and white checkerboard floor of the lobby that he saw twice daily at drop-off and pickup, but he had no idea what went on beyond that, because according to Toby, he did *stuff* or *nothing* all day. When Toby’s teacher quit over a month ago, the school had actually reached out to parents, asking if they would volunteer to teach classes while the search committee found a replacement. In the spirit of covert infiltration, Sean volunteered to lead an art class, and today was the day.

When they turned onto Ninety-third Street, parents and children pooled outside the glass and wrought iron door to the school. Fathers waited impatiently. Mothers chatted. Something was wrong. Drop-off was usually a wham-bam affair with fathers blowing kisses at their offspring while checking Blackberries, and a few malnourished mothers on their way to the gym. It was too early for estrogen and small talk—that came at three thirty during pickup.

Lilly's mom looked up from a conversation with Melanie Drake, the mother of Toby's best friend, Calvin. "You're early today!" she said, looking like she'd been up for hours and already run around the reservoir, worked out with her personal trainer, and cooked a three-course breakfast for the family.

"Am I?" His eyes darted to the entrance. "Why isn't the door open?"

"Five more minutes," Melanie said, holding her wrist out so he could see it was only seven fifty-five.

He took a quick inventory of the scene. Kids and their parents bobbed in place to keep warm as they waited to be let in. Sean froze when he saw Cheryl out of the corner of his eye.

"So have you already started it?" Melanie had returned to a conversation with Lilly's mom. "Susannah's friend did it when she was eight and this girl just aced her verbal SATs."

"We're three weeks in already." Lilly's mom looked at Sean. "Is Toby doing it, too?"

"Doing what?"

"Sight training."

He wasn't sure what she was talking about but guessed it wasn't a class for seeing eye dogs. "Uh, I don't think so."

"Oh, you'd know," she went on. "I bring Lilly to the midtown office three times a week. It's special physical therapy that strengthens the eye muscles."

"The school recommended it for Calvin." He liked Melanie. She was married to one of the biggest developers in Manhattan, but she somehow managed to stay more or less down to earth. "I'm trying to decide if we can fit it all in."

Cheryl was now standing a few feet from him. When she caught his eye, she cocked her head and winked. Maybe he'd been too hard on himself. Maybe his bathroom performance had been okay. Good even.

"When we finish up with the OT for Calvin's pencil grip," Melanie said, "maybe we'll try it. Is Toby doing OT, too?"

“What?” He eyed the door and vowed never to be early again.

“Occupational Therapy,” she said. “How’s Toby’s grip?”

She was waiting for an answer. “Well, the pencil’s never flown out of his hand,” he said, knowing this couldn’t have been the answer she was looking for.

As soon as the front door unlatched, kids streamed into the lobby and their parents peeled off for work.

“Come on, Dad,” Toby said, pulling him away from all talk of pencil grips. Sean shot the mothers a look that said *you know how kids are* as he allowed Toby to drag him into the lobby and past the eighth grade Jasper Johns study on display. A few of the pieces weren’t bad, especially considering the artists were thirteen. If his own grade school had had a full-time school-museum liaison, everything could be different for him now. He’d had to wait until art school for the kind of exposure Toby had gotten in kindergarten.

Sean tried to keep up, following Toby under the fleet of nine-hundred-ninety-nine origami swans that dangled from an elaborate mobile—the seniors’ first semester art project—then up the grand staircase.

At the fourth floor, Sean followed Toby through a fire door and into a hallway that was carpeted in bright blue. The third grade self-portraits that lined the walls smiled out with circle eyes, wobbly red lines for mouths, and an oompa loompa orange for skin. He wondered why the girls’ drawings were all about hair and lips, while the boys were obsessed with freckles and teeth. All except Toby’s. He’d obviously sketched himself in a mirror and used perspective and shading, like Sean had taught him. It didn’t look exactly like Toby, but it captured his sleepy lids and long lashes. In the self-portrait, his bangs fell loosely below his blond eyebrows just like they did now. Sean smiled a self-satisfied, cocky smile of a parent who knows his kid has just blown all the others out of the water. He didn’t get to gloat often. Especially at this school. He savored the moment.

“Dad, come on. What are you doing?” Toby was pulling at his arm. “We did those at the beginning of the year. They’re dumb.”

Inside the classroom, red contact paper covered the walls. Maps and cursive letters and more artwork brought the room to life. He hadn’t seen the classroom since the first day of school when Toby had met Ms. Martin. Now, he felt the panic of a tourist trying to see all the sights in a single afternoon.

“Come see my Native American corn project.” Toby was practically bouncing as he dragged Sean over to a diorama he’d built in a Merrill shoebox. “These are my artifacts.” He handed Sean a belt made of red and yellow and white yarn. “I wove it all by myself.” A bell dangled from one of the long strings that hung off both ends.

“You made that?” It was actually pretty well done. Weaving wasn’t easy, at least he didn’t think so. “No way.”

“And this is my wampum.” Toby pointed to some marbles and shells. “It’s like Native American money.”

Before Sean could respond with appropriate amazement, Toby pulled him over to the math corner where he pointed out tricky problems in his workbook that he’d gotten right. What was the school making such a stink about? Toby was doing great.

He wondered which sub they’d throw at the kids today, the fat smelly one Toby and his friends called “El Stinko,” or the strict school marm the kids called “She Who Must Not be Named.”

But there were no subs in the room. Just the busty assistant, Miss Bix, who was fussing with a map and push pins. With the new teacher starting next week, he figured the school was skipping the subs completely.

When Calvin blustered into the classroom, Toby ran over to him and they plopped down on the rug together to look at a comic book. Calvin made all the special sound effects of guns and lasers. Toby groaned and gurgled death throes of dying bad guys. This was the old Toby, relaxed and happy. The Toby he hadn’t seen much of lately.

Sean felt a small finger jab at his thigh. It was Alexis. “Hi Toby’s dad,” Alexis said. She and Toby had been friends briefly

in first grade. The girl was a disaster waiting to happen. Once, Toby had come back from her apartment having played *sturgeon*, in which they fashioned new boobs and lips for her American Girl dolls out of Play-Doh and fed them Tic Tacs that Alexis kept calling Xanax.

“Why are you here?” She gave him the once over, lingering on his extremities. Probably sizing him up for a *procedure*.

He twitched uncomfortably. “I’m going to make collages with your class.”

“Representational or abstract?” Alexis asked. Her eyes were squinty and her lips puckered like she’d just sucked on a lemon.

He shrugged. “Up to you.”

He ought to sit. It would give him something to do, and maybe Alexis would go away. He lowered himself into a mini chair, but the thing was way too close to the ground. His knees were in his armpits and only half his ass fit on the seat. Suddenly, the chatter in the room stopped. He looked up to see an incredibly attractive sub put a bag down at the teacher’s desk. Her hair was brown, almost black, and pale freckles dusted her skin.

Toby was staring at her. They all were. Sean tapped Toby with his foot. “Who’s that?” he mouthed.

Toby shrugged, no clue.

The sub smiled at the class, then focused a surprised look directly at Sean. He’d been waiting to be booted. Bradley School rules: no parents in the classroom unless cleared ahead of time.

“Oh. Hi,” she said. “Who do you belong to?” She had a great voice. Like she’d spent the weekend screaming her lungs out at a football game.

He looked up at her from the mini chair and wished he hadn’t sat in it to begin with. “Oh, I’m . . .” He pushed himself up awkwardly. “Sorry. I . . .” He tried to straighten his knees and hoped the effort didn’t show. “I’m Sean Benning. Toby’s dad.” He extended his hand: *I come in peace*.

“Nice to meet you.” She shook it. Her hand was delicate but strong.

Her eyes were blue, but much lighter than blue eyes he’d seen before. They were like blue vapor.

“I’m doing an art project with the kids second period,” he said. “I brought some work to do in the hallway until it’s time.”

“No, stay if you want. It’s good to have you.” She smiled and went to the board and wrote the name Jessica Harper. She turned to the kids. “Hi.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled. “I’m Jessica Harper. Your new teacher.”

The kids exchanged looks.

He couldn’t believe his good luck. The other parents would kill to be crashing the new teacher’s first day.

Alexis, visibly rattled by this departure from the schedule, raised her hand. “You’re not supposed to be here until Monday.”

“Surprise,” Jessica Harper said. “I couldn’t wait to get started.”

The girls giggled. Toby and Calvin whispered excitedly, then Calvin raised his hand. “What should we call you?”

“You can call me Jess,” she said. “That feels more normal to me.” This answer prompted more whispering. Until middle school, teachers could choose to be called whatever they wanted. Only a few—the very cool few—opted for first names.

Jess was now focused intently on the class. “Miss Bix tells me you’ve started some Thanksgiving essays. Why don’t you get them out of your binders and we’ll get to know each other?”

As the kids rustled around, she carried an adult-size chair over to Sean and placed it next to him. “This should work better.” She was twenty-eight, he decided. Maybe thirty.

When the kids settled down, Jess unfolded a piece of notebook paper. “I did one, too. I’ll go first.” She surveyed the room before starting. “I’m thankful for the Boston Red Sox.”

The boys sat forward defensively. He saw Jess stifle a smile and keep going.

"I'm thankful that I don't care about peer pressure and that reading good books is still legal. I'm thankful for my new job at The Bradley School and also for the chance to get to know you guys."

Drew's hand shot up. He had Opie-like ears and a head full of cartoon-grade red hair.

