

CHAPTER ONE

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd have a story worth telling, at least not one about me. I always knew I was different, but until I discovered I had my own story, I never thought I was anything special. My destiny began to unfurl during my very last game at school. What started with an accident on the court ended with the single most devastating look I ever got from my father. And it made me want to die.

At the game, I'd scored twenty-two points, which already topped my personal best by a basket, and I showed no signs of slowing down. Every time I sank the ball, I could hear a lone deep voice begin to cheer a full second before the rest of the bleachers chimed in. Dad's voice was hoarse from screaming, but I could still tell it was him, because no one else there would bother to remind me to follow my shot or get my hands up for defense.

I ran down to the other end of the court and posted up under the basket, and I caught him out of the corner of my eye. He was sitting in the remote upper lip of the bleachers, in his usual spot, away from everyone else. The crowd was sparse up there, which he said gave more room for a man of his considerable size to spread out, stand every few minutes, and stretch his back. The truth was that the extra room also made it harder to tell that people were uncomfortable sitting close to him.

I was surprised to see a young couple sitting near him that night. The husband would occasionally turn around to agree with my dad on a call or congratulate him when I made a shot. They were probably parents of one of the freshmen on the team. Didn't recognize my father yet.

But I got the feeling they found something about him familiar. Like someone they'd seen on TV, in a movie, a local politician, or someone vaguely famous. They would have recognized him right away if he'd been wearing his mask. My guess is he'd probably saved their lives at some point. Dad always ran into people whose lives he'd saved. I could tell because his left jaw would clench, just a smidge, a bicuspid ground into a molar—a telltale sign that he was either going to be ignored, maligned, or dismissed by someone who was only still breathing by the good graces of my father's actions. He never wanted me to see it, but kids aren't stupid. Even if Dad had ever possessed superpowers, invulnerability wouldn't have protected him from the shame of having people look down on him in front of his own son.

I looked over and saw that Dad had his bad hand in his pocket as usual. I couldn't tell from that far away if he was

grinding his teeth. The minute the new couple would go to shake his hand, they'd figure it out. The hand always got 'em.

Usually the only person who sat alone at the games was Mr. Carrier, whose wife had shown up at a PTA meeting more than once with a black eye. He always tried to strike up a conversation with Dad.

"Hi, Hal, Bill Carrier. We met when we picked the kids up from basketball camp, remember me?"

"Vividly."

Dad wouldn't shake Carrier's hand, no matter how many times he tried to strike up a conversation. And it wasn't because he was uncomfortable with his deformed appendage, either; it was because Mr. Carrier didn't deserve the courtesy after what he'd been doing to his wife. Dad was like that with his convictions, utterly firm, no gray areas.

Dad had a perfect attendance record at all of my sporting events, except for one game four years ago, and that wasn't because he didn't try to make it. He punched out of work at five on the nose, never a second later, when I had a game. That winter he'd been nursing a severe cough, and on that particular day, he finally collapsed in the parking lot after a nasty coughing fit brought on by helping my geometry teacher push her Tercel out of a snowdrift. In the examination room at the hospital, the doctor told us she'd never seen such an acute case of pneumonia where the patient had been ambulatory, much less alive. My dad came the closest he ever had to smiling when he heard that. He tied his hospital gown tightly around his waist, still the trimmest

midsection he knew of for a man his age, and readjusted his shoulders as if he were suiting up to enter battle. He wasn't one to toot his own horn, but you could tell he liked to win, even if it was just against an infection.

He was so dedicated to my games that he even showed up the night he discovered Mom had disappeared for good. He just sat up there in the back corner of the bleachers, same as any other game. He cheered when we were up, he shouted at the ref to get a new pair of glasses when we were down. He waited until after the game to tell me the news.

"Why didn't you say something?" I lowered my voice, careful not to show too much emotion in front of my team.

"No use losing a game over it," he said.

