

UNTIL I FEEL SAFE

A SAMPLE

KIRK HOLLAND

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ISBN: 979-82583901-2-7

Cover design by: Alexander Wells

Printed in the United States of America



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*For anyone who has ever had to choose
between belonging and being honest.*

*May you find the place
where you no longer have to choose.*

*For those who were told
they were broken.*

You never were.

*For the kids still waiting
to feel safe.*

This story is for you.

FROM THE AUTHOR

In June of 2020, at the age of forty-one, I came out.

I was married with two children.

It was painful for everyone involved.

It was right. It was good. It was necessary.

Over the past six years, my relationship with my ex-wife has grown into a friendship unlike any other. We talk openly about our lives and relationships, and we stay tightly teamed up as parents to our boys. My sons and I have a wonderful relationship, and I've watched them make their own choices as they explore and understand their identities. It has taken work, effort, intention, and love.

These days, a small but growing number of people come out later in life. Alarmingly, many of those who wait do so because of religion. Fear and shame are powerful forces. They certainly were for me.

I grew up in a double whammy of religion: church and a private

Christian school. I won't take the time here to dive deeply into the purity culture that taught us things like sex belongs only in marriage, masturbation is sin, girls are responsible for boys' sexual drives, and same-sex attraction is something to be fixed.

Like Luke, the protagonist in this book, I recognized my attraction to boys early in life. Because of the messages I received at church, school, and home, I kept the lid tight and did my best to become straight. I had girlfriends, but I was always more interested in talking and sharing emotions than being physical. Every Sunday at church, every Christian camp, every chapel service at school pushed my despair deeper.

I prayed. I read the Bible. I begged God to heal me.

Then I grew up, got married, worked at a Christian school, became a youth pastor, and I passed the same destructive messaging forward, all the while ashamed, horrified, and deeply self-loathing.

At home, I was a monster. I raged, isolated, accused, and blamed. I even attended conversion therapy in the desperate hope of finally getting fixed. Instead, it only drove the pain deeper, leaving me convinced that either I was too broken to repair or God simply didn't care.

In 2017, my family and I moved to Shanghai, China, where I began working at an international school. This was when my turning began.

Why?

Because I was finally away from the church culture I had been buried in my entire life. I had space. For the first time, I could begin thinking for myself without all that noise.

Three years later, it happened.

As I said earlier, it was painful for everyone involved, and it was right.

I didn't expect to write this story; it came to me late one night in June of 2025, and it was time.

Exactly five years after coming out, *Until I Feel Safe* was born.

My hope is that readers recognize themselves somewhere in this story and feel inspired to find—or become—a safe place.

Maybe you're the loving friend or family member who can be home for someone.

Maybe you're the struggling parent who needs a different perspective.

Maybe you're teen Luke, isolated in a world full of people, desperate for a safe place.

Or maybe it's decades later. The road has been hard, but you've arrived where you are now, and you've finally found safety.

Whoever you are, I'm glad you found this book.

And if you're still waiting for the day when you feel safe being exactly who you are, I hope this story helps you believe that day will come.

PART ONE

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10, 2024

My hands are raised in the air, and I feel a tremble pass through me, head to toe. The lights are warm, not hot, but warm, and I'm sweating. Nothing unusual. It's Texas. It's Texas, but it's not summer yet. It's a mild spring. Nearing the end of junior year.

I'm definitely sweating.

Some people might think it's because I'm on stage, nervous under the lights, but the stage is my second home. I've been an entertainer since I was six years old, memorizing lines, belting out lyrics, nailing choreography, feeding off audience energy, and sending it back to them. Acting, singing, dancing—I'm prepared for all of it. I'm even prepared for the unexpected. Someone misses their entrance? A guitar string snaps? The sound system blows? I improvise. I fake it. I smile and shift the dialogue to cover the moment. I sing a cappella. I use my God-given talents—charisma and projection—and the audience rolls right along with me.

I'm a master at faking it.

Right now, the music plays behind me, the guitars softly filling the air as the bass lays a low, thrumming foundation, and the cymbals shimmer and grow. I grab the microphone in one hand while keeping the other in the air, reaching for something. Striving for something. "I believe You'll lead me through it," the lyrics of worshipful faith glide from my lips, and I

mean them in the most heart-wrenching, gut twisting way. "I believe You'll get me to it, I believe that You will do it right now, something has to break!" I really do mean them. I'm desperate for them to be heard.

I belt the last few lyrics of the song over and over, my intense pleading compounding with each repetition, "Something has to break! Something has to break!" like other words I've repeated over and over in just as much desperation.

Then the instruments fade out, and I step away from my microphone, those words dying on my lips as I'm sure they've died before even reaching God's ears.

"Father God..." a voice says earnestly into the mic near me, and the prayer goes on. But I'm too busy with my own plea to the Heavens, and it goes something like this:

Please...please, God...please, heal me...transform me... I whisper in anguish, my breath barely giving sound to the words, as my fingers twist the beads on my bracelet.

The prayer comes from deep down inside. Guttural. Always the same. Silently begging and hoping that this tribulation will be taken from me, much like Jesus prayed. Though Jesus and I don't share the same hardship.

I open my eyes and look out across the sea of people my age, teenagers, many of them with their heads down, their own hands in the air, a few with their arms crossed. Gabby is near the front, but her eyes are open, and I can see she's chewing on her lip as she picks at the back of the chair in front of her. They look fervent, for the most part.

Behind them all, in the tech booth, Noah is working with the other students on lighting, sound, and projections; shifting the mood of the enormous room with visual manipulation. I subtly turn to read the band. Jake, on lead guitar, is still gently picking out the song in simple notes, while the others have their hands folded over their instruments. KC and the other singers hold their mics at their waists, heads bowed, lips moving in their own prayers, nodding in agreement with the central prayer pouring from the speakers. They look genuinely fervent, just as I do, but I know that not all of what they see is genuine when they look at me.

I fake it.

“The music was great tonight, Luke! Right there at the end, the Spirit was so intense!”

I smile. “Thanks, Whit!” She gives me a quick hug, and I hold the smile until she’s ducked into her car and pulled the door shut. Then I let it go with a sigh, letting the heaviness in my chest swallow my false chipper façade.

My car is parked at the back of the parking lot because Pat wants us to reserve the closer spots for the people attending the Wednesday night youth service, especially visitors. Ethan parks close anyway because he has to haul a lot of drum equipment in his van. But the only equipment I’m carrying is my voice, so it’s the back of the parking lot for me, the avid rule follower.

Fake.

As I approach my car, I see KC leaning against her silver Toyota Corolla, her silhouette long.

“Hey, handsome,” she greets.

While I’ve been in my head all night, forcing a smile for the last three hours, I can genuinely smile now. “Hey, gorgeous.”

She pats her perfect afro, as if it could ever be out of place. “Gee whiz, you’re gonna make a girl blush.”

“Well, golly, Miss KC, a fella would be lucky to be the cause of a pretty girl like you blushing.” It’s a dumb routine we started when we began dating. She said the way I asked her dad’s permission to date her was old-fashioned, but I know Mr. Davis appreciated it. Plus, it wasn’t as if I had a choice. My parents had insisted. If I were going to officially court a girl, I would do it respectfully.

She giggles, her lips glossy even in the dim moonlight. She throws her arms open for a hug, and I oblige. We hug appropriately, our hips keeping their distance and leaving space for the Spirit, as Pat reminds us, but when I begin to pull away, I feel her pressure to prolong the embrace. “If people see us...” is all I have to say, and she reluctantly releases me.

I lean back against my car, the bright red paint job of the ’66 Mustang is dull in the darker recesses of the parking lot. I should say, my dad’s ’66 Mustang. He’s the one who loves it.

“Great job tonight, Luke. As usual.” She smiles. Did she have on that much lip gloss after the service closed? I swallow nervously when I realize she must have touched it up between then and now.

"Thanks." I grin. "I liked how you improvised on He is Holy. That was a really nice touch. I'm glad you agreed to lead on that one."

KC shrugs and looks out over the empty lot. "Looks like everyone is gone."

I scan the lot, hoping to find at least one other car, but there aren't any. It's just us. "A bunch of people are headed to Chili's. You want to go?" I blurt out. "I think Noah was going to save us seats."

She frowns with a smirk. "Noah never goes to Chili's. He's more of a Taco Casa kind of guy."

"No, sorry," I correct myself. "Jake. It was Jake who mentioned it. He's probably waiting on us."

She shifts and coyly steps forward, closing the distance between us. She reaches out and lightly runs her nails up my forearms, my skin breaking out in goosebumps. KC smiles warmly, encouragingly, and my heart races.

"KC..."

"Yeah?" she asks softly, hopefully.

If I could press myself further back into my car, I would, like that gif of Homer Simpson disappearing into the shrubs. "I don't think this is appropriate for our leadership positions in the youth group."

She arches an eyebrow and smirks. "There's no one here, Luke. It's just us."

I glance up to the sky meaningfully, then back at her.

She drops her eyes, and as she wilts, I take a breath of relief.

"I just thought...we've been dating for four months as of today. I mean, this is exactly where you asked me if I would be your girlfriend. So, I thought maybe it would be the perfect place for our first—"

"Don't you think four months is still rushing things?" I straighten up and take her hands in mine, purposefully running my thumb over a certain ring she wears on her left hand, a silver ring with a delicate golden cross in the middle of a heart. Her Promise ring, which she received when a big group of us signed the True Love Waits pledge cards at the end of the course back when we were freshmen. My ring is silver and features an encircled, gold intertwined Alpha Omega symbol. "I think the longer we cherish our relationship and make sure that the core of our connection is based on God, He'll bless our physical relationship all the more when the appropriate time comes. Plus, once we open that door, I don't know about

you, but I want to make sure I'm capable of standing strong against the temptations that will follow. You want that too, right? I know it's challenging, but I think it's what's best for us."

I can sense her palpable disappointment, and I'm glad it's dark, because I don't want to see the hurt in her eyes. Her head is bowed, and by the way she folds in on herself, I can tell she's embarrassed. I'd hate myself for it if I weren't so relieved.

"Why don't we go to Chili's and celebrate four months with some bottomless tostada chips, skillet queso, and a lava cake?" I know all of those are her favorites, the same order she's gotten for as long as I've known her. Five years now.

She lifts her head, and I can see tears trickling down her cheeks, but she attempts to smile. "I should probably go home. I still have homework."

"Okay." I squeeze her arm. "See you in the morning, gorgeous?"

"See you in the morning, handsome." KC lingers for a moment, a frown shadows across her brow, a word perches on her lips, but then she shakes her head and smiles again. Sadly. Dejectedly.

I wait to get in my car until KC closes the door of hers. We wave to each other, and she backs out of her parking spot and drives across the lot. My chin drops to my chest, and my entire body deflates. I hate myself. I know exactly what I just did, and I hate myself for it. The simple act of putting the keys in the ignition and starting the Mustang is overwhelming, and I wonder if I could sleep in the parking lot instead. The back seat isn't long enough for me to stretch out, but it's comfortable enough; I've had my fair share of naps back there. However, if anyone happened across me, it would look weird. Like, why aren't you going home? Dunno. Must have dozed off...in the back seat. At the risk of appearing out of sorts, I fish for my keys in my jeans pocket, but my hand is blocked by a thick piece of paper instead.

I withdraw the bent and wrinkled tri-folded paper from my pocket and stare at the front of it, the Wednesday service's name, "Cross-Exam," in trendy pixelated letters.

Opening it, I catch Pat's black and white headshot first. He looks like a goofball who should be catching waves in California rather than ministering to teenagers in Fort Worth, Texas. I grin at the picture, though,

because the idiot is cross-eyed with his tongue sticking out. He's an idiot, but he's our idiot.

Below Pat's goofy picture are the headshots of the other assistant youth ministers and volunteers. And there's me, black and white, smiling, eyebrow cocked, hair styled just right. "Student Worship Leader." I stare down numbly at the guy in the picture, the black and white making it appear as lifeless as I feel inside right now, and my eyes zone out. No thoughts. No internal monologue. Just the hollowness in my chest and creeping vines of shame. As awful as the title near my picture feels, there's something just as comforting about it, like my cushy down comforter at home. My soul snuggles down into the emotional muck I've been wallowing in all evening.

I toss the paper into the passenger seat with my backpack. As it lands, it flips over to expose the back of the bulletin, displaying an announcement of the upcoming message series starting in May: "True Love, Sex, and Passion: God's Plan for Your Purity."

I feel a wave of nausea barrel through me. Scrambling, I throw the heavy car door open just in time to puke onto the parking lot, the remains of the nuggets and fries I'd hammered down before service splattering on the asphalt. My throat tightens, I croak out a horrendous burp, and another round splashes into the first. I hang my head and wait, spitting, my nose running, my eyes tearing up. I hate puking. I grab the only thing I can find to wipe my mouth with, the tri-fold bulletin. The paper smears more than it helps, but I don't mind; there's something poetic about seeing the trails of vomit streak across the back page's purity announcement. I wipe my eyes with the hem of my T-shirt, fold the program in half, then drop it on the asphalt into my stomach-puddle of mostly digested fast food.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I run through a plea for forgiveness three times in my head before the guilt of littering simmers down.

CHAPTER 1

THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 2025

YAWNING, I stretch and fumble my phone from its charger on my bedside table, then burrow down into my comforter, the only thing shielding me from the frosty air. Even in January, everyone in the house prefers to sleep with the air conditioning on and ceiling fans spinning.

I blink against the brightness of my phone screen. KC never responded to my goodnight.

Good morning, gorgeous, my thumbs tap out on my phone.

I was up late, again, and my eyes are struggling to stay open.

“Rise and shine, Luke,” my mom calls out with a passing knock on my door. “Today is the day the Lord has made! He made it chilly, so bundle up!” She adds as though I can’t check the weather on my phone. Or maybe she doesn’t trust that I’ll check. But what does it matter when life’s most crucial morning riddle is solved for you in the form of a school uniform—khaki or navy pants; a white, red, or navy polo or sweater; and the same style of tennis shoes you’ve been wearing for the last thirteen years of your life? White Converse. Apparently, God wants His children to dress alike, so no one feels judged for not having trendy clothes or the right label on their jeans. But there’s no dress code for accessories that a teenager can use to differentiate them-

selves from the other uniformed people walking the halls. Purses, watches, ball caps, rings, earrings, belts, backpacks, and sunglasses are loopholes regularly abused. So let the judgment commence.

And that doesn't even begin to touch on how these uniforms, meant to put everyone on the same level, don't fit everyone the same way. Pleats can go all kinds of wrong; shorts and skirts don't hit legs in the same place. For some girls, when the plaid romper dresses fit their ample chests properly, they end up gapping or hanging oddly elsewhere, turning the whole outfit into a plaid potato sack. But again, this is where money comes in. You have big boobs and a tiny waist like Chelsea? Great, you have a tailor narrow it in here, shorten it there, and suddenly most guys think you look hot in that plaid potato sack.

