

Speechless



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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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and incidents are either products of the author's
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To our boys, Aidan and Anderson

I'm about to learn the following:

- 1. Family members will be the first ones to make you feel out of place.**
- 2. Family members will eventually show their true colors.**
- 3. Friends and relatives show support in different ways.**
- 4. Everyone has a breaking point.**
- 5. Poor social skills can get amplified.**
- 6. Some people enjoy a wake like it's a wedding.**
- 7. You'll be surprised at who shows up.**
- 8. You may hear things you didn't expect.**
- 9. If you're not sure what to say about the deceased, don't share your thoughts.**
- 10. Everyone has a story—especially the quiet kids.**
- 11. If you're not sure what to say about the deceased, say it into a microphone.**
- 12. Listen more than you speak.**

***CHAPTER 1**

**Family members will be the first ones
to make you feel out of place.**

So this is it.

This is how I go.

Not in a fiery blaze of glory.

Not risking all of my being for a cause both mighty
and true.

Not in any way that will be celebrated.

Pants.

These pants will be my undoing.

No way the few threads keeping that button on will
hold for the rest of the day. Or tomorrow. No chance.
Maybe if I just don't eat anything, they won't be so tight.

Painful red indentation lines have already formed under my muffin top. The pants are merging with my skin. I'm one deep breath away from losing them.

It's not like I ever asked for fancy dress pants. Mom bought me these for the spring dance in seventh grade, and they fit fine *then*. I know I've grown since last year, but maybe was in denial about my waist expanding with my height. These are the only black pants I own, and Mom said there wasn't time to get me new ones before the wake. And they would have to do. And that was that.

These pants may kill me.

At least I'm already at a funeral home. That should save everyone some hassle.

I need to get out of this car. Sitting only makes the pants more constrictive. We're the only ones in the parking lot, so at least no one will see if my waistline causes a scene. I step out carefully to keep the button from popping. Standing helps some. My skin gets a moment of relief as I run my thumbs between my waist and its tormentor. We walk to the entrance, each of us in our shiny shoes, with seemingly extra-loud footsteps against the pavement. I wonder if everyone thinks that when they walk into a wake.

The outside of the funeral home actually looks like . . . a home. A big white house with a parking lot. I know I've been by this place several times, but I never made the connection that it was a funeral home until now. It isn't how I pictured a place with dead bodies should look. And the man opening the entrance door to greet us isn't what I pictured, either.

"Hi, folks! Come on in! I'm just heading out, but Marty's on his way to join you."

He's . . . excited? I didn't expect this greeting, or the funeral director to be wearing a cherry-red baseball shirt with EMBALLMERS in gleaming white across his chest.

"Big day today. Chamber of Commerce season opener this afternoon. Every year we are sooooo close to the championship but never seem to get out of the playoffs. Not this year. Things are clicking for us, and this will be our season."

I'm not sure what I expected walking through the doors into my first wake, but an easily excited softball-playing mortician is a bet I would have lost.

"Uh," Dad responds, trying to get his bearings on this guy, "good luck to you, then. Listen, I know we're early, but we were wondering if we could just set up a few —"

“Pictures! Sure! We can help with that. Shoot . . . I’m glad you said that. I was about to leave without my good camera. The wife promised to get pictures of the team. Should probably bring my coat, too — not exactly softball weather lately. Can you believe it’s March and we still have this cold? Crazy, right? Going to make for a long seven innings. At least it’s warmed up some since the weekend.”

“So, we just need to get a few things set up,” Dad says a bit more assertively.

“You know we’ve lost to the Sons of Pitches for the last three years? We’re going to take them down today, though,” he boasts, waiting for our approval.

“Can we set up for our nephew’s wake now?” Mom interjects. She’s done with this man.

“Oh, sure, sure. Let me just see where —” He places his hands on his hips while bobbing his shoulders around. “Marty should be here any second. . . .”

I don’t know that this guy can focus on anything other than his upcoming softball season. May as well have fun with it.

“So, what’s the strength of the emBALLmers? Pitching? Defense? A fierce lineup that can go yard?”

The mortician stops searching for Marty and looks

at me as if I'm the coach who just called him in to pinch hit for the win.

“Oh, we've got it all! Our cleanup hitter absolutely killed it last season. He's a machine. Our leadoff guy is Mr. Reliable, and our catcher can throw anyone out. It's going to be such a great season.”