Since I was on such a hot streak this particular night, Dad didn't have a whole lot to say to the ref. Yet despite playing the most spectacular ball of my life, we were about to lose to the Tuckahoe Trojans. Before you laugh at the name, understand that this was the toughest school around. In fact, after some unfortunate postgame assault issues, they'd been banned from the schedule for the past five years. Rumor had it that if they lost a game, they'd break the fingers of the opposing team members, at least whoever they caught. One finger for every point by which they lost. An eye for an eye, a finger for a point.

Needless to say, things were a little rough in the paint that night. I'd been popped in the eye by an elbow during a mad grab for an airball, but I could tell that it wasn't a black eye because it hadn't swollen shut—yet. The jab took me by surprise, first because it hurt like hell, but also because after the guy who threw it popped me, he followed the ball down to the

other end of the court, stopped, stared at me with contempt, and then did the strangest thing.

He winked. Like he was flicking me off with his eyelid.

A little on-court hostility wasn't uncommon. Sometimes it could be a great motivator, help get your juices going. But this was different. Somehow this was personal, and the more I thought about it, I knew I'd seen this guy somewhere before.

He was a good two inches taller than I was—a rare thing, particularly because he was my own age. The summer between fifth and sixth grade I'd had an agonizing growth spurt when I grew over a foot in the span of three months. Dad sat up with me during those long excruciating nights on the stretching block (i.e. my old twin bed). He brought me orange Popsicles and laid cool washcloths on my forehead and played cards with me until the pain passed.

About this time I started having the seizures, too. Although the doctor said there was no connection, you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out the link between shooting up out of your body and losing control of it. Soon I would discover that seizures weren't the only strange things my body could do.

So it was pretty unusual for me to play against someone who was even taller than I was. The guy's shoulders were broader and more worked-out than mine, too, like he took the business of physical training much more seriously than most people our age. The line of his jaw jutted out straight and severe. There were deep pools of dark in his eyes, so you couldn't tell where the pupils ended and the irises began. When you looked in his eyes, you saw a darkness that went on forever to some faraway place, where neither you nor I nor anyone else was welcome to

go. And I got this sense from the way he leaped up for the ball, just a hair above everyone else, that he was deliberately holding back. Like he could have touched the ceiling if he'd wanted to. When he sprinted, his breath was even and controlled, like he was saving it up for something else, something more important.

For all his size, he was faster than everyone else, too. I hadn't seen anyone come even close to him on a fast break. But even though he was the biggest guy on the court, his shoes barely squeaked and he never stomped the wooden planks of the gym floor after a dunk. You'd never hear him if he snuck up behind you.

Anyway, the most remarkable thing about this kid popping me in the face wasn't that he was bigger and stronger than I was. It was remarkable because it was clear he'd hit me on purpose. He wanted me recognize him, to know who'd thrown the elbow. And when he turned back to wink at me, I finally figured out how I knew him.

It was a memory I would have rather forgotten.

Let me backtrack for a second.

Even though I go to what our neighborhood association hails as a good school, I don't live far from the Tuckahoe Trojans. Years before I was born, when Dad had finally scrimped together enough money for a down payment on a house, he took out a map of the county and pinned it to the wall. With color-coded pushpins, he targeted the areas with the best school districts, and researched the cheapest houses in those areas. He came up with a house he could afford: a modest two-bedroom on the outskirts of what was then the toniest new neighborhood in the suburbs. Our home was also known to our snottier neighbors as

“the shittiest house in the whole subdivision.” But Dad isn't one to shy away from a challenge, and from the minute he moved in, he went on a tear of home improvements. A slick paint job on the front of the house, a well-manicured lawn, a new mailbox. I'm not sure what Mom did during this. I expect all she had to do was get pregnant and keep things orderly. Dad's sacrifices and fixing-up didn't really add up to much if you didn't have any children to pass on the Better Life to.

Despite Dad's many attempts to fix up the house, our neighborhood seemed to have its own plan to join the other side of the tracks. Last summer, I chipped the blade of our lawn mower on something hard. I turned off the motor, flipped over the machine, and saw a big chunk of the blade was missing. I emptied the contents of the grass bag and discovered the culprit stuck in a wet clump of crabgrass—a crack pipe.

