

The Packing House

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It has been said, "Time heals all wounds." I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it is never gone.		
	—Rose Kennedy	

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Part I—Broad Run High School Home of the Panthers

1 | Monster

At the bell, I head to study hall, my last class. There's a substitute today. Cell phones come out. Someone has their iPod up way too high. In a way, I feel sorry for the sub; as a job, it has to be right up there with garbage collector. I prop a book between me and my backpack then close my eyes, which have been slamming shut all day.

The next thing I know, the substitute is standing over me, his hand on my shoulder, shaking me awake. Someone sniggers nearby.

"Wake up, young man. There's no sleeping in study hall."

Pushing my glasses back into place, I look up and try to get my eyes to adjust and stay open; I blink a few times and look around wildly. *What an idiot.* I even forgot where I was for a moment. A flush of warmth starts at my ears and neck before sliding across my cheeks.

"All right, I'm up."

Whispers erupt in various places around me as I sit up and rub my eyes. Someone laughs. My desk is askew. Something smells bad. *Sulfur*. Odd... the realization hits me hard.

A female voice remarks, "If I were him, I'd be totally embarrassed!"

"What's your name?" the substitute asks quietly.

"Joel Scrivener."

The substitute leans down. "Joel? You might want to speak with a counselor about those dreams." "What do you mean?"

He leans closer, lowers his voice. "You kept saying, 'get off me, stop touching me, get off me,' over and over."

He gives me what he must think is a reassuring smile. Then he leaves.

The only thing worse than getting caught asleep in study hall: getting caught asleep *and* crying out from a bad dream in study hall.

There's more whispering, but this time it crackles nearby. A recording—presumably of me—replays the sound of me jerking around in my chair, desk legs scraping against the floor, then "Get OFF me!" and "Stop TOUCHING meeee!"

The bell rings.

Down the hallway, students gather in odd clumps, skittering away from me like I'm the monster. A cacophony of whispers follows a chorus of aborted cackles; I hear my voice playing over and over, like my life jammed on repeat. I'm too stunned to reply, even when Shampoo Girl, who rides my bus, tries to stop me. I'm not good with names. We move too much for them to matter. This girl is heavyset, plain, with nice hair. I like how it smells if I sit behind her on the bus. Shampoo Girl. She's one of the few I've caught glaring at my attackers when I'm dropped into the lunchroom trashcan or tripped with an armful of books between classes. She hasn't said anything to my attackers, like that punk from Algebra II, but her quiet defiance is at least reassuring. Not that I've thanked her or acknowledged her for that.

"Joel? Joel, are you okay?" I definitely don't deserve her sympathy; instead, I look back down the hall.

My own brother Jonathan is with his swim team posse and says, "I can't believe you dudes got this," before he sees me.

"Izzat rilly yer bro, man?" asks a blond-haired skater-punk friend of Jonathan's, pointing at his cellphone. They must be watching the video of me from study hall just like everyone else. *Man, that traveled fast*. On the far end, cackling like a fiend, my brother Jonathan laughs at his best friend Elias' reaction, who is doubled over and turning purple. Skaterdude is on this end, sputtering and waving his arms like he's

imitating me from the video. Between the other two is Elias. *God, I hate him sometimes*. Why does he stick his nose where it doesn't belong?

"You still owe me a fiver for the Terror Bet," Jonathan says, slapping the back of his hand on Skaterdude's chest. He should've kept our energy drink bet private, between the two of us, but instead I imagine he thought he'd impress his posse and make a few bucks. *So he bet off me, did he?* Jonathan looks up and sees me staring right at him. He tosses up two fingers after bouncing them off his chest like a salute to his homies, although I'm clearly not one of them. I'm just his loser brother.

It doesn't matter.

He's right. Jonathan must think of me as another one of his casualties just like *him*. I'm a cast-off, like Terror Man, my mother's latest boyfriend. To Jonathan, Terror Man and I are just accessories on his social status climb. Even after our most recent beating for touching the shrine of Terrors, Jonathan dared me to try to steal one without getting caught. I thought he was just looking out for me since I haven't been sleeping much, but I guess I was wrong. If I can't tell the difference between someone being nice or using me, I wonder how I will ever fix things with Amber Walker, the only girl I've ever wished was more than friends.

No turning back now. My social life is officially over. I wonder how long it will take until everyone hears, and probably sees, a cell phone clip of my nightmare.