She raised an eyebrow, pretending to be surprised that he had a comment. "What's your name?"

"Drew," he said. His Izod shirt matched the turquoise stripe on his V-neck sweater, a miniature version of an investment banker on a golf outing. "The Yankees rule."

"I'm also thankful for freedom of choice," she said. "And the right to voice one's opinion in a public forum. Drew, why don't you go next?"

He picked up a professionally matted laser printout and straightened his spine. "I'm thankful for my mother and stepfather, my new twin brothers and in-vitro fertilization. I'm thankful for Democracy, technology, and my Xbox."

What eight-year-old was thankful for in-vitro? This kid was going to be pretty surprised down the road when he learned how babies were usually made. Sean got a flash of Drew's mother on Larry King last year talking about her new book, *Liars*. Any woman who claimed she didn't want children, she announced on national TV, was a liar. For six months, news shows featured one angry woman after another debating women's biological imperative to reproduce. During that six months, Drew's mother got divorced and remarried. Not too long after that she was waddling around The Bradley School pregnant with twins at the age that most women were starting to think about grandchildren.

The classroom was a sea of raised hands shaking to get the teacher's attention. Jess called on Kayla, who was wearing a Pepto-Bismol-colored sweat suit with the word "Juicy" emblazoned across her butt. Her Puma sneakers matched exactly. Kayla was just figuring out how to use her talents to get what she wanted from people. Unfortunately, Toby was under her spell.

“My name is Kayla and I’m thankful for my innate gymnastic abilities and for Boris, who fled his country to help me achieve my Olympic dream,” she said. “I’m thankful that I am an American and can vote for president when I’m eighteen.” She smiled a beauty pageant smile she must have practiced in the mirror and sat down.

A girl he’d never seen before was next. “I’m Emily B,” she said, and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “I’m thankful for J.K. Rowling’s magical writing and for Harry, Hermione, and Ron. I’ve read all the books twice. I like to memorize passages and recite them in a British accent for my mom during dinner.”

Toby hated *Harry Potter*. It was way too hard. As it was, Toby refused to read even the simplest chapter books to himself unless strong-armed into it. Getting through an eight-hundred-page *Harry Potter* book would be pure torture—for both of them. He’d get there someday. Maybe.

Calvin stood next. He’d slimmed down a little over the summer and looked very serious. “I’b Calbin.” His *ms* and *vs* sounded like *bs*. “I’b thankful for engineers and skyscrapers that bake New York City the bost ibportant city in the world.” He stared hard at the paper as if the letters might vanish. His hands were trembling. Sean wondered if Calvin’s father, who was responsible for building half of those skyscrapers, had fed him that line. “I’b thankful for Wolberine, Silber Surfer and all the X-Ben super heroes.” He sat down and took a deep breath through his mouth.

“Thanks Calvin,” Jess said. “Would you like a cup of water?”

He shook his head quickly.

Next she called on Alexis, who batted her dark eyelashes before beginning. “I’m thankful for the new anti-global warming legislation and also for *iCarly*, and the miracle of organ transplants.”

“That’s a wide spectrum,” Jess said. “I like that.”

Toby was next. He stood and looked at his paper, then at Sean, then down at his shoes. Sean tried to guess what he’d be thankful for. Saturday morning cartoons? Sour Straws? Christmas presents?

Toby swallowed before starting. "I'm thankful for my dad," he read. "He takes me to school and plays with me and makes me food and stuff while my mommy is away. I really miss her, but I've still got my dad." He smiled shyly, not looking at Sean, then sat down.

Sean blinked back tears. His chest felt like it might cave in as he remembered whacking Toby and telling him his mother had run out on him. Everything else could change, disappear, disappoint. Toby was his constant. The only thing that mattered. He had to be a better father. Tearing up in front of these kids, not to mention the new teacher, was out of the question. For a second, he noticed her eyes dart over to him, trying to figure out what the essay meant. He coughed like he had a tickle in his throat.

"Thanks Toby," she said. "Your dad sounds great. And I'm happy to turn the class over to him for a while." She gestured him up to the board. "Mr. Benning?"

He stood up, which was much easier now that he had the bigger chair. "Uh, thanks. I'm . . . call me Sean." He looked around for the materials, then asked the class if they'd had time to slice up the *Buzz Weeklys* he'd sent with Toby last week.

Kayla marched to the supply closet and emerged with two shopping bags. Sean dumped the pieces onto a table and spread them out, then moved a few onto a sheet of paper and rearranged them until something interesting started to happen. "Just start playing around. Certain shapes and colors are going to call to you. See where it takes you." He recognized the orange and black squares and circles the kids had cut from the "Lapdogs of the Stars" piece that had run last month.

"Can I make a horse?" one girl asked.

"You can do whatever you want. But try it without knowing what you're making before you start. Just see what happens."

They looked suspicious, but gave it a try. Jess pulled up a chair next to Toby and started one too.

Isaac raised an eager hand and fingered his Einstein glasses with the other. "I'd like to do a map of the United States. Can I do that?" The kid was a brown-noser who'd written his first novel the summer before second grade and was currently the reigning ten-and-under New York Regional Chess Champion. Last year, his parents had called a meeting with Mr. Daniels to request a course of independent study because the second-grade work wasn't challenging their brainiac spawn.

"That's going to take a long time, Isaac," Jess said.

"I can take it home and finish it tonight if I'm not done."

"The idea is to let the content drive the form," Sean said, trying not to sound annoyed. "Allow the pieces show *you* what you're making."

"No." Isaac shook his head. "I think I'll make the map."

Jess, who'd stepped deftly out of the conversation, focused on her collage and tamped down an amused smile.

Soon, the kids were busily working. Drew was focusing so hard, Sean thought his tongue might bore a hole through the lining of his cheek. Luke pasted blue squares in a mass at the bottom corner of his page as he scratched absent-mindedly at a patch of red bumps on his neck. They were an intense bunch.

After a double period of working on the collages, Jess looked at the clock. "Who's hungry?" she asked. Toby ran up to her and tugged at her sleeve. "Can my dad have lunch with us? Please?"

"Of course," she said. "I mean, it's fine with me. As long as he doesn't have to get back to work."

"No, I'd love to." He realized, with a rush, he'd never seen lunch. The kids cheered. He was a rock star, at least until someone more interesting came along. As he texted work to cancel his noon meeting, he realized he'd only been in the fifth floor dining room once, on the school tour five years ago. Walking into the room, he remembered Mimsy Roach, the admissions director, in her pastel sweater set and Barbara Bush pearls, boasting about how the same

wallpaper hung in the White House. The other parents had oohed and aahed at this tidbit, which struck him as idiotic. It was *wallpaper*. Boring, old-fashioned wallpaper of women in petticoats picnicking on a lawn.

But looking around now, he wondered if the presidential paper had anything to do with how insanely civilized the kids were behaving. They sat at tables, engaged in polite conversation. At least that's how it looked from where he was standing. There wasn't a spitball or mashed potato catapult in sight. Food fights had been a highlight of his grade school experience. Toby was going to miss all that.

He pushed his tray through the cafeteria line. The kitchen bustled with precision movements. A chef in a white hat served him grilled Atlantic salmon with polenta. When Toby came home from school reporting there'd been fish for lunch, he'd imagined fish sticks, overcooked cod. Not this. He followed Toby to the two third-grade tables and watched the kids unfold linen napkins on their laps.

He and Toby sat next to Zack, the only son of the Knicks' once-kickass power forward, Billy Horn. The kid had gotten the height gene from his father and had learned to dribble the ball before he could walk. If all went according to Billy Horn's plan, Zack would carry on his NBA legacy.

Jess put her tray down at the table next to Sean. "How's the lunch here?" she asked. "It looks amazing."

He had no idea how lunch was. "Let's see." He took a bite of the salmon. "Mmmm."

Isaac zoomed in for prime real estate next to Jess, but promptly turned his back on her, pushing away his nutritious gourmet meal.

"Knight to B4," Isaac said to Luke. The red bumps on Luke's neck looked nasty. Even more unappetizing was Isaac's painfully tedious account of a national chess tournament he'd won that weekend in Florida. He paused for dramatic tension. "And check."

"Isaac, eat," Jess said, taking a bite of pork tenderloin. It looked like something you'd order at a restaurant.

He tried to imagine eating like this every day, but that was depressing because unless he came to school with Toby, there was no way it was going to happen.

“I don’t eat lunch,” Isaac said, and made a face at Jess’s food. “Do you know how they raise pigs? It’s revolting. The conditions in the slaughterhouses are barbaric.”

Sean let his fork drop. “Thanks for that.”

“Grab a PB&J or something,” Jess suggested.

“The Bradley School is a nut-free zone,” he said. “Besides, I’m not hungry.”

Calvin pushed his tray away nervously. “Me neither.”

“May I please be excused?” Isaac asked.

“Lunch isn’t over yet,” Jess said. “Why don’t you guys tell me about yourselves? Which sports do people like to play? I played lacrosse in college.”

“Ivy League?” Drew asked.

“Trinity,” she said without missing a beat.

Isaac looked at his Tourneau watch. “I have to go to the nurse.”

“I have a pony,” Nina said. Her velour top exclaimed STAR! in purple rhinestones. “I ride her in competition.”

“I have to go to the nurse, too,” Luke said.

“Me too,” Marcus said.

They’d each pushed their food around their plates to make it look like they’d eaten something, just like the girls in college used to do.

“You should have our names on the list.”