He's positively glowing. Any sense of empathy for a family about to bury a child has been replaced with sheer anticipation for his upcoming seven innings. How does this guy work with dead people? Or live people who are here to mourn dead people?

“Wow,” I respond with a toothy grin. “You guys are going to have an awesome day. I, on the other hand, will be —”

“Jimmy, we need to get set up.” Mom cuts me off before I can bait the emBALLmer any more. She knows I love toying with people who don't get it.

“Hey, there he is! Marty will take care of you folks. Wish me luck today!”

“Good luck, sir!” I respond cheerfully. I envy this chipper grown man whose love of his sport outweighs reading his customers. He gets to play seven innings of softball; we get to attend the wake of a thirteen-year-old boy. “Knock 'em dead!”

Mom gives me the familiar glare to knock it off.

“What? Can’t I wish him good luck? It’s an important day for the emBA —”

“Jimmy.” Dad’s warning tone lets me know he’s done with my game, too.

The other mortician hurriedly greets us. No softball uniform: his suit is a serious black that matches his hair.

“Good morning. My condolences,” he says while extending his hand to Dad. Not sure how he combines a sunny phrase like “Good morning” with a somber “My condolences” and doesn’t sound weird, but he pulls it off. I guess when you do this for a living, you get good at that stuff.

“I’m Martin. We spoke on the phone yesterday. However I can assist you, please let me know.” He looks younger than Dad and smiles with a mix of confidence and caring. I always pictured a funeral home employee like Dr. Frankenstein’s assistant or someone old with wavy hair and a lazy eye, not this guy. I didn’t expect Mr. Softball Superfan either, though.

“Good morning,” Dad replies kindly. “We’re the boy’s aunt and uncle,” he adds while tilting his head at Mom. “My wife, Lily,” he says with his far hand on her shoulder to guide her toward the introduction. It

reminds me of when we were taught how to lead our partner in the ballroom dancing unit of PE. Mom shakes his hand before it's my turn. "And his cousin, Jimmy."

"Hello, Jimmy. So nice to meet you," he expresses with concern while shaking my hand.

"Mortician Marty . . . great to meet you."

For someone not at all athletic, Mom puts a stranglehold on my arm ninja-quick. Message received. Two words come through her lips that are meant for me alone, but everyone gets to be part of hearing: "Not. Now."

Dad quickly intervenes before I get the chance to respond. He focuses back on Marty before giving me another chance to test him. "Is it all right if we set these up before everyone arrives?"

Mom put together two poster boards of pictures. She spent most of yesterday afternoon looking through our photos, letting out subtle bursts of profanity along the way. It isn't hard to find pictures of my cousin, but those when he smiled? That's a different story.

"Of course, of course. Let me gather a couple of easels for your display, and we can set them up next to the guest book." Marty opens his hand, gesturing

toward a podium in the corner where a white book lies open with a silk ribbon down the middle. I envy his calmness.

We follow him through the entryway to a large, open room. It reminds me of an art gallery we saw on a field trip last year, only missing all the art. Patrick's body is on display at the far end. The room is just dim enough that the light above him acts as a spotlight. I would have done the opposite, but it's my first wake, so maybe the dead bodies are supposed to be showcased. I quickly look away once I realize it's my cousin. And I'm not ready to see a dead body.

Dad, carrying the poster boards, continues to follow the mortician to the corner. I'm following behind him, but Mom grabs my arm with the same firmness she uses when we walk through the glassware section of Elliot's. I didn't even say anything this time.

"Jimmy?"

Mom has her serious eyes on.

"Tomorrow you get to do something for Aunt Rose and Uncle Mike."

I hate when I *get* to do things.

"What? Be a pallbearer?" I halfway want Mom to be impressed that I know this term.

“At the funeral tomorrow, you’re going to say a few words about your cousin.”

My eyebrows creep down.

“The priest asked for a family member to speak about him,” she says with authority. “And we all thought you would be best.” The *you* stands out, getting extra emphasis among the rest of the request.

Images of a large audience, silence, and an oversized microphone flood my mind. I’m able to formulate one word.

“What?”

That’s all I get out. Too many other words, like *public speaking*, *crowd*, and *speech* are warring for room in my head.

“It’s not a big deal. Just say a few nice things about your cousin is all.”

“A speech?” My voice. It’s getting loud. “In front of everyone?” It’s doing that high-pitched thing I can’t control.