Only I can't wake up from this one.

I don't plan to collapse on my frameless mattress late that night. By the time I'm fully out.., I'm already drifting down a vaguely familiar set of stone stairs, before I realize the déjà vu—at first a cold tingle then a white-hot shudder that seeps down my spine. As it dissipates, I continue down, despite the thrumming in my ears.

Firelight dapples across shadowed walls near the bottom. Cold air gusts past, chills me until my teeth rattle, and almost blows out the torches. The room opens to the right, but I can't see around the corner.

As I step into the guttering light, I'm knocked on my face so fast I barely get my hands out to break my fall. I gasp for breath beneath this tremendous weight. There's no getting away. Sharp pain bursts along my ribs.

From its grip, I get a twinge in my spine, sharp stings that shoot up my back and spread out across both shoulder blades. Whatever is behind me is huge. Its hulking mass presses me down into the ground. I sure as hell don't dare move.

"C'mere, Joel!" the deep voice snarls against my ear.

I wake up.

Sometimes I wake screaming. *How does it know my name?* My mother has found me a few times that way; about as comforting as getting caught jerking off under blankets.

When she finds me like that, I roll toward the wall and mumble about a bad dream. *I'll be fine. Go back to bed. Please don't ask any more.* I'll never live this down if my mother holds my hand and chases away some boogeyman. I've got to figure this out. Better to man-up than be labeled a loser. At least Jonathan's still asleep. I don't need him betraying me any further.

If I could, I'd squeeze my eyes shut and will myself back to sleep. What if that thing is there? The stone stairs. The horrible, personal things it says. The sweat-rot stench of sulfur. I'd rather stare at the blurry ceiling all night. Besides, questions begin to swirl, threatening to keep me awake indefinitely. There's at least three hours until it's time to get up for school. I might have a test. Better not think too much.

Next thing I know, it's light; the roof of my mouth is sandpapery, I've got rank morning breath, and, if I don't get to the bathroom right now, I'm going to have a waterbed for sure.

I have to limp my way there, momentarily forgetting about our lecture at the hands of Terror Man last night. I don't like him. He's always in our faces. Always trying to prove what a man he is when he slams us against the wall or some shit.

He's nice enough when he's not railing on Jonathan and me for drinking his Terrors.

As I find relief in the bathroom, I start to wonder about this latest nightmare. Then I grab a shower, wincing when the tender spots in my back come under the flow. Maybe I should've let Jonathan take the brunt of it all, since he made the bet, but I couldn't live with myself if I hadn't intervened. I thought he was gonna kill Jonathan this time. What a nightmare. Which reminds me: I've got too many memory gaps to make sense of it all. I need to figure out their source. The root cause.

It's not for lack of trying.

I've scoured every book on nightmares I can find. One said the mind is a strange muscle that remembers every ache. Nightmares are a way we revisit each painful experience, circling back to make sense of what happened. That still doesn't explain how the creature knows me well enough to snarl my name. *Is it someone I know?* I glance at the clock. No time to dwell; the bus'll be here any minute. Time to get dressed and head downstairs.

My mother is at work, and Jonathan went in on the early bus for swim team. I grab breakfast and ibuprofen and then head for the street corner. My hand lands on the last two cans in my backpack. I'd forgotten all about the Terrors. *Jonathan*. I'd toss them back in the fridge if I weren't already at the bus stop.

Might as well. Chugging the first one down, I collect weird looks as I let the burp rip. Jonathan still got pretty roughed up; after all, he dared swipe from the shrine of Terrors on the top shelf of the fridge. Terror Man left no visible marks on me, only bruises, but I doubt Jonathan made it out unscathed. I wonder what Coach said to him this morning.

Was Jonathan trying to set me up? Guarantee a win for his second round of Terror Bets, so he could up the ante? It's never enough with him. Jonathan can't seem to leave well enough alone. Like he has to poke the bear or something. Everyone knows you let a sleeping bear lie. Not him.

The last stragglers come out as the bus pulls up. I'm the new guy. Technically, it's Redhead-Dude-With-Braces-And-Acne's stop.

I must space out the whole ride to school because it feels like only moments later when the bus pulls into the drop-off circle by the *Broad Run High School, Home of the Panthers* sign. Cheerleaders brush past in uniform, and the football team is sporting jersey hard-ons, strutting as we all press toward the door.