“Oh right. The list.” Jess reached into her bag and produced a clipboard and checked it. “Okay, anyone who has permission can go to the nurse now.”

Marcus, Luke, Calvin, Isaac, and Kayla got up to leave.

“You sure you all need to go?” she asked, as a few more kids got up from the other third-grade table.

Kayla waved as she followed the boys.

“What’s that about?” Sean whispered.

She shrugged and turned back to the remaining kids. "I guess something's going around."

"Knock-knock," Zack said.

"Who's there?" Toby happily obliged.

"Yah."

"Yah who?"

"What are you so excited about?"

The kids howled. The exodus had barely registered with them. Sean made a mental note to buy Toby some Flintstones vitamins. Just to be safe.

"Dad, want to come to computer class?" Toby asked, as Sean scraped his plate. "We're going to make pictures on the Mac to go with our Thanksgiving essays."

"Let's try not to get me fired on my first day," Jess said, winking at Sean.

"Seems fair." He turned to Toby. "I've got to get to work anyway."

When everyone had bussed their trays in an orderly fashion, Miss Bix herded the class out of the dining room.

Jess extended her hand. This was the end of the road. Except for one minor detail. "My coat," he said. "It's still in your classroom."

"Come on," she said. He followed her into the hallway where a pack of teachers waited for the elevators. Something familiar flashed across her features. It was the same look Toby had given him on the first day of kindergarten when he'd been thrown into a room full of strangers.

"Why don't we take the stairs," he suggested. "Work off all that fancy food."

"Sure." He heard a touch of relief in her voice.

"So how's the first day going?" he asked as they entered the stairwell, which was decorated with fifth grade maps of Europe.

"Better than I expected."

"It takes a while to get the hang of this bunch." He paused. "You're doing great."

“It’s . . . not like other schools.”

“So you didn’t go to a Bradley either?”

Her laugh was loud and spontaneous. Like an exhale. “Not by a long shot.”

He was looking at her, not at the stairs, when his foot came down on a soft, uneven surface that sent him flying into the facing wall. Jess grabbed the railing just in time to stop herself.

“Oh my God!” she gasped when she saw what it was.

Calvin was lying half on the third floor landing, half on the step. “Calvin,” he said. “Are you okay?” Sean’s heart raced as he knelt down.

“Calvin!” he screamed. “Calvin!” Screaming at Calvin was ridiculous. The kid needed help, not a hearing aid. He steadied Calvin’s head, which was jerking from side to side against one of the sandpaper-lined steps. His body shuddered and flailed and his eyes rolled back in his head. “It’s okay, buddy,” he said, having no idea if that was true. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“Call 911,” Jess said. She held Calvin’s head to free up Sean’s hands, and he pulled his phone from his back pocket. In his entire life, he’d never dialed 911, and when the operator answered he stumbled over the information. He told her everything he knew, which, he realized, was very little.

“They’ll be here soon,” he said. Adrenaline pulsed through him.

“What should I do?”

“His medical file.” Sean hadn’t been able to answer any of the questions the operator was asking. “We should have it for the paramedics.”

“I’ll get the nurse,” she said. “Can you, um . . .” She gestured toward Calvin with her head and Sean traded places with her. “I’ll be fast,” she said, and sprinted down the stairs.

She was back a minute later, a sheen of sweat on her forehead. “Any change?”

He shook his head. Nurse Astrid lugged her well-padded body up the stairs, a full flight behind Jess. He wondered if Astrid had ever

taken the stairs in her life. The nurse getup—white uniform, white stockings, white orthopedic shoes—was out of the fifties. At least she didn't wear the cap.

“No preexisting conditions,” she said, reading from the file and gasping for breath. “Nothing. Let me see him.” She knelt down awkwardly and took his pulse. “It's fast,” she said, almost angry. “Where's the ambulance? We need the ambulance,” she screamed. The costume couldn't hide the fact that she was helpless and scared.

Within minutes, the paramedics arrived and strapped Calvin onto a stretcher, carried him downstairs, and loaded him into an idling ambulance.

The air outside sliced through his shirt. Jess hugged her arms across her chest, shivering. Bev Shineman, the school psychologist, barreled onto the sidewalk in a long down coat, her hand gripped in a fist around her cell phone. “I have calls in to his parents and both his nannies.” She stared at them. “How are you two holding up?” She added it, almost as an afterthought.

“Fine,” he said, even though his heart rate was still way too fast and his knees were rubber.

Shineman's cell phone rang. It must have been Calvin's parents because she lowered her voice and walked quickly away as she spoke.

Jess had a funny look on her face, like she might cry.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She tried reassuring him with a smile. “Fine.”

“I need an adult,” the paramedic barked from the back of the ambulance. She stared at him, then at Jess. “Who's coming?”

## CHAPTER THREE

SEAN HAD NEVER ENTERED MOUNT SINAI THROUGH THE AMBULANCE entrance and was disoriented as he raced after Calvin's gurney into pediatric emergency, otherwise known as hell. Inside, he recognized the windowless room from last year when Toby had fallen off of Calvin's bunk bed and hit his head on the way down. He'd turned out to be fine, but the six hours in emergency had traumatized them all. Looking around now, he recognized the terror on the faces of the desperate parents trying to calm screaming babies, cool fevers, and staunch bleeding.

A team of doctors who looked like they were just out of med school circled Calvin, listening to his heart and taking his pulse. The paramedics reported what they knew: no preexisting conditions, no allergies, all in all a healthy eight-year-old boy.

A 12-year-old in a doctor's coat turned to Sean. "Can you tell me what happened today?" Her eyes were huge and dark like in Japanese animé.

"Um . . ." He had no idea what had happened. "I . . . we found him on the stairs. He was unconscious and kind of . . . flailing around."

"Does your son have any known allergies to medicine, food, anything you can think of?"

"I'm not his father." He'd tried to make that clear in the ambulance. "But I don't think Calvin has allergies. According to the file, I mean."

"Have there been any changes to his routine recently? Has he taken any medication or been out of the country? Has this ever happened before?" She stared at him with her cartoon eyes waiting for something. Anything.

"I don't think so. I have no idea," he stammered. "I'm not his . . ."

Shineman rushed in. "There you are," she panted. She reeked of breath mints. "His parents are on their way."

"Let's get him on a monitor and take his vitals." An orderly in teddy bear scrubs began sticking electrodes on Calvin's chest.

Sean heard Cal Drake before he saw him. "Where the hell is my son?" he boomed. His footsteps were heavy but fast. He raced around the corner and stopped short when he saw Calvin lying motionless, hooked up to oxygen, with an IV in his left arm. Melanie trailed a few paces behind. When she caught up, she let out a gasp. "Calvin!" she sobbed and tunneled through the sea of residents and interns to hold her son.

"Jesus Christ." Cal exhaled slowly. He looked around for what he considered to be a real doctor, but finally focused on the girl with cartoon eyes, who was marking information on a chart. "What's wrong with him? Will he be okay?"

"When we finish these tests we'll know more," she said.

He turned angrily to Shineman. "What the hell happened?"

“He collapsed on the stairs,” she said. “Sean and the new third grade teacher found him there. They may have saved his life.”

Melanie turned her head toward Sean and mouthed *thank you* through a stream of tears. Cal glared at Shineman, concentrating all his fear, helplessness, and hostility into tasers that shot from his eyes. “What the fuck was my son doing in the stairwell by himself?”

Shineman spoke extra quietly to counteract the yelling. “This is a tense time,” she said. “For everyone.”

“Oh, you’re going to feel a lot of tension,” Cal spit out. “Believe me! I entrust my son’s safety to you and this is how you protect him?” His voice escalated, though it hadn’t seemed possible. “I’d like an answer to my question.” His nostrils flared. He was waiting—for an answer, for someone to blame. The doctors furiously took readings and looked about as bewildered as Sean felt.

As her husband tore Shineman a new one, Melanie clung to her son, kissing his hand and begging him to wake up. She wouldn’t remember the details of any of this. He could see that everything else had fallen away, that she was channeling everything she had into willing Calvin to be all right. Watching her sob over Calvin, he imagined Toby on the gurney. If he didn’t slip out now, he would start crying too. He backed away slowly. “I should go,” he said, even though no one heard or cared. “I hope Calvin’s okay.”

As soon as he hit the sidewalk, he broke into a run. He had no destination, just a need to get somewhere fast. It was below freezing and Sean had left his jacket in Toby’s classroom. When he saw the sign for Hanratty’s, he knew that was where he was going. He plopped himself at the bar, leaving a few empty seats between himself and a middle-aged man whose nose and cheeks blossomed in a web of burst capillaries. The man wore a ridiculous turtleneck covered with lobsters and was sweating alcohol.

The bartender dropped a paper coaster in front of Sean. “What can I get you?”

“Bloody Mary,” he said, before he’d made the decision. Drinking in the afternoon was always a bad idea. But he knew there was no way an overpriced cup of Starbucks coffee was going to do the trick. Besides, he reasoned, Bloody Marys were a daytime drink. “House vodka’s fine.”

Sean drank in silence and pretended to be riveted by a rerun of an old Lakers/Knicks game from the nineties on the flat-screen television behind the bar. He watched a young Billy Horn dribble through the Lakers’ best guys over and over to make six easy layups in a row. There was no denying he used to be a basketball god.

When the door opened again, a young, preppy guy bounded in, beaming unguardedly. “Hey man,” he said to the bartender. “Can I order some food to go?”