At some point, the guys won the Battle of Hair, and we can now have long hair past our collars, and seniors can have cleanly trimmed facial hair. Truth be told, most guys can't grow anything close to a beard. At best, we have a few guys who can grow mustaches, a couple more who can grow a full Van Dyke, and only one who can grow an actual sideburns-to-chin-and-lip beard. Yours truly. And I do when a show requires it. But I keep my face cleanly shaved otherwise, and as the school hours tick by, I have an obvious five o'clock shadow by the end of the day. It's my dad's genes. Don't get me wrong, it's a pain to shave every morning. Still, when a show pops up and I'm once again cast as the father, chief of police, or any other role of masculine authority, I'm grateful I don't have to apply a fake beard with spirit gum, which burns my skin like God's holy judgment.

I head to the bathroom, then check my phone as I run the electric razor over my face. KC still hasn't responded. She's left me on read. Twice.

By the time I make it to the kitchen, Connor is already wolfing down a bowl of cereal—possibly his second—while flipping through one of Dad's old issues of *Sports Illustrated*, and Mom is on the phone. I look at the key hooks on the wall under the collection of crosses—some are Pier 1 Imports gaudy, some are remnants of my childhood faith. My dad's keys are gone from his hook, which means he's already left for work. Another exciting day of upper-middle management in medical supply distribution, a job he's had since he and my mom

married when they were fresh out of college, and two years before Brad was born.

They met at a Sunday school class during their third year of college. Dad was at the University of Texas, and Mom was at a tiny bible college just north of Austin. The Lord told them they were meant for each other after their first chaperoned date. No holding hands, no prolonged hugs, and certainly no kissing. My brothers and I have been following the same dogmatic road, and the staunch restriction on physical intimacy is part of the reason why no one has ever suspected—never mind.

“I don’t know, hon,” my mom says as she sets a plate of eggs and bacon in front of me. I bow my head and run through a quick, well-practiced prayer before digging in. “He’s applied to most of the local schools with programs that seem to meet his standards for what he wants to major in. You know how it is; it wasn’t that long ago since you were in his shoes. It’s a big decision, and it isn’t easy to narrow down so many great choices, but staying in-state is a good start. Well, musical theatre, of course, but he’s been very selective about which school he’s willing to go to.” There’s a tone there, a touch of exasperation.

I glance at Connor, who winks at me and rolls his eyes before picking up his cereal bowl to chug the milk. I don’t know how a guy his size and build manages to bulk like he does, fueling himself with two or three bowls of Cinnamon Toast Crunch every morning. I don’t even know how he stays awake in class. If I don’t have something solid in my stomach, like bacon and eggs, I’m crashing before the end of the first block.

Connor barrels through his morning classes like his big Ford truck and hammers down two sandwiches at lunch for a refuel before football, baseball (his first love), or track practice by the end of the day. My parents got their second athlete in Connor, ten months younger than me, my Irish twin, as Dad loves to say. Brad, four years older than me and a senior at the University of Texas, whom Mom is talking to on the phone, is an athlete, too, but nothing like Connor. I’m the artsy one.

“He’s just having a hard time finding a theatre program he likes.

He's auditioned for a school in Abilene. Yes, that one. No, Bradley, it's a good school. Don't say that. Cheryl's daughter goes there and loves it. They have required chapel service every week," she says as though that's a selling point. "Anyway, he auditioned there and received a partial scholarship offer for their musical theatre program, and also at Southwestern University in Georgetown, not too far from you. That one also has a good Christian ministry program, which I personally think would be the perfect fit. But what do I know, I'm just the mom. Yes, it's where I went."

Connor gets up, pats my shoulder, and rolls his eyes again. Connor is one of my best friends. I go to all his games, and he's at all of my shows and choir concerts. We look like opposite sides of the same coin. We're the same height, but where he fills his school uniform with muscle, mine hugs my lean frame. Most people mistake us for actual twins, and if we were, it would definitely be fraternal.

Our older brother, Brad, falls somewhere in between us, part jock, part creative, though his medium has always been words. Poetry, short stories, a perfect slogan, our English teachers use his work as exemplars to this day. He took off for the University of Texas four years ago, shattering mom's hope that he'd go to a private Christian college and pursue the ministry. He countered that it would actually be more Christ-like to go to a public university with all the "sinners" than to hide away in a bible college. Mom didn't like the suggestion that she had hidden away, but I agreed with Brad. Silently. I hoped that, since Brad had shattered the non-Christian college ceiling, I'd have the same clear pathway, but my mom has only doubled down, encouraged by my being the student worship leader at our church for the last three years. While she's willing to let me study musical theatre, because it will improve my vocal and stage skills, she's insistent that I look at schools where I can major in theatre and minor in theology.

Dad is another story. Being a UT alumnus himself, he was thrilled that Brad followed in his footsteps to be a Longhorn. When it comes to me, though, he stays pretty quiet. He never actively supports Mom's encouragement for me to enter the ministry, but he also doesn't come to my side when I try to explain that I want to study my passion—

Theatre. It's how it's always been. While he isn't against me, it also doesn't feel like he's for me. At times, I wonder if he cares at all.

Connor sweeps back into the kitchen, his red, white, and blue letter jacket on, setting my backpack and puffy red coat down by the table. "We gotta go, Lukey."

I shovel eggs into my mouth, wrap my bacon in a napkin, then scoot my chair back and hop up. "Bye, Mom!" I almost choke on the egg in my mouth as I sling my coat on, then scoop up my backpack.

Mom frowns, flustered by our sudden exit. "Hold on, Bradley, the boys are leaving. Well, okay—bye, I guess. Love you."

"Love you too, Mom," Connor says as he heads out the door to the garage.

"No, I was talking to Bradley."

"Gee, thanks, Mom!" Connor shouts from the garage.

Her fluster rises a couple of notches. "No! I love you, too! I meant I was telling Bradley I love *him!*" She spins toward me, a look of genuine concern in her eyes. "Does he think I don't love him?"

I roll my eyes. "Of course he knows you love—"

She cuts me off with a frown. "Lucas, eyes. Don't roll your eyes. It's rude. I hope you don't do that to your teachers."

I stop myself from an eye-roll encore. It takes effort. "Of course not, Mom."

"Good. Love you, hon."

"Love you, too," I mumble—the early morning admonishment stings.

"What's that?"

"I love you, too," I say more clearly.

She touches my hair, and I let her, unwilling to risk another reprimand. "Enunciation is important if you're going to be a minister someday. No one wants a mumbling worship leader."

"Got it," I enunciate sarcastically, hitting the Ts hard; not enough to sound rude, only playful. I kiss her on the cheek to be sure the joke lands properly. She accepts the affection, and I leave through the garage.

EVEN THOUGH WE'RE going to the same place, Connor and I both take our own cars. He has pre-season baseball practice, and my spring musical rehearsals started just before Christmas break.

The show is a Lerner and Loewe classic, *My Fair Lady*, and I landed the lead, Professor of Phonetics, Henry Higgins. I love the musical; the tunes are unforgettable, and the dialogue is chock-full of witty banter, as my mom and I would say. It's one that we would watch over and over, to my dad's and brothers' annoyance. The setting is 1912 London, the Edwardian era, all top hats and tails for the upper crust, and cockney dialects for the dregs.

The story is about a linguist who can supposedly tell where someone is from, down to the street they were born on, simply by listening to them speak. He makes a bet with this other old man, Colonel Pickering, another phonetics fanatic, that he can take this flower-selling beggar girl and pass her off as a high society lady. I mean, that same story is all over the place. TV shows and movies have retold this old trope over and over—someone tries to present themselves as something they're not, and it eventually backfires.

Something about the story makes my stomach turn, and it's not just *something*. I know exactly what it is, but I shove it down. Resisting the urge to check my phone to see if KC has finally responded, I fiddle with the six beads on my bracelet instead, reciting what each one stands for to clear my head. *Black is for sin, and red for the blood of Christ. White is forgiveness, washing us clean as snow. Baptism is blue. Spiritual growth is green. Gold is for our reward in heaven.* I run through the beads a few times until my stomach calms. I've been through five of these bracelets; my nerves have doomed them all.

Anyway, *My Fair Lady* is a good show. I've watched the film with Rex Harrison playing Henry Higgins opposite Audrey Hepburn's Eliza Doolittle far too many times to be considered healthy. I practically already have the lines memorized. Heck, anytime it rains, my mom and I will glance at each other and sing, "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain!"

And it's another lead role, which will look good on my college applications to wherever I finally choose to go. I don't know where I want to go, but I do know where I don't want to go: anywhere in Texas

or a bordering state. I want to go to a university where I'll have a shot at making connections in theatre performance, where I can work with people who are in the industry and not used-to-be or never were. A school where, when I graduate, I can call on the connections I made, or launch into a graduate school to hone my craft. While I love what I do on Sundays and Wednesdays for the church, once I sing the last song on Sunday, May 25, Graduation Sunday, I'm done. I haven't told anyone I'm leaving the ministry except for Connor.

"YOU KNOW Mom and Dad will flip their shit," he said one evening a couple of months ago at Whataburger as we sipped our shakes—his cookies and cream, mine chocolate banana.

"Connor."

"Sorry, *Pastor Lucas*. Flip their *doo-doo*." He rolls his eyes. "Poop? Dookie? Fecal matter? It all sounds stupid, Lukey. Shit is spot on."

"Doesn't matter."

"Does matter. It sounds dumb," he grumbles as he fights to suck up a chunk of Oreo through his straw.

"Whatever. I think making Graduation Sunday my final day to lead worship makes sense. It's a perfect period on the whole thing." *And after that, I won't have to suffer through feeling like a fraud at the end of every service anymore.*

Connor works his straw in and out of the shake, breaking up the cookie chunks, the plastic lid on the straw making the weird *hoo-hoo* sound over and over. "When are you going to tell Matt?"

I shrug. "Some time in April. No point doing it now."

He shrugs, too. "You gonna miss it?"

I act like I'm considering his question, giving it a real moment to turn over in my head, but I knew the answer the millisecond the words left his mouth. *No!* I want to blurt out no, but I don't. *And I won't miss the imposter syndrome either.* Instead, I say, "There are things about it I'll definitely miss. The team. The opportunity to guide people into the presence of the Lord. Stuff like that. But it'll be nice to have the time freed up for the summer as I get ready to go to college. I mean, techni-

cally, I won't be a student in the youth group anymore. Ethan can take over. I've been getting him ready for it, and the summer will be a good opportunity for him to settle into the role before his junior year starts. Matt likes him and says the couple of times he's led when I couldn't be at church went well. So, yeah..."

Connor is watching me.

I raise an eyebrow and take a sip of my shake, a chunk of banana getting lodged in the straw.

He doesn't say anything.

The banana is really stuck, and I'm working on pulling it through, my cheeks hurting.

Still nothing. From my brother or the straw.

"What?" I finally ask, giving the straw and my cheeks a break.

"Bull fecal matter," he finally says.

"What?"

"You heard me. Bull doo-doo." He tilts his head. "You're gonna be happy to be free of it. But that's not why. I don't know why, and you don't have to tell me, but *that's* not it."

My chest tightens up, and I can tell I'm breathing weird, but I'm doing my best to maintain eye contact and act like everything is fine. It helps that the chunk of banana is relentless, so I shift my focus to it, suggesting we probably should head out before curfew.

THAT'S the last time Connor and I discussed my leaving the ministry because he came too close to—never mind. I push that night at Whataburger out of my head by reciting the beads again as I touch them one by one with my right hand and steer with my left.

I pull into the school parking lot behind a line of cars. Each senior class gets to claim their own parking spots near the high school building and paint them however they want. My school is tiny compared to the huge local public high schools. We only have twenty-six students in our graduating class, in stark contrast to their hundreds. So, twenty-six parking spots are painted in every which way. The athletes usually have something representing their sport of choice;

there are always a few gamers with school admin-approved video game characters, and then a scattering of other hobbies, from horseback riding to chess. My spot is framed by red curtains, with a Tony Award taking center stage. One thing all our spaces have in common is a Bible verse painted somewhere in the design; it's a requirement. Mine is Philippians 4:7; feel free to look it up yourself. It's about peace, and that's precisely what my brain is in constant need of.

No sooner do I pull into my spot than a hand slaps my driver's side window, gratefully jolting me out of the current narrative spinning through my head despite the worship music I've been listening to all the way to school. KC's silence is at the eye of my anxiety tornado.

I glance out the window, and it's precisely who I anticipated it being. Noah, wrists full of jelly bracelets and chains, his bleached hair halfway grown out, and his mustache questionably trimmed. We've been best friends since fourth grade, when we both came to Prairie Hills Christian Academy, and found ourselves being picked last for touch football in PE. As a fourth-grade boy, it's humiliating, but as seniors in high school, we're both comfortably in our lanes. I drive like a grandma in my musical theatre lane, while Noah lays on the horn in his animation fast lane. The way he brings characters to life on his tablet and creates a short cartoon in just a few days blows my mind. I've had the honor of voicing them for a few years now.

He yanks open the heavy door of the Mustang. "What did you do?"

They've already talked. KC got to him first. To be fair, it's not my problem. It's hers.

I swallow, then ask forgiveness for such a disrespectful thought. Outwardly, I shake my head ruefully. "You know how I feel about it." My breath clouds in the morning January air.

Noah rolls his eyes. In my head, my mom rebukes him. "Dude, it's so archaic. I mean, I'm not promoting you having... you know...but a kiss isn't that big of a deal. Even Pat said so."

I close the car door emphatically, closing the topic just as clearly with, "It is to me."

KC and I have looped back around this dead horse so often there's a worn path. We've been dating for a little over a year now, and she

first started it back in April 2024. I can't help feeling offended every time she brings it up. *How many times do I have to explain to her I'm doing it for us?*

Noah sighs behind me as we head toward the main entry of the school, a decades-old shopping plaza now classrooms for the middle and high school. "You have the math homework?" he asks as we step through the doors into the lively hallway of red, white, and navy school uniforms—ultra patriotic of us, taken over the top by our super original mascot, the Eagles. Lockers open and slam in the crowded hallway, and I gesture "hey" with a hand or head tilt to most people as I pass by.

"Yeah, I have it. You have the history reading check?"

"Yup, but you need to make sure you read it 'cause she said there's a quiz."

"Which *she*?" I ask hesitantly.

"Mrs. Lan. Not KC." He drops his voice. "But speaking of, since you brought it—"

"I didn't bring it up!"

"You did in a roundabout way. Your bad. So, speaking of, you need to talk to her."

"I've tried texting her. Here's the math." I slip a sheet of paper into his hand like a drug deal.

"Thanks. When?" Noah slides the history assignment into my backpack.