School's a bust. I doze through most of my classes, but at least I overhear that the history test has been moved to next week. Now I just have to make it through English class (easy for me), study hall, and I'm out.

We're reading this book *Fahrenheit 451*, where Guy Montag is an anti-fireman who burns books for a living. If I could talk some sense into him, maybe he'd lay off the bonfires and help me sort through all the bizarre shit in my brain. Yeah, it's a crazy thought, just like the ones about Amber.

I get flustered when I think of her.

Maybe Montag and I aren't as different from each other as I first thought. We both have problems we're running from. Beatty hunts him down when they catch Montag hoarding books in his air vent. I knew he was a reader. His own wife turns him in. *Betrayed by someone that close. Man.*

That's what set him off running.

My English teacher makes us write on the salamander or fire lizard. Is it a tattoo or just a uniform logo? I consider writing a story or a poem. According to legend, they're not lizards, which are reptiles. Salamanders are amphibians and have an affinity for fire. They can also regenerate lost limbs and tails. Remind me of an Escher tessellation. Patterns that transform from one thing to another. I should go for extra credit.

Speaking of extra credit, my grades have been nothing but toilet water, they're so flushed. Up until now, I've held tight at honor roll. But, just like that time in the closet with Amber, it, too, was a test I knew I was doomed to fail. Now I can't shake these nightmares. Neither could Montag.

If I don't do something soon, I'll have to repeat my sophomore year. Then I'd be in the same grade as Jonathan. That's reason enough to invoke my previous plan.

2 | Lock-In

It's late afternoon and not the time for sleep. I manage to snag an hour on my mattress, the one thing between me and the floor of our room, before Jonathan's loud-ass banging wakes me. This is the only rest I'll get ahead of tonight's school lock-in. He crams contraband in his backpack and slams drawers. Still, he could be quieter if he expects me to help him pull off the booty call he's been lining up for weeks.

Like I'd want to do anything for him, at this point.

Which is—of course—why losing the Terror bet obligates me to do crap for him now. Screw you, universe. Every time I see Jonathan, my mind fills with Terror Man and his belt and every word he slung at us in lecture mode. *You two are just a couple of punks, taking things that don't belong to you. It's time someone set you straight.* Well, that and the crap at school.

Jonathan had his posse in on the bet, too. They were settling up in the hallway after study hall. Why'd I have to go and lose the bet? Now I'm a slave to my younger brother and his list of girls for the night. At his beck and call. I'm an idiot for agreeing to any of this, but it's too late for "should have knowns."

I stretch out the aches in my limbs and rub the remnants of sleep from my eyes. With any luck, I'll find somewhere private to crash at the high school, in case the nightmares come back. I was up all night with them again, filling notebook pages to keep from seeing that thing chase me down again. The shudder takes me by surprise.

"I had no idea you were trying out for a spot at the zombie prom." Like Jonathan knows all the things that keep me awake at night. He says that but knows I've been the recent target of locker-wedgies and toilet-swirlies, thanks to Math Punk and his drones, just because I carry a pocket-sized notebook to jot down ideas while I'm at school. I guess that makes me an easy target. Maybe Jonathan knows something he hasn't said.

"I'm not, doofus. You're cocky as ever." I glance with meaning at his bulging... backpack. Must be tied to his booty-call plans. "You can't be serious."

"A Boy Scout is always prepared."

"You're no Boy Scout."

Forcing myself to stand, I rummage through my bag to see what else I'll need. *This time, I'll run away for good,* I promise myself, doing my best to ignore the slew of images as they flash through my mind from my latest nightmare. I grab a hoodie off the floor, cinch it around my waist, and snag the book I'm reading off the milk crate that serves as my nightstand. My eyes slam shut in protest. Jonathan looks over and sighs.

"Dude, I'm serious. I've got a lot riding on your duties as wingman. Don't let me down." He passes me several forbidden Terror drinks he probably stole from the fridge. After last night's beating, this is a new level of desperate, even for Jonathan. I hesitate but take them anyway. Our mother has taken things with Terror Man to the next level, letting him stash his drinks at our place, but they're off-limits for us. I'm talking "police lights rolling red blue from every reflective surface" off-limits. Doesn't mean we haven't pinched a few.