The bartender handed him a menu.

The guy picked it up, but didn’t have the patience to read it. “Do you have shrimp cocktail? My wife wants shrimp cocktail and I told her I’d find it for her. You have it, right?”

“We’ve got shrimp scampi,” the bartender said.

The guy considered it for a minute. “Yeah, okay,” he said in an annoyingly upbeat tone. “That’ll probably be fine. I’ll take an order of that to go.” He looked at Sean and the alcoholic next to him, and then at their drinks. “And I’ll have a beer. You know, while I wait.”

He sat at the bar and kicked his feet against his stool and fiddled with the coaster. The energy of the place was suddenly all messed up. The kid was going to want to make conversation. He could feel it.

“I just had a baby,” the kid blurted out. “I mean, my wife did.”

So his mood was pure joy. Sean decided to cut him some slack. “Congratulations.” He saluted with the Bloody Mary. “Boy or girl?”

“She’s a girl. Savannah. She’s got these little dimples.” He pulled his phone from his down jacket and stared scrolling through what seemed like hundreds of photos. He stopped on a picture of his new family. At home in an album somewhere, Sean had an almost

identical photo of himself and Toby and Ellie that had been taken eight years ago at Mount Sinai. He loved that photo. In it, Ellie's hospital gown is slipping, her hair is a mess, and she looks like she's been through hell. She'd never looked more beautiful. In the photo they're happy. In love. Hopeful. That first night they'd stared at Toby for hours. "This is it," Ellie had said as they watched their child. "We're in it for the long haul."

The long haul hadn't turned out to be all that long. "I'll have another," Sean said to the bartender.

After his second drink, he looked at his watch. He had five minutes to get back to Bradley. He slapped money on the bar and walked into blinding daylight. The new father carried a Styrofoam box of scampi. Sean didn't have the heart to tell him that if a woman who's just given birth asks for shrimp cocktail and you bring her shrimp covered in garlic and oil, there most certainly will be hell to pay. The kid would find out soon enough.

The vodka only kept him warm for the first block and a half, and as he ran past the Mount Sinai buildings, he thought of Calvin in the ER, Melanie sobbing over his lifeless body. Whatever buzz he'd had was gone now and he felt heavy, slow, sick.

He dragged himself into Bradley just in time to see the kids following their teachers, single file, down the sweeping staircase and across the lobby. A few girls in bellbottoms and sparkly T-shirts giggled. A tousled-looking boy tripped over his feet, but then recovered. Sean winced, remembering how he'd tripped over his own feet all through school.

He watched Toby search the room, find him, and shoot him a toothy grin. He seemed fine. All the kids did. Maybe Jess hadn't told them about Calvin. Sean tried to read their faces, but you couldn't tell with kids. Sometimes information like that took a while to sink in.

Jess had pulled herself together and was talking to the kids like she'd known them forever instead of just eight hours. From a distance it was easier to size her up. She'd said she played lacrosse in college,

and now he saw it. She had a great body. Athletic, not sucked-out and bony like so many New York women. Her expression hovered somewhere between authoritarian and conspiratorial and was as intriguing as anything he'd seen in a long time—especially here.

He watched Toby laugh at a joke Zack was telling. Calvin should have been laughing right along with him. The other parents in the room still had no idea how lucky they were to be here picking up their kids while the Drakes prayed to see Calvin's eyes open.

He took a minute to catch his breath, to steady himself before pushing through the wall of mothers.

"You're Sean Benning," a soothing male voice said. A hand descended on his back in a fatherly way. "Walt Renard."

He shook the hand that was extended toward him. "Hi." Walt Renard looked tanned, well-rested, like he'd just stepped off a tropical island.

"I hear you took Calvin to the ER."

Walt was one of the parents who knew everyone, even though he didn't fit The Bradley School's parent profile. In all the years he'd seen Walt at dropoff and pickup, Walt had never once worn a suit and tie. Today he wore blue jeans, a button down shirt, and expensive shoes.

"Word spreads fast," Sean said, keeping Toby in his peripheral vision. "Does everyone know—about Calvin?"

"Not yet. Not most people."

"I have no idea what happened, why it happened."

"There's nothing more terrifying than being a parent." Walt removed his glasses and wiped them with the hem of his untucked shirt. "We do everything we can to protect them. And then something like this happens."

Toby was looking for Sean across the room. "I ought to . . ."

"Yeah, you ought to get your son," Walt said. "You did a good thing today." He clasped Sean's hand again. "Karma points," he said, and gave a wave.

When Toby saw Sean, he stuck his hand in Jess's direction for his formal dismissal handshake. As soon as they'd unclasped hands, Sean scooped Toby into a fierce hug. He hadn't meant to, but there was no fighting it.

"Dad," Toby said, embarrassed.

He hated letting go, but forced himself. "Don't know what came over me," he said. "Sorry."

Jess handed him his jacket. "You might need this."

He thanked her and put it on. She seemed so together. "How are you?"

"Fine," she said, as though they hadn't just saved a kid's life together. Or probably saved it. "Thanks for the art project." Apparently, he *and* Toby had been dismissed.

Toby said nothing as they walked to the bus stop.

"So," he said, when he realized Toby was going to need some prodding. "How was the rest of your day?"

Toby shrugged. "Calvin went to the hospital."

Sean nodded. Wait for it.

"Kayla said Calvin's eclectic," Toby said.

He tried to imagine ways in which Calvin could be eclectic but failed. "He's what?"

"Eclectic," Toby said. "Kayla saw a show on PBS. They get all weird and shaky when there's a lot of bright light."

He should really write this stuff down. "Epileptic?"

"Yeah," Toby said.

Sean was pretty sure Calvin wasn't epileptic. If he was, the doctors would have identified it fairly quickly. The blank looks on their faces had made the whole thing that much more terrifying.

"Drew said it could be a peanut allergy," Toby went on. "Even though Chef Antoine doesn't use peanuts."

"Calvin doesn't have allergies, Tobe." Sean wondered if Toby would ask how he knew this, but he didn't. It was a given that parents knew everything about everything.

“Isaac said school was going to have to pay lots of money if it was their fault.”

Perfect. Isaac was working the litigious angle. “So are you worried about Calvin?”

“Remember Patrick?”

Patrick, Patrick. “Uh . . .”

“Remember, he did the Empire State Building set for the second-grade play?”

Sean remembered some kid’s parents paying two hundred bucks to have a professional set designer come in and build the set.

“Patrick had a peanut allergy and had to go to the hospital, too. He came back.” Toby shrugged. “But then he left school after the summer.”

“Calvin doesn’t have any allergies.” He put his arm around Toby and they walked a while without speaking.

“I hope Calvin comes back.”

“Me too,” Sean said. “Me too.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

“WHERE’S THE SEX?!” RICK HOLLINGSWORTH BELLOWED accusatorily through the office. It never failed to make the young *Buzz* staffers tremble in their Vans. But Sean liked Rick—sort of.

“I want flesh on these pages,” Rick shouted. The skin under his chin wobbled when he moved his head. Sean routinely photo-shopped the same turkey flap out of Harrison Ford’s profile. Rick had endured a few too many late-night closes, and the endless supply of pizza and beer had settled into a fifteen-pound tire around his middle. His lids drooped, giving him a heavy, tired look.

“Find me swimsuit shots for Christ’s sake,” he said. His waddle continued to wobble even after his head came to a complete stop. “Where are the Big Five? Someone’s got to be on a beach this month!” He stormed into his office and slammed the door.

The sad fact of the matter was that Rick was a brainy guy. Should have been at *Time* or *Newsweek*. But seven years ago he'd lost his shit and heaved his computer out the window of his eighteenth-story office at *The Economist*. It was a miracle it hadn't hit anyone. Any real career Rick might have had in journalism had flown out the window along with the computer. Now, even though antidepressants had more or less fixed the bugs in his brain chemistry, he was stuck here at this sorry excuse for a tabloid. A lifer. Rick's morose presence served as a constant reminder to Sean to get out while he still could.

The job was supposed to be temporary, a stop-gap after Toby was born while Ellie took time off from the network. He'd given up the freelance work and his painting studio for a steady paycheck and health insurance. But three years had turned into five, then eight. He'd get out somehow, but for the meantime, Sean needed the job. He dialed Gino.

"I'm away from my phone right now," Gino's voice announced. "Leave your number and when I get out of the hot tub I'll ring you back."

Gino never picked up his phone. Sean knew the drill. "Code Blue," he said, and hung up. The sick thing was, Gino might actually *be* in a hot tub. He imagined Gino, flanked by topless Bunnies, their steamy ears askew. His fearlessness, coupled with a total lack of humility, made him one of the best paparazzi in the business. In the middle of Jen and Brad's divorce, he'd left a paper bag full of steaming dog shit on Jen's front step. When she bent down to open it, he caught the whole thing with his foot-long zoom from the mansion next door. The photo—a close-up of Jen's devastated expression—ran on the cover with the caption "Jen on the Verge." Inside, a fabricated story from "sources" revealed she would be checking into a Malibu facility for "treatment."

The phone rang at Sean's desk less than sixty seconds after he placed the call. He picked it up on the first ring. "We need T&A," he said. "ASAP."

“Nice to hear from you, too,” Gino said, with a post hot-tub calm. “Tell me.”

“Flesh deficit. Big Five only,” he said. They’d had the same conversation dozens of times. “So what do you know?”