Her voice softens when she detects the anxiety in my response. “Just think of it like the presentation you did in English. Your teacher said you did a great job on it. You’ll do fine on this, too.”

My big presentation last week on *The Iliad*. . . . I

did do fine on it. I actually think I gave one of the better speeches in my Honors English class. Even got bonus points for choosing a classic instead of a modern book. Still, just because I'm good at public speaking doesn't mean I hate it any less. It terrifies me. I peed three times before second period that day. I didn't tell Mom that part.

“Why me? I mean, why not —?”

“Obviously, his sister can't do it, so that means you need to.”

Well, yes, we all know Sofia can't give a speech.

“Why not Uncle Mike?” I won't even ask about Aunt Rose. She couldn't problem-solve her way out of a locked car without her twin or husband by her side.

Mom steps toward the poster boards Dad is setting up. She tilts her head from one side to the other to see if his placement is straight. I haven't seen the pictures she chose to display until now, and I'm not happy that one is of a six-year-old me crying at Thanksgiving. I don't want that picture up, but that battle is small in comparison with the current one and not worth fighting.

“It's going to be hard enough for your aunt and uncle as it is. You can't expect them to stand up in front of everyone and talk after what they've been through,” Mom says as if it were common knowledge. I still don't

get it. I'm not trying to be a jerk; I just don't know why it has to be me.

I respond using the kindest voice I can muster. "Why don't you do it, then?"

That isn't well received. I have her full attention now as her face inches closer to mine. Marty politely exits. I bet he can tell this is getting awkward.

"Your aunt asked if you would do this for your cousin, and you are going to do this for your cousin and that's that," she responds with her words firmly gripping me. She does her patented "turn before I can respond" move and focuses back on the pictures.

And she wonders why the two of us don't get along. "I know, but —"

Her attention is back on me. Not sure that's what I wanted.

"But what?"

I make a sound as if the word "I" had more syllables, but only the first one gets out and it just sounds like a weird breath.

"Really? Now is the time you choose to not have something to say?"

How do I respond to that?

"I . . . I don't —"

“Your aunt needs us.” Her teeth grind together; only her lips are moving.

I hate it when she does her “I am the law” thing. There’s no coming out ahead when it happens.

“Aunt Rose can’t do it?” I’m reaching now; I know that. She would never put her sister in a bad spot.

“And we are going to do everything we can for her,” she responds, ignoring my suggestion.

She’s angry. Dad can tell. He steps in before it gets worse. He knows that Mom and me in a conflict can get explosive.

“Jimmy, you don’t have to say a lot. Just a few nice things about your cousin.” Everyone has stopped calling Patrick by name and simply refers to him as *your cousin*. “Just think of a story about you guys playing when you were younger, something like that. Something simple.”

Mom walks toward the entryway of the funeral home as Dad tries calming me. She’s done with me. I shouldn’t have asked if Aunt Rose could speak. Mom always gets so defensive about her twin. She acts like vulnerable Aunt Rose is standing beside her and I’m slinging insults that only she can deflect.

“But why me?” I ask with all the sincerity I can find. None of this makes sense.

“It’s the right thing to do.” He looks toward Mom while she puts another pen out for the guest book. His expression doesn’t exude confidence that the only possible solution is for me to be the speaker tomorrow.

“But what do I say? I don’t even know what to make up.” The Trojan War wasn’t the most engaging topic to talk about for fifteen minutes to my Honors English class, but at least I didn’t have to invent anything.

“You don’t have to make anything up. Just tell a story about you guys playing when you were little. Say something nice, or mention something you’ll miss about him . . . maybe a game you played together.” Dad’s selling comfort, but he knows I’m not buying it.

“Like what?” My voice always cracks when I’m frustrated, and though it’s not there yet, I can hear that crack only an octave away. My anxiety over public speaking is fighting with my anxiety over what I’ll say. Either way, my anxiety wins.

I try to speak with confidence: shoulders back, chin up.

“I don’t want to give a speech tomorrow.” Fake confidence is better than no confidence, right?

“It’s not a speech. You’re just telling a story about your cousin at church tomorrow.”

“In front of everyone? That’s a speech.”

There’s that octave.

“I don’t know, Jimmy. Just . . . just don’t worry about it.”

I hate hearing that phrase. People only say that when something isn’t their problem. Frustration is in his voice now, too.