A wave of guilt washes across my beyond-tired frame. I know I shouldn't do it, but there's no way I'll survive tonight without some serious help. I crack one open and chug the entire contents, gasping as it burns on the way down. Just in case, I hide the empty can in my backpack. I prefer to avoid any more collateral damage, if I can help it. Jonathan's considerate gesture is highly suspect. If he weren't thinking with his dick, I'd be more suspicious.

I shouldn't get so worked up over a drink that tastes like ass. It's wannabe beer, not even a legal issue; carbonated cough syrup. Why do I let it get to me? Because it's one more excuse my mother's

boyfriend uses to thump the life out of Jonathan and me. He could threaten to take away the library from me for good... The hell if I'm giving up the one thing that keeps me sane, though.

That's why Jonathan started calling him Terror Man, the way he guards those drinks like they're his claim over our territory. If you ask me, he might as well piss on the refrigerator or in my mother's bedroom door. Clearly visible is that purple welt Jonathan earned from last night's Terror Beating.

I shudder. These images keep cycling through my mind on repeat, whether I'm awake or asleep.

It's the same with my mother. I used to call her mom, but that changed when we spent time in that homeless shelter because she was gambling away the bill money. I can still feel the roaches crawling over me in the dark, hear the crack heads screaming through paper-thin walls. They weren't supposed to be using while they were at the shelter, but sometimes they got away with it. Most adults don't think kids pay attention to details, like the exchange of pharmacy bags and money, the glazed-over look in their eyes, or the tools used to cook their meth and the marks they left behind.

I made the mistake of pointing this out to her. "We wouldn't be here if you hadn't gambled everything away. Now we have to check for roaches before eating anything and pretend we can't see or hear those other people shooting up in front of their kids."

My mother fired right back at me, "Let's get one thing straight. I'm the mother and you're the son. Learn your place. I won't be talked to like that by a child. You hear me?" You bet I did. To this day, I've stopped calling her mom, and only use "mother," now that I've learned my place.

Not that she's noticed.

Our mother's voice wafts up from somewhere below. "Joel? Jonathan. Get a move on, you two. I'm not driving you in, if you miss the bus. It'll be here any minute." I grab the pack of Amber's letters as an afterthought. We thunder down the stairs, backpacks and smuggled items in tow. Fortunately, our mother isn't one for a strip search or pat-down. Too bad I can't stop the belch from the Terror before it's too late. My mother raises an eyebrow.

"Sorry." Laughing probably doesn't help much, either.

"Please tell me that isn't what I think it is. You know how he gets when you touch his stuff. Give me a break, okay?" Like she sticks around to watch Terror Man dole out consequences.

"It was his idea," I say, tagging Jonathan on the chest before bolting out to the safety of the bus stop. Soon after, Jonathan comes out, hauling ass. He must've done some smooth talking.

When we get to the bus stop, my stomach pitches. *Elias Stone*. I couldn't care less; it's his sister I'm queasy about. I still haven't managed to figure out why she gives me the time of day, unless she's leveraging for something. Elise could pass for Amber's doppelgänger if she curled her straight hair and dyed it fiery red. I'm convinced everyone has a body double scattered in different parts of the country. That's what Amber and I are now. Scattered. Past tense. No longer a thing.

If Elias's here, Elise's already back at school, warming up for the pep rally on Bonfire Field. That's not the official name, just what everyone calls it. Every varsity player and cheerleader will be there rehearing. In fact, the school lock-in might as well be a season preview. At least I'll know where to avoid.

My thoughts aren't enough to distract me from witnessing Jonathan's fist bump and one-armed hug fest with Elias.

"Elias, my man. What's shakin'?" They complete an elaborate handshake before full-on chest bumpage. That's when Jonathan's bag splits open, spilling an ambitious quantity of condoms at their feet. Elias doubles over just as the bus pulls up.

"Aw, yeah, that's what I'm talking about." More high fives.

If they were any friendlier, I might second-guess their orientation. Jonathan's straight as a line and completely at home with his sexuality. He doesn't even mind it when other guys, including Elias, check out his junk in the pool locker-room. He and Elias are both on the swim team, but I don't think Jonathan knows all there is to know about Elias, despite how he's fronting now.

"D'you bring your gear for the show? The honeys I've lined up got game."

"Sa-weet."

I slug my backpack over my shoulder and climb aboard.

**

The universe has it out for me. When we arrive at school, not only does a hole fail to open and swallow me whole, but Elise meets us at the drop-off. I can't help but eye how high her cheerleader skirt rides up as she bounces around, apparently excited to see her... brother? *Ah, of course*. She's practically panting for *Jonathan*.

