

## CHAPTER 1

As Adrian quietly marched down a set of old rusty railroad tracks, heading to his appointment, a horrific question entered his mind: *Even without my hearing, are my other senses strong enough to warn me in case a train comes barreling through?* A part of him almost hoped that they weren't. That was the difference between actually committing suicide and just hoping that something killed him. It took the decision out of his hands and put them squarely in the hands of a higher power.

Ironically, as he thought about it, a train whistle sounded off in the distance. A huge fifty-two car industrial train was coming his way. The ground began to shake and rumble; the train was getting closer.

Adrian ignorantly continued walking down the tracks, unaware of the hazard approaching. With every step he took, and every wooden tie he passed, he thought about all the people who were unsuccessful at committing suicide. 'I was too much of a coward to do it,' seemed to be their general consensus. *But what does bravery have to do with committing a coward's act,* he wondered. *It makes no sense.*

With the train only two hundred yards away from him, the little pebbles on the track began bouncing up and down from the vibrations.

Still, Adrian remained calm and oblivious to what was happening.

With the train even closer now, Adrian could finally feel it. The time had come for him to make a decision; he had to either move or remain still and let fate have its say.

A bead of sweat rolled down Adrian's forehead and into his eyes. He was beyond scared and emotionally drained. Life had beaten him to a pulp. His instincts took over and his left foot hugged the steel rail,

as if it were trying to escape the rest of his body. His fingers balled into a fist and his legs tensed up.

*Let's get this over with.*

If he wanted to move, it was now or never, but sadly, in the absence of words, he gave into the voice in his head and chose never. With his eyes bound to the tracks, he said, "Sorry," as if someone were listening. One would imagine the words were meant for God, but it seemed almost absurd for a self-condemned man to pray to God. After all, God is the one you're supposed to thank for giving you life, not apologize to for bringing you death. But Adrian was clouded by judgment and governed by uncertainty, so absurd or not, he did it anyway, letting out the last bit of air in his lungs.

His palms were perspiring, stomach in knots, eyes now shut tight, afraid to look back, bones vibrating, legs shaking and the taste of stale morning breath was filling his mouth.

In a moment like this when your life is supposed to flash before your eyes, only one memory came to Adrian's mind: his father, the artist, clumping up crumbs of clay with his index finger, gathering them like a shepherd gathering sheep. He thought about his talk of alchemy. "When not even one particle of me remains," he said, "you can find me in my little clay models. I'll either be out the fire or in the ashes." Fire and ash, those were the only two options for a man he would say: hardened in the kiln or cracked by the heat. "After all the atoms we have exchanged," he continued, "every morsel of clay is just as much me as I ever was." He then turned to Adrian, handed him a virgin block of clay and told him to create.

Adrian tried, without success, to mold the perfect image of himself (happy and unabated by the pressures and pains of life). But the model was unrecognizable, a crude rendering of himself. He kept breaking it down and changing it until he forgot what happiness was, and he couldn't remember what he used to be. After several hours, he finally abandoned it, leaving it to dry and crumble to pieces in the sun.

But unknown to him, his father returned and brought back water to the thirsty, dry clay, molding it from nothing, just as he had diligently molded Adrian once. His patience far out trumped Adrian's hastiness. He didn't realize it until his father had passed away, but he was trying to make sure that Adrian didn't rush the journey and arrive at his destiny empty handed. A lesson that was clearly wasted on him. That was the one and only memory that flashed before his eyes: his father

patiently resurrecting him from clay. But no such luck this time. This time he was all alone. There was no one left to mold him, no one left to resurrect him, and clearly no patience left to slow him down.

For the first time since the accident that claimed his hearing, he actually found comfort in the silence. He couldn't hear the bone chilling sounds of the train at his back. As intelligent and strong and confident and humble as he was (all these characteristics he once accepted and admired about himself), he condensed all those dimensions, adjectives and attributes to his psyche down into only one word: defeated. He was flat and useless as a piece of paper with the word *help* crossed out in permanent marker.

His thoughts had complete power over his reality. And no matter how much the people around him tried to convince him that his life was too big compared to how small he felt, they couldn't begin to understand the weight of it all. He was now closer than he had ever been to the end.

Sound was no longer a requirement. The earth's volatile shaking let him know that the train was now at his back. The pounding and screeching of the cars rolling over the tracks would have frightened a hearing man. The heavy sound of metal on metal was pure deafening.