“Your aunt and uncle will be here any minute and they don’t need to hear this. You’re talking about your cousin tomorrow and it’ll be fine.” He clears his throat the way he does when he’s finished talking about something. I sense he’s as outvoted as I am. “Come on. We’re here to say good-bye.”

I start breathing a little heavier. This happens when something overwhelms me. Mom and Dad don’t like that I self-diagnosed myself with anxiety, but they don’t know how it feels. It feels like . . . like public speaking in a room full of people staring at you.

I don’t move. I stay in the corner of the large seashell-colored room and watch my parents walk to the front. They stop in front of my cousin.

He’s so quiet. Patrick typically wasn’t quiet. That’s how I know he’s really dead.

He doesn’t look like himself. I know it’s him, but

he looks different. Almost as if someone made a stunt double of Patrick for this. I keep my distance. The thought of a kid's corpse is still unsettling to me. My parents kneel in front of the casket and bow their heads. Thankfully they leave me alone for the moment and don't force me to get close.

The speech.

No way out of it now. I'm going to speak at the funeral tomorrow. I have to come up with something during the wake today.

My first wake.

I have no idea how they work or how people act at them.

What am I supposed to say tomorrow? Dad said to just tell a funny story or talk about something we did when we were younger, but he doesn't get it.

There are no funny stories about Patrick.

He always ruined everything.

I hated the kid.

Patrick was the kind of guy who would kick your dog. And not to see what the dog would do but what you would do. I've actually seen him kick a dog. Maybe I should tell that story.

I want to ask Dad again, but seeing Patrick's body

lying motionless in front of my kneeling parents stops me. No one else is here in the funeral home yet. Just us, Patrick's body, and deafening silence. I so want a natural disaster to strike, anything to change the reality of this moment.

There's no use trying to argue anymore. This speech is going to happen.

What could I even say about Patrick? I always called him "When, Not If" in my head. It was always "When will Patrick Feeny ruin/break/hurt something? . . . Not if." There has to be some story I can tell from the time when we were really little.

My childhood memories of my cousin typically involve tears from someone other than Patrick. We didn't play many games together as kids. He didn't do well playing with others.

OK, there has to be something I can remember. Playing as kids, fun stuff . . . When was a time I played a game with Patrick?

I actually do remember one game from when we were pretty young.

Near-death experiences are hard to forget.

* * *

Junior Explorers. Not just the name of the class, but what the instructors called us each morning in the week-long nature exploration summer class for kids going into second grade. Mom read me the blurb from the park district catalog. All I heard was “animals” and “dangerous”—two words any seven-year-old boy would take for bait.

The class met each morning for a few hours at a local park. The first day I remember feeling out of place for not crying when Mom dropped me off. One boy with red hair and mismatched socks was sobbing and lasted only a few minutes before his mom gave up and took him home. Another kid cried through the first half of the morning. I’ve never understood why kids cry when their parents leave. I’ve always looked forward to the freedom.

A couple of high-school boys wearing matching red shirts with an outline of a bear on the front were the camp leaders. They were both named Zack and towered over our group of boys sitting cross-legged on the wet grass. Within a few minutes of starting, three of us had asked about the wild animals. The Zacks said we would see the animals tomorrow. We spent the rest of the morning talking about birds, which to me weren’t

very wild. We each had to find a pinecone, and even though we all found one right away, the Zacks spent the next hour telling us to “keep looking for better ones” while they sat on a bench talking. They showed us how to smear peanut butter on them and dip them in birdseed.

I didn’t find it dangerous, but one boy did.

A freckly kid named Noah wouldn’t touch the supplies. He kept his distance from the table containing the birdseed and peanut butter. He started shaking his head, saying, “I can’t! I can’t touch it!” until the Zacks gave up and told him he could just watch. He calmed down a bit and sat behind the rest of us while we finished our feeders. The Zack wearing glasses tried to get the group back together.

“Now you can attract and feed any kind of dangerous birds in the wild,” he said with a halfhearted smile.

The pinecone bird feeders concluded day one of dangerous-animals camp. I feared the rest of the week would bring the same level of excitement. As we drove off that first day, I could see the Zacks talking, the shorter one shrugging with his hands up. They didn’t seem too worried about making the camp more adventurous. Not sure they cared.

The morning of day two did bring a level of excitement. Just not the kind I wanted.

“Why is Patrick here?”