"Last night. This morning. Nothing." And I see her at the end of the hall, but not before she sees me. She's gorgeous, and it takes my breath away. Always has. Her dark skin is radiant, and the way she highlights her eyes with bronze eyeshadow is on point. She's as quick-witted as she is quick on the track, and her voice is so full when she leads out on songs at church. I had to twist KC's arm to get her to sing a solo a couple of years ago, but since then, her confidence has grown, and I think she's better than I am at leading worship. Better than me in a lot of ways. KC should be the student worship leader. But she's a girl, and while our church bucks some traditions, others they don't. No women in leadership roles, no one who's been divorced can be on staff, and anyone who shows evidence of leading an alternative lifestyle isn't

welcome as a member of the church whatsoever. However, they're welcome as visitors, and their monetary offerings aren't turned down.

KC turns on her heel to head to her first block, economics, which we don't have together. I guess that's another hour and a half my stomach will keep twisting.

Black. Red. White. Blue. Green. Gold.

The morning block passes and I try to find KC during break in our usual spots—the picnic table between buildings, the bench outside McCrae's office where the school's Director of Spiritual Life, sort of like a school youth pastor, holds court with upper classmen between classes, dishing out terrible dad jokes with a dollop of wisdom, and then the Black Box Theater where I spend most of my time— but no luck. No sign of her, and she's still not answering my texts.

I've gone from mildly concerned over KC's silence to twisting with anxiety over it in the fifteen or so minutes I've been searching for her, and I don't hear Mrs. Bledsoe calling roll until Gabby elbows me in the ribs. I blurt out some combination of here, present, and yeah, much to the class's amusement and thankfully, Mrs. Bledsoe's. Gabby and I have been playing opposite each other in scenes and fall plays for years now. She's not much for musicals, as singing and dancing aren't her thing, but she can connect with characters on levels I've never seen. When we work together, I feel like she's pulling me into a world I didn't know I could access, and when it's over, it takes me a moment to bring myself back around to reality. Honestly, I'm a better actor because of her.

Gabby has already committed to a school in New Jersey that she says fits her vibe, and she earned a partial performance scholarship. Thanks to her mom's tireless work applying for every grant Gabby qualified for, my ultimate scene partner is heading to her dream school debt-free, ready to make the kinds of connections that could one day lead her straight to Broadway.

Mrs. Bledsoe instructs us to continue working on our current scene. Gabby skips and I drag to our claimed corner and make as though we're running our lines.

Gabby peers at me through her purple-framed cat-eye glasses, and runs her lime-green nails through her crimped-out blonde hair that

frames her head like a lion's mane. She is all kinds of a lot. "You, babes, aren't here."

"No," I mumble, "I'm not."

"Listen, babes, I love your girl, KC, and this ain't good for either of y'all." Gabby's Texas accent is thick and smoky as brisket when she's not on stage, but she's gotten the twang under control when it counts. The smokiness, however, is what often sets her apart and gets the judges' attention when she competes in monologue competitions each year.

I guess the stunned look on my face says it all.

"Yes, babes, I know all about it."

My mouth finally works. "How?"

"Conn."

I'm going to kill my brother. "He told you?"

"We were textin' last night."

"He told you?"

"And you, good sir," her twang is gone, "should know better than to besmirch a lady's reputation." She's suddenly proper, her posture perfect.

I pick up on her cue immediately. "If it *is* a lady I see before me!" I sneer in character.

She holds a hand to her chest. "You, a common roustabout, dare question the integrity of a lady?"

I bark a guffaw. "Lady, my eye, your lowship, if the whispers of your activities be true."

Gabby swings her hand across the airspace in front of my face, and I feign to the right as though I've been slapped.

Mrs. Bledsoe passes by and turns her attention to another acting pair, to which she immediately dishes out a sharp admonishment for not focusing on their scene work. The two of us have this system down to a science. Gabby positions herself to keep an eye on Bledsoe, and we vacillate between working and being each other's therapist when we have in-class rehearsal days like today.

"Yes, Conn told me." Back to Texas twang Gabby.

I hate him.

I'll never hate him.

“What did he say?”

“He heard she’s done.”

My anxious internal twists swirl into a monster, and my mouth fills with saliva. I jump to my feet and make a break for the door, hearing muffled calls of concern from Mrs. Bledsoe as I dash out of the room. I run down the hall, my Converse slapping the old linoleum, and I shove my way through the boys’ room door, feeling the weight of someone slamming against the wall on the other side with a shout, but I don’t have time to see if they’re all right before I’m face down in a public toilet, puking. I hear a voice behind me ask if I’m all right, but the only answer I can give is a guttural belch before I launch into rounds two and three.

I wipe my eyes on the sleeve of my navy sweater. I almost empty my stomach again when I see the pee-stained, pubic hair-decorated rim of the toilet I’d been tightly gripping during the event. Pulling myself to my feet, I take shaking steps past the freshman who’s holding the back of his head while asking again if I’m all right. I think I mumble an apology for slamming him into the wall, but I can’t be sure. I wash my hands three times with soap and warm water, then look at myself in the mirror. My eyes are bloodshot, and around them are the tell-tale signs of busted blood vessels, the sure sign that I’ve thrown up. They look like someone took a little needle and pricked them repeatedly until I appear as though I’m experimenting with gruesome eyeshadow.

Offering another apology to the freshman, I wobble my way to the nurse’s office, which is just a closet off the high school secretary’s office, who is, in fact, also our nurse. At small Christian schools like this, most of the faculty and staff play double duty of some sort. I give Mrs. Marks the quick rundown of what happened, my voice hoarse, and coupled with how rough my face looks and the eye witness testimony of the freshman asking for Advil to help with his headache, she has mercy and prays for me, then lets me lie on the cot in the dark, where I promptly pass out.

CHAPTER 2

IF YOU'VE EVER FALLEN asleep on a cot in the nurse's office closet and resurrected hours later, you know how disorienting it can be. I can't figure out where I am, but it's tiny, cramped, suffocating, and oddly familiar. The walls are decorated with the official posters one would expect in a space dedicated to preserving human life, diagrams on how to wash your hands and eat a balanced meal, and a yellowed chart of the human body, with certain reproductive parts blacked out for decency with a permanent marker. Then there are the framed embroidered scriptures for healing, Ten Statements for Claiming Your Healing, and in a gaudy gold frame in the center of it all, a print of Jesus with His arms spread wide over a child in a hospital bed, her parents praying over her, heads bowed and hands folded. On the rare occasions I've visited the nurse's office, I wondered what illness the little girl had and if it was easier to cure than what I begged God to heal me from on a nightly basis as I spiraled in shame.

Fully coming to my senses is taking time, and part of me is eager to get up and get back to class, knowing full well the rumor mill is already in full tilt about my explosive exit from theatre class. But on the other hand, I need time. Time to sort the whirlwind of thoughts demanding my attention all at once.

He heard she's done.

He—Connor.

She—KC.

Done—Us.

My eyes immediately burn with tears, then warm trails run down the left side of my face. I turn onto my side, hooking my arm under the thin pillow, and stare at the wall only a few feet away from my face. I stare at the picture of Jesus with His arms outstretched, begging his embrace to be for me. Stifling my sobs, I force my body to be still because I don't want Mrs. Marks to come in and start drilling me with sympathetic questions that will end with her offering to pray with me again. I want to be left to my misery.

Black for sin. Red for blood. White for forgiveness.

He heard she's done.

I've never been broken up with before.

I've never been in a long-term relationship before.

I've never potentially ruined such a close friendship before.

Blue for baptism. Green for spiritual growth.

KC and I have been best friends since seventh grade. I've always made friends with girls faster and easier than guys, except Noah. Noah has always been the exception. I find it insanely hard to connect with most guys. In Texas, it seems most men talk only about sports. So, I hang out with the girls—and Noah. When KC came to PHCA in seventh grade, we had all our classes together, and something just connected. A little over a year ago, those feelings of friendship seemed to develop into something more profound as we spent more time on the worship team, in prayer groups, and in choir class. People kept asking when we were going to get together, and after one Wednesday night service last January, I finally asked her out, and we've been dating ever since. It doesn't feel as though anything has really changed, except that we hold hands regularly and pose in couples' pictures. It's just been Luke and KC, like it's always been.

But there's the stuff that's become increasingly—

No.

I fight the swirling in my stomach and the urge to grab the trash

can for an encore of my Exorcist impersonation, then push myself up to sitting.

Gold for heavenly treasure.

I hear the swish of a denim skirt, and Mrs. Marks pokes her head into the tiny recovery room. “How ya feelin’, hon?”

I swallow the saliva collecting in my mouth, willing myself to be all right, and push those thoughts that wanted to follow the *But*—. “I think I’m all right. Must’ve been something I ate for breakfast.”

She sighs sympathetically. “Don’t I know it, hon. Mr. Marks had a bad case of it the other night after we had dinner at the catfish place up the road. He mentioned a piece didn’t taste right, but kept eating anyway since he can’t pass up an all-you-can-eat buffet, especially when it’s catfish. I tell you what, those hushpuppies are to die for. I could eat my weight in hushpuppies and butter. Probably have over the years. But he was up all night with an upset tummy, the likes of which I’d never seen—or smelled. I prayed for him and dabbed a bit of essential oils on him, thieves oil does the trick—like how Jesus hung on a cross between two thieves?—and he was all right by morning, praise the Lord. I have some thieves in my drawer. You want some? I could put a little dab on your temples? Pray for you?” I could hear the eagerness in her voice, but I wasn’t about to let her slather any essential oils on my face. My skin is sensitive enough without adding *extra* oils.

I manage to get out of the nurse’s office with just a quick prayer for healing, and discover it’s almost three o’clock. *Crap!* I slept through most of the day! I dash to my locker to get my cellphone, assuming it’ll be all right since the final bell is about to ring, and when I power it up, I find a single text message from KC.

Meet me at the picnic table after school. We need to talk.

Cussing isn’t my thing, but I really want to right now and feel so bad about it, so I ask for forgiveness. This is the worst day of my life. I want to run away. I’m not prepared for this. I know I should be praying about it, *laying it before the Lord*, but I’m too panicked to do anything like that. All I can muster is a simple *ok* in response, then I yank my bag out of my locker and drop my phone inside.

I swear I can hear a funeral dirge playing as I drag my feet to the courtyard between buildings, which is really nothing more than an alley with several white painted picnic tables scattered up and down it. It's senior privilege for us to eat out here, but it's been freezing cold, so we haven't eaten out here in weeks. The table that KC and I, along with a few others like Noah and Gabby, occupy is located at the end of the alley, furthest from the cafeteria. I can hear the ghosts of our conversations, usually gossip masked as concerns for people and the latest shows on Broadway or animated films that Noah is geeking out over. But all of that is dead now. I've killed it. I've killed it all because I won't cross a line that I'm personally convicted about.

Perched on top of the table, I wrap my arms around my knees and try to stay warm in my puffy coat. My right leg is bouncing out of pure nerves, but a twinge of something bubbles in my gut, and it's not the kind of something that will make me puke. I let it bubble there, thinking about it, ruminating on it, until it's fully formed and I feel the familiar thickness of anger in my forehead.

"Are you ignoring me now?"

My head whips to the side, and I see KC standing there in her long green faux fur coat, the one she and I found at a thrift shop in December. I bought it for her as a Christmas present. Her arms are pulled tight around her thin frame, and there's a look in her eyes I don't think I've ever seen before. Distrust.

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't hear you. I was in my head." I try not to let the anger add bite to my words, but she raises an eyebrow and looks away.

"What's new?" she sighs.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She takes a step back and looks me square in the eyes. "You're always in your head, Luke. Always thinking about something."

I bite and can't help it. "And that's bad? I have a lot going on."

She huffs. "You can say that again."

My eyes narrow. "And what's *that* supposed to mean?"

KC holds up her hands, her purple chrome nails sparkling in the winter sun. "You know, this is not how I wanted this to go."

"And what is *this*?"

She drops her chin and looks me dead in the eyes, something switching off behind her own. “I’m not dragging this out. I’m breaking up with you.”

My body goes cold, and my heart tries to escape up my throat. I can’t feel my hands. Is that normal? *No*. I can’t feel my feet either. That can’t be normal. Am I going to pass out? Should I get off the table so I don’t fall over and hit my head on the concrete? My fingers start fumbling with the beads on my bracelet.

She spreads her hands and cocks her head to the side. “That it? Nothing?”

I finally get my breath, brain, and mouth to all work together once they’re all sure I’m not going to topple over. “I don’t... just... Why?”

Her eyes narrow now. “You. Know. Why.”

And it flares. All the nerves. All the numbness. Everything flushes with heat, and my hands grip the edge of the picnic table so hard my fingertips hurt. “Because I won’t kiss you?” I hiss at her vehemently. My face screws up with rage, and my forehead is pounding. “That’s really it?” I feel my face contort into a sneer. “Are you really that much of a—” *Don’t say it.* “—that much of a whore that you would end our relationship because I won’t satisfy your lustful passions—”

KC’s hand flashes out of nowhere, and my head whips to the side, the burn of a slap stinging my cheek, my eyes watering out of pain, all followed by humiliation. Then her voice is in my ear, a lethal whisper. “You listen to me, you little asshole. I don’t know what’s going on with you... Actually, I think I do know what’s going on with you, and I know it’s not me. And I will not waste the rest of my senior year pining for someone...for something you *can’t* be for me.” Her nostrils are flaring, and her lips are tight against her teeth. “I deserve better, Luke. I deserve better, and let’s get something straight. Wanting physical intimacy from your boyfriend is normal. I have a line. I have boundaries I’ve committed to. I know them, my parents know them, God knows them. They might not fully line up with what you committed to,” she gestures at the ring on my finger, “but you aren’t the end-all be-all when it comes to chastity and godly character, Lucas Hamilton, you gaslighting asshole.”

The fire in me has died under a loss of oxygen; I’m positive I’ve

stopped breathing. My whole body is numb except for the pulsing handprint on my cheek. My watering eyes have gone fuzzy, and I'm staring off into nothing. No, not nothing, hopelessness.

I hear KC take a step backwards. "I think my brother was right about you. I should have listened to him."

I hear her footsteps fade away down the alley.

Bit by bit, my body tingles, and the numbness dissipates, replaced by what I can only assume is hyperventilating. Fears are racing across my mind, and I'm terrified to truly look at any of them. I try to pray, but I can't even manage to string those words together. What did she mean by, *I think my brother was right about you?* No, I think I know what she meant, and my stomach churns.

Black for sin.

Stop. Stop! Stop!

I jump to my feet, willing my rage and resentment to spark. I tighten my fists, bite my bottom lip, willing the external actions to create and fuel the internal feeling of anger. I scoop up my backpack, my hands shaking furiously, and turn to almost run into Mr. Deeb's. He frowns, his thick eyebrows caving into his eyes, as he looks at my cheek. "Somebody slap you, Mr. Hamilton?" He's always about using our last names like some bygone era.

Red for blood.

"No, sir," I say calmly, willing myself to maintain eye contact. "Just cold."

He cocks his head to the side and looks at my cheek suspiciously, but he waves it off. "Then you'd better get on home."

I gesture toward the high school building. "Can't, sir. I have musical practice."