I showed the crack pipe to Dad.

“There goes the neighborhood,” he said. You could never tell when Dad was joking.

I wasn't driven to action until after the night those idiots broke in. They had to be on large quantities of drugs because they were evidently the only people in the tristate area who didn't know my dad lived there. God knows, if you counted the hate mail we received or how many times the yard was vandalized, you'd think we had my dad's name lit up in neon letters above the front door.

I'd just had knee surgery to repair some torn cartilage, so I was set up on the couch for a few nights because I couldn't make it up the stairs. Dad's car was in the shop again, so there were no cars in the driveway, no evidence of anyone home.

I'd just finished watching an infomercial about a new skin-care product, which, because of the painkillers, I'd found immensely entertaining and curiously emotional. I turned off the TV and let the darkness from the house seep into my head. High on the meds, I practiced my favorite method of drifting off to sleep. I filled my head with thoughts of the future, of infinite possibility. *There's someone out there who will one day find me and fall in love with me and prove that all this waiting actually meant something. . . .*

There was a smile on my face when the back door exploded open. At first I thought the house had been struck by lightning. I bolted upright on the sofa and tried to get my bearings. I looked out the window, but I couldn't see any rain, and the trees weren't moving in the wind, either. Then I heard quick footsteps in chunky boots and hushed, hurried voices. I turned toward the direction of the voices, and in the doorway to the kitchen I saw the silhouette of two men. Very large men.

I thought about reaching for something to defend myself. The best I could come up with was the poker by the fireplace, but that was clear across the room. I froze. It was the most terrified I'd ever been in my life. When they stepped in the room, I saw there weren't two of them, after all. There were four. One of them had already begun to rifle through our hall closet for valuables. Valuable whats, I had no idea. A couple of old umbrellas, some mismatched mittens from when I was little, Dad's favorite old Tarheels hat? At least they hadn't seen me yet in the darkness. I tried to hold my breath and prayed they wouldn't hear me, but my heart was pounding so hard in my chest I thought they'd know I was there by the vibrations.

One of them walked toward me. I was sure he was going to grab me, but he passed right by and began to unplug our TV.

"Cheap bastards don't even have a DVD player," he said to himself.

I let a little air out through my nose and tried to keep myself from shaking. But there was a guy in the doorway who stopped and looked over in my direction.

"Hey, give me the flashlight," he said to the guy in the kitchen.

The guy in the doorway took a few steps in my direction and stopped for a moment. I saw his posture soften in a sign of recognition, and it sent a chill up my spine. His head tilted ever so slightly to the right, and I knew he was beginning to make out the shape of my head poking up from the couch. He took a step closer.

"Shit," another guy said from across the room. He'd found Dad's trophy case, his medals, all his commendations.

The moonlight reflected off an old medal the president had once given Dad for single-handedly fending off an invasion of telepathic starfish-shaped aliens and illuminated a very distinct impression on the thug's face. Panic.

"What is it?" said the guy who was digging for gold in our mud-crusted closet.

"We gotta leave. Now. You know who lives here?" There was an alarmed tone to his voice, but it didn't stop the man in front of me from closing in.

"Shhh, shut the fuck up!" He crept closer toward me. "Listen!" he whispered. "I think someone's *in here*."

They froze and my heart sank. There was just enough moonlight trickling in through the window behind me to cast a glint off the gun in his hand as he raised it toward me.

I bit my lip. I knew he was going to shoot me, and I fought the urge to wet myself. I heard him cock the gun, and then he lunged for the light switch to flip it on. In a millisecond I knew he would see me, and I prayed it wouldn't hurt, that it would be over quickly. In a flash, light flooded the room.

And there was Dad.