“Stop. It’ll be fine,” Mom assured me as she pulled in next to my aunt’s car. “Aunt Rose thought this would be good for Patrick, and they let him join late. So just be nice to him.”

“Why did you tell her about it?” I asked in hysterics, suddenly dreading the day ahead.

The week before, Patrick broke my scooter by trying to see how high he could jump it. He never said sorry. Aunt Rose did, but he didn’t.

“This sucks” came out of my mouth without my realizing it.

“Jimmy! Enough with the language!”

“I . . . I didn’t mean it.”

That was the truth. I didn’t realize a bad word came out. Didn’t matter.

“Choose better words or we’re going back home.”

Mom hates swearing and considers “sucks” swearing. It’s the quickest way for me to get in trouble. I hadn’t meant to say it, but when she told me Patrick was joining camp, it just slipped out.

“Sorry,” I said shamefully.

“He doesn’t know anyone here, so you need to be nice,” she reminded me again as we waited for Aunt Rose to finish talking to the Zacks. I wasn’t the one who needed to be nice; she knew that. I stewed, knowing I had no options, while my aunt prepped the Zacks. Aunt Rose never just dropped Patrick off anywhere without giving the host a talk about his “free spirit.”

My arms crossed on their own while I started imagining the week ahead. I was already questioning if any dangerous animals were happening this week. Now I would have to spend it with one. I huffed out of the car and took a seat with the rest of the Explorers.

Patrick spotted me and waved with his arm straight out and only his hand moving. He was acting like he hadn’t broken my scooter a week ago. I’d have to wait until my birthday to get a new one, and he didn’t care. I forced a wave back, not saying a word as he plopped down next to me.

The Zacks stood in front of us with a stack of white paper, boxes of crayons, and a worn backpack on the picnic table. I hoped there was something scratching to get out of that bag, but it sat quietly. Zack with Glasses spoke first.

“OK, Explorers, we have an adventure for you

today. An adventure that will take us into the woods,” he said while sweeping his free arm in the direction of the wooded area to his left. His other hand held his coffee. “We are going exploring on a secret mission.” This last part he said in a quieter voice as he hunched down.

Secret? I was getting interested. Short Zack took over.

“Explorers, we are going deep into the forest. We need to be careful, be alert, and stay together because of the many dangerous animals lurking in the trees,” he exclaimed while making a claw with his hand. We were more intrigued now but still not sure there would be any danger for us.

Junior Explorers was held at Washington Park. It’s one of Harper’s larger parks — a few minutes from home and a place every boy in the group knew well. While it does have a wooded area, it isn’t something you would call a forest by any stretch. Washington Park has been known to host birthday parties, cookouts, and various other family events. All of which involve kids running through the small patch of woods. We were all familiar with them and had never seen anything more dangerous than a ground squirrel.

Zack with Glasses grabbed the items from the table.

He set his coffee down and held up the paper in one hand, the crayons in the other. “Your mission today, Explorers, is to find the perfect leaf.”

All the seven-year-olds groaned in unison.

Leaf rubbings. Every one of us had done countless leaf rubbings since kindergarten. We all knew the routine.

1. Find a leaf.
2. Place it under white paper.
3. Rub the crayon on its side over the paper.

It seemed like anytime the weather was nice, we did leaf rubbings. Anytime the teacher was in a bad mood . . . leaf rubbings. It was a rite of passage for kindergartners in the town of Harper to do at least six leaf rubbings before you could move on to grade school.

“Do we have to?” Patrick interjected. His personality had moments of usefulness.

“Well”—Zack with Glasses paused, thinking of his sales pitch—“you don’t have to. But . . .” He knew we were on to him. Short Zack had come prepared, though. He reached for the backpack.

“This mission has a reward. The reward is in this bag. So if you don’t complete the mission, you don’t get the reward.” He dumped the contents on the table in

dramatic fashion. A heap of Fun Size Snickers lay in a pile for us to drool over. We were all on our knees, inching toward the prize.

All except Noah.

“I can’t have Snickers. . . . I’ll die if I do. I can’t be around peanuts,” he said with a squeak in his voice. Each of us showed the empathy of a seven-year-old boy by exclaiming how we would eat it for him.

“Then don’t eat it,” Short Zack told him as if he had ruined the party. He stuck his hand into the pile and pulled out the crown jewel of the group—a full-size Snickers bar. It rose above the Fun Sizes like a giant among men.