“Julia is in Aruba with the twins, Brangelina is in Thailand, Britney is in Baja. Any of those work?”

Gino always knew. In a sick way, that impressed Sean. “Just get me the shots by day after tomorrow. I don’t care where you have to go.”

“Code Blue rules. Code Blue pay, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. Go.” Code Blue, the magazine’s screw-the-pay scale emergency mode, had made Gino one of the richest slime bags in his slimy business.

If Gino made good on one or two Code Blues a year—and he almost always scored more than that—he was in the black. For the Aniston dog-poop shot alone, the magazine paid him a hundred grand. First class airfare, four star hotels. It was worth it. He was newsstand gold.

Sean, on the other hand, was making seventy thousand dollars a year at the magazine, putting him just barely above the poverty line in New York City. Hand to mouth was pretty accurate. There was never anything left over for a splurge, a vacation, savings. If his in-laws weren’t paying, The Bradley School would never have been an option.

He dialed Rick. “Got it covered,” he announced. “Gino’s on it.”

He could hear the sigh of relief through the phone.

But Sean knew even Gino couldn’t deliver 100 percent of the time. Just to be safe, he opened his emergency folder. There was a “Separated at Birth” thing he’d put together that played off celebs who looked vaguely similar: Matthew McConaughey and a young Paul Newman, Kiera Knightley and Wynona Ryder. He also had a “Then and Now” story ready to go that compared high school yearbook photos with current shots of the stars. Then there was the

evergreen “Who Wore it Best” story that humiliated two actresses for having generic taste, then went ahead and mortified one of them for not wearing it well enough.

Stories fell out constantly at *Buzz*. Celebrity couples broke up, reconciled, and broke up again so fast, you never knew which story to run with. He knew how to drop in a new story on a dime.

The phone rang again. There were always two or three calls from Gino getting approval to hire assistants, drivers, escorts. The guy had balls. Sean approved it all.

He picked up the phone. “What?”

“Sean Benning?” *Beneeng*. The woman’s voice was French and throaty. It brought to mind black underwear.

“Uh, yeah?” How articulate.

“It is Camille Burdot, Burdot Gallery. You dropped off your portfolio last month?”

He’d pushed it out of his mind because nothing would ever come of it. “Right.” His voice came out sounding too high. He coughed and lowered it. “Should I come down and pick it up?”

“I think your work is quite interesting,” she said. “I would like you to come in for a meeting.”

Sean opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

“Mr. Benning? Did I lose you?”

*Deed I lose you?*

“No. I mean, I’m glad you like my work. When should I . . .”

“Tomorrow. How’s three o’clock?”

Three was not good. He and Toby were supposed to be baking an apple pie for Thanksgiving. “Three’s great.”

“See you then,” she said, and hung up.

As the shock wore off, a smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. Next came the victory dance that involved pelvic thrusts and pumping fists.

No way he could do a “Who Wore it Best” story after a conversation with Camille Burdot. It would be just his luck if she were one

of those French women with greasy hair, fuzzy armpits, and a two pack a day habit with teeth to match. He shook his head to dislodge the image and tried to get back to the black underwear.

Luckily, it was two forty-five. Time to pack up. No matter how much he hated his job, Sean was well aware that no other boss would let him get away with leaving this early on a regular basis.

“Women are the devil,” Rick had told him when Ellie left three months ago. He’d closed the door to his office and poured them each a glass of Johnny Walker Black from a bottle he kept tucked between hanging folders in his filing cabinet. It was 11 a.m. “Maddie dumped me six years ago. Ruined my fucking life,” he said. “I see my kids every other weekend.” Color rose in his grayish cheeks. He loosened his collar, then took a drink. “You get the work done, you can leave whenever you need to. Don’t let her wreck the kid’s life, too.”

Now, on his way out, Sean stuck his head around the glass door to Rick’s office. Rick was slashing copy with a red pencil. Maybe it was the residual effect of the *Economist* episode, but he used the red pencil instead of the computer whenever possible.

“We should have images day after tomorrow.” Sean wondered if he was still smiling.

“That’s why you earn the big bucks, buddy,” Rick said. The gruff act had already passed. “Say hi to your little genius for me.”

Sean hightailed it to Grand Central and was on the Lexington subway six-and-a-half minutes later. If he got on the train before two fifty-five, he could make it to school on time. If he missed the train by as little as forty-five seconds, he’d hit a gap in service and he’d suffer the consequences of *tardiness*. Every parent knew that being late to pick up your child from school was mortifying on numerous levels. Not only would your kid glare at you sullenly when you walked into the empty lobby, but the teacher, who’d invariably be checking her watch, would be pissed you were now using her for babysitting.

Today Sean caught the express train and was a full seven minutes early as he rounded the corner toward The Bradley School.

He had never understood the whole walking on air thing, but today he knew exactly what it was all about. He reached for the front door handle. Maybe he'd get his own show, invite Bradley parents, even Cheryl. Sure, he'd still have to work at *Buzz*—for a while—but now it really could be *on the side*. If he had his own show.

The chatter emanating from the mothers and nannies as soon as he got inside didn't even faze him today. The room was already human gridlock, filled with the deafening white noise of women gossiping, bragging, laughing. He liked pickup. He liked watching Toby's face light up when he found Sean in the crowd. Soon Toby would be a teenager and that unselfconscious smile would be buried under acne and angst.

"Sean!" a voice chirped at him. Isaac's mother.

What the hell was her name? Missy? Mousy? She'd been Class Mother for the last three years running and took the job way too seriously. He disliked her more than he thought was normal, but it was what it was.

"You're on my list," she said. Everything about her was precise—her ski jump nose, her lipstick, the demure blond ponytail fastened with a tortoise shell clip. Her teeth were inhumanly white. "I haven't received your thirty dollars for the holiday gifts."

Because he'd been dodging her for weeks. "I totally forgot." He opened his wallet and thumbed through its contents. He handed her a ten, two fives, and four ones. "I owe you six," he said. She accepted it as if it were pocket change and not his lunch money for the rest of the week. Come to think of it, he probably needed it more than the teachers.

He knew she was friendly with Cheryl. Could she have heard about the bathroom sex? He tried to read her but couldn't see much behind the Stepford stare.

She touched his arm with a manicured hand that sparkled with a monster diamond. "No word from Ellie?"

Hearing her say Ellie's name out loud gave him an odd muscle spasm in his intestine. Kind of like gas. He shrugged. The last

thing he was going to do was supply her with content for the class website.

“I’m so upset about what she’s done to you and Toby.” She shook her head disapprovingly. “She was such a hands-on mom. I don’t understand it.”

“It’s pretty simple,” he said. “She lost her shit.” She could print it if she wanted. Who cared anymore?

But she didn’t blink. “It’s extremely difficult for successful women to give up lucrative careers to be stay-at-home moms. When their kids get to this age, they feel downsized.” Her expression turned optimistic. “I suggested the Parents’ Association hire a guest speaker to do a breakfast chat on the topic.”

If it were legal to carry a handgun, he would brandish his now and happily pull the trigger. But then he’d get life without parole, and then where would Toby be? Laws were good.

Billy Horn’s very blond, very well-proportioned second wife, Deanna, sidled over to him. “Haayyyyy!” she squealed, and punched Sean’s shoulder playfully. She was wearing one of her trademark low-cut sweaters that highlighted her best attributes. “How *are* you? Fun party the other night, huh?”

What did she mean by that? Did she know something? “It was pretty good, yeah.”

Isaac’s mother saw another victim across the room and pounced, leaving him alone with the hottest—and most mind-numbingly boring—woman in the room. Making conversation with Deanna proved difficult on a good day, but he had no choice. “So,” he tried. “How’s it going?”

“Really super,” she said. “I just came from my Zumba class. Have you ever tried it?”

“Uh, no.” At the chorus concert earlier in the year, he’d lost an hour of his life listening to her drone on about the bran muffin she ate for breakfast, the new flip tops on toothpaste that “made a big mess on the sink,” and the pros and cons of DVR.

“I’ve already lost five pounds.” She patted her hips. Her boobs jiggled in an intriguing way. “Those Latin rhythms really get you going.” He scanned the crowd for a way out, but various mom gangs surrounded him, blocking every escape. To the right, the Power Brigade gesticulated madly. They were the Ivy Leaguers who’d quit their law and finance jobs to do the mommy thing but still led their lives with the aggressiveness they’d cultivated over decades of training. They scared the shit out of him. So did the Grannies, the clique-ish post-career mommies whose adopted Chinese, Vietnamese and Romanian children made up a good percentage of the school’s *diversity*. The Caribbean nannies clumped together looking disdainful and bored. He’d tried to speak to them a few times, but they always shut up when he got too close. And, near the bust of some hairbrush heiress who founded The Bradley School, were the Chanel-wearing stay-at-home moms in full makeup, who used lunch as a verb and devoted their waking hours to the gods of high-end retail, comparing thousand dollar handbags while they waited.

Then he spotted Cheryl. She was eyeing him as if he were a piece of beef jerky. He’d always wanted the power of invisibility when he was a kid. How could he have known it would prove even more useful as an adult? His stomach clenched. He forced an awkward smile. Maybe if he waved it would make the whole situation less horrible. He waved.

Cheryl flashed him a half smile. She was pretending to decide whether or not to rescue him from Deanna’s grasp. Maybe Deanna wasn’t so bad after all. For one thing, he’d never had drunken bathroom sex with her at a parent social. He turned back to Deanna. He’d try really hard to make conversation. His mind went blank. “Cold out there, huh?” It was lame, but it was something.