He stood upright in the middle of the room, his massive frame positioned directly between the gun and me. As the guy pulled the trigger, my father's foot kicked the gun up into the air. The sound of the gunshot and the flash of light immediately captured everyone's attention. Dad expertly used the element of surprise—one of his trademark tactical maneuvers—coupled with his intimidating physical presence, and leaped into action.

I'd seen old footage of Dad fighting, and no matter who he was up against, there was a majesty to the way he carried himself, even if the odds seemed to be dramatically against him. Didn't matter how many superpowers the villains had. Didn't matter that Dad had none himself. He was like an ancient warrior dressed in chain mail who knew he could take on an entire modern army with nothing but his trusty broadsword.

In the brightness of the room, you could see Dad's posture was tense and ready, but his face was relaxed, almost at peace. His normally wrinkled, eternally worried brow was completely

smooth. I'd only seen it that relaxed after the rare third, maybe fourth beer.

In the time it took for the gun to land in our fireplace, Dad delivered the answer to the question about who lived here. With one decisive gut punch, he took out the guy who'd tried to shoot me. Before the guy in the kitchen had a chance to react, Dad had blinded him with a torn bag of flour from the counter, and proceeded to knock out five of his eight front teeth.

The last guy made a desperate scramble over to the fireplace to grab the gun. He managed to reach it before Dad could stop him. He trained the gun on me and shouted for Dad to stop.

Dad looked up like a lion stalking his prey. He saw the guy threaten me with the pistol. The calm look on his face tightened and his eyes narrowed. He stood up and, with a quick and even pace, marched over to the man with the gun, who by this point actually did wet himself. With his good hand, broad and thick, with callused fingers, Dad took the back of the man's head, like a pro would palm a basketball, and smashed his face through the glass of the trophy case.

After the police had left, Dad replaced the dead bolt on the back door, quietly swept up the broken glass from his trophy case, and poured baking soda on the urine stain in the carpet. It was then that he finally spoke to me.

"I thought for a second, when I first heard something, maybe it was your mother coming home."

I'd had it with my neighborhood; the break-in was the last straw. My dad always said it's one thing to bitch about things

that bother you, but it's another thing entirely to get off your butt and do something about it. If I didn't like what was going on in our neighborhood, I should try to make a difference. I went to the community center, over by Tuckahoe High School, and signed up for a tutor-mentor program. There was some mandatory bullshit training seminar led by a sharp-featured woman named Cindy, who visited the center maybe twice a year from the state education board, and she talked to the volunteers like we were first graders. After I gave them proof from my doctor that I had passed my tuberculosis test, I started going to the Student Life Center every week to tutor.

The first few months were rewarding. I mostly helped kids with their math homework and taught them how to read. A lot of times I read books to the younger students. There was one little girl who never missed an afternoon. Sunita had lived in a series of homes; her mother had left her at the hospital after giving birth prematurely. Sunita's birth weight had been so low that the doctors were certain she wasn't going to live, but she rallied, and other than being a little small for her age, I'm not sure anyone would have known the difference. The director of the Student Life Center, Phyllis, said she didn't think Sunita's brain had developed properly, because she hardly ever spoke.

"Listen, Thom," Phyllis said, "I've raised six kids through that age, and the last thing you could imagine is a single minute of any day without all of them talking, usually at the same time. I'm telling you, something ain't right with that girl."

But when she came to my reading group, she always listened attentively, laughed at all the right parts, and grunted for me to turn the page if I was a little slow on the draw. Personally,

I didn't think she was a slow learner. I think she just didn't have that much to say yet.

When I came in one afternoon for my weekly reading session to the kids, Phyllis informed me that this was an important day for the Student Life Center: Cindy from the State and various other community leaders had come to tour the facility for "a very special visit."

"What for?" I said. "A book burning?" I was only allowed to read from a strict list of state-approved "culturally sensitive" books.

"No, even better," Phyllis said. "Budget cuts."