“Whoever gets the perfect leaf sketch gets the grand prize,” he said while holding up the trophy we all coveted. “We’re going to explore the woods for an hour and give everybody a chance to find their leaf. Then we’ll do our rubbings, and Mr. Zack and I will judge who captured the perfect leaf.”

We all stood up, with renewed energy at the thought of winning the grand prize, and formed the single-file line we’d practiced the day before. The Zacks took us into the woods, where we scoured the ground and trees for the perfect leaf. There were no wild animals,

no sense of being in danger. Didn't matter. There was a chance to get a full-size Snickers bar, and that was enough to motivate us.

We walked the trail of Washington Park Woods in search of the perfect leaf. Then a second time. And a third. The Zacks stayed up front while each of us searched with the fear that someone else would spot the perfect leaf before we did. Patrick was particularly good at hearing someone say they found one and pouncing before they could reach it. He hadn't stopped talking since the candy-bar display. Patrick was easily excited by anything with sugar.

The Zacks told us to get three leaves each, which most of us did in the first pass. Then Zack with Glasses said to keep looking. According to him, we missed some good ones and needed to go back through the woods again.

We returned to the picnic table armed with our findings, each of us eager to prove we had the perfect leaf. Zack with Glasses gave us paper while Short Zack placed boxes of crayons among us. We worked diligently, placing our naked crayons sideways while carefully rubbing the paper. It took surgical precision

to apply the right amount of pressure to get the structure of the leaf without the color overwhelming it. I was quite skilled at this and liked my odds.

After a few minutes, we set our creations in front of us while the Zacks came by for inspection. They spoke quietly for a moment as we waited with our hands on our knees. I had no idea what the criteria was for a perfect leaf, but I thought my chances were good enough to take home the grand prize.

“All right, boys, you each did a great job. Mr. Zack and I talked it over and we have a winner,” Short Zack said while displaying the Snickers bar that would require both our tiny hands to hold. Patrick was rocking with anticipation as he bit his lip, hoping to hear his name. Patrick liked candy, a lot.

“The winner of the perfect leaf exploration . . .”

Each of us leaned forward.

“Is . . .”

We leaned farther forward, gripping our knees, with craned necks.

Short Zack paused until we almost tipped over. Our eyes widened and our hearts pleaded with him to call our name. He inhaled and released the winner.

“Jimmy!”

Clenched fists and painful grimaces. That’s how seven-year-old boys show sportsmanship.

My grin was ear to ear as I stood up to accept my prize. I had no idea how they decided what made the best leaf, but I didn’t care. The giant Snickers bar was mine. I had big plans for it, too. I would eat some of it that night after dinner and put the rest in the freezer for tomorrow.

I went back to my seat while Zack with Glasses walked around our circle giving the rest of the boys the consolation-size Snickers. Except for Noah; he sat on his hands when Zack with Glasses offered him the treat.

Patrick looked at my prize with envious eyes. I gripped it tightly. He would not ruin this for me. Even before he received his treat, he asked with frustration in his voice, “Can we eat it now? We can eat it now, right? You never said we have to wait, so we should just be able to eat it now!”

He was talking fast. Like happy-energy fast. He talked fast last week after he saw my new scooter. Right before he broke it. I hoped the Zacks wouldn’t take their eyes off him.

Short Zack was gathering up all the supplies from

the morning and responded, “Eat up.” The Zacks started talking about something a few feet away while putting all the crayons back in the boxes.

“Wait,” Patrick said while holding his hand in the center of our circle as if there were an imaginary button to press in the middle. “I have an idea.”

I found my shoulders leaning away from the circle of my fellow Explorers. None of the other boys knew Patrick. They didn’t know what his ideas were like.

I knew. Just like I knew he’d made sure the Zacks were turned around before he said anything, I knew Patrick’s idea meant someone was going to be in tears very soon.

“We need to eat these like real explorers.” He looked at me with his aggressive eyes. “One bite. We all get one bite and that’s it.” There was a hostility in his voice that could intimidate kids who didn’t know him. He had a way of commanding an audience.

Sounded simple enough: eat your Snickers by shoving the whole thing in your mouth. If you didn’t, then you were a wimp. I was pretty sure real explorers from old times didn’t eat this way—very sure they didn’t have Snickers with them, either. It was no use arguing, though. The boys nodded and were willing to try it.

All but two: Noah, who had nothing, and me. Patrick ignored Noah and focused on me.