“Oh yeah,” Deanna said. “Brrr.” She crossed her arms, which squeezed her breasts together. “My dad moved to North Carolina. I like that weather. You know, coat weather, but not gloves and hat weather. Hats just do not work on me. No one from Florida can

wear hats. We're just not designed for them." She took a breath. "The other night at the party, my hair was just a smooshed mess because of that darn hat. I felt like I spent the whole night trying to poof it up."

He was glazing over when he realized Cheryl had made her way through the crowd and was heading toward them like a heat-seeking missile. A moment later, she thrust her body against his, pretending to bump him accidentally. "God, what a klutz I am!" she said. Her hand brushed his ass and lingered.

His reaction had to be just right. It would set the tone. "Not a problem," he said, as casually as he could. He put some distance between his ass and her hand. He gestured to Deanna. "You two know each other, right?"

"We sure do!" Deanna said perkily. "We did checkout at the book fair together. All that math!"

"Nice to see you," Cheryl said. Her voice was different when she spoke to women. Less throaty.

"We were just talking about the party," he said, hoping this was the way to go.

"It was super." Deanna nodded vigorously.

"I had a *very* nice time," Cheryl said. She locked eyes with Sean. "It was such an intimate gathering." Cheryl cocked her head, coquettishly. "And I'm sure the next party will be even better."

The next party. If she was talking about a *next* time, then he must've done all right. He stood a little straighter.

Deanna waved vigorously to someone behind him. A moment later, Walt Renard was standing next to her. "And how is everyone on this bitterly cold day?" Walt was rubbing his hands to warm them.

"Fantastic," Deanna said with a wink. "As always."

"What an excellent answer."

"I try." She flashed him a flirtatious smile.

"You'll all be at the auction, right?" Walt looked expectantly at Sean.

“The auction,” Sean repeated. He’d gone to the auction once. Ellie had won a family portrait session with Annie Leibovitz for eight hundred dollars, which they’d never used. A weekend on a private island in Greece had gone for ninety grand. “Depends on whether I can get a sitter.”

“I’m the emcee this year,” Walt said. “Don’t know if that makes it more or less appealing.”

“Oh I’ll be there.” Cheryl made it sound like a dare, somehow. “I’m on the committee. I have no choice.”

Walt checked his watch, which looked expensive. “Oh boy,” he said. “Late again. Gotta go!” He gave a bow and took off into the crowd.

“I just love him,” Deanna said. “What a nice guy.”

“And loaded,” Cheryl added. “He’s given more money to the school in the last five years than any other donor. And that’s a lot of money.”

“Didn’t his son graduate last year?” Deanna asked.

Cheryl nodded. “I’m pretty sure he’s going to an Ivy League.”

“But . . .” Sean couldn’t get his mind around this new bit of information. “If his son’s graduated, why’s he always around?”

Deanna made an expression that indicated she was thinking. He hadn’t seen it before. “He’s Chairman of the Board, right?”

“I don’t think he’s the Chairman,” Cheryl said. “But I might be wrong. He also does some pro bono work for the school. I know he’s got his own environmental law practice.”

Sean watched the kids shaking hands with their teachers. “Shall we?” Cheryl said, leading the way.

He retrieved Toby and was almost out the door when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Sean,” Bev Shineman said. Her down coat was unzipped, revealing a green cardigan that strained at the buttons. “Do you have a minute?”

“Is there news? About Calvin?”

“Can we talk in my office?” She smiled. “I’m sure Toby won’t mind waiting in the library.”

Shineman’s office was tiny and cluttered. There wasn’t a clear surface anywhere. “So how’s Calvin? What’s going on?”

“He’s hanging in there.”

He waited, expecting more. “Is he conscious?” Pulling teeth would have been easier than getting information from her.

Shineman took a deep breath and let it out ominously. “I should respect the privacy of the family.”

He wanted to shake her. “Come on, I was there. Tell me what’s going on.”

She considered this a moment. “It’s touch and go right now. He went into cardiac arrest last night, but they got him going again.”

*Touch and go.* For the first time since it happened, he realized Calvin could die. Really die. “What happened? Why? How?”

She hesitated, as if she wasn’t sure whether to confide in him. “It turns out Calvin had developed a severe nut allergy.”

“Calvin didn’t have any allergies,” Sean said.

“He’d never had a reaction until . . . well until the other day.” She shook her head again. “Kids grow out of allergies all the time. And sometimes they grow into them. Someone must have brought in a snack made with peanut oil that set it off. It’s just unfathomable that this could have happened.”

“If the paramedics had known . . .” His head was spinning. “About the allergies . . .”

“It might have made a difference in the way they treated him,” she said. “I know . . . It makes you feel so helpless.”

Calvin might die because he developed an allergy no one knew about. Talk about life not being fair. This was criminal. How could Calvin die? And how was he going to tell Toby if that happened?

Shineman sighed loudly in an attempt to leave the awful topic behind. “But that’s not why I wanted to talk to you.” There was a

shift in her tone. “I wanted to talk to you about an incident in the classroom today.”

“With Toby?” *Incident* could mean anything from a playground tussle to projectile vomiting. Once in preschool it had meant that another child bit Toby on the nose and had drawn blood. “Is he okay? What happened?”

“He’s fine. But another student was sent to Nurse Astrid with quite a scratch.”

“Toby scratched someone?” Toby liked to play around, but he was not a scratcher. Never had been.

“He didn’t scratch the child. He pulled a chair out from under her during social studies.”

“Who was it?”

“She scraped her back on the corner of the chair when she fell,” Shineman said. They never identified the victim. “I wouldn’t ordinarily talk to a parent over one isolated event, but it seems that Toby’s behavior is becoming an issue.”

“His *behavior*?”

“He’s got to stop horsing around.” She paused. “What do you think would drive him to do a thing like that?”

“Come on,” he said. “Seriously? Why would an eight-year-old boy pull a chair out from under an eight-year-old girl? You don’t need a degree to figure it out.”

Shineman didn’t see the irony and expressed that with an unamused stare.

“You’ve got a child unconscious in the hospital—a child who might die.” He hadn’t meant to yell. He tried to reel it in. “And you’re giving me grief about a scratch? A stupid prank?”

“Could you please keep your voice down?” Shineman scolded in a strict whisper. “I know Toby didn’t *mean* to hurt anybody.”

She didn’t know anything about his son.

“But this kind of behavior problem is a distraction to the rest of the class.”

“Toby does not have a *behavior problem*.” He didn’t care if everyone in the building heard.

Shineman sat quietly with her hands folded in her lap. Was she waiting for him to calm down? Because that was only infuriating him more. “You’re not helping him, you know.”

“Everything I do is to help him.”

“I’ve seen a lot of kids, Sean. Toby is easily distracted. It’s going to be hard for him to keep up with the other children academically. Which is going to prove to be a major issue for him if we don’t do something to help him now.”

He pushed himself up from the chair. “I’ve got to get Toby to tutoring,” he said, before she could launch into her medication rant again. She’d hit him with it three weeks ago and then again via Ellie, and he had no desire to go for a third round. “Wouldn’t want to be late for that.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

GETTING DOWNTOWN FOR TUTORING WASN'T SO BAD. EVEN THOUGH the East Village was a different world, the trip only consisted of a handful of stops on the Lexington line. Getting back to the Upper West Side during rush hour was less fun. More than once, he'd considered finding a more geographically desirable tutor, but the uptown tutors charged double Noah's fees. A hundred bucks an hour was pricey enough, plus Toby had liked Noah instantly, and Sean couldn't put a price on that.

Noah had several advanced degrees in education and was probably just a few years younger than Sean, but he exuded that just-out-of-college slack—threadbare jeans that hung off his hips, limp hair smoothed behind his ears. He threw “dude” around for good measure. Unlike the school, Noah had not been *concerned* when Toby was stumbling over his reading last year. “Kids learn this

stuff at different speeds,” he’d told Sean. “We can crank it up for Bradley’s sake, but don’t let them get to you. It’s all good.” As a rule, Sean hated the phrase *it’s all good*, but he focused on the fact that it meant Toby was fine.

Now, sitting with Toby on the downtown 6 train, Sean knew he was supposed to bring up the *incident*. Part of him wanted to just let it go. But Shineman had Toby in the crosshairs.

“So I heard about what happened in Social Studies,” he said.

Toby took a heavy breath.

“Spill it.”

“It was just a joke,” Toby said. “Kayla pushed a bouncy ball out from under me at roof-play and everyone laughed. So I did it back to her in the classroom.”

Tit for tat. Reasonable. “You can’t do that kind of stuff, Tobe.”

“I didn’t mean for her to get cut,” he said. You could tell he felt bad about it. “I took her down to the nurse. I think she’s going to be okay.”

Sean smiled even though he knew he should use the Serious Dad face he’d practiced for moments like this. He tried frowning a little, hoping that would do the trick.

“We’ve had this talk, Tobe. You can’t be silly in school.”

“It’s not fair,” Toby was whining now. “Kayla never gets in trouble. She pushes in line and the teacher yells at *me*. She makes funny faces in music and I get in trouble for laughing.”

Maybe it was time for the Life’s Not Fair speech? “Do me a favor,” he said. “For the next few weeks—until Christmas vacation—try extra hard to be good. That means no pranks, no giggling, no matter who’s making funny faces, and doing whatever the teacher tells you to do.”