Phyllis warned me that they might stop by while I read to the kids. Everyone was to be on best behavior, since these visits had a direct impact on their annual operating budget. In my mind, this meant I should take advantage of the opportunity single-handedly to win them their funding for those streetlights in the parking lot they desperately needed to stay open late. So instead of the usual lighthearted reading (*Hop on Pop* and *Green Eggs and Ham* were favorites), I decided to impart a little environmental wisdom, and I grabbed a worn paperback copy of *The Lorax* from the bookshelf above Phyllis's desk. That should impress the visitors.

The tour group had already made themselves at home when I walked in. They stood in the back with attentive, stiff smiles on their faces, and seemed to study my every move as I sat down to read. Cindy from the State popped a lozenge in her mouth. I could hear her sucking on it as I opened the book.

"I am the Lorax and I speak for the trees!"

I think I was trying a little too hard. The kids didn't make

a noise, and I realized this wasn't exactly one of the Doctor's more cheerful books.

Here I had introduced these kids to the rich, colorful world of Dr. Seuss, and in the span of one afternoon, I tore it all down and drove away all the cute, furry creatures. There wasn't a single laugh or giggle in the whole room. You could hear the squeaking sound of sneakers as they pivoted on the basketball court in the gym down the hall. I heard Cindy crunch on her lozenge through her closed mouth. When I finished the last page, which warned the children to take care of their world, I closed the book and asked the group of blank faces, "Well, what did you think?"

Silence filled the room. The group of adults standing in the back craned their necks to examine the kids' reactions.

I imagined the number of kids who returned next week would drop off dramatically, funding would be cut, they'd never get their streetlights. The whole center would eventually be shut down.

I caught Sunita out of the corner of my eye as she rubbed her eyes. Great, I even made one of them cry.

"Sunita, are you okay?" I asked.

She looked up at me with an intense stare, and then the little girl who never spoke opened her mouth.

"THOSE FUCKERS BETTER PUT THOSE TREES BACK WHERE THEY BELONG OR I AM GOING TO FUCKING KILL THEM!"

"Why don't we go see what's happening in the pottery class." Phyllis hurried the visitors out of the room. As the tour left, I saw Cindy's mouth was still open.

The next week they asked me if perhaps I'd be happier working with some of the older students. As Phyllis rushed off to round up some troubled students for me to tutor, I checked her shelf for some books to have them read out loud. Nothing jumped out at me. Picture books were too juvenile, and Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Fitzgerald weren't exactly going to score any points for relevance with this crowd. I knelt down and opened the lowest drawer of her desk and dug deep for some workbooks.

"What are you doing in there?"

I jumped and hit my head on the desk. I turned around and saw one of my new students, about my age, standing behind me.

"You scared me." I shut the file cabinet.

"What are you doing in there?"

He had a thick accent, so his family must have only moved here recently. One of the many English-as-a-second-language students who came to the center to learn English. He sounded just like Ismeta, the cleaning lady at school who'd once talked to our class about her experiences as a Bosnian refugee. I always felt bad for the ESL students. I couldn't imagine what I'd do if I had to take chemistry in Bratislava, or learn high-school French in Pakistan. Maybe I could start with the Dr. Seuss after all, I considered. I picked up *Hop on Pop*, and he eyed me suspiciously.

"Oh, I was just looking for something for us to read tonight," I said, slowly enunciating each word. "Do you like books?"

He stared at me. He didn't blink.

"See, that's the great thing about learning English. You get

to read some cool books and stuff, so it's not all about boring homework."

He still didn't blink. "Books and stuff?" He repeated the words like he was spitting out poison.

"Yeah," I said. "It's pretty fun when you get into it. Reading and all."

Phyllis hurried back in the room. She hadn't yet noticed the toilet paper on the back of her shoe.

"I see you've met Goran," she said.

"Yes." I smiled. "I have the feeling he's going to pick up English in no time."

Phyllis looked at Goran to see if I was serious and then looked back at me.

"Thom, Goran founded the literacy program for the older kids here two years ago. I asked him to show you the ropes tonight," she said. She leaned in to me and continued, "You should take a look at Goran's poetry if you get a chance. *Harper's* published one of his poems last month."