He slides his arm around her waist as she flings her arms around his neck. She's all over him. Still, I ogle every flash of Spankies, even though I can't actually see anything, until the thought of Amber seeing me check out Elise makes my stomach contort. I duck behind Elias and Jonathan and slink away, muttering something about catching up later. Or never. Besides, I have plans that have little to do with lock-ins or making good on this debt thing with Jonathan.

The universe has other plans.

"Leaving so soon?" Elise grabs me by the hoodie, using sleeves to steer me back around. I look up at the splash of sunset scattered across the evening sky, unsure how to speak popular.

"Pretty much," I reply.

"That's too bad."

Dare I ask? I'm distracted by the uniform and how much Elise reminds me of...

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'That's too bad.'" Her eyes wander over to where my brother is amassing a small crowd. She emits an excited squeal before turning back to me.

Yep. Too bad every girl I know looks right through me at Jonathan. "Have fun with pool boy."

"I was hoping we could finish our conversation." Elise sidles up next to me. "From last time."

I shake off the urge to place my hands on her hips.

"Your lips moved, but I don't recall words."

She doesn't deny it. At Jonathan's last at-home meet, Elise had pulled me over to her while we waited outside the locker room, but it'd felt wrong, like I was just there for her practice or amusement. We'd been so close to kissing...

And now, even though Elise is standing in front of me, Amber is a hundred miles away. The confusing part is how much they look alike. I do a double take every time I see Elise. I want to do things I shouldn't, things I never got the chance to explore with Amber.

My brain engages, and my gut screams for me to get out of there, picturing how we stopped short. "Sorry, my plans for tonight are—see you around."

Before she can protest, I dive for cover inside the school and press through the crowd. Most of the students greet their friends in clumps and check the schedule of events. I keep glancing over my shoulder to see if I gave them the slip. The images slam through my brain, reminding me they're still there. Like I could forget.

When I see the flash of pompoms, I don't hesitate. Pulling on my hoodie, I duck into the auditorium where they're showing slasher movies. I pick a seat on the far left end, near the exit door. Just as a door opens in the back, I slink down in my seat. *Please don't let them find me; please don't let them find me.* The door closes again. I let out a slow breath. Realizing I'm in the dark and somewhat horizontal, my eyes scrunch shut. I fight to reopen them. I could knock out hard. As I exhale, sleep tugs me down until the realization hits me, and my eyes pop open, darting left and right. I can't let that happen. Not ever. Especially here.

Then I remember the other Terrors in my bag. I pull one out and down it. The auditorium is not safe. I'd better find somewhere else or get going on my real mission. Sneaking out the side door and up the dim hallway, I can already see a commotion underway.

"Five bucks he croaks before his fingertips touch water."

"Isn't this the third or fourth time he's tried?"

"Not a chance he'll break the record."

"He's gonna do it. Everybody to the pool!"

Jonathan mentioned a "show" when he greeted Elias, but I didn't know it would draw a crowd. What an attention whore. The mass of bodies shoves toward the Panther pool. Heading in the opposite direction, I'm met by a wave of pompoms and cheerleaders surging back toward the crowd I tried to avoid. When I look away, an arm slides around my bicep and steers me back toward the natatorium.

"You're going the wrong way. I thought you two were close."

"What's this about, Elise? Why are you even slumming with the likes of me?"

She gives me a look and then continues. "You disappeared before I could tell you earlier. Johnny's gonna try to break the district record. If he gets it, he'll land Regionals."

When we stop, I turn to face her.

"First of all, his name's Jonathan. Not Johnny. Second, he's been trying to break that record since summer tryouts. I've got better things to do than watch another one of his shows."

"Well, I want to be there when he does."

"Don't let me keep you." A huff escapes before I can stop it.

Elise leans in toward me, catching me completely off guard. Heavy-lidded, her eyes cast down toward my lips. When they close, I freeze, unsure if I should kiss her back. Her presence reminds me so much of Amber—of when we were together in the basement closet—that I struggle to think of anything except anticipating the taste of her lips and tongue, my hands on her skirt, pulling her close. Some part of me fires off an alarm, a warning, an interruption.

What is wrong with me? She's obviously using me to get to Jonathan. I bolt.