“But dad—”

“Okay?”

An extra-wide Hasid with perfect ringlets that grazed his shoulders sat in the two seats next to Toby. When Toby had been three,

he'd seen a man wearing the same black orthodox-issue hat. "Look dad," he'd exclaimed, happily—and loudly, "a real live cowboy." The memory made Sean smile, in spite of his efforts to keep his Serious Dad face intact.

"Okay." Toby sighed, now sullen and tween-like. He avoided Sean's gaze and started shading in a drawing of a superhero he'd started earlier. It was good. The muscles rippled under the suit and he was fighting some creepy-looking wolf-dogs.

"I hate going to Noah."

"No you don't. You like it," Sean responded, in a brilliant moment of parenting.

"I can read already. Can't we skip it? Just today?"

He shook his head. "Negativo." He couldn't believe now that he was a father he said things like *negativo*.

"Only stupid kids go to tutoring."

"Who said that?"

Toby shrugged. Not telling. But he was sure it was Isaac. Isaac had actually started out okay. He and Toby were buddies that first year, but by the time he was seven, Isaac was rolling his eyes and calling kids morons when they gave the wrong answer in class. Interesting, Sean thought, that if a sweet, intelligent Bradley third grader was at third grade reading level it was a major disaster. But if a malicious, condescending Bradley third grader happened to have a genius IQ the school wrote off the bratty behavior as a personality quirk. In any other school in any other city, this kid would be pummeled on a daily basis. At Bradley, *he's* the bully.

"Hey. You're incredibly smart," he said. "You have a creative mind and you can think for yourself." As soon as he said it, it sounded like a consolation prize. "Besides, everyone can use help with something. I'd like to see Isaac try to draw a superhero like that."

Toby shrugged. Wouldn't look up. "When's Calvin coming back?"

“I don’t know, Tobe,” he said. “Soon, I hope.” Later in life, on the couch, Sean was pretty sure some therapist would refer to this period as *The Year Everyone Disappeared*. There was nothing he could do about it. Except stick around.

He rested a hand on Toby’s shoulder as they emerged from the subway into the East Village. After the buttoned-up, low-density Upper East Side, it was like landing on another planet. It was also the reason Sean didn’t mind the schlepp down here: to show Toby that they weren’t the only ones who lived in New York without a chauffeur-driven SUV and a fully-staffed townhouse. Down here, New York lifers and art students with pink hair and pierced tongues went about their business as if nothing—or at least nothing important—existed above Fourteenth Street. A six-foot transvestite in full makeup, mini dress, and what looked like size-thirteen heels, strutted back and forth in front of Lucky Chang’s. Toby’s eyes widened as they passed. He hadn’t asked yet, but it was only a matter of time. Sean really should have a good explanation ready to go.

Noah greeted them in front of the door of his fourth floor walk-up with a basketball under his arm. “Toby, dude, what up?”

Toby gave him a half smile and a high five as he entered what Noah called the “Arena.”

“Catch,” Noah said, and sent him a low bounce pass. Toby caught it, dribbled on the scuffed wood floor, and took a shot on the regulation-size hoop. Sometimes he and Noah shot baskets between reading drills. Three bar stools at the dinette counter constituted the entirety of Noah’s home furnishings. Sometimes Noah would make Toby spell vocabulary words as he took free throws. Sometimes he’d have Toby read a story, then ask him comprehension questions while he dribbled.

“I’ve got some good stuff planned for today,” Noah told Toby. “You’re gonna like it.”

This was Sean’s cue to give a quick wave and disappear for an hour while Noah worked his magic. “Do you have a minute?” he asked instead.

They stepped into the fluorescent light of the stairwell and he could hear Toby dribbling inside. The downstairs neighbors had to be deaf not to hear, too.

“You said Toby’s doing well, right?” He tried to sound nonchalant. Or at least not like the insane parents Noah was probably used to dealing with.

“He’s doing great.”

Sean untensed his shoulders. Toby was doing great.

“His reading comprehension is way up,” Noah said. “It’s all coming together for him. I’m stoked.”

If Noah was stoked, how bad could it be? “The school is on him again. They say he’s falling behind.”

“Those fuckers,” Noah said. He was biting the inside of his lip, staring at a smashed cockroach on the wall. “Toby is a smart kid. He’s a *very* smart kid. I know he’s not into reading on his own yet. That’s the key. But you can’t force that. He’s got to want it. Keep reading to him. Make it fun. The more of a chore it becomes the longer it will take.” He ran his fingers through his hair.

It all sounded so reasonable when Noah said it. “Those Bradley kids are reading Proust,” Sean said. “Toby can’t sit still for Cam Jansen.”

“Those perfect Bradley boys—and yeah, I know there are a lot of them—are the exception, not the rule. Back in caveman times they wouldn’t have survived five minutes. They’d have been Sabertooth tiger dinner. No joke.”

He liked the image of Isaac scratching away at the sand with his spear, discovering calculus or the cure for cancer, not noticing a puma as it leapt on him and ripped out his little jugular.

“Boys need to move around. We’re hunters, man. It’s genetic. We’re wired with quick reflexes for hunting, strength for hauling. Testosterone—we all know what that’s for. None of those things make what these schools call a *good student*.”

“Tell that to Bev Shineman.”

“She knows. They all do. Boys and girls learn differently,” Noah said. “It’s a scientific fact. But the schools don’t want to deal with that. They’re treating boys like defective girls. It sucks. It truly sucks.”

The whole thing sounded hopeless. “Maybe I should just cut my losses and take him out of Bradley.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Noah frowned, disapprovingly. “He’s at the best school in the city.”

SEAN KICKED AROUND THE NEIGHBORHOOD. REGULARS WERE already nursing beers in a dim bar with sawdust on the floor. A hole-in-the-wall boutique was selling underwear made out of recycled rubber, and a pricey new comfort food restaurant advertised mac and cheese for eighteen bucks a plate.

Why was Sean making both their lives miserable? Staying at Bradley meant asking for more abuse from Bev Shineman and subjecting Toby to intellectual bullies like Isaac. But Noah had a point. What were his options, really? Was he really going to move to the suburbs? Every day he woke up and thanked God he didn’t have to live in the suburbs.

Not that he could afford to move, even if he wanted to. At nine hundred dollars a month, his apartment was the best deal in the city, and for a pre-war doorman building, it was obscene. A two-bedroom that *wasn’t* rent-stabilized went for two or three thousand dollars. And even if he decided to sell his soul and move to the suburbs, there was no way he could afford a down payment. He was staying put.

He walked a few more blocks and found himself in front of P.S. 15. Someone had scrawled *suk my dick* on the building’s puke-colored cinderblocks. Mesh wire encased every window. He tried to decide whether it was to keep out the residents of the sketchy neighborhood or to lock the kids in. So it was ugly. Institutional. Kids all over the country went to crappy schools just like this.

And public schools in New York weren’t *all* crappy. There were magnet schools and gifted and talented programs. Lots of lower

schools were fine. Better than fine. His niece, Kat, seemed to be doing great at P.S. 163. The problem was that there were something like five decent *middle* schools in the entire borough and a zillion kids trying to get into them. Not all private school parents were rich. He knew plenty who were borrowing from their own parents and taking out second mortgages on their apartments. They knew the hundred and eighty thousand dollars it cost for K through five was worth every penny if it meant their kid would be guaranteed a place in private middle school when it came time.

It was the reason he'd finally agreed to let his in-laws pay for Bradley. Ellie had made the lethal argument: "Don't you want Toby to have the best education money can buy?" What could he say to that? Of course he did, even if it meant he would be endlessly humiliated every time he opened a tuition bill that he couldn't pay.

Now Toby had the best education at the best school in the city, maybe even the country, and apparently they didn't know how to teach boys. It was hard to imagine how that could really be true.

What killed Sean was that he knew it was just a matter of time before school clicked for Toby. It had been the same way for him. None of it had made sense in second or third grade. If he pulled Toby out now, it was like giving up on him before it all fell into place. But if he kept Toby at Bradley and there was no magic moment where it all came together, there was a decent chance Toby would fall even further behind—or worse, fail out. And that could shatter his confidence forever. Basically, he was screwed if he did and screwed if he didn't.

## CHAPTER SIX

SEAN HADN'T FULLY OPENED THE DOOR TO HIS APARTMENT WHEN his sister's voice barreled down the hallway. "Where've you two been?" Nicole's tone was always a little scary. At least he was used to it.

He gave Toby a pat on the back. "Homework. Go." Toby trudged to his room.

Nicole's pumps lay where she'd kicked them off. She was reclining on the couch reading *The New York Law Journal*.

"You, too," he said to his sister. "Go, you'll be late." Thursdays were insane. As soon as he got Toby home from tutoring, Nicole went back to work and left Kat with them.

"I'm off tonight," she said. "They had to wait until the last minute to tell me, those assholes."

Over the years, Nicole's thighs had thickened and gray strands had crowded out the brown in her short haircut. She'd always been

a tomboy, and now, as an adult, she'd embraced a butch look that worked for her. Her official orientation was heterosexual, but non-sexual seemed more fitting.

"And my class is canceled next week," he said. "Don't forget." The gig at the Art Students League paid him just enough to cover one-sixth of a shared painting studio downtown. Without Ellie around to stay with Toby, he hardly used it anymore. But he refused to give it up.