Goran, arms folded, stared at me with contempt.

Sometimes I am the world's biggest loser.

"Goran, this is Thom, one of our new volunteers." Then she added with a lower, hushed tone, "Keep him away from the Dr. Seuss."

I couldn't bring myself to make eye contact with him when I stood up to shake his hand. He was a full two inches taller than I was.

He shook my hand hard and slow. Hard enough to send a message about his strength, and slow enough to tell me that the handshake—like any other future interaction of ours—would

begin and end on his terms. I managed to make brief eye contact and then he let go.

Goran's utter lack of expression made me think he was going to hit me.

He opened his mouth to say something, but stopped short of any words. Instead, he turned and walked down the hall, long determined strides, and I struggled to keep up with him.

After he introduced me to my new students that night, I never saw him again. Phyllis said he'd switched nights because he'd recently taken a full-time job, in addition to his regular schooling and extracurricular activities.

"He supports his family, you know," Phyllis whispered, like it was a secret.

I could barely imagine supporting myself, much less an entire family. I'd bitched ad nauseam when I had to pick up work as a stock boy last Christmas. Lifeguarding each summer at the pool hadn't exactly been a real career motivator or moneymaker, either.

"What does he do?" I asked.

"Security," she said. "He's a night watchman."

I always wanted to run into him again and tell him I was sorry. That I was an idiot and I wasn't thinking when I met him, and I'm not usually like that. Maybe we'd even have a laugh about it—stranger things have happened. But I never saw him again.

Until he popped me in the eye during the basketball game and stole the ball from me.

"Foul!" my dad shouted from the stands. "Are you blind?! Foul!"

I sped down the court, my eye stinging from the sweat that trickled in the welt left by Goran. He pulled up at the top of the key and sunk a three-pointer, which put his team ahead. By the time I got back under the basket, the elbows were flying on both sides. It wasn't out of loyalty to me, either. I'd grown used to the fact that my father's disgrace had isolated me from most of my childhood friends. By high school I'd learned it was easier not to make friends in the first place than to lose them after they found out about my dad. But even if my team didn't care much about me personally, they didn't like someone else getting away with a cheap shot against them. And they certainly didn't like the idea of losing.

I'm guessing that's why Clayton Camp, our Harvard-bound power forward—who graced us with his presence on the basketball court only because it kept him in shape for another All-American lacrosse season—lashed out. I'd just missed a layup, a real confidence builder during such a tight game, and the rebound had bounced in Clayton's direction. Clayton had already slightly bent his knees and lined up his three-point shot, but the ball never reached his fingertips. Goran intercepted the ball with impossible speed. Frustrated and humiliated, Clayton turned around and kicked the back of Goran's heel as hard as he could.

No one at the game that night would ever see a more flagrant foul in his lifetime. Not even the ones who would go on to play ball in prison. As Goran tripped, the momentum from his sprint propelled his massive frame through the air parallel to the floor. He landed on his leg and knee with an eerie crunch and tumbled into the bleachers.

The Tuckahoe Trojans cleared the bench.

Clayton got the worst of it. The Trojans' point guard, a little guy who looked like Gary Coleman on steroids, led the charge. I saw Clayton disappear under a pile of Trojans as they pummeled him. It took almost every adult in the gym to pull the kids off each other and restore order.

Meanwhile, I looked over at Goran, who was doing his best to hide an expression—excruciating agony. He was crouched in a fetal position clutching his knee. He heaved deep, labored breaths through clenched teeth, but he was determined not to cry. If an accident this painful didn't make him cry like a baby, I figured the guy didn't have tear ducts or nerves or something, because when I looked down at the injury, I saw bone.

A portion of his tibia had poked its head out of the skin under his knee. The crowd had cleared away to give him plenty of breathing room. A few kids were yelling and pointing. Most of the parents couldn't even look. One of the mothers—his?—was screaming to call an ambulance. The trainer was one of the only people who hadn't turned away, but he was next to useless. Other than giving Goran a few towels to wipe up the gore, he was practically as helpless as the rest of them. He could tape a sprain, sure, but a mangled leg was a little out of his depth.