He shakes his head. "No, you don't, son. I know you were under the weather and sleeping it off in the nurses' office, but you still missed three-quarters of your classes today, so according to school attendance policy, that means—"

"But I was here the whole time!"

Mr. Deeb's holds up a thick hand. "School policy says, you can't attend—"

“I didn’t mean to sleep that whole time!” I feel my face flushing with heat.

“Be that as it may, you can’t—”

“If Mrs. Marks hadn’t let me sleep that whole time, I would have gone to class!” I can’t feel my hands again. The throbbing behind my eyes has turned my head thick, and I can’t think. I can barely hear, and for the first time in my life, I’m actually seeing red.

Red for blood.

“Mr. Hamilton, you need to get your things—”

And then my lips part, and I can’t stop it. “This isn’t fucking fair!”

Mr. Deeb’s usually squinty eyes widen in shock, then cloud to a thunderous glower; his chin tucks, and his neck thickens. “To my office. Now.”

CHAPTER 3

MOMENTS in my life often go on repeat in my mind. I remember walking out into the driveway at home and seeing the Mustang for the first time with the giant white bow on the hood. I remember the first time I rode the Haunted Mansion at Disney World when I was six, feeling the Doom Buggy tilt backwards and thinking it had somehow disappeared behind me in the dark of the mysterious ride. I also remember the first time I brought home a report card in seventh grade with an eighty-eight in life science—the sheer disappointment from my mom, the lecture, and the silence it earned me for two days.

Launching an F-bomb at Mr. Deeb is going to be more like the latter.

Prairie Hills Christian Academy still uses corporal punishment as a means of discipline in the twenty-first century. Every parent signs a clause in the student application that gives the administration permission to spank students when deemed necessary. For high school boys, Mr. Deeb administers the punishment with a long wooden paddle. I've never heard of a girl receiving swats in high school. In all my thirteen years at Prairie Hills Christian Academy, I've never gotten swats. I know people who have. Noah has been on the receiving end of a swat three times because, according to him, his sense of humor is underap-

preciated by the teachers and misinterpreted as disrespect. The last time he got swats was in ninth grade, and he swore after that it would never happen again because “Deebs can swing a mean paddle.” He promised he could hear the paddle whistling through the air like a bomb dropping in an old Bugs Bunny cartoon. Before that, Mrs. Connors, the middle school principal, had administered the swats with a thick ruler, and Noah said he had to keep himself from laughing when it was over. Mr. Deebs was no joke, and I can now attest to that. My butt is killing me, and yeah, I’m pretty sure I heard it whistle, too. Not my butt. The paddle.

But more than my butt, my soul is killing me. *How could I have said that?* And I don’t just mean to Mr. Deebs. To KC. *Why had I called her that?* I lie in my bed and palm-wipe the tears from my eyes before they have a chance to fall. My anger came out of nowhere, and things were wildly out of control before I knew it. The disbelief, rage, and disappointment on KC’s face, the sheer hurt. I did that. *Why?*

I pick up my phone from my chest and see the twenty-three texts I’ve received from Noah, Gabby, and Connor, and the two I’ve received from my dad and mom. The last two are the ones that are making me sick to my stomach all over again. Mr. Deebs called them both right before the swats to let them know what was happening. He put them on speaker phone so I could hear the disappointment in their voices, far more painful than the following corporal punishment. Their texts were short and to the point; both of them versions of, *I’m so disappointed*, and *we’ll deal with this when I get home*.

I respond to Noah, Gabby, and Connor.

I don’t want to talk about it

It’ll have to suffice, though Noah and Gabby both try to coax it out of me. I know Connor will be home after baseball preseason, and we’ll talk then. But I don’t even know what I’ll say, because I’m not going to admit the thing that lurks in the back of my mind. Not to anyone. I’ll blame my outburst on the anguish of the breakup, but not what I ignore lying at the root of it.

A gnarled root that's been growing, burrowing, and spreading for years.

A root that's twisted and forced itself through my mind and heart since I hit puberty.

Noah was the first person I remember having a wet dream, and he told me about it in full detail—what it was like to see a girl's breasts in his dream, to kiss her, and then to ejaculate in his sleep. He said it was life-changing. I looked forward to it happening to me, and he made me promise that when it did, I would tell him all about it in full detail because it was only fair. But when I finally had mine a few months later, I couldn't wrap my mind around it. My first wet dream featured a male model from an underwear package stepping out of the picture and standing in front of me, my hands exploring his body, even reaching inside the pair of briefs he was filling out so well. I woke up with my pajama shorts covered in ejaculation, and my sheets soaked from panicked sweats. Of course, I made good on my promise to Noah, but instead of it being a muscular man in my dream, it was a Victoria's Secret model from a window display at the mall. Since then, I've had a hundred similar dreams, and each one plunges me into further despair.

Across the house, the door to the garage opens and closes, and from the jingle of keys, I know it's Mom. I'd give anything to have it be Dad. I place my phone on my bedside table and sit up in bed, wincing, my butt still in pain, preparing myself for the first disappointed parent encounter. My fingers start twisting the beads on my bracelet. I hear her sigh from the living room, and next thing I know, she's framed in my doorway.

She glares at me.

I lower my eyes.

She opens her mouth to say something, but stops.

I clench my jaw and swallow down the saliva gathering in my mouth.

She raises a hand, points a red, polished nail at me, then slaps the door, and I jump.

Then she's gone.

My heart is racing, and my breathing is short and rapid. I know it's not over. It's only beginning.

And she's back, framed in the doorway. "Do you know who I was with when I received the most humiliating call of my entire life?" Her jaw is jutting, and her eyes are piercing. She's not shouting. Yet.

I shake my head.

"Excuse me?"

A shake of the head isn't ever good enough. "No, ma'am."

"Sister Carol, Luke. Sister Carol!"

Sister Carol is Pastor Harold's wife, the matriarch of our church, and the pinnacle role model for every woman who attends The Table Fellowship, the biggest church in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. My mom and a select few other women have the honor of being in Sister Carol's exclusive inner circle. Other women at the church envy them. No, they can't envy them. That's a sin. They pray for the Lord's favor to one day be in my mom's shoes, no matter the cost.

"I'm sorry—"

"And I answered the phone right there in front of her, Luke! Sister Carol! Of course, I thought you were sick, or perhaps I was getting another praise report from one of your teachers. Wouldn't that have been nice, Luke? Don't you think that would have been a pleasant surprise right there in front of Sister Carol?"

The winds of her storm pause in their roar, but the fury is only rising.

"Yes, ma'—"

"But that's not what I got, is it, Luke? Instead, I was humiliated! I was horrifically humiliated right there in front of Sister Carol, Fran, Ruth, and—" Then she's gone again. I hear her go to the kitchen, open a cabinet and slam it, open another cabinet and it slams, then running water.

Black for sin.

I take the brief reprieve to gather myself, taking deep breaths that do absolutely nothing for my twisting stomach and racing heart. I wish my dad were here.

Mom is suddenly back, filling the doorway with her billowing fury. "Lucas Jason Hamilton, I have never—never!—" She open

palm slaps the door again, “—been more humiliated in my life!” Now my mom is yelling, and her eyes are wild. She stalks into my room, the finger pointing, and she keeps coming until her red nail is inches from my face, so close I can see it trembling in rage. My mom has never struck me, but I don’t feel as though it couldn’t happen. If I thought my heart was ready to launch itself from my chest before, it pales in comparison to the jackhammer chiseling away my ribcage now. “You made me lie to Sister Carol, Luke! You. Made. Me. Lie!” I wince as she jabs the air in front of my face with her nail with each word, and each jab feels like it’s about to take out my eye.

“How did I make y—”

Her fist strikes the wall beside my bed, hard enough that I hear the drywall crack, but I don’t dare look or draw attention to the damage she may have done. “What was I supposed to do, Luke? Confess in front of all those women how my worship leader of a son has used the most objectionable language in the human tongue to disrespect an admirable man of God? So I answer with limited responses, a bunch of *uh-hubs* and *I-sees* and tell them afterward that the school was letting me know you’ve had another one of your dramatic panic attacks.” Her face screws up in a mask of fury mixed with mock sympathy, and I’ve never felt smaller. “You have made me a liar, and I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to face Sister Carol again without feeling that blemish on my spirit!”

Her chest heaves, and her eyes stay locked on mine, leaving me utterly lost on what to do next. I feel like I’m standing under a massive tree during a lightning storm. Any moment, I could be struck, but I’m in the middle of a forest, and nowhere feels safe.

I look away first and swallow. “I’m sorry, Mo—”

“Don’t call me that,” she hisses.

My eyes water, but I keep them under control. Crying will only make things worse. Crying will only attract the lightning. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, barely catching enough breath to make the words audible.

“What, Lucas Jason Hamilton, are you *sorry* for?” Again, the mocking.

I silently pray for God to give me wisdom on how to answer this

without getting electrocuted. “I’m sorry,” I start, “for humiliating you in front of Sister Carol—”

“And?” she asks viciously.

My mind is racing, and *please, God, help me!* “—and your other friends...”

I look up, and her wild, terrifying eyes are still locked on me. “*And?*”

I don’t know where else to go with this. My mind is frantic, and I can feel myself slipping into a panic attack, which only causes me to panic all the more because I know it’ll only serve to fuel the next eruption. Then I realize what she wants me to apologize for. I swallow. “I’m sorry I...” I can’t believe these words are about to come out of my mouth, but it’s the only way to soothe her. “I’m sorry I... I made you a... liar.”

Suddenly, she straightens, and it feels as though she’s towering over me. Her eyes, once raging and wild, are now cold and distant. “I never knew anyone could hurt me so brutally. But for it to be my own son. I will never recover from this.”

She holds out her hand, and I flinch. “Give me your phone.”

I quickly glance over and see it on my bedside table within easy reach for her, but she wants me to place it in her palm. Picking it up, I can’t help but notice how badly my hand is shaking. There is no argument. There is no reasoning as to why I need it. It won’t do any good. It will only make things worse. I know it.

Her red polished nails wrap around my phone, and I know she wishes she had the strength to crush it. “This belongs to me until I decide to return it. You will not drive. You will ride to and from school with Connor.”

“For how long—”

“Until I say!” She points at me one more time. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man, *Luke*, out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.” The scripture knocks the wind out of me and only confirms what I’ve been fearing about myself. She spins on her heel, marches through the door, and turns to go to

her bedroom, brushing past someone else whom I hadn't seen until now.

My dad.

He was there the whole time.

He doesn't say a word.

Instead, he lowers his head in disappointment and follows my mother to their room.

That's when her next tirade begins, one I caused my dad to suffer through.

Black for sin.

I listen in the silence for what seems like hours—not moving, barely breathing. I can hear her shouting, but my dad never raises his voice enough to carry past the door. A big lie in our family is that we don't cuss. I once asked my mom if swearing was bad, because I'd heard kids on TV do it, and friends on the playground at school. But I don't think she understood what I was asking. I wanted to know whether saying something like “I *swear* I saw it” was wrong. She thought I meant using foul language, cussing. I knew not to say bad words. The word *shoot* if used in any other way than firing a gun, was on the same level as the S-word. If I ever said it in the context of an exclamatory statement, let's say I hit my thumb with a hammer when helping build the sets for a show and hissed “shoot” afterward in pain, I might as well have cussed. “Because it's not what you're saying, it's what's in your heart, and that word is rooted in offensive language. The Lord knows your heart.”

But the big lie is, whenever my mom goes into a rage, she cusses.

I've heard her shouting the S-word at dad in their room. I've listened to her screaming that she was ready to beat Connor's A-word, and I've even heard her yell, “God-D-it.” So, as I'm sitting in my bed in the same position I was sitting in when she stormed out of my room half an hour ago, I'm hearing these words we don't use, and I'm quaking in fear.

Finally, there's relief in the form of the garage door rumbling open. It can only be one person since Brad is four hours away in Austin. The door to the garage closes, and then silence. Because Connor is listening for it, too. Quiet tennis shoe footsteps cross the tiled entryway of the

house, then Conn is wide-eyed at my door. I almost start crying. He quietly closes the door behind him, then comes and sits on my bed, leaning against the headboard with me. Gently, he takes my hand in his. “Lukey.” He’s barely speaking over a whisper. “What happened?”

And that’s when I cry. I’m crying through every word, from theatre class with Gabby and the dash to the bathroom, which he knew about, to waking up in the nurse’s office several hours later. Then comes the breakup, but I can’t tell him all of it. I’m too ashamed that I called KC what I did. But even without that piece of information, he sees why I lost my head at Deeb’s.

“Like, you actually launched an F-bomb at him?” His eyes are twinkling with glimmers of delight, and while I usually love it when he gives me any sign of adoration, this is just pressing his thumb into the wound.

“Yes, and don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you think it’s an achievement.”

“Lukey! It *is* an achievement!” his voice rises above a whisper. “Like, you did it! You told Deeb’s to F-off!”

I let go of Connor’s hand. I’m appalled. “I did not tell Deeb’s to F-off!” I’m forcing myself to keep my voice down.

He’s almost giggling. “Well, that’s what everyone’s saying you did.”

My stomach makes a familiar twist. “Who’s *everyone*?”

“*Everyone*, everyone. Like, I’ve gotten, like, three or twelve or twenty-eight texts about it already.”

I’m off my bed, my hands gripping the side of my head. My feet want to run to the bathroom to avoid cleaning up puke on the carpet, but my brain needs more information. “Three or twelve or twenty-eight is a huge difference, Conn!”

“Calm down, Lukey. It’s no big deal.”

My mind is swirling as I imagine texts pinging across Fort Worth to Arlington, all the way to Dallas or Denton, about my launching a verbal attack on Mr. Deeb’s. “It’s a huge deal!”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is!” I shout at him before my feet take over, and I sprint to the toilet. By the time I’m done slobbering vomit, Conn has a wet

washcloth and hands it to me. I wipe my mouth, then fold it and wash my face, hiding the tears. It must have been loud enough to cause a timeout in my parents' room, because the next voice I hear is my dad's. "Why's Luke sicking up in the toilet?"

"Cause it's better than the carpet," Conn says.

"Don't be smart. You know what I mean."

"He's just twisted up over what happened today."

There's a brief pause, and I'm begging my dad to end it by saying something comforting. "Well, that's a good sign. He should be." Then he leaves.

I wait until I hear their bedroom door close before returning to my room, closing the door behind me to make it clear I want to be by myself.

CHAPTER 4

FOR BREAKFAST THE NEXT MORNING, Connor and I both have cereal. My parents' door is closed. My dad's keys are gone. My mom's keys are still hanging on her hook, a little bejeweled cross dangling from them. We don't talk about her absence from the morning routine, because there isn't anything to talk about. Both of us know what's happening, and like always, we know we don't know how long it will last. When Conn brought home a C+ in algebra 2 in ninth grade, the silence after the storm lasted for three days. During another emotional hurricane season, something happened with my parents' finances, and the hush in the house lasted for nearly a week. And when we find ourselves in a muted home, my parents' door stays closed, and a darkness hangs in their hallway. It's misery. At least it is to me, Conn somehow manages to weather it differently.