“Since you won, you have to take the biggest bite.” This was Patrick being Patrick, creating a masterful plan to destroy something good that happened to me. I wanted no part of it.

I looked to the Zacks. They were still turned toward the parking lot, knowing we animals had been fed and would be fine unsupervised. I was on my own.

“No, I’m saving mine.” It came out sheepishly.

My response was met with an onslaught of disapproval. I think every one of them was still mad they didn’t win and wanted to see my victory ruined. The candy bar sat in my hand while I wondered how it could possibly fit in my mouth.

Patrick unwrapped his Fun Size.

“I’ll go first. Watch.” He shoved the small block into his mouth and choked it down before he had a chance to enjoy it.

“Now you go.” He pointed to the boy on the other side of him while still swallowing chocolate. The boy followed orders by unwrapping and shoving his entire Fun Size in his mouth. Patrick had a way of making himself the referee in his own competitions.

The game continued around the circle, skipped Noah, and then reached me. I had no choice but to play.

“You have to do it now,” Patrick reminded me.

I reluctantly unwrapped my prize and saw it reach from my palm to beyond the tips of my outstretched fingers. I couldn’t imagine it fitting in my mouth. The boys all watched eagerly to see me fail. They knew just as well as I did that it wouldn’t work.

“Go on! You can fit it in. Come on. . . . One bite!” Patrick said with the angry energy taking over his voice.

My mouth opened wide. My hand went for it.

I shoved one end into my cheek, as far as it could stretch. I figured it would choke me if the bar was forced straight back, so I tried to go sideways, like a bow tie for my teeth. Push and push again, and now a third effort.

I couldn’t believe it. The entire Snickers bar actually fit. My mouth was two inches away from being able to close, and my cheeks were wider than my head, but I did it. I got a candy bar bigger than my hand into my mouth. The other boys leaned back where they sat, unable to hide their impressed expressions.

All but one. Noah looked like he saw something the rest of us didn’t.

The moment of achievement lasted about two

seconds. Then I realized I couldn't swallow. I coughed, hoping I would hack the candy bar out. No, it only made things worse. My tongue moved in every direction, trying to pry the bar out, but I grew more frantic as the massive block sat wedged firmly in my mouth.

I coughed again. It only caused me to lose my breath. There was nothing in my throat, but I still couldn't control the functions of my mouth. It sent the rest of me into frenzied movements.

A tiny drop of spit hit the back of my throat.

Panic set in.

I stood up, clawing at my cheeks, as if that would loosen the bar, while my midsection bobbed up and down. I felt my eyes water and heard "He's choking!" come from one of the boys. I fell on my knees, coughing furiously, facing the ground.

I thought it was the end.

A hand grabbed me. One of the Zacks heard me.

Short Zack placed one hand on my shoulder to stand me up straight. I was wrong when I thought the candy bar was too big to fit in my mouth, and I was wrong when I thought Short Zack's hand was too big to retrieve it. His fingers struck like a cobra, too fast

for me to see it or know what he was doing. One swift motion — that’s all it took.

I didn’t realize it had happened until I saw the chocolate block in his hand. He held it in front of me for a second — I think to reassure me that it was out of my mouth and I could breathe again. His hand never left my shoulder as he threw the Snickers to the ground and turned to his side.

“Thanks, Noah. Good work,” he said as the freckly Explorer looked at me with concern. Noah had been here before. He was no stranger to someone reacting after putting something bad in their mouth. “You OK, Jimmy?” Short Zack asked.

I wasn’t OK.

I couldn’t speak.

I was crying.

I nodded anyway.

The Zacks had no idea Patrick had orchestrated the whole thing. They just thought I was a dumb animal trying to put big objects in my mouth. I pulled myself together as best I could before the parents arrived. I hoped the Zacks wouldn’t say anything to Mom.

They gave us our leaf rubbings, and we walked to

the parking lot as our moms were pulling up. Patrick quickly got into Aunt Rose's car without even looking back. Short Zack talked to Mom, since my red face couldn't hide that I'd been crying.

He gave her the short version, but it was enough to make her furious with me. I didn't tell her the long version, the Patrick version. It would have only made things worse.

It was all my fault anyway. I was the one who shoved a brick of chocolate in my mouth. I was the one trying to not look like a wimp in front of everyone.

I was the one who did what Patrick told me to.