I can't explain why I did what I did next. I guess I was thinking about Goran and his full-time job and how he would support his family if he lost his leg. I guess I was thinking how his eyes, still deeply guarded, still opaque, didn't betray the weakness of the rest of his body. I was propelled by a force deep within me that I didn't understand. I knelt down beside him.

"Let me see," I said.

He couldn't speak, he was so racked with pain. I reached out my hand. He looked at me, startled and curious. I hesitated for a moment. Then I grabbed his leg firmly by the ankle.

"Don't touch it!" The trainer winced.

Goran eyes locked on mine. I held on to his ankle and my hands began to move up his leg. I reached the wound and covered it with my palms, bone and bloody bits and all.

His eyes never lowered their gaze.

My hands suddenly felt scalding hot, and all I wanted to do was pull them away and stick them in a pile of snow, but I held on for as long as I could. I felt dizzy, and my eyelids grew heavy. Something was guiding my hands, something I couldn't see or understand, like a Ouija board that actually works.

Finally the whistle blew, and the ref asked us all to return to our respective benches. An ambulance had arrived, and I saw two technicians wheeling out a stretcher for Goran. His breathing had finally relaxed, his face suddenly expressionless again.

He never broke eye contact with me, even when I turned around to head back to the bench with the rest of my team. Bewildered at my own actions, I stopped to catch my breath and spotted my father carefully observing me from the bleachers. He had a peculiar look on his face and held up his hands and pointed them at me. I looked at my hands and saw that I had blood on my palms. Not as much as you'd expect, but blood nevertheless. I saw the new parents notice my Dad standing with both hands out of his pockets. I wiped the blood off on my jersey and crouched down to huddle with the rest of my team.

Clayton earned his first ejection from a game, and after the Trojans sank two free throws from the technical foul, we

resumed play. We were losing only by a narrow five-point margin, but I didn't really give a shit about winning anymore.

That is, until that little punk-ass Gary Coleman look-alike clipped me as he drove for the basket. I didn't bother to foul him—if he wanted to score that bad, he could knock himself out, as far as I was concerned. But it was what he said after he clipped me that made all the difference.

After the ball went through the hoop, he looked at me with a prune face and said, "Faggot."

That made me want to win more than I've ever wanted to win any game in my life. I glared at the scoreboard and wiped the crusted saliva from the corners of my mouth. Only two minutes left. I sped past him to the basket. I got the ball at the top of the paint and fake-pumped a pass in his face before driving to the basket for another two.

We stayed down under the basket for a full-court press, man-to-man. Sticking on a single opposing player, shadowing his every move, is the most exhausting form of defense there is. You can't keep it up for more than a few minutes without dropping, but adrenaline fueled me. I wasn't going to let their center get the ball under any circumstance. My arms stretched into the air, blocking any clear path from the ball to his hands. My feet bounced and danced around him. Wherever he went, I was there. The Gary Coleman point guard had trouble getting past midcourt with our press, so with no other option, he lobbed it to their center. I leaped up in the air and snatched it.

I could have passed it off to anyone else on my team; they were all closer to the basket than I was. But I broke into a sprint and took it myself at full speed the entire length of the court,

right past Gary Coleman to the basket for an easy layup. I smacked my palm against the glass backboard for emphasis, and the sound echoed throughout the gym. I looked in the stands and saw my father jumping and shouting for me, and the cacophony of the crowd drowned out his voice. I saw that my hand had left a plum-colored smear on the backboard, a combination of my sweat and Goran's blood.

Then my finger began to twitch. This may seem like a pretty harmless detail, nothing more than a little side effect of all that adrenaline and testosterone, or maybe I'd smacked the glass too hard, but for me it's one of the worst things that can happen. The twitching only *starts* with the finger. It rarely stops there.

