

ONE

JULIAN

THERE IS A room in this school that no one knows about but me. If I could teleport, I'd be there now. Maybe if I just concentrate—

“Julian.” Mr. Pearce says my name sharp enough to make me flinch. “You’re less than a month into high school, and you’ve missed your English class *six* times.”

I’m sure I’ve missed more than that, but I guess no one realized I was gone.

The principal leans forward, two fists wrapped around his tall, twisted cane. It has a little creature carved at the top, and I’ve heard other kids talk about it, wondering if it’s a gnome or troll or a tiny replica of Mr. Pearce himself. This close, I can see the resemblance.

“Look at me!” he shouts.

I’m not sure why people want you to look at them when they’re angry with you. That’s when you want to look away the most. But when I do what he says, the windowless office seems to shrink, and I shrink along with it. A microscopic boy underneath Mr. Pearce’s gaze.

“It’d be a lot easier for you to look someone in the eye if you got a

haircut.” He glares harder when I start pushing my hair out of my face. “Why haven’t you been going to class?”

“I . . .” I clear my throat. “I don’t like it.”

“What was that?”

People are always telling me to repeat myself or speak up. The main reason I don’t like English is because Miss Cross makes everyone read out loud, and when it’s my turn, I stumble over my words, and she tells me I’m too quiet.

Knowing this, I pitch my voice a little louder. “I don’t like it.”

Mr. Pearce lifts two gray brows, looking completely stunned. “Do you really think not *liking* a class is reason not to go?”

“I . . .” For everyone else, talking just seems to come naturally. When someone says something, they automatically know what to say back. But for me it’s as if the pathway between brain and mouth is damaged, like a rare form of paralysis. I can’t speak, so instead I fiddle with the plastic tip of my shoelace.

“Answer my question! Is not liking a class a good reason not to go?”

I know what I think, but people don’t want you to say what you think. They want you to say what *they* think. And knowing what that is isn’t easy.

The principal rolls his eyes. “Look at me, young man.”

I look up into his flushed face. He grimaces, and I wonder if his knee or back is hurting him the way they always seem to be. “I’m sorry,” I tell him, and his whole face softens.

Then all of a sudden, his bushy brows come together, and he slaps open a file folder with my name on it. “I should call your parents.”

My shoelace slips from my frozen fingers.

His lips curl into a smile. “You know what does my heart good?”

I manage to shake my head.

“Seeing that particular look of fear cross a student’s face when I say I’m going to call home.” He lifts the phone to his ear. He and his little wooden monster watch me as the seconds tick by. Then slowly, he pulls the phone away. “I suppose I don’t have to call . . . if you promise that I’ll never see you in here again.”

“I promise.”

“Then get to class.”

Out in the hall, I try to breathe, but I’m still shaky the way you’d be if you were nearly clipped by a speeding car but you leaped out of the way at the very last second.

When I enter Child Development, all the girls lift their heads like a herd of deer sensing danger. Then, the second they see me, they look away as if I was never there at all.

Since I’m late, I have to stand in front while Miss Carlisle glares at my tardy slip. Even though no one is looking at me, I can’t stop thinking that my hair is too long and my jeans are too short and my shirt is too small and everything I’m wearing is ugly and worn.

“I already marked you absent.” Miss Carlisle sighs. She’s probably even older than Mr. Pearce, with hair that might have once been blond and eyes that might have once been bright blue before she faded like a photograph. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

I know the new online attendance system is stressful for her, because she tells us almost every day. “I’m sorry,” I say.

“It’s fine.” She slumps, her posture weary. “I’ll take care of it.”

As I’m heading to my seat in the back, the only other boy in class, Jared, waves to get my attention. “I’ll see you on the bus today, right?” he says.

I don't answer.

Miss Carlisle announces that we have to complete the assignments in groups, so everyone shouts the names of the people they want, and they pull their desks into circles.