I promised myself to never listen to him again.

***CHAPTER 2**

Family members will eventually show their true colors.

When you walk into a funeral home, this feeling happens. It's like when you walk into church . . . but scarier. You don't want to touch anything, you have to be quiet, and there are men in suits walking around watching you. It's like a boring museum, with tissue boxes every ten feet.

I don't know if sitting down at a wake is rude, so I do it before anyone arrives. One side of the room has a couple of large high-back chairs, while a couch is centered toward the back. I choose the more comfortable-looking couch, and my pants immediately remind me that I was better off standing.

Mom and Dad are still going over things with Marty in his office.

So it's just me and Patrick.

And silence.

And time.

I scan the room again for anything interesting. I don't want to look at the pictures of Patrick. I wish they had magazines, anything to distract me. The walls are bare of any art or decorations. Maybe it's too hard to pick out paintings that pair nicely with corpses.

Near the sign-in book is a narrow table with the room's only decoration: a pyramid of plastic fruit, painted gold, stacked in a matching bowl. At the top of the pyramid rests a perfectly shaped golden apple.

This is a bad omen. This is how the Trojan War started. The goddess Eris tossed a golden apple through Zeus's gates and said it was "for the fairest." Then the female gods started arguing, turning on one another. Things escalated quickly and didn't stop until the Trojan War. All because of an apple.

Is that where I'm headed? Some big ugly mess because of a little thing like a speech? It already feels like everyone has turned on me.

"Hey, pal, you doing all right?"

Dad. I knew he would check on me.

“Fine.” He hates one-word responses, but I want him to know I’m mad.

“Look, don’t worry about this speech. It’s . . .” He lets out a breath as though it’s a lot of work to find the right word. “It’s just part of the service.” Guess he didn’t find that word.

“K.” Down to one letter.

“It’s just something you need to do. All right? I spoke at Grandpa’s funeral. I talked about how we went fishing. I didn’t want to talk in front of everyone, but I did it for Grandpa.”

“So I’m doing this for Patrick?” I’m breaking my one-word rule for this opportunity to corner him. He’s trying to make me feel better, but he knows just as well as me this isn’t fair.

“Well, yes”— he knows Patrick’s benefit is not a selling point with me —“but also for your aunt and uncle.”

“If you spoke at your father’s funeral, why don’t they speak at their son’s?” I’m pushing. I know it.

“Because it’s going to be hard enough for them tomorrow. It’s going to be hard on everyone. You were his best friend and —”

“Art?” Mom sticks her head out from the hall.

“Could you come to the office? We need to sign some papers.”

I stop staring at the floor and look him in the eye. He knows I would never call my cousin a friend.

“Look, Jimmy. To him, you were his best friend. I know you don’t see that, but you were.” His shoulders turn toward the hall.

“Can you ask Mom if someone else can do it?” This won’t go anywhere, but I want to at least hear the truth. I want someone to admit that no one wants to do it.

“Art?” Mom’s voice commands again.

“Jimmy, please, we need you to do this. I can help you with it later.”

“K.” Back to one-letter responses.

Dad always takes the path of least resistance with Mom, especially when it comes to anything with her sister. I wish he stood up to her more. As he walks down the hall toward her voice, I am confident it won’t happen today. At least he tries to help. A for effort; not so much for results, though.

Just me and the quiet again.

All I can think about is this horrific speech that no one else will do. What am I going to talk about? My speech on *The Iliad* was different. I like talking about

Greek mythology. I pick that topic every time we're given a choice. Something about the all-powerful gods behaving like spoiled children has always appealed to me. But this isn't the same as talking about a book. How long do I have to talk for? Will everyone notice I'm wearing the same suit?

Back to just me and the room — this intentionally plain room. If a furniture store and a dentist's office had a baby, this would be it. Open enough to accommodate a fair number of people, but without rows and structure — and a sense of anxiousness in the air.

The quiet is pierced when the metal handle of the entrance door springs back into position. I'm surprised a place like this has such a loud door. A woman's gruff voice cuts into the silence, followed by the clamor of the door closing itself.

“Good Lord, that's heavy.”

She pauses at the entrance as if she's waiting for someone to greet her. She looks to be my grandma's age and about as pleasant. No clue who she is or whom she's talking to.

I turn back to the walls. She's Marty's problem. Being social and polite isn't in me right now.

All right, time to take advantage of the quiet. Patrick,