His lips shouted, "Move!"

But his mind replied, *what's the point?*

The train was coming impossibly fast. He stood his ground...waiting...waiting, each minute more and more convinced he was already dead. It didn't matter if the train was a kilometer away or a centimeter, he couldn't move now if he wanted to. The decision was final. More and more shockwaves rode the rails and shook his legs, until, finally, the train came barreling through: fifty-two rail vehicles propelled by a large locomotive, travelling at one-hundred-twenty-five miles per hour and weighing a collective eight thousand tons—a devastating piece of machinery, which no man could survive.

But to Adrian's amazement, he was still in one piece. As he opened his eyes, he saw the train running parallel to him. Looking down, he noticed that less than twenty feet behind him were wing rails, which carried the train off onto another set of tracks.

He crumbled to his knees. Technically, he had already committed suicide in his mind. Where is a man supposed to go after that? What is he supposed to say, and who is he supposed to say it to? God, perhaps? Luckily, Adrian had already introduced himself to God with his shabby

apology. Now if only he could come up with something better to say. But instead, he just sat there in the middle of the tracks, saying nothing at all. He was afraid that he could no longer be redeemed, and completely oblivious to the fact that true redemption comes from within.

Adrian crawled to his feet, slowly gathering the broken pieces of his subconscious mind together. One attempt at suicide was one too many for the day. Although the idea of losing it all and coming that close to death gave him a new appreciation for life, he knew that a man looking for a way out was bound to find one.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, folded manila envelope, clutching it tightly in his hands. He didn't open it, but the feel of it slowed down his pacing heart, enough for him to catch his breath. His face was painted with every shade of orange that the sun could muster. The light wrestled with his hazel eyes; it was obvious that through his veil of pain, there was still some passion there—just barely.

Adrian was exhausted from the countless nights of insomnia; he tried to rub the fitful sleep out of his eyes, but it lingered in the corners, creating bags on top of bags. He had gotten used to looking at the world through half-lidded eyes. There were even times when he felt like he had lost two senses: the sense of hearing, and of course, the strongest sense of all, the sense of time passing. He would blink and an entire day would go by. He would breathe or get lost in a thought and hours would somehow just evaporate. Even now, as he looked down at his watch, hoping to see 8:00 AM, it was actually 9:00. The fact that he was still alive also meant that he was now late for his appointment.

He moved through the blinding lights and a city street constant with all the activity of an anthill—crowds moving, shifting, turning and changing in absolute silence. In the center of all this movement was a two-dimensional man stuck in a three-dimensional world.

Adrian thought it was funny how in movies internal monologues always had a physical voice, usually deep and certifying, provocative, like an Anthony Hopkins or a Morgan Freeman. But in reality, thoughts have no tone or pitch, not even a whisper, just a muted semblance of a voice.

Adrian knew that just outside his deaf ears, sounds were filling the air, letting him know how loud the world really was. He knew that cars

were honking, laughter was ringing, music was singing, mouths were moving, and people were talking, telling the torrid tales of their lives.

Adrian listened with his eyes now; he watched the movements and the gestures. It wasn't as efficient, but it got the job done. There were so many annoying sounds that he was dying to hear, like a construction site, the reputed honking of a car horn, or the cry of an ambulance. He would have even settled for the guttural howling of the coyotes that used to wake him up in the middle of the night when he was a child. A terrifying sound, more like screams than howls, like women being raped in the woods. But even that was more pleasing than the dead silence of nothing. It was like feeding a starving man a peanut, even a tiny morsel felt like a feast.

The one sound, however, that Adrian was glad to be rid of, was the sound of doctors. His psychiatrist, to be exact—the aforementioned appointment that he was late for, perhaps intentionally. But after his morning attempt, it was clearly the best place for him to be.

He entered the neo-classical building, which was located in an older part of town. The glass walls of the office were smoked and framed in rich wood and the waiting room was filled with pretentious pieces of art that one would find in a high-end gallery. Adrian could see the psychiatrist's silhouette brooding inside. As he reached for the door, which had her name engraved on it in thick, bold letters: Dr. Kessler, he could feel the anxiety surfacing.

The first thing he saw as he entered the room was a wall covered with diplomas and pictures of her shaking hands with pseudo celebrities, mostly politicians who no one cared about other than her.