Cutting through the open gym, I pass clusters of students playing basketball and volleyball. I run. The divider wall has been opened so students can move between stations. A few lucky teachers are directing from the sidelines. What must Elise think, expecting our lips to meet and instead being startled when her eyes open and I'm gone?

Running is my go-to response, especially in a situation like this. Without thinking, I did it, like putting on one pant leg and then the other. One step always follows the other. It was easy. Nothing messy; I just took action.

I stop to catch my breath once I'm out of the building, my eyes adjusting to the night sky and glittering stars as I overlook the field. Everyone's probably at the pool, basking in the glory of Jonathan's show. Which is why I'm here, making the most of this opportunity.

Even though I didn't think it through, didn't discuss it with myself, I know where I'm going. In fact, I planned this all along, when I packed extra clothes and Amber's letters and my toothbrush. I never planned to stay at the lock-in or play wingman for Jonathan or run away from Elise all night. My plan was to leave—something no one will see coming until I am long gone. I promised myself and told no one: *this time I'm running away*.

"Where have you been?" Shit. Jonathan.

"Look, I'm gonna hafta reschedule. I'm busy."

I hope the look on my face somehow helps to explain enough so I don't get sucked into twenty questions. Too bad his brain is otherwise occupied. If he could, he'd formulate a question. Instead, he just stares.

"Jonathan, I've got problems. Elise won't keep her hands off me." There's no time to talk. I head for the tree line at the edge of the field.

"Woah, bruh. Good for you."

"No, not good." I turn to face him.

"Oh?" There's something weighted in his reply. Like he's holding back some part of what he's thinking.

The sound of the band and the crowd surging out of the school for the field coincide with the realization that my plans have failed. Now I'll never get away before someone spots me. I can't ditch Jonathan if he sees me leaving. The adult staff is busy lighting the bonfire.

"My first rendezvous should be here any minute. I need you on point. Circulate and prep the next few girls. Check your list, but try not to be Captain Obvious. Capisce?"

I'm exercising great restraint not to deck him in front of his entourage.

"You sure upping that bet was legit?" He'd won the first round fair and square, but still, my kingdom for a loophole or an escape clause.

Elise arrives in a flurry of pompoms and skirts. Not that I was looking.

"What are we discussing? Is this about the current Terror Bet or that video thingy?" She smirks, crossing her arms over her chest.

"What the hell?" I look from Jonathan to Elise and back.

"Uh, I can explain." Jonathan lifts his hands and starts to back away.

He betrayed me?

If he blabbed about our bets to Elise, what other embarrassing or private family stuff has he told her? Certainly not who gave him the shiner last night. *Or would he?* My mind floods with images of the study hall video clip aftermath: walking down the hall, all those eyes drilling into me. Everything explodes, tinged in red. I'm shoving Jonathan with both arms before I even realize I've downshifted into action.

"No need. Elise has caught me up plenty, asshole." I take a swing and shudder as my fist clashes against his raised arm. Cue the posse.

"Brother fight!" someone shouts as the crowd encircles us. I miss the next few punches, but a kick sends him reeling, and then I've got him pinned to the ground and my fists are pummeling him before I feel myself floating away, and it's like I'm watching someone else turn his brother's face to hamburger. Guys from the football team and the swim team pull us apart as teachers engage, barking orders. I feel something hot dripping down my face. I can't open my left eye. Both hands hurt like hell. If my right eye is working, I'm in far better shape than Jonathan.

When we're escorted to the principal's office, they call our mother to come get us. I must have nodded off longer than I realized in the auditorium. It's close to three in the morning, and our mother is not a fan of losing sleep. I can't believe he'd betray me like that. If Elise knows, then half the upperclassmen know by now. What a douche. This whole thing was a set up. What business is it of hers? And why did Jonathan feel the need to share it with Elise Stone? Neither of us speaks. I doubt we could stick to words at this point.

My mother's voice slams into the tiny room before the rest of her catches up. "I've a mind to let you two spend the night in jail for the stunt you just pulled. I cannot believe you'd do this to me at three o'clock in the morning." From the way she's digging in her purse, I can't tell if she's searching for car keys or cigarettes.

"Jonathan's the one who started this whole thing. He—"

The back of my legs bang into the chair. It lists across the linoleum.

"Joel threw the first punch. He tore into me for no good reason." He grabs his bag from the chair at the other end of the room.