While I barely touch my bowl of Raisin Bran, Conn is wolfing down his third bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. "You gotta hurry, Lukey," he says with the typical trail of milk trickling down his chin. "We need to leave for school soon."

I get up and take my bowl to the sink, dumping its contents into the disposal. Conn is close behind me and drops his empty bowl in the

sink with a clatter, not bothering to rinse it out. “Gonna brush my teeth,” he says, wiping his chin with his sleeve.

The ride in his truck to school is sensory overload. Loose baseballs roll and knock into my feet with each turn, the radio is loud, playing some pop rock I’m pretty sure we’re not allowed to listen to, and the smell of unwashed athletic gear is enough to make me roll down the window on a cold January morning. Conn is playing the drums on the steering wheel as we’re flying down the highway well over the speed limit. I don’t get it. Our house is a battle zone, and he’s acting like it’s the last day of school, and summer vacation starts after the three o’clock bell today.

“How can you be like this?”

He briefly turns and looks at me. “Huh?” he shouts over the music.

I reach over and turn the radio down. “How can you be like this?”

He frowns exaggeratedly. “Like what?”

“Conn.”

“Lukey,” he mocks.

“Never mind.”

He slaps my leg. “No, I’m sorry. It’s just. I don’t know. The last time she was this angry at me—mind you, I didn’t tell Deeks to fuck off—”

“Connor!”

He laughs. “No, man. Listen. The last time she was this angry at me, it felt awful. It felt like—shit.”

I cross my arms and hold myself tight. “Stop talking like that. It’s not you.”

“Yeah, actually, Lukey, it *is* me. It’s very much me. And I like it.” He bounces an eyebrow at me like an idiot. “So, she was mad. She did her exploding thing at me. The days passed, and life went back to normal. And guess what.”

“What?”

“Three weeks later, she was pissed again, and silence fell. And guess what.”

I’m hating these guessing games. Zero mood for it. “What?”

“Then the clouds lifted, the sun came out, and she was fine again.

So, yeah, you screwed up, but the sun is going to come out again, and she's going to be fine. Lukey, take a deep breath, and go about your fucking day." He turns and looks at me with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

When we pull into the parking lot, I'm still mulling it over. I don't like Connor's newfound freedom to spout off whatever words he thinks best suit a situation. I hate even more that I'm somehow the progenitor of it. As I'm checking to make sure I have everything I need in my backpack, a cracking slap hits the passenger side window, and I jump out of my skin. I look over and I'm faced with an iPad playing a short cartoon of a guy dressed in my puffy red coat, mouth stretching to launch a missile with the F-word on the side of it at a hugely overweight version of Deeks, who explodes into a bloody mess. Noah's proud face pops out from behind his iPad, and he takes the liberty of opening the door for me. "Bruh-ski!" He loves to jab at the bro-dudes with that twist of their favorite word. Bruh. Bruh-ski. Bruh-licious. Bruh-dacious. "Why weren't you answering my texts?"

"Mommysaurus Rex took his phone after losing her shit on him last night, and don't hit my windows like that, Bro-ah."

Noah takes a deep breath and lets out a moan, "Bruuuuuuh..." until he fully deflates. "Well, at least you got to fire one off at Deeks, Bruh-kenheimer!"

That's what it's going to be all day, and I'm not sure I can take it. "I didn't *fire one off* at him."

Noah points at his satirical cartoon of the event in question. "Evidence points to yes."

Connor gets all pouty-lipped. "He's sensitive about it. And nice cartoon! Airdrop it to me."

"No!" I shout. "Delete it." I get down out of Connor's truck and turn to him before closing the door. "And, no, I'm not sensitive about it, Connor. It's just not what happened. It was a...bad moment and a poor choice. That's all." I push past Noah, who follows me close behind as we enter the school.

"Gabby said the same thing."

"Well, you should be saying the same thing, too, man. What happened sucked, and what happened after sucked even more."

“Your mom?”

“Of course.”

“Heard about Deeb’s,” some underclassman says as I walk hurriedly to my locker.

“You heard wrong,” Noah pipes up for me since my growl isn’t going to be enough.

Halfway to my locker, someone else says, “That was wild, Luke! Didn’t know you had—”

Noah tucks his iPad into his backpack. “It wasn’t wild. He’s not happy. Read the room, Bryan.”

My hand is on my locker door when—

“He had it coming, Luke! Last month, Deeb’s yelled at me for—”

I turn on whoever it is because my brain is spinning so fast that my eyeballs aren’t even registering information or details. “You probably deserved Mr. Deeb’s yelling at you for whatever the F—” and my stomach drops when I have to bite back a particular word, “for whatever the foolish thing is you did. So, yeah...” Then a flash of inspiration hits me—the only way to make this stop. I grab my books for first block and make a quick move to the one spot where I can spill new tea in the halls. Mr. Deeb’s office is at the T-intersection of the hallway, with a big window looking out to keep an eye on the high school students. He’s sitting at his desk with his bifocals perched on his bulbous nose. I knock on his door, aware that other students heading to first block see me.

He looks up from his computer, and his mustache twitches. “Yes, Mr. Hamilton?”

I wipe my sweaty palms on my khaki uniform pants. *Why am I nervous?* “Do you have a minute, Mr. Deeb’s?”

He glances at his computer and then back at me. I notice a slight slump to his shoulders, but he gestures to the chair in front of his desk. “Sure, come on in, son.”

Stepping into the office, I leave the door open behind me and choose to stay standing, because he’s made it clear he has business to attend to and I’m an impediment to it. “I won’t take long, sir.” I clear my throat and toss in a bit of good old theatre projection to make sure

anyone eavesdropping can hear me. Not too much, but just enough. “I wanted to apologize to you.”

“If I remember correctly, you apologized a heap of times yesterday after the event.”

I feel my face flush. “Yes, sir, you’re right.” I turn my eyes to the floor. “But I obviously had a lot of time to think over what I did, and I’m incredibly sorry for disrespecting you like that. I respect you, sir, and the spiritual leadership you provide us here. Please, forgive me. I have no excuse for my behavior, and I promise nothing like that will happen again.” I look up and add an extra dollop of emotion and some key Christian-ese. “I’m hoping our relationship can be restored. I want to be under the appropriate authority of the school and in spiritual alignment. Is that possible, Mr. Deeb’s?”

Mr. Deeb’s drops his chin and looks at me over his glasses. He then stands and comes around his desk, opening his arms and pulling me into a heavy Old Spice-scented hug. I return the hug and add a sniffle. “We’re all right, Luke. I forgive you. Mistakes happen. The Lord wants us to learn from them, and I think you have.”

“I have, sir.”

White for forgiveness.

He releases me from the hug, and I step back, running a hand over my eye to catch a tear that Gabby and Constantine Stanislavski, the Father of Modern Acting, would be proud of.

“That’s good, son,” Mr. Deeb’s says as he lowers himself back into his tall and worn faux-leather wingback chair. We used it once for a production. “Now, get yourself to first block.”

I walk quickly and lightly out the door, pretty proud of myself as a few people brave enough to hover around Deeb’s door scatter to the winds to hopefully disseminate the news that the Dean of Students and I are on excellent footing. I’m proud, that is, until I turn the corner and see one of the few people I didn’t need to see just then. KC is standing in the exact right spot to have watched the whole thing through Deeb’s window. There’s nothing aggressive about her stance; her face is unreadable...to most people. What I see there is knowing and disappointment. She gives a little *hmm* and turns to one of her

girlfriends, and they walk down the hall to their first block, which luckily, I don't share with them.

Were it not for that little moment between my ex-girlfriend and me, I'd be walking on cloud nine. As it is, my cloud is more like a five, maybe even a four. My cloud four grays and hovers over my social studies class, and while my body is present, my mind isn't. There are a few people who can see through me—at least the version I've manicured for presentation. Connor, Gabby, Noah—most of the time—and KC.

Well, there's another, but I haven't been able to talk to him since *the* incident. I wish I could. He would get this.

I'm afraid KC is seeing more than I want her to. *I let her get too close, and now she's scrutinizing every step I take, everything I say, and every little gesture, all through a filter I don't approve of.* I feel like a character study, and it makes my skin crawl. If I'm being honest, it feels intrusive and unwelcome. Because of her, I find my mood souring just when I should be celebrating my victory in maintaining my reputation.

FINAL BELL, *thank God*. I mean it. I whisper a prayer of thanks to God for getting me through the day and for giving me the wisdom to turn the tide with the PHCA rumor mill and restore my relationship with Mr. Deeb, in the privacy of the public eye.

And now I get to be in my element. I arrive at the black box theater, where we rehearse for a few months until we can put the set together and move into the actual performance space. I don't mind, though, the BBT is home, and if it's my home, my favorite roommate is already here.

I drop into a folding metal chair next to Gabby, who instantly grips my arm, her eyes wide behind her dramatic, prescriptionless, purple frames. "Babes! I'm in somethin', and I'm draggin' you down with me," she purrs with smoky sultriness.

I can't help but laugh, and it's a welcome explosion of joy. "Okay, I'm simultaneously intrigued, horrified, and already willing to say yes."

"Perfect!" She rummages in her backpack, pulling out a wrinkled

flier, and shoves it so close to my face that my eyes cross. “You’re goin’ to join me in this.”

Everything is a blur, and I snatch the paper from her hands. “What is it?”

“Panther City Playhouse has classes this semester for the first time *durin’* the school year. I’ve been goin’ to their summer program, you know.”

I *do* know because she’s never been able to go to church camp because the summer acting intensive is always at the same time.

I remind her as much, to which she arches an eyebrow and gives me a slow, “Riiight. Anyways. You’re goin’ to join me, babes. These are the people who upped my game. I am who I am because they are who they are. You know? You know. God, I’m so pumped.”

Someone gasps nearby.

“Easy, Chuck,” she says to some freshman girl, the gasper. Anyone Gabby doesn’t know is automatically Chuck. “I said it with a little G. I swear to little-G god.” She turns back to me and grips me by both arms. “Anywho. You’re goin’.”

“I can’t! I have this show. *We* have this show. You’re Mrs. Higgins!”

“It’s Monday nights at seven. Musical rehearsals end by six. You get your homework done *durin’* the school day. Worship practice is on Tuesday nights. Hamilton family Bible study is on Thursday nights to digest Wednesday night’s service. And I’m literally only in two scenes ‘cause I play your mom. Is there anything I’m missin’, babes?”

I laugh at how Gabby has my weekly schedule burned into her head. “How about the fact that I’m grounded and won’t be going anywhere until—until some ambiguous point in the who-knows future.”

“Cause of yesterday?”

“Because of yesterday.”

“Okay,” she says in her smoky Texas drawl. “Here’s what you’re gonna do. Your parents want you to have the best shot at gettin’ into college, right? Well, after even two classes with the Playhouse, you’re gonna be able to...”

“...REALLY be able to take my audition monologue to the next level, Dad.” I walk next to him in the front yard under the silvery light of a half-moon, my words taking flight as puffs in the cold air. I roll the Christmas lights around the plastic thingy that keeps them from being next year’s nightmare before Christmas. We’re out here because it’s better than being in the suffocating silence that still blankets the house in muted awkwardness.

When we got home, Dad had pizza on the table. Connor and I ate and talked about the day with Dad, who said he was incredibly proud of me for humbling myself before my authority at school and giving a sincere apology. Connor had told him about it. I wasn’t planning on relaying any of it to Dad or Mom because the moment had served its purpose at school. But now that he knew, I hoped maybe Dad could tell Mom, and it might shorten our silent sentence. Plus, I figured it could only help my chances of attending the acting classes with Gabby.

Dad tenderly pulls the string of lights off the holly bush, a few of the leftover red berries plinging off and landing in the dry grass. “Well, bud, I don’t know where things stand right now.”

My stomach drops. My hope plings off and disappears into the dry grass with the holly berries. “I know.” I carefully wrap the slackened strand.

After a moment of extricating more of the lights from the prickly leaves, Dad asks, “When do classes start?”

A glimmer of hope. “Monday. It’s \$175, which I can easily cover from a little of my savings. It’s an excellent investment when you consider it might get me a scholarship, you know?”

“You don’t have to do that. I can cover it.”

I pause in the light winding. “Wait. That sounds like...”

I can see his grin even in the moonlight. “That’s what it sounds like.”

White for forgiveness.

But I can’t let the happiness linger too long because of what’s still lingering in the darkness of our house. “But Mom...”

My dad’s grin falters. “I think she’ll agree with me. Eventually.”

We finish de-lighting the shrubs and talk about church, youth

group, and work. It was small talk, but it felt good to be talking about anything. When we go back into the house, Mom is pouring hot water into a white mug Connor had given her several years ago, listing her virtues written in a rainbow of glaze colors. She doesn't say anything and walks out of the kitchen, but I let out a sigh of relief once I hear her door close with a normal, gentle click.

Dad pats me on the shoulder. "There we go."

CHAPTER 5

DODGING KC for the rest of the week is goal number one, while I eagerly and anxiously anticipate the acting workshop at Panther City Playhouse. Noah and Gabby make the dodging part easy during the day and at lunch; they love the extra attention anyway, and the more I give them, the more they demand. Musical rehearsals are another thing altogether. When I arrive at the black box, KC is already there since the ensemble is called today, and I can feel her watching me, studying me. And I hate it. At one point, while I'm running through "Why Can't the English," a song where my character laments how the British butcher their own language, I pass KC and her ensemble of snooty high-society British ladies. And every time I do, I can't tell if her scrutiny is in character or part of her new extracurricular activity: Figure Out Luke. Whatever the case, it's irritating and pushes a button I've tried to keep hidden all my life.

Is it fair to say all my life? I mean, I'm seventeen, and the first recollection of feeling this way was a crush I had on a boy on a Disney Channel show, *Lab Rats*—Chase, the cute, brainy one. There was just something about him. My dream-self knew it because he starred in my dreams more than once when puberty hit, but I never let on. I never

let on to any of it...except once, and a few months later, the only person I'd ever brought my problem to was fired.

WHEN THE FOLLOWING Monday rolls around, Gabby is obviously more excited than I am, and she spends the whole day "preparin'" me for the acting class to come.

In Spanish class, she turns around to say, "It'll start out with some kinda warm-up game—"

I roll my eyes. "Gabby, I hate—"

She flings up a hand. "And then an improv game."

I throw my head back like a kid refusing to eat his Brussels sprouts. "Gabby, you know how I feel about improv games—"

"And you'll survive, Luke Hamilton, because—"

We get shushed by Mrs. Baker, who sits behind her desk, no doubt trying to decide what Christian animated Bible story we'll watch next in Spanish. Then she'll attempt to twist it into something that somehow resembles a legit lesson. It's a sophomore-level class that Gabby and I both have to take because we opted to skip it our tenth grade year to take a theatre class a year early. Don't ask. Our graduation credit system is as loose and confusing as our Bible teacher's explanation of the rapture and tribulation. Seriously, the end-times, anxiety-inducing, Jesus-returning *Left Behind* books have more theological accuracy than his theories.