She sat in the center of the room in an oversized armchair, wearing an uptight, grey suit and stiff, rigid glasses. Her eyes were ice cold, yet her hair was burgundy red like a fire, and her brows were raised in an overambitious way like she could see right through Adrian's soul. She reminded him of his first-grade teacher: a mean spinster, who would've taken a ruler to his ass if it was still legal to do so.

Dr. Kessler indicated for Adrian to sit. He took a seat on her cold leather couch, which he was sure was used to make her patients feel comfortable—but not quite comfortable enough for him. Leather has a way of inviting you in then sending you on your way. It was that hot and cold attribute that Adrian was convinced women practiced constantly.

The shades in her office were partially drawn behind her, showing

her in silhouette, as if she had some kind of a God complex. Adrian was sure that in her mind she was the light and he was the shadow, the one who needed her valuable advice.

Adrian was only there under the recommendation of his doctor, who thought he should see a psychiatrist as a part of his rehabilitation. He was surprised by the extent of OCD that came along with being deaf. He would find himself looking both ways over and over, before crossing a street, or searching the ground to make sure he didn't trip over anything. He also couldn't drop the feeling that someone was right behind him or about to crash into him. It was hard to explain, kind of like putting on headphones and walking around a crowded city street. It all brought back memories of playing blindfold tag with his sister and the neighborhood kids—stumbling around, in complete deprivation, trying to find each other. Every time the flashback came to him, he would find himself asking the same question: *which sense is the better one to lose?* If he had to part with one, hearing would've been his first choice, but then again, it was the fact that he had to choose at all that was driving him crazy.

Dr. Kessler took out a notepad to communicate with Adrian, but also to record his answers, which were to be scrutinized and analyzed later. She wrote on her pad, while Adrian nervously wrung his hands like a chimpanzee waiting to be fed.

He couldn't help but notice her penmanship. Pens had slowly become his new ears, speaking a language of lines and shapes made up of ink and scribbles, where punctuations had never been so important: an exclamation point, a comma, a question mark, parenthesis. How loud was someone's tone? What were they trying to say? Whatever it was, Adrian was all too happy to hear people write.

Dr. Kessler turned the pad over and it read: *How are you feeling today, Adrian?*

He thought about the question before answering. He didn't quite feel like telling her the truth about his morning. He knew what she would say, or even worse, who she might call. So instead he covered it up with a simple, "I'm fine." But he could tell that his voice came out broken and inconsistent, nothing like the voice he was used to hearing in his head. It wasn't just his hearing that had been affected; the condition had spread to his lips. Adrian tried to speak as little as possible. He hated people pitying him. They heard a voice that wasn't really his, it was the voice of a deaf man, an alter ego, just some lost

soul that Adrian had never even met. He had never introduced himself to Adrian, *verbally* that is. He had no idea who he was or what he sounded like. But if the world wanted to hear the deaf man speak, then so be it.

“That’s good to hear,” Dr. Kessler replied, in what Adrian assumed was the voice that all psychiatrists had: that steady undertone, usually peaceful and accommodating. She then wrote: *Our last session concluded with your accident. So tell me about the first few months after that.*

Adrian took out a pack of smokes from his coat pocket and held it up as if he was asking for permission to have one.

Dr. Kessler nodded and respectfully moved an ashtray under him.

Adrian tried to concentrate and enunciate the best he could. He tried to imitate the voice he knew he was capable of speaking, the voice he grew up with, the voice that took him thirty years to culminate, the voice he had to bear with as it cracked and changed through puberty, the voice which declared such beautiful proclamations like I love you, my heart is breaking, and I want to die. But all that came out was the shaky unconfident voice of the deaf man.

“Uh...” Adrian could feel it: the disconnect. His lips were playing catchup with his brain.

Dr. Kessler sat patiently waiting for him to reply.

“...The first few months after my accident are a blur,” he said. “I spent the nights mourning and the mornings trying to sleep away the pain. Sometimes I would wonder what happened to me, if any of this was real.” He looked up at her, his disheveled face reflected on her glasses. “Do you know what it feels like to be imprisoned here?” he pointed to his mind. “A life sentence, from which there is no escape. I can’t dig or blast my way out. And my cellmate is a man that won’t shut up. He won’t leave me alone or let me forget anything.”

Dr. Kessler seemed unconcerned; she had heard this story before, hundreds of times, in fact, from hundreds of different people, and each time, it got less and less sentimental for her. She wrote: *I’m sorry to hear that.*

Adrian smiled to cover what he was really feeling: hopelessness.