"Hey. Cool it. Not interested in who did what. I've a mind to let Samuel talk some sense into you two when we get home. Until then, zip it."

A hush falls as the weight of her words and the realization sinks in: Samuel only lectures with a belt in his hands. Jonathan glares. I flex my hands and wince. Our mother signs us out, and we head to the car in heavy silence. There go my plans.

3 | Strained

The dishes are a mosaic of broken shards on the tile floor, bits of food still clinging to some of the pieces. I halt in the kitchen doorway. My mother's boyfriend may have noticed a few of his Terrors missing.

I'm the one Terror Man will pin it on, thanks to Jonathan spilling the fact that he should check my bag. But Jonathan stashed them there, not me. I got played by my own brother. I can feel the weight of what's coming. It's familiar. My mind buzzes through these thoughts like a fly, angry and unable to land.

Moving through the room in slow motion, I might as well be underwater. My stomach drops out from under me; it feels like I kick it across the kitchen floor, along with the debris. The stench of day-old food mingling together cloys at my nostrils. The house is too quiet. I follow the trail into the living room, where I can breathe again. Maybe he didn't notice.

The railing is ripped off the stairs and hangs like a limp arm out of its socket. My hand instinctively slides up to my shoulder. I must be the first one home. *Should I go upstairs?*

Not that I have a choice. I've got to sort this out. *Did this happen because of me?*

"Not again," I say and sigh. No, it's not the Terrors. It's not me. Before I reach my mother's bedroom, I already know what I'll find. She's not here, and we'll have to move again.

I enter her bedroom. This time there's a huge hole in the bathroom door. A bed rail protrudes from the hole, pointing oddly at the ceiling. It looks so strange—the way a needle lances a blister—that I start to laugh.

Water gushes everywhere, soaking into my sneakers.

The toilet and sink must've overflowed. Stepping back onto the carpet, I hear the slap of water beneath my feet. This'll probably rain down through the living room ceiling. *Will I have to change schools this time?* Guess it depends on how far away we have to move. I hate moving. It's like running away on someone else's terms.

I should have run away when I had the chance.

All these places we bounce between are like the shimmer trail a snail leaves on the ground. A few summers ago, I used to trace their squiggly lines across sidewalks. Now I'm the snail, dragging myself shell and all through another day I never asked for. I don't get to choose which part remains, me or the iridescent line like a shadow behind me.

Coming to my senses, I realize I've imagined the water. But I'm sure I heard the slap under each footstep. *Was I... dreaming*? Nightmares are bad enough, but seeing things that aren't there while I'm awake is even worse. This can't be happening. Just like last time.

I know the drill. I've done this before. Punching in the numbers, I dial the police and tell them who I am. A crackly voice answers.

"Please hold."

After a minute, they get back on the line to tell me my mother is there, at the police station. She's been assaulted.

Which one was it this time? In the past year, she's seen a couple different guys, like the black dude who rides a motorcycle from a few doors down. We might have to leave the state. *Oh, boy. There goes high school*. I'll be a nobody. That guy with no name. Hiya, No Name.

My mother comes on the line long enough to tell me to stay put, she'll be home soon, blah, blah, blah.

I hear myself saying, "But Mom, there's a bedrail sticking out your bathroom door—"

"I'll explain it when I get home."

I come to when I hear dial tone in my ear.

Then I realize I haven't seen Jonathan yet. Nor have I heard mewing from the stowaway fuzz ball he snuck in off the street, right after we got nailed for the lock-in. It's like he can't be in enough trouble already? I head to our bedroom. The closet door is shut. There are muffled sounds. Well, he's here, but I have no way of knowing whether he saw what happened or if the kitten is okay.

"Hey, uh, Jon," I say as calm as I can muster. "Everything all right when you got back? With the kitten, I mean?" My stomach lurches while I wait for an answer.

Pause. Then, "Yeah. Sure. Why?" He says each word stilted, probably trying to figure out what I'm getting at. I hear suppressed giggles. Jonathan's not alone in there. Guess he got lucky after all. He must've just come in and gone straight up to our room with one of his lock-in booty calls. Missed the kitchen. But how would he have missed the railing? It was still dangling when I came upstairs.

"No reason," I begin. "Well, there's a reason. Something you'd better see. Mom's on her way home. From the police station."