I'm probably the only person in the school who hates it when the teacher lets us choose our own groups. I lower my head to my desk and close my eyes. I used to think that if I concentrated, I could make myself disappear. I don't exactly believe that anymore, but sometimes I still have to try.

"Julian," Miss Carlisle says, "you are really pushing it today. Find a group." I glance around at the ones that have formed, a tight anxious knot in my stomach. "Just join the group closest to you."

Closest to me is Kristin, a girl who looks a little bit like a goldfish with her orange hair and bulging eyes. She sends me a bruising glare, and I feel like I'm wearing a defective invisibility cloak—a device that works perfectly until I do something stupid.

I met Kristin at the beginning of school this year. In first period, she tapped my shoulder and asked if I was reading an Elian Mariner book. I nodded, wary, because no one ever starts conversations with me. But when she asked what it was about, my words just spilled out. Yes, it was an Elian Mariner book, probably my favorite in the entire series. Kristin kept nodding and asking questions, and she said her sister loved those books. Then she added, "My sister's *seven*."

When everyone around us started laughing, I hid the book in my backpack. It wasn't until my next class that I noticed it was missing. Then in sixth period, I was returning from sharpening my pencil, and there it was, sitting on my chair.

I opened it to find that every illustration had been desecrated with black Sharpie. Drawings of penises were jutting up from Elian's pants,

and floating penises were pointed at his mouth. Eyes stinging, I looked up to find the entire class watching me. I caught Kristin's fish eyes in the crowd, then she fell headfirst into her desk, shaking with laughter.

"Julian!" Miss Carlisle calls out now. "Move."

I quickly drag my desk to join the girls.

"So, *Violet, Jen,*" Kristin says, "should we split things up?"

I pretend not to notice that she's excluding me and open my textbook.

"Okay," Violet answers. "Julian, did you want to—"

"I want a good grade on this," Kristin interrupts her. "Let's just divide it between us."

Violet doesn't answer, and I keep pretending I can't hear.

After the final bell, it looks like someone kicked over a beehive. Kids are swarming and flying in a thousand different directions. There's a sudden explosion of noise—talking and cell phones beeping. But I stand frozen at the top of the steps just outside the school.

My father is leaning against a tall tree across the street.

When I was little, my mother was usually the one who picked me up, but every now and then Dad would get off early and surprise me. Instead of joining the pickup line of cars, he'd meet me on foot. His hands were always blotted with ink, like a child's after finger painting, and he'd say, *It's too nice a day not to walk.* He'd say that even if it was raining.

But of course the man across the street isn't actually my father. It's just some trick of the sunlight filtering through the branches on a jogger who stopped to catch his breath.

I stand here, heavy now.

So heavy that the tall steps become a mountain to climb down.

So heavy that it takes a while to summon the energy to start the long walk home.

Ten blocks from school, I start to shiver. Autumn is here, but it seems too soon. Almost like I skipped over the last three months because there are certain things that are supposed to happen every summer.

I'm supposed to go to the beach with my parents. We're supposed to see fireworks and buy sparklers and find seashells. I'm supposed to stay up late and sit on the front porch eating popsicles while my mother plays the guitar and my father draws. Then as he's tucking me into bed, he's supposed to ask, *How many stars?*

On a great day I'm supposed to say nine or ten. But if it was amazing, the best day I ever had, I'm supposed to cheat and say something like ten *thousand* stars.

But we didn't get to see fireworks or eat popsicles or do any summer things, and I have this ache inside, like how you might feel if you slept through Christmas.

The same heaviness I felt after school reappears the minute I walk inside the empty house. Every inch of it is dark, glossy, and neat. Every piece of furniture is strategic. Every color is coordinated by someone trained to do it. It's exactly the sort of house I thought I wanted . . . until I got it.