Kessler continued, writing: *Is there a sound you miss most of all?*

Adrian lit a cigarette, puffed it three times and killed it in the ashtray. “My daughter’s voice,” he replied with a big grin. “She does more for my soul than my own heart does; all that does is keep me alive. She, on the other hand, gives me meaning for this life, she gives me

purpose.”

Dr. Kessler raised her eyebrows, just slightly—her way of smiling, perhaps. Her pen returned to the notepad and wrote: *What word will you miss the most?*

He thought about it. “I think my name most of all. It’s now become a tap on the shoulder, a wave in front of my face to catch my attention. I am tap, I am wave, yet *Adrian* is lost to my ears. I wonder what happens once a man loses his name? Does he cease to exist?”

*Of course not,* Kessler wrote, *a name is just a label.*

Adrian took in a breath. “I’ve seen cans in the supermarket without labels, and I have no idea what they are or what they have inside of them. They might as well not exist either for all the good they do.”

Dr. Kessler scribbled something on her pad, as if his answer was a homework assignment that she just graded with a big, fat ‘F’. She then followed it up with her next question: *Are you still having your reoccurring nightmare?*

Adrian looked at her, the nightmare suddenly coming back to him as though fresh: a grand, majestic ballroom, something out of a 1940’s Film Noir. A magnificent masquerade ball was in full swing, complete with a large orchestra, playing classical music. It was clearly a black-tie affair. The men were wearing full length jester masks, white, black and silver. The women were wearing full length Venetian masks with feathers, sequences and glitter. The overall effect was one of worn elegance and romance. People were dancing the waltz: long, graceful movements, continuous turns, and the rise and fall of elbows. The dancers appeared to glide around the floor as if it were made of ice.

Adrian stood atop a giant marble staircase decked out in a full tux, watching this magnificent scene play out.

As the orchestra played louder, the dancers swirled even faster, and Adrian made his way down the steps, mesmerized by the dancing. With each step that he took, the music began to fadeaway, becoming softer and softer. As soon as he reached the foot of the staircase, the music splattered to an awkward stop. Everyone stopped dancing and began staring at him as if his presence alone had somehow ruined the party.

From behind their masks, Adrian could see their eyes, cold and garish, boring a hole right through his soul. His face entertained a look of distress, and he began walking backward, up the stairs.

The dancers slowly removed their masks, disclosing their featureless faces.



Adrian began to panic, the stress carving deeper into his face. He went to scream, but his mouth was gone, then his ears, then slowly his nose, and eventually his eyes, until he became a faceless man with no senses or an identity to speak of. He dropped to his knees and a small high-pitch sound reverberated throughout the ballroom getting louder. Then like some horrific scene out of a movie, it all cut out at once.

“I haven’t had that dream in a while,” Adrian told Dr. Kessler.

He was lying, of course; he had it the night before. But the last thing he wanted to do was talk about it again. His entire life had somehow become a reoccurring nightmare.

The next question Dr. Kessler wrote was: *Are you still feeling lonely?*

Adrian shifted ever so slightly in his chair to ease the discomfort, of which there was a lot. He couldn’t seem to muster up the words, so he simply nodded his head in the affirmative.

Dr. Kessler gestured *more* with her hands. “Tell me...”

Adrian sighed and then rubbed his face. “I miss my daughter. She lives exclusively with her mother, while I find my balance. I don’t get a chance to see her much, but I guess an absentee father is better than no father at all. So for the first time since she was born, it’s really quiet...” he smirked. “Not sound, obviously, but movement. There’s nobody around.”

Dr. Kessler pointed to an empty medicine bottle. “What medication are you taking currently?”

Adrian tried to recall their ridiculous names. “Propranolol...and Vicodin for the pain...500 mg.”

Dr. Kessler wrote: *I’m going to prescribe you an antidepressant, which should help you adjust.* She then wrote, *Venlafaxine* on her prescription pad and passed the sheet over to Adrian.

Knowing that he needed an antidepressant to help him cope made Adrian feel even more depressed.

Dr. Kessler concluded with the declaration, “It’s going to be OK.”

*Eight years of school and training and that’s the best response she can come up with? Something your grandmother tells you when you’ve scraped your knee.*

Adrian sighed, realizing the severity of his situation.