We're quiet for a moment before Gabby starts back up. "You're goin' to have to get over it," she whispers. "Improvisation is the keystone to a good actin' technique."

"I thought the keystone was authenticity."

"Okay, improvisation is another keystone."

"I'm pretty sure you can only have one keystone. Like, that's the whole point. It keeps the other stones in place. It's the *key* stone."

"Do I look like a stone mason, babes?"

"Miss Poteet, that's a mark," Mrs. Baker says, her eyes wide behind her outdated, large green plastic frames.

Gabby crosses her arms and sinks in her chair to continue watching *David y El Gigante*.

Then, she starts back up in Government and Economics. *Do you have a monologue?*

Yeah, I found one in a monologue book from Bledsoe's shelf. She recommended it, I write on the note and pass it back, while Mrs. Wallen praises the work the current White House administration is doing in trade agreements with foreign countries, especially those Middle Eastern countries that persecute Christians.

Gabby reads my response and makes a horrified face. *You're using a monologue book monologue? That's so trash.*

I grin. I know exactly which of her buttons I'm pushing. *It's a funny one.*

Her eyes go wide, and she shoots me a real-time glare. *Comedy? You're going in with comedy? That's acting class suicide.*

I can't help but enjoy the reaction I'm getting from her, so I keep pressing it. *It's about this guy who really needs to use the bathroom at a church picnic with his girlfriend's parents.*

She's furiously scribbling a response when Wallen's bony hand sweeps in out of nowhere and grabs the note out from under Gabby's pencil. "Miss Poteet," the ancient teacher drawls in a Texas twang that puts Gabby's to shame, "that's a mark."

Startled, Gabby's jaw drops and her thumb jerks toward me, but Wallen won't hear it. "A young lady shouldn't be passing notes to gentlemen. It will defile her reputation."

Gabby huffs and slides down in her chair with a glower.

Since she already had three marks due to previous lapses of judgment, unfortunately for Gabby, five marks earn a detention, and she has to spend that day's rehearsal copying Bible verses about obedience, reputation, honor, and respect. I hear all about it on the way to the Panther City Players rehearsal theater in downtown Fort Worth. Honestly, her ranting is a welcome distraction from the nerves gathering in my belly. "You were just as guilty in both of those situations today, and you didn't get a mark either time!"

"What did you want me to do? Suggest they give me a mark, too?"

Things at home are finally chilling out. The last thing I need is detention to poke the rabid bear.”

Gabby honks her horn, and the person in the sedan in front of us is suddenly startled by the girl in the yellow Volkswagen bug behind them. When they look at us in their rearview mirror, Gabby throws up a “what the heck” hand and swerves around them. I get carsick every time I ride anywhere with her in the Buggy Mobile, even if it’s just a block down the road.

“It’s sexist.”

“It’s not sexist.”

“You don’t think so because you benefit from it as a straight, white male. You benefit from the patriarchy.”

My stomach twists, and my mouth goes dry.

“See,” she pushes on, “you don’t even have a response. We’re about to get it shoved down our throats at Youth Group with the whole purity bullsh—crap next month. Girls, it’s your responsibility to make sure you’re not leadin’ boys down the road of lust and temptation. So, it’s long denim skirts and turtleneck sweaters for the rest of your lives,” she says in a voice that sounds almost exactly like Matt’s preachy smarm.

He’s not a bad guy, but there’s just something about him that comes across like a showman more than a man who shows he genuinely cares. Pat was different. That thought only deepens my silence. I’m not sure if it’s her next statement or the bump of pulling into the theater parking lot that snaps me out of my funk, but the next thing I hear her say is, “I don’t think I’m gonna go anymore. At least on Wednesday nights.”

My head whips around. “You what?”

She’s quiet for a moment. “We can talk about it later. Let’s go enjoy poppin’ your actin’ class cherry, babes.” Her eyes widen cartoonishly, and she lays a hand on her ample chest. “Sorry, sugar, that might lead you down the path of lust and temptation.” She winks at me and hops out of the Buggy Mobile.

THE PANTHER CITY Players rehearsal theater is what you'd expect from a community theater. The whole place is black from floor to ceiling: black wood floors, black brick walls, long, thick black curtains surrounding the performance space, black chairs. All black. The intention is to shift the focus from the space itself to the activity taking place within it, and it feels like home. Just like our black box theater at school, but bigger. While this space is most commonly used as a rehearsal space, it's also outfitted with lighting and sound for smaller productions. I once came to an intimate production of *Art* here with Gabby, where three guys spent two hours yelling at each other over whether a blank white canvas is actually a piece of art. It was awesome.

Gabby proudly leads the way into the space since it's her territory, and a couple of other people our age break off their conversation to say hi before returning to whatever they were talking about before. We grab seats in the front row, a rather exposing location, but it's fine. I don't mind attention, but I don't want to get sucked into some inane improvisation exercise. Maybe a couple of rows back would be better.

Since we're early and she busted open a can of worms in the car, then tried to duct tape the lid back on, I figure I'll bring it up before too many other people show. "What you said in the car just now. About not going to church anymore."

She unzips her backpack and rummages through it, avoiding eye contact with me. "On Wednesdays."

"Okay, yeah, you're not going to go on Wednes—"

"Nope, we're not talkin' about it right now."

"But you have to—"

Gabby looks up and right into my eyes. "No, babes. I don't have to." A moment of silence lets that settle in. "And no church here. Church is not allowed in here. This place is sacred. Here, you don't talk about church."

I sit back and cross my arms. "But church is who I am."

Her eyes narrow. "Luke. Church is somethin' you do. It's not who you are. I love you, so I'm sayin' this. I'm not quite sure you know who you are *because* of church."

My stomach twists at the thought, as if somehow being involved in church is hindering my ability to understand who I am. Still, it's

because of church that I know my identity in Christ and recognize that whatever is happening with me is broken and in desperate need of fixing.

Then there are the goosebumps. The moment those words left her lips and hit my ear canals, my arms broke out into goosebumps that tickled their way up the back of my neck. Why was the idea of church, the place I've invested my entire life in, somehow the culprit in hiding who I am?

My brain wants to start spinning around that notion, but before it can, an energy swoops in and wraps Gabby in his arms. "Gabby *Gato!*"

Gabby is all giddy hugs as this newcomer spins her around in his arms, creating a blur of plaids, denim, and happy expletives that make my ears burn. When they finally come to a teetering stop, the new energy turns his eyes on me and smiles, with slightly crooked white teeth and a jaw dusted with dark scruff that matches the mop of black hair that popped up when he yanked off his beanie. His dark brown eyes twinkle, and my mouth goes dry. His hand thrusts out to me, two fingers with silver rings, and a couple of bracelets dangling off his wrist. "Hey, I'm Cody."

"This is Cody," Gabby gushes.

That's Cody.

I sit in my chair.

He holds his hand in place.

Gabby is somewhere nearby.

But *that's* Cody.

His smile grows a bit more, and his head tilts. "You there?"

I blink and jump to my feet. "Sorry," I stutter. "It's been a long day. Rehearsals and stuff."

He looks up at me. "Whoa, you're tall."

"Kinda."

"Yeah, he's tall," Gabby chimes in, somehow sounding proud of my height. "He always plays the dads and stuff in our shows at school."

"Tall is good. Real good." His smile flashes at me again. "Nice uniform."

I glance down and suddenly feel very self-conscious in my school

uniform. Gabby changed out of hers at school, but like an idiot, I didn't bring anything else. "Thanks, it's—uh... It's a uniform. I won't wear it again. Here. I won't wear it again here next time." *How much of an idiot do I sound like right now?* By the look on Gabby's face, a major one.

"Nah." Cody waves me off with the hand that had been awaiting a shake. "Some people are really into uniforms."

I shake my head. "No, I don't really like it, it's just something I have to—"

"No." He grins. "Some people are *into* uniforms."

I immediately catch his meaning, and my face flushes with fire.

Gabby slaps him on the shoulder. "You're makin' him blush, Code."

Cody grins again. "I don't mind." He thrusts his hand out again, and this time I follow social norms and take it. Maybe a little too eagerly.

I take a deep breath and try to steady myself, but I can feel the texture of his hand in mine. His palms are rough and calloused, which somehow makes my mind flail all over again. "I'm Luke," I manage.

"I know who you are, Uniform. Gato's told me all about you for a couple of years now."

Which is weird, because she's never once mentioned anyone named Cody.

"Of course. You're Cody. She's talked a lot about you, too."

He grins again. *Does he ever stop grinning? I don't want him to stop grinning.* "Liar. Gabby Gato keeps all this to herself."

I finally pry my eyes off Cody and look at Gabby, who is turning her own shade of pink. "Oh, hey, look! More people!"

She's right, and her distraction works because Cody's rough hand lets go of mine, and he immediately trots to another couple of girls who just came in and throws his arms around them, bringing them into just as tight a hug as he'd given Gabby, minus the spin.

"You've never mentioned Cody."

She shrugs. "Like he said. I keep things separate."

The class goes as Gabby had prepared me for; though knowing how she apparently keeps things separate, I'm surprised I was invited

into her acting sanctum at all. The stupid warm-up games and tolerable improv skits were bearable because I got to watch and size up the other fifteen or so people in the class—who range from a couple of kids who couldn't be more than fourteen to a woman in her early forties, with several people our age and some twenty-somethings sprinkled in. And Cody. I get to watch Cody. From the feel of it, he's watching me, too. I lose count of how many times my face flushes.

By the end of the night, we have our homework: looking for our authentic moments in life over the next week. When are we our most authentic selves, and when do we hide behind an act? And if we haven't selected a monologue yet, we need to find one that reflects us.

"Luke?" I'm pulling on my puffy coat and turn around. It's the teacher. Coach? Instructor? Director? It's Sheila. Her clothes look as though she rummaged through a bin at a secondhand shop and put on everything in layers, all categorized as wispy and cozy. "I'm so glad you got to join us. Gabby has wanted you here for several summers now. I'm glad it finally worked out."

She means it. I can feel it.

"I'm glad it worked out, too."

She tilts her head, and there's an odd little pause as though she's listening to the echo of my words. "Good," she finally says warmly. "Listen, I eavesdropped on your monologue when you were running it with Kate, and heard the character is a middle-aged man. Are you a middle-aged man?"

I don't know where to go with that, and my bewilderment must have oozed onto my face. "No?"

"No," she confirms. "You're not a middle-aged man. Who are you, Luke?"

"I'm a teenage guy?"

"Are you?"

"Yes?"

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Yes," she confirms. "You are. Start there when choosing a new monologue, and don't listen to Gabby. If you find something in a

monologue book you connect with, go with it.” She winks. Gabby must have vocalized her prejudice against monologue books here, too.

I FIND Gabby leaning against the Buggy Mobile, deep in conversation with Cody, a plume of white smoke, too thick for cold breath, billowing from her mouth as she casually talks. She sees me, then passes the vape to Cody. Though I’m committed to keeping the question about it at bay, she isn’t committed to not explaining herself. “I vape, babes.” Short explanation.

I shrug. “Okay.” Short response.

“*Dios mío*. All right, I’m breaking the weirdness. You two can discuss it on your way home. I gotta jet. *Mi papa* has a strict curfew on me.” He wraps Gabby in a deep hug, then turns to me. “You a hugger, Uniform?”

“I... yeah.”

And that was all he needed. Cody wraps me in a hug, and I can smell the remnants of his cologne and the berry smell of the vape they’re sharing. He has to rock up on his tiptoes, but when he does, we’re cheek to cheek, scruff to scruff, and his cheek is a little cold.

He gives me a squeeze and pulls back. “Rough cheek, Uniform.” He winks at me...

...and I don’t remember how I got in the car, when I got home, or what I said to my parents about the class, though I was left with the impression that my mom smiled about it, and my dad’s tone was one of relief.

I do, however, remember the ritual. I brush my teeth. Wash my face. Put my dirty clothes in the hamper. Turn off the lights in my room. Then I wait.

Thirty minutes.

Fifty-two minutes.

My parents’ door closes.

Connor’s door closes.

Thirty more minutes.

I get out of bed and sit at my computer, turning it on and dimming the monitor.

I listen.

Incognito mode. I click.

With just enough pressure on the keys to navigate the browser, but not too much to make loud clicks, I find what I'm looking for and slip my briefs to the floor.

Two hours later, I go to bed.

Relieved.

Ashamed.

In anguish.

Hating myself.

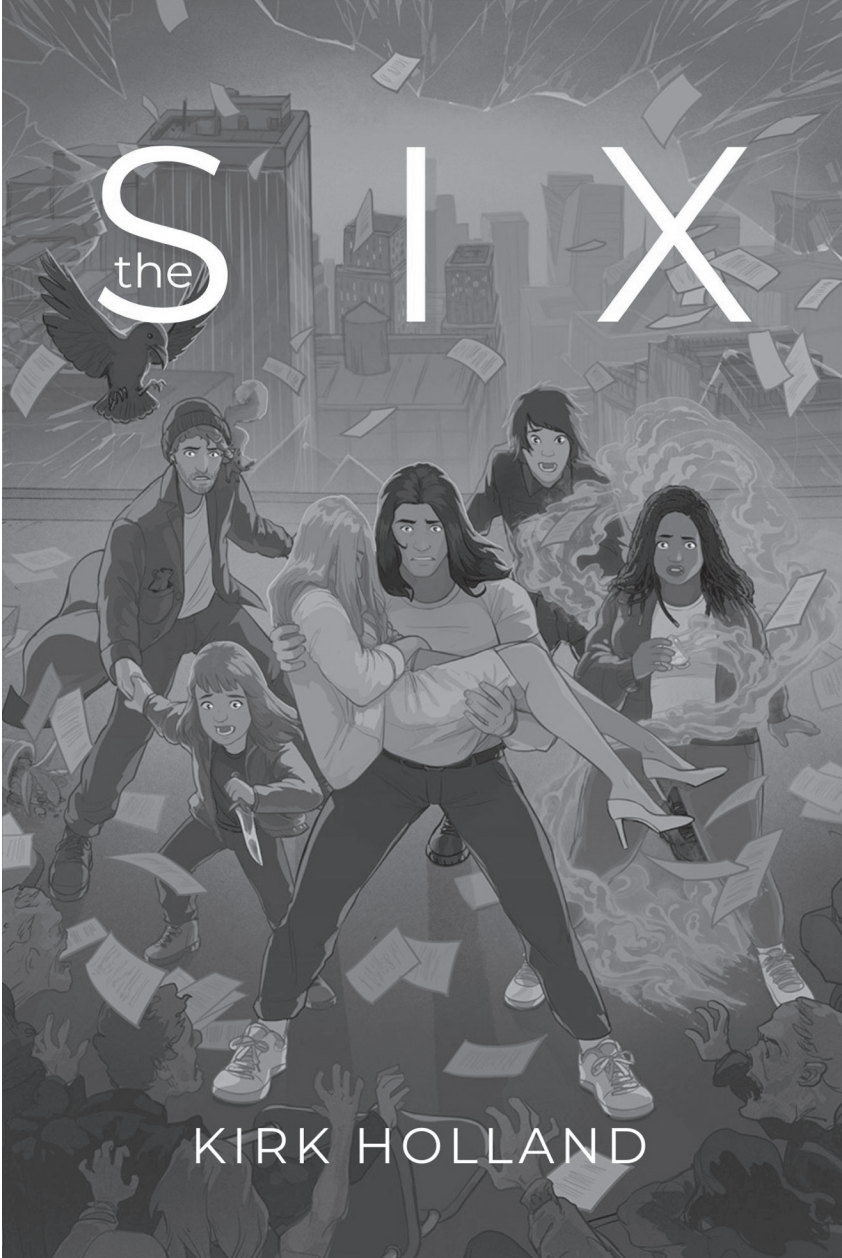
Praying to be changed.