"Mommy!" Kat was sobbing as she ran out of Toby's bedroom. Her bony little legs looked like they might crumple from the exertion. Kat embodied everything her mother lacked in girliness. She played with dolls, wore pink daily, and wanted to be a ballerina when she grew up. Nicole would shrug her shoulders. "She must get it from her father."

Nicole got knocked up during a one-night stand around the same time Ellie got pregnant. He and Ellie used to call it the immaculate conception because neither of them could imagine Nicole having sex or anything approaching a relationship. She was far more comfortable in a prosecutorial role.

"Kiddo, what is it?" Nicole reached out and pulled in her daughter. "Calm down. What's wrong?" Kat tried to catch her breath. Her face was a streaky mess. "He called me . . . he called me a COOL."

"Well that doesn't sound so bad." Nicole smoothed back a strand of her hair.

"Not cool," Kat said. "A COOL."

Nicole and Sean eyed each other. What were they missing?

Toby skulked guiltily out of his room.

"Toby says a C-C-COOL," Kat stuttered, "is a Constipated, Overweight, Out-of-style Loser." She burst into tears.

He had to admit the insults had gotten more creative since he'd been in school. "Toby," he said. "Over here. Now."

Toby let out a defeated sigh. "What?"

Sean raised his eyebrows. No need for more.

“Sorry Kat,” Toby said. “You’re not a COOL.”

Kat’s lower lip was still trembling. “Really?”

“Yeah, you’re a JERK.”

“Mom!” Kat was ready to unleash another flood.

“Toby,” he now used the Ultra Serious Dad voice he reserved for serious infractions. “Go to your room.”

“No dad, a JERK is a good thing,” Toby said defensively. “It’s a Junior Educated Rich Kid. There’s also PERK, which is a Perfectly Educated Rich Kid. That’s what I am.”

Sean stared at his offspring, unable to control his jaw, which had gone slack. Forget the fact that Toby was not rich. If he was going to go around telling people outside of Bradley that he was rich and perfectly educated, well, he was going to get the crap kicked out of him. But this probably wasn’t the moment to get into that.

Nicole rocked Kat. Her glare screamed disapproval.

“Enough with the acronyms,” he said to Toby. “Apologize.”

“But . . .” Toby started. He looked at Sean, then at Nicole, and decided not to push it. “Sorry Kat,” he said. It was less than convincing. But it would have to do.

“And no more name calling,” he said. “Last warning.”

They dragged their feet down the hallway. Before they turned the corner into Toby’s room, Kat stuck out her tongue. “Told you you’d get in trouble,” she taunted. Toby just shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“Bradley kids—future leaders of the free world,” Nicole mumbled. “Nice.”

Obviously Bradley had its drawbacks. He’d never planned on sending his kid to private school. And Ellie—always up for rejecting her past—had been fine with the idea of public school. They were all set to do it. Somehow Ellie’s mother had convinced them to take a look.

“Bradley has changed,” Maureen had said. She was your classic volunteer lady—the thing Ellie was most afraid of turning into.

“You’ll see. It’s very *with it*. They have minorities now—scholarship students from Queens and the Bronx.” To Maureen and Ellie’s father, Dick, the outer boroughs were exotic and volatile, much like third world countries. Sean couldn’t remember now why they’d agreed to take the tour.

“At Bradley we focus on the *whole child*,” Mimsy Roach had said with feeling as she guided prospective parents from the gymnasium to the black box theater. “Each child’s differences make her unique.” The use of *her* had thrown him, but he tried to stay with Mimsy’s spiel. “Different ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, learning styles, we welcome it all,” she went on. “That’s what makes this place stand out from all the other independent schools. We don’t only *accept* diversity. We *crave* it.”

Mimsy was a walking billboard for the place. With casual asides like, “There’s no challenge we don’t love,” and “our primary goal is to teach children to give back to the community,” everything that came out of her mouth was exactly what you wanted to hear. She let it slide toward the end of the tour that she’d graduated from Bradley and rushed back to work at the school after matriculating to Wellesley.

By the end of the tour, every parent was sold on the place. Suddenly, neither Sean nor Ellie could imagine sending Toby to a school that *didn’t* have a state-of-the-art computer room, cutting-edge science labs, a competition pool, and a professional art studio. Ignoring, for the moment, the joy they knew it would bring Maureen and Dick (who never tired of wearing his Bradley ‘53 varsity sweater), they found themselves being swept up in the excitement. They decided to go for it. When they got Toby’s acceptance letter, they jumped up and down and shrieked with joy. They couldn’t help feeling like they’d won the lottery.

“You’re spending tens of thousands of dollars,” Nicole said now, “or should I say tens of thousands of dollars are being spent—so Toby can learn to be a snob.”

“I could send him somewhere I could afford,” Sean said. “But you of all people know you get what you pay for.” This hit her where he knew it would hurt.

Nicole had decided to save on student loans by choosing an affordable law school. At eight thousand dollars a year, University of Buffalo seemed like the perfect choice. “Suckers,” she’d say, when her friends graduated from Yale and Harvard strapped with one hundred and fifty thousand dollars of debt.

When it came time to apply for jobs, it turned out that Nicole was, in fact, the sucker. The big New York law firms—and the six-figure salary she’d been counting on—dried up when they saw SUNY Buffalo on her resume. Maybe if she’d been on *Law Review* or at the top of her class or something it would have been different, but Nicole had had to work two jobs just to pay the discounted tuition plus room and board.

Her job as an Assistant District Attorney wasn’t bad, but the pay was. She lived on 155th Street and was barely getting by. Luckily, Kat had gotten into the G&T program at P.S. 163—New York-speak for “Gifted and Talented.” In theory, it was an “enriched” curriculum available free to any four-year-old who scored high enough on a standardized kindergarten exam, but it was still public school, which meant money was always tight. As a result, music and art—anything extra—flew out the window in lieu of things like lunch and toilet paper.

Sean was breaking his one rule with Nicole: do not under any circumstances get her started on school. Not only did she have a gigantic chip on her shoulder, but she was also an excellent litigator, not to mention she’d been trained to go for the jugular by the D.A., and by their parents before that.

“At least I’m not taking handouts from my in-laws,” she said.

“Nice,” he said. “What’s up with you tonight?”

“I’m on the rag.”

“Well back off. I’ve had a hard day.”

Nicole’s body language changed. “What happened?”

Sean shrugged away the question.

Nicole narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice. “Did you hear from Ellie again?”

“No.” He said it defensively.

Ellie had been sending postcards to Toby from all over the country as she got progressively farther away from home. The last one had come from Santa Fe. But she’d only bothered to call Sean three times since she’d been gone. Once to say she was okay—that she’d gone off the Prozac and was no longer staying up all night and dropping a thousand dollars a day (that he was still paying off) on Internet purchases. But she didn’t want to come home. Not yet. She told him not to worry. But not to call either. It was temporary, she said. “I’m not sure I want to leave you.” The statement had been as reassuring as a two by four to the solar plexus.

The second time she’d called she was crying hysterically and slurring her words. “I’m a bad mother,” she’d said.

“So come home,” he said and hung up. It seemed to have completely escaped her that she’d abandoned him, too. The third time had been the other night at the parent social.

The last miscarriage had pushed Ellie over the edge. He hadn’t been convinced another kid was even a good idea—the cost, for one thing—but when Ellie realized how hard it would be to get back into network television at an executive level, she decided to bag the job search and throw herself into another six years of the super-mom thing. It would be great for Toby to have a sibling, she’d argued, until he agreed. She waged a highly orchestrated attack involving ovulation kits, waiting thirty-six hours between “tries” as the doctor called what had become of their sex life, and elevating her legs in the air for twenty minutes afterwards. It took almost a year to get pregnant. Ellie was devastated when she lost the baby ten weeks in. It took another year to get pregnant again. When she had another miscarriage, she sunk even deeper. He’d tried to stop the “trying” then. But when he suggested that maybe a second child wasn’t in the cards, that they

were good the way they were, Ellie became even more focused on success. “I’m not giving up,” she’d said, as if sheer will and hard work were going to make the difference. “We can do this.” The two other pregnancies ended almost before they started. She managed to take Toby to school in the mornings before crawling back into bed for the rest of the day. She stopped shaving her legs and shopping for groceries. He told her he loved her, that they didn’t need another baby. He kept telling her that their family was perfect the way it was. He cooked her dinner and combed her hair, but Ellie couldn’t shake it. She was depressed.

He took her to a shrink. The Prozac helped her get out of bed. Three months later, she left him.

“So if it’s not Ellie, what is it?” Nicole had tossed the *Law Journal* on the table and was gearing up to hound him. “Is it work? Wait, don’t tell me. You have to do a layout of Brad Pitt’s colonoscopy.”

“Funny.” Sean went into the kitchen and grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge.

“So it’s school. Let me guess . . .”

This was not a fun game. “Just drop it, okay?”

But Nicole didn’t drop things unless she wanted to. “Let’s see, they want Toby to start training now for the SATs.”

He handed her a beer.

“They’re worried because he’s not in AP physics yet and he’s falling behind the 11th graders.”

“Okay. I get it.”

“He’s in too many after school activities.” She was on a roll now. “He’s not in enough after school activities.”

He took a drink, and tried to ignore her.

Nicole plowed ahead. “His advanced artwork is taking time from his advanced math so they’d like to give him extra help and maybe throw in some study drugs to get him up to speed.”

He stared at her, annoyed but slightly impressed. She took a sip of beer and raised her eyebrows as if to say, *Am I close?*