The door flies open. Two bare legs disappear into the closet. Jonathan's head pops out from behind the door to join the rest of his body. All he's wearing are boxers, and they're on inside out. More snickers. An arm pulls at him and starts sliding the door closed.

For a moment, I'm reminded of Amber and me at her place. *Damn it*. Why does it work for him and not for me?

"What did you just say?" Jonathan holds the door, distracted.

"I said, 'the police station,'" I repeat.

"What's the matter? Why is Mom coming home from the police station?"

"I'm not sure, but the house is pretty smashed up. Didn't you notice the railing was off the lower stairs?"

"Come here," a female voice interjects.

"No, I was in a hurry." Laughter erupts in reply. "To check on Meshach. I kinda like Abednego, too." He turns back to his girlfriend, and the door slides shut with a bang. I guess they came in the other way, through the front hall and up the stairs. But the railing... He's got balls to bring her here.

"Well, if you planned on getting it food, the kitchen's a mess. Don't go through the living room, and be careful where you step. I'll talk... when you're done."

Guess he isn't that worried about the kitten, just what it can get him. Now that Jonathan's preoccupied, I head downstairs, relieved my spot on the couch remains unscathed by Terror Man's path of destruction through the house. My throat tightens; a lump forms and tastes like metal.

My own thoughts keep crowding in. I wonder if I'll ever be worthy of Amber's attentions. I don't mean it in the way Jonathan plays them. There's way more to a girl than that. Swallowing hard, I retreat to the safety of pages. Everyone's after Montag. He has to go to this hermit guy for help to mask his own scent. I lose track of time.

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

Words sting like salt as tears streak down my face. My nose runs. Eyes bleary and red, I take off my glasses and wipe at them. Don't let anyone see me like this. No one cries over a book. Maybe it's not just that.

Montag got away from the robot hound to memorize Ecclesiastes? *No way*. No. Way.

The sun rises and sets, the oceans are never full, there is nothing new under the sun.

I get that, but I need answers, not this shit.

Not sure if I like this or not. I wish it could help me decipher things with Amber, like the secret decoder rings in cereal boxes do. Maybe if I revisit it later, the meaning will be clearer.

Should I care what comes next in English? I'll be long gone by then. Then it hits me: *why the hell should I stay put or wait for my mother to come home?* Jonathan'll be fine. After all, his celebrity status is more important than blood.

He made that clear with the Terrors.

Getting up to leave, I watch Jonathan and Elise come barreling down the stairs. *Elise*. Why am I not surprised? Guess they ran out of condoms. Turning away, I wipe my face. Their feet thud at the landing, and their staggered gasps peel through the silence. I turn around to find them witnessing, apparently for the first time, the mangled railing still dangling.

"Whoa, when the freak did this happen?" Jonathan leans over to touch it like it might disappear. At least they're both dressed.

"It was like that when I came in, and you were already here."

"I don't know how we missed that—"

Elise pulls him in for a lip lock. "I think I can refresh your memory."

"Oh, yeah," Jonathan says with his mouth full. "I wuhmembuh."

"Gross. Get a room."

"We already did," Jonathan proclaims.

"Wait, he's in that YouTube thing, right?"

"That's right," Jonathan says, wagging his finger at me. "Did you know your study hall slumber party is an online sensation? Everyone's talking about it."

I want to say something, but I can't do it. This isn't like the lock-in. How would they like it if I filmed them and put their closet rendezvous online? I can picture their blanched faces, but I won't follow through. Not with her here.

I take a ragged breath and let it out. So, now it's online. My mother's trips to the police station are bad enough. Anyone can look up police records online. I can't get away from a video.

"Look. I fell asleep. I couldn't help it." My eyes begin to well up.

"What will everyone at school think?" Elise is talking to Jonathan as if I'm not here. After the lockin, I doubt if anyone could separate us, given our epic brawl in front of the whole school.

This can't go any further. It's too personal. I've got to get out.

I can't leave it like this, either.

"I can always count on you to stick up for me."

Grabbing my bag, I aim for the door and head to the library. I use my sweatshirt sleeve to wipe my face. Walking into a strong wind, I work my way out of the development and onto the road, away from the direction my mother will come in. I cross the field and speed up.

No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

Nothing makes sense anymore. Nothing but running. I keep my head down, collar up, and shove hands into pockets. My backpack bounces rhythmically against my shoulder blades.

I keep going and lean forward into a biting, unforgiving tailwind.