I enter my room with its polished wood floors, desert-brown walls, and heavy furniture. My eyes are pulled to the only thing out of place—the big steel trunk at the foot of the bed. My parents got it for me to take to camp the summer I turned nine. They told me I was brave to go off on my own, but I got so homesick I couldn't even make it through the first night.

I drop my backpack to the floor and lift the trunk's heavy lid. My heart squeezes as I look down at all the things I love: photo albums and Elian Mariner books and my mother's green spiral notebook. I leave that untouched for today and fish around for my own notebook. I flip a few pages, then pick up where I left off.

It's hours later when I drop my pen at the sound of a car pulling into the garage. It's after eight o'clock, but sometimes my uncle gets home even later. And sometimes, if he has to go meet with clients in other cities, he doesn't come home at all.

I watch my bedroom door, the way the light from the hall shines around the perimeter like an entryway to another dimension. I listen for the sound of him climbing the stairs to his office, because even when he's home, he's usually working.

Instead, I see a shadow fall beneath my door.

I close my eyes, but I can't teleport, and I can't disappear.

My uncle Russell once told me he used to be so tall and willowy that when his high school theater put on *A Christmas Carol*, he was asked to play the grim reaper. I've tried to picture it, but it's hard to imagine he was ever frail.

Russell doesn't speak, just lifts the conch that sits on top of my dresser and turns it slowly in his hands. His fingers are long and thin like stretched putty.

"Getting homework done?" he finally asks.

"Yes," I answer, and immediately feel guilty. It's late and he's just getting home from work, still neatly dressed with a tie around his neck, while I haven't even opened my backpack yet.

He returns the conch to its place, then takes the notebook from my hands. He squints at it, turning it upside down, then sideways,

then right side up again. He does this sometimes, a sort of joke about my terrible handwriting.

“What is this?” he asks.

“A book report.”

He gives me a sharp look, and I’m afraid he can tell I’m lying. I peek up at the deep fault lines in his forehead and under his eyes, trying to read him. Some nights when he comes home, usually after he’s been gone for a few days, he can seem drowsy, relaxed, almost like he just finished a big meal.

Other nights it’s as if there’s something moving just beneath his skin, something crawling and scratching to get out. On those nights it would be better to hear his office door shut. Lonely and locked out, but still better.

His mouth twists to the side in an almost smile. “You misspelled *sinister*.” He drops my notebook to the floor. “Come into the kitchen.”

I follow him to the other room, where he opens a take-out container. He stands at the black granite countertop, slicing his steak with a sharp knife and eating dripping red bites. The house is quiet except for the distant metal thumping of the water heater, like the sound the dryer makes if you leave coins in your pocket.

“Your principal called me today.” Russell’s voice is deep, calm, and steady, but his words prompt a heavy thumping in my chest. Mr. Pearce said he wouldn’t call if I promised to go to class, and I’d promised.

For just a second the image of my father standing to meet me outside the school flickers behind my eyes.

“Are you listening to me?”

I nod hastily, ashamed. I don’t work hard enough. Not like Russell, who works harder than anyone I know. He’s had to ever since his

dad died when he was seventeen. Again I try to picture a young, frail Russell, but I can't.

He slices the steak and takes another red bite. "How long have you lived here?"

My stomach goes cold, like I've swallowed winter. He's going to kick me out. I've pulled this one too many times, and he's done. "I'm sorry."

"That's not what I asked you."

"Four years."

"In all that time, what's the only thing I've asked of you? What's our only agreement?"

"That you can trust me."

"And?" He takes another bite.

"You can trust me to do the right thing."

"And?"

"You won't have to look into what I'm doing."

"I don't ask too much of you, do I?" All the feeling that's not in his voice starts jumping in the vein in his neck.

"No."

"I understand your . . . limitations. I don't expect A's from you. I don't even expect B's. But sitting in a classroom isn't too difficult, is it?"

"No."

"I don't like getting called by your school. I want to be able to trust you."

"I'm sorry." I really am.

He sets the knife next to the clean bone. "Go get it."