Committing to never doing it again.

Miserable over the fact that I've sworn the same thing for the last five years, and I'm still just as broken as ever.

Black for sin.

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the SIX

KIRK HOLLAND

ONE

STUMPED

CHARLIE HATED TEXAS.

Hated everything about it. The unpredictability of the weather. The ridiculous heat in the summer and the infuriating fact there were only two seasons: hot summer and warm winter. No fall. No spring. It was all the same and it was suffocating.

Or how about the flatness? The brown. The dead brown mesquite trees. Muddy brown creeks. Dead brown grass. Brown dirt roads. Brown.

Wildlife? Fire ants. Buzzards looking for something dead and rotting to eat. Decimated skunks littering the country roads yet still filling the air with their stink as though it were their last vengeful act.

Suffocating.

Yet the most suffocating thing about it was the expectations. If you were a guy, you played sports, particularly football. If you were a dude and didn't play football, it meant you were probably gay and that label took on a whole new set of social complications. To Charlie's knowledge, only one guy ever dared to come out of the closet at Farnsworth High School. The other guys were relentless in their taunting and harassment of the brave kid who dared to claim his identity, it actually gave the geeks a break for a little while. They never laid a hand on the

guy, they *wouldn't* for fear of catching *it*. But the daily social crucifixion was hard to watch. *Everyone* just watched. At some point the kid disappeared, moved away to live with his grandmother or aunt or whoever in wherever.

Charlie imagined girls had it just as bad in their own way. Most of them *aspired* to be a cheerleader and those who didn't quite hit the mark, but were still pretty enough, were shuffled into some sort of consolation prize dance team, the *almost* cheerleaders but not really and everyone knew it. But if you weren't pretty enough, strong enough, popular enough, rich enough, you were either a target or a nameless face in the crowd.

Charlie was just a face.

Sweat trickled down the side of his face and he rubbed his cheek on the shoulder of his t-shirt. If his mom had seen him "desecrate his freshly laundered shirt," she would have given him an ear full even if she *did* have to cross the two-acre front yard to where he sat hunched over, knees to his ears, perched on the "waiting stump", something his dad had come up with when he started riding the bus in kindergarten.

Seven o'clock in the morning and it was already hot enough to sweat. Charlie could feel it trickle down between his shoulder blades and down his butt crack.

Texas sucked. Texas was the dull *butt crack* of America.

In reality, Charlie wasn't faceless, people just treated him that way because he required it of them. Coaches had all but begged him to play football since he was in fifth grade. And why not? He was a perfect candidate for it. He'd been taller than everyone else since he could remember. The first time his height really registered was in second grade. It was a class party, probably for Christmas or something, and one of the moms, a pug-nosed woman with gooey red lipstick had asked him how old he was.

"I'm seven," he had told her.

She had scrunched up her face with suspicion and twanged, "You're only seven years old?" Somehow that last word was divvied up into two syllables.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You turn eight this year?"

“Yes, ma’am. My birthday is in March. March 16.”

“You’re a big boy! You gonna play football? Be a big football player?”

He shrugged.

Later on, he remembered hearing her tell another mom about how young, but how big he was. The other mom swore he’d been held back a grade and whispered how he clearly didn’t take after his daddy, short and scrawny. Charlie just sat at his desk drinking his watered-down punch, nibbling his cookies with green sprinkles.

It only became more exaggerated from there. In sixth grade, he was already as tall as some tenth graders and his voice had dropped. By eighth grade he was as tall as a senior and just as broad-shouldered, but still not filled out. And now as a junior in high school, he was taller than all of them and built like a tank. But he didn’t shave. No need to. Anywhere. That was embarrassing in the locker room.

Tall, broad, fast, coordinated. Every year, he knew a question mark hung over his head. Would this be the year Charlie Daniels finally figured out he was meant to serve the football gods and would sell his soul to the football team, more specifically Coach Tark? Would he give in and just play?

Coach Tark could shove it. It wasn’t happening. Charlie was prepared for another year of the looks, the sneers, the rolled eyes. Some of the guys on the football team ignored him, but most still considered it their job to make their disapproval clear. They referred to themselves as *the Pack*. The Pack roamed the halls like wolves, bigger and stronger than the rest of the team, they all looked as though they should be serving time in a juvenile penitentiary and every single one of them had at least one tattoo, a big black wolf paw on their chest, shoulder, or neck. It was stupid. Only one tattoo shop existed in town, and the Pack must have paid extra for the burly Hell’s Angel reject to not check their IDs. Never guys to make actual trouble, they just managed to make you feel weaker, inconsequential. The Pack, of course, was all starters on the team, Coach Tark’s little gang. And first and foremost in that gang, was Ben.

Ben was a junior, like Charlie, but had to be at least twenty-one, yet if he were, he wouldn’t have been able to play on the team

according to state rules. He was almost as tall as Charlie, but where Charlie lacked in the more follicle aspects of puberty, Ben was clearly the alpha in the Pack. Only seniors were allowed facial hair, but Ben insisted he shaved every morning, it just grew too fast, so his face was always covered in stubble. The guy was a beast and Charlie was suitably intimidated. Ben was the only person who outright intimidated him.

And because he didn't play football, he was doomed to be in PE. It was fine, it gave him the opportunity to stretch his legs at the end of a full day of sitting at a desk. The issue, however, was PE ended right before football practice started, meaning the locker room deteriorated into the Pack's den. And the Pack didn't care a shred about decency. They would parade around the locker room howling in all levels of undress. Most of the scrawny or chubby PE guys wouldn't shower and vacated the locker room as fast as they could, adding their unshowered funk to the bus ride home. Not Charlie, he stayed decent, but refused to give up his rightful territory. He took his shower, dealt with the sneers, the disdainful looks from Ben, muttering and laughing, dressed and left.

Decency had always been a big deal to his parents, James and Harriett hammered it into him. The way you treated people, the way you presented yourself, what you talked about, and what you *didn't* talk about. Being shirtless at home wasn't necessarily an issue, but he was expected to be dressed when he came to the table. And "maturing" obviously wasn't on the list of decent topics. Puberty had been hellish, no one talked about any of it. His body was changing, his thoughts were changing, and the combination of a changing body and changing thoughts created situations he didn't know how to deal with. Hoping again hope, Charlie kept waiting for his dad to talk to him about it, have the birds and bees talk, whatever that was, but it never came. He figured things out on his own, well, on his own and Mr. McWhitten's biology class, but he was pretty sure there were gigantic gaps of ignorance that might not ever be explained.

Another element of the whole decency zone was control, and Charlie was always in control. You had to be good, even tempered, and cordial. He only overstepped that one time when he was a freshman.

This kid, not a member of the Pack, but desperate to prove himself, was brave, or stupid, enough to get in his face about his refusal to even try out for the team when Charlie had first arrived on the high school campus, but even as a freshman, he was bigger than most of the seniors. That kid had found himself on the ground holding his nose before he knew what hit him and Charlie had found himself suspended for two weeks. "You're bigger than they are, Charlie," his dad said with disappointment. "You have to control that. You could have really hurt that boy."

Charlie went on to learn his strength was the underlying real need for control. Simple brute strength. It's what he spent his free time doing. His dad relied on him to lift big rocks or limbs on their land that most people couldn't. He was unusually strong and he had to control it because if he didn't, his parents constantly reminded him, he would hurt someone. "Be gentle," his mom used to tell him. "Be careful," his dad would say. They didn't have to say it anymore, it was ingrained in him. If he weren't gentle or careful, something bad would happen. Something worse than a bloody nose.

Charlie's absence from any athletic field or court had started when he was going into junior high. He'd actually been excited about trying out for the football team, he knew he'd be a star, the crowds would chant his name and the girls would be lining up. The permission slip was never signed. He gripped it in his hand, waving it at both his mom and dad, pleading until he was furious and in tears. "You just can't, son," his dad begged him to understand, a true sincerity underlying the heartbreaking denial. Charlie looked to his mom, but with tears in her own eyes, she crossed her arms and shook her head. In a rage, Charlie yanked open the front door and nearly pulled the entire thing off its hinges. No one ever had to explain it again. If he had done that to a door as a twelve-year-old, what might he do to another kid?

Charlie took a deep breath and felt sweat drip from his nose. It was like this every morning. The waiting. Sitting on the stump, waiting for the school bus to rumble down the dusty road to his old farmhouse which sat alone on several acres of land. Privacy acres, as his dad called them. They didn't do anything with the land, no farming except for his mother's garden out back, no animals, the land just sat there like a vast

guardian against anything that might be moderately interesting or fun. The whole town was like that, like some kind of wall keeping out the murderous hordes of . . . what? Life? Experience? Adventure?

And why exactly was he sitting there? Sixteen and carless. An automotive virgin. “There’s no place in Farnsworth, Texas, you can’t reach on foot or on a bicycle,” his mom would say, pushing a strand of curly gray hair out of her face. “Another car would be nothing but trouble. Headaches and trouble. And your legs are stronger and more capable than any car you could have.” *Technology* was nothing but headaches and trouble—period. No television, so Charlie was socially stunted in discussing television *shows*. No video games, so Charlie spent his time in the garage with the weights his dad bought him several years ago and added to regularly. No computer, so Charlie knew the land surrounding their farmhouse like most kids knew the internet. Not even a DVD player, so Charlie dreamed. The only films Charlie had ever seen were the ones shown in class from time to time when the teachers were clearly passing the time until Christmas or summer break kicked in. His home’s lack of technology was also why his parents still wrote their books by hand on stacks and stacks of yellow legal pads. The publisher hated it, but the two bestselling authors could have it their way and did.

The books were so popular that film and television producers had been pursuing his parents for the last three years. Always touting it as the next great *fill-in-the-blank*, the blood sucking vampires (his mother’s pet name for the money grabbing producers) did their best to sell their big picture visions. Was it going to be a multi-film epic? Would it be the next blood and guts fantasy drama on premium cable? Maybe the next streaming subscription hit? Whatever the case, his mother was sickened by the “obscene” amount of money they wanted to throw at the two authors. Money wasn’t their thing and every time a producer called quoting a new amount, his parents dug their heels in that much more. Unfortunately, it wasn’t going to be any of those entertainment goldmines. James and Harriett weren’t interested, they simply wanted to sell their books. No, he’d been thoroughly corrected over that particular phrasing, they simply wanted “to tell their stories.”

One particular media mogul, his parents wouldn’t tell Charlie

who, not that he would know a mogul from a mongrel, was particularly persistent. At first, the *assistant* made the calls, and despite the fact his dad was going to turn it down, James Daniels was still insulted. What neither of his parents was prepared for, however, was the calls from the mogul's attorneys. They were threatening. Initially, onslaught of legal jargon terrified his mother, and that infuriated his dad. James didn't get worked up often, but this had done it. Their own attorney, some guy connected to the publisher, finally got the legal dogs called off. Things were quiet enough for a couple of months, then the gift baskets began to show up on the first Monday of every month complete with a friendly phone call from the mogul's own *daughter*.

Charlie looked up the empty road. Bestselling authors. They could *afford* to buy him a car. Should the world turn upside down and James and Harriett caved in the great automobile debate, Charlie could never decide between big or fast. Most of the guys in town had trucks, big trucks with big wheels. It may have been one of the only things he had in common with those guys. Their trucks were beautiful and could all be found parked in rows, shining in the sun, like sun bathing beasts. But fast looked like fun too. *Those* cars belonged to the guys in shop class, the self-proclaimed grease monkeys. Vintage Camaros, Mustangs, a T-Bird here and there. Fast and loud, and sometimes late at night, they would scream down the empty road, racing by Charlie's lonely house. He would lay in bed listening, his jealousy growing in bounds.

Big or fast? Not a problem he'd ever have to solve apparently.

Charlie sighed and wiped his sweaty eyes on his shirt. Two years ago, he had started carrying a spare shirt in his backpack because by the time he got to school, he was a slick mess. He may not have gotten any of the body hair with puberty, but he certainly acquired the sweat glands.

He heard the rumbling of the old yellow school bus before he saw the chugging machine. Full of lower class-men and rejects, that bus was the bane of Charlie's mornings and afternoons, even more so than the Pack in the locker room. Obviously, he could ride his bike to school and add a third shirt to his backpack, but that would be giving in and Charlie Daniels never gave in.

Standing, Charlie brushed the dirt off the butt of his long athletic shorts, about the only thing that fit him normally, and hiked his backpack up on his shoulders. The bus came to a groaning stop as though it hated the morning routine as much as its next passenger. With a squeal, the door unfolded and Charlie stepped in.

Man, was there a funk. Which came first: social rejection or poor hygiene? It stood to reason if you wanted to work your way up that social ladder, you might want to do something that would immediately make you more tolerable to others. Shower. Brush your hair. Brush your *teeth*. Wear freakin' deodorant. Were these keys to acceptance so hard to grasp? As it was, this was hands down the worst smelling place associated with school. You'd think the locker room would be reigning champion, but the fact of the matter was the locker room may have started out smelling like body odor and sweat, but at least ended in a cloud of body spray and cologne. This bus was still the dominating victor of funk.

Gladys, the drooping driver, ignored Charlie as he passed her. He knew her well enough to know, though she seemed disinterested and oblivious, Gladys was all too aware of the goings-on of her bus. The woman had been the bus driver as long as Charlie could remember. Year after year, her back bent lower, her hands gnarled more, and the bags under her eyes grew thicker. Her mouth always hung open, making her dangling turkey neck bulge. Gladys the bus driver was a crooked staple in Charlie's life. With every transition, she was there. She'd terrified him the first time the school bus door screeched open when he was in kindergarten. For the first three weeks, his mom had to take him by the hand and lead him past her until he realized if he just looked at the floor he could pretend she was a sweet lady with bright eyes and rosy cheeks. In junior high he thought he'd escaped her, but the first day of school, she was there. Droopy. And surprise, surprise. Gladys "welcomed" him his first day of high school as well.

Working his way to the back, Charlie avoided eye contact with everyone. He found his usual empty bench and dropped his backpack next to him in an attempt to dissuade anyone picked up in the next several stops from joining him. Truth be told, he took up most of the

bench anyway. However, to further his subtle demand for seclusion, he leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes.

“I brought my book for your parents to sign!”

Some people wouldn't take the hint.

A heavy hardback book dropped onto Charlie's lap, hitting him squarely where he wished it hadn't. Charlie doubled over with a groan and the book fell to the floor of the bus. The owner of the book, a rotund boy, leaped from his seat in front of Charlie and dove for the book as though rescuing a priceless national treasure. Charlie was too concerned with his current discomfort to help the blundering interloper who was currently burrowing under Charlie's seat as the book slid back due to the bouncing and jarring of the bus.

“There! Got it!” The kid proclaimed triumphantly as he unwedged himself from between the seats with no little effort and exposure of butt crack, to stand unsteadily, intermittently situating his stretched fanboy t-shirt and thick glasses, while clutching the back of the seat beside him.

“Sit down!” Gladys slurred loudly from the front of the bus, her sagging, basset hound eyes watching in the large, overhead mirror.

The kid scrambled onto his bench, but immediately turned around on his knees to focus his attention back on Charlie. “So, here's the book.” He made to drop it again, but Charlie, still feeling the echoes of dull pain from the last time, quickly snagged the book and tossed it onto the seat next to him. The kid watched, an internal battle playing openly across his face: a reprimand for the unholy treatment of a sacred text versus gushing thankfulness that the object was one step closer to his idols.

Charlie took the burden of making that decision from him and offered him a sighed assurance it would get signed . . . eventually. The kid beamed.

The kid was Humberto Hidalgo, but he insisted everyone call him Bogart. Most kids called him Bogey if they called him anything at all. He was one of the only Hispanic kids at FHS, one of the very few people of color at FHS aside from a black assistant coach and three of the Pack, two big black guys and an Asian guy. A weird phenomenon in Texas, but it explained the racial slurs the kids at FHS felt were okay

to jab at Bogart. Charlie didn't do it, it wasn't decent or right, but he certainly didn't try to stop it. If it bothered Bogart, he could deal with it himself, but Charlie wasn't sure if Bogart was even aware of it.

Charlie, however, was all too aware of Bogart. The kid blathered on and on about everything sci-fi/fantasy related and when he found out who Charlie's parents were, Bogart attached himself to Charlie like a leech to a skinny-dipper. Charlie had attempted to avoid any bus seat near Bogart, but that didn't matter. If he sat somewhere else, Bogart would simply invade the seat in front of him whether it was fully occupied already or not. Soon enough, Charlie discovered resistance was futile and the best defense was monosyllabic responses and neutral grunts.

"I can't believe you finally agreed to have your parents sign my book! You still gonna have them do it? Like you said, right?" the puffing boy said with punctuated spittle. Bogart had begged both overtly and subtly for two years. Yesterday, Charlie snapped and told him to bring the stupid book and he'd have his parents sign it. He was pretty sure it was the most he'd said to the kid in months.

Would you mind remembering antiperspirant, Charlie grumbled internally. "Yeah. Fine."

"Can you get them to sign it tonight?" Bogart asked feverishly.

"Yeah."

Bogart started to say something, but he gagged on the words, his hands kneading the back of the bench. The kid's face was red and sweaty from his excitement, the heat, or his high cholesterol. Probably all three. "Ever since," he choked out, "ever since I looked your house up on the internet and saw who your parents were, I've been obsessed with getting that book signed. I mean, what are the odds the son of James and Harriett Daniels would be on my bus? You know? I mean, what are the odds mi abuela and I would move to this awesome little town and the son of James and Harriett Daniels would go to my school?" Bogart watched expectantly for a response. Bogart lived with his grandma, or his abuela as he called her, and the woman was dropping the ball when it came to teaching her grandson about social normality.

Charlie didn't offer a response.

“I mean . . . you know? Just . . . wow, right?” Bogart panted liberally. His dark brown eyes widened suddenly and his meaty hands doubled their efforts on the back of the seat his bulk leaned against. “I hope you don’t think I’m just your friend so I can get that book signed. I mean, you’re my best friend and *would* be whether your parents were James and Harriett Daniels or not. I promise. You know? Right?”

Best friend? Bogart thought Charlie was his best friend now? This had to stop. Charlie sighed, “Bogart . . .”

The sweaty kid’s eyes lit up. “Yeah?”

“We’re not friends. We’re —” Bogart began to wilt like a flower planted in the scorching Texas heat. Charlie just couldn’t do it. It wasn’t *decent*. “We’re not friends just because of my parents. We’re just friends . . . because.” Charlie wanted to cuss, but that wasn’t decent either, so he never did.

And that wilting flower took shade and was planted in the stinking compost of false hope and a decent lie. Charlie couldn’t ever remember seeing Bogart this energized and that was saying something for the kid with pixie sticks flowing in his veins.

It looked as though Charlie was about to experience the full wrath of Bogart’s glee, but the bus came to its usual lurching halt and the rotund boy was thrown back. Charlie had never been more grateful for Gladys and her lead foot. Taking advantage of Bogart’s momentary distraction, Charlie snatched up the book and his backpack and darted down the aisle, pushing freshmen aside and leaping out of the door with yet another disapproving slurred bark from Gladys.

The heat hit him again full on, but he didn’t give it time to settle in. Charlie rushed past the variety of social groups meeting up on the well-manicured, dead-brown lawn outside the sprawling high school. He dodged groups of skaters, jocks, pretties, and geeks, none of them giving him the slightest hint he existed. And that was fine, he could do without them too. As he reached the doors, he was sure he heard Bogart calling from a distance, but Charlie was practiced at ignoring the nuisance.

Walking briskly through the halls, Charlie made it to a second-floor bathroom that was practically forgotten by the general popula-

tion since it was so far from the nearest occupied classroom. Apparently back in the 1940s, when the city council built Farnsworth High, it was during a population boom and the projected need was that of a bustling city like Houston or Dallas. Those visions of grandeur never came to fruition and much of the high school was abandoned and used for storage. Charlie had discovered the isolated restroom one morning when an omelet his mom made didn't settle too well and he needed some privacy while his body sorted some things out. It hadn't been anywhere near *decent*. Now he used the lonesome bathroom as a place to change out of his sweaty t-shirt and freshen up before the day began, avoiding the locker room and the Pack who prowled there.

Charlie had just pulled off his shirt and was wiping down his pits when a toilet flushed in the stall behind him and out sauntered Coach Tark. Charlie let off a string of expletives in his head, internal decency forgotten. Of all the bathrooms in all the school, Tark had to be in this one. The looming man in his inappropriately tight coaching shorts and tucked in t-shirt hocked something up in his throat and spit it into the nearby sink. Charlie shuddered. Tark was the only person on campus whom Charlie felt small around. The mustached coach was solid and a solidly terrible teacher. Charlie had endured him as a computer teacher one year and didn't learn a single thing except the fact earwax could be dug out with a pencil and common scissors were good for trimming thick mustaches and nose hairs. But it wasn't his public grooming that made Charlie want to bolt, it was the inevitable coaxing to the dark side.

"You changed your mind yet, Daniels? Looks like you got even bigger over the summer. You a junior now?" The coach knew he was. "What program you usin' to build muscle like that? You usin' HGH, son? *Officially*, I have to tell you we do not condone the use of chemical enhancement on the FHS field." Tark crossed his burly arms, tattoos peeking out of his short sleeves and just up out of his collar, and stood in front of the bathroom door blocking any and all escape.

"No, sir. I just lift, sir." Charlie was suddenly very aware he was being sized up like a race horse or rodeo bull. He quickly pulled his

shirt on and fixed his unruly hair. He'd have to endure whatever sweat was left.

"I seen your dad, he's a little fella. Where do you think you get it? You got a grand-dad with your size? Maybe on your mama's side?"

Charlie wasn't sure if that was a slam on his mom, so he avoided the matter by squatting and stuffing his other shirt in his backpack. "Don't know, sir. I've never seen my grandparents. They're all dead."

"Photographs?"

"No, sir," Charlie shrugged, "my parents lost all that in a fire just after I was born."

Tark made a face, "Fire? What fire?"

Charlie refused to make eye contact, so he shrugged as he pretended to be struggling with the zipper of his backpack. "I dunno, when I was a baby."

"Been here a long time and don't remember a fire."

"Maybe it was before I was born, I don't know."

"Huh." Tark stood watching. Examining. What did he want? "This gonna be the year, Daniels?"

Standing, Charlie looked the looming coach in the eye, "No, sir." Charlie wasn't exactly sure what happened next. When he went to pass the coach, he suddenly felt himself pitched across the room, knocking the trashcan over as he slammed against the tile wall, barely keeping his footing. "Holy," Charlie groaned.

Tark was still standing by the door, his arms crossed over his broad chest, no sign he had moved an inch. "I don't know what you're waiting on, hot shot," the hulking man sneered, "but this is all passing you right up. You got the build, and I figure you got the coordination to go with it, but what's it all for? Huh? Damn waste is what it is." Tark gave him one final appraisal and threw the door open, banging it into a paper towel dispenser.

The bathroom was quiet except for Charlie's breathing. His heart was pounding in his chest and his knees were threatening to give out on him. What was that all about? Could the coach get fired for that? He *could* get fired for that, right? The bigger question, could Charlie actually turn him in? His all too vivid imagination had no problem creating scene after scene of gruesome outcomes if he dared to report

Tark. In most of them, Tark destroyed him barehanded on his own, in others, the Pack joined in. If the coach was willing to go that far on campus, physically shove him into a wall, what would he do off campus? Charlie knew he'd never say anything about it.

Taking a deep breath, Charlie tucked his hair behind his ears and left the restroom that had once been a sanctuary. The rest of the morning was just as much of a blur as his flight into the bathroom wall. He was intimidated by the Coach before, now he flat out feared him. Charlie couldn't help constantly looking over his shoulder for the big man, rocketing him to the top of the list of daily avoidances, just above Bogart. Worst of all, the fear that kept niggling in the back of his mind wasn't the threat of being murdered, *that* was looming in his frontal lobe, it was the fear the mustached monster might be right. All his time spent working out, running, getting stronger, getting better, was all for what? Was he passing up his best shot at college? While he wasn't an idiot, he certainly wasn't the smartest, therefore it wouldn't be his grades winning him entrance into a good school. And he wasn't involved in school clubs or activities. At all. The guidance counselors had gathered all the juniors into the gym at the beginning of the year and droned on and on about how colleges like to see what you're a part of. Plain and simple, Charlie wasn't *a part* of anything. And now he was shooting down his best chance to excel. What *was* he doing?

The hulking coach didn't get it. The problem was, it wasn't simply that Charlie *wouldn't*, it's he *couldn't*. He wasn't allowed to. What if he got on the field, the adrenaline hit, and he lost control? That kid he punched as a freshman lucked out. *Charlie* had lucked out. Over two more years, Charlie was stronger than he'd been as that freshman and he trusted himself even less.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kirk Holland lives in Shanghai, China, where he teaches theatre at an international school. At fifteen, Kirk started working at a small bookstore in a mall in Fort Worth, Texas. It was then he was introduced to the fantasy genre and fell in love with the adventures and endless possibilities. He

earned his undergraduate degree at Texas Christian University in theatre and television with a focus on script writing and later his graduate degree in theatre education at the University of Houston. Telling stories on stage has been a passion of his for over twenty years that he shares with students as he leads them into their own discovery of their storytelling voices.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I think this is one of the trickiest things to write. How can I write an entire story and come to the acknowledgements and freeze up? Not because I don't know who to thank, but I don't know where to start. So many people who have no idea they're apart of this process come to mind and I question whether or not to include them. Let's kick this off and see how it goes.

First, Danielle Acee and her team at authorsassistant.com. This team is amazing and Danielle has taken care of me and pushed me across the finish line with this project. She's a cheerleader, an honest eye, and an encouraging shove. For all of you out there who have a passion you explore on the side and a full-time pay-the-bills job, you know how sometimes the latter can overtake the former though it's the former you'd rather hangout with rather than the latter. Keeping that straight? Danielle can tell you that my bill-payer definitely took the driver's seat in the final few months of getting AGD off the ground, but she was patient and we finally made it here. If you're looking for a supportive team of people to help you self-publish and then all the follow-up shit you have to do to get people to read it, head over to authorsassistant.com and find that help. You won't regret it.

Often the first thing people judge is the cover and I'm happy to say it's worthy of judging. Kim Sajan has done it again and under some crazy duress. In early 2023 when I asked her to do the art for another of my books, and she agreed, life hadn't quite taken the turn it would in the months to come. In June, her family moved out of Shanghai where they'd been for over fifteen years, starting the journey to their new home in Chile. It would be one thing to just settle herself in an entirely different country, but how about doing that for you, your

husband, and two daughters, one a teen and the other an almost teen. Good grief. There's isn't enough coffee in the world. Thank you, Kim, for your hard and beautiful work! You can check out more of her work and get in contact with her at kimsajan.com.

Let's shift from the professional to the personal. I wouldn't be where I am in this journey called life without three highly important people. First, my boys, Harrison and Jones. Two humans who couldn't be more different and with whom I fall more in love with as the days and years pass by. I can't wait to see the lives and stories they craft for themselves and hope they feel the freedom to do it exactly as their hearts need them to. And my best friend and ex-wife, Janice. Our marriage story ended in 2020 when I came out. It was an unexpected plot twist, one I never thought would happen for so many reasons. But it did happen. Janice is the hero of this story and it's because she chose to preserve our relationship and was willing to explore it in a new way despite the pain and betrayal caused by me living a life of denial. She's powerful, wise, courageous, and a fucking rockstar. Check her out at janiceholland.com and learn more about her story, her practice, and how she's helping women worldwide through their trauma.

Here's a weird one. To all of you YA authors who have been unknowingly filling my tank. Gay teenage Kirk who, thanks to religious people, firmly believed he was broken in need of the right amount of prayer and bible reading, needed your books. While devouring the pages of works by Adam Silvera, Bill Konigsberg, and so many more, two things happened for me. First, I obviously learned so much as a YA writer. You learn by studying others and that's exactly what I've been doing. Learning voice, perspective, story, character development, and a variety of other aspects of the craft. And at the same time, I was filled and soothed. I read characters whom my teenage self related to, emotions that adult me relates to, and relationships I either wanted to experience or in some ways had, both encouraging and painful. I continue to seek out novels by these talented writers and hope to one day see my books hanging out with theirs on someone's shelf.

And can we have a shout out to coffee shops? As a dude diagnosed with ADHD, working at home is hell on earth. So many other things I

would be doing if home were my only place to work. But thanks to the ingenious invention of the café, I can narrow those distractions down to a cup of coffee, a baked treat, my playlists, and iPad. So, thank you Café du Village, Summer Moon, Todos Los Dias, and Luneurs, and the dozens of other shops I've visited around the world on my travels for keeping me caffeinated and focused... not an easy task.