Suddenly I started to feel like I was hearing things under water, like I was walking through Jell-O. My tongue secreted a metallic, acrid taste, as if I were sucking on a rusty nail, or drinking water from a tin bucket. I swallowed and tried to ignore it, but the warning signs were always the same.

The spotlights hanging from the rafters cast a halo around everything. Then the world around me grew dim. It reminded me of looking through an old View-Master, and the dark outlines around the edge of the picture slowly grew and grew until the entire picture became dark, too.

I put my hands on my knees and heaved and huffed as I tried to catch my breath.

"Cosmic Boy . . . Lightning Lad . . . Chemical King . . ."

On rare occasions, I'd been able to stave off the seizure if I caught it early. I practiced some good old-fashioned rhythmic breathing I'd learned in swim class, and I recited to myself the roster of *The Legion of Superheroes*, my favorite comic book when

I was a kid. Back before Dad banned all superhero comics from our house, back before the books detailing my father's adventures had been canceled, all old issues removed from the shelves and discarded. This was how I struggled to regain my composure, to ward off the full throes of the seizure.

". . . Invisible Kid . . . Colossal Boy . . . Phantom Girl . . . Element Lad . . ."

The world began to tilt, and I felt like I was about to spin off into orbit. Like you felt as a kid when you were rolling down a hill, only this hill had no end. I struggled to hold all my atoms together as the world around me grew dark. My feet became numb, and the twitching had traveled up my arm to the side of my face.

Even as far away as he was, my father saw the right side of my mouth quiver. He pushed past the young couple new to town, his ruined hand planted on the wife's shoulder for balance, and jumped over the side of the bleacher to rush to me.

I closed my eyes and took three more quick, sharp breaths.

"Saturn Girl . . . Shadow Lass . . . Ultra Boy . . ."

I looked up, and my vision returned in time to see the basketball sailing for my head. I reached out and grabbed it with my twitching hand. I struggled to hold on to the ball. My fingers sputtered and spasmed like they'd been plugged into a light socket.

The world stopped. I could hear bits of conversations echo off the cinder block walls. The paramedics argued over where to put the dressing on Goran's leg. They could no longer find the spot where the bone had punctured the skin.

My dad raced toward me. I saw there were three seconds

left on the clock. I heard my team, the coach, the stands yell, "Shoot it!"

“. . . Chameleon Boy, Dream Girl, WILDFIRE!”

I bit my lip to stop it from shaking, and with all the energy I could muster I jumped into the air and pushed the ball forward. The basketball quelled the twitching as it rolled off my fingertips. The ball sailed through the air at an impossibly low angle. It hit the backboard—loud and hard—and bricked straight back through the hoop with a graceful swish.

The crowd erupted with cheers. The buzzer sounded the end of the game, and I stood there looking at the scoreboard in disbelief. I saw my dad standing in front of me on the court.

"You okay?" he mouthed over the din of the crowd, a skeptical look on his face.

I nodded, and then my teammates pounced on me. My dad took a step back behind the bleachers, and my team picked me up in the air. As I rode on top of sweaty, eager hands, I watched the paramedics wheel Goran out the door, around the side of the gym. It was hard to tell, jostled around up in the air like that, but I could have sworn I saw that same expressionless stare fixed on me as he disappeared around the corner.

Later, fresh and showered, we met our parents in front of the gym. I pushed open the door and savored the moist promise of spring in the evening air. The sun was setting later and later each day, summer would be here soon, and everything would be okay. I rubbed my hand through my wet hair and spotted Dad waiting under the streetlight in the far corner of their parking lot.

The New Parents sidestepped my father to get to their

parking space. I saw the mother lean over and whisper a private word with her husband as she pointed at my dad, a sharp look on her face. Dad put his bad hand in his pocket and jingled his keys. This was the gesture he made whenever he pretended not to notice.

"Good game, kiddo. You really took it to those knuckleheads," my dad congratulated me.

My teammates surrounded me, with some of their parents. The coach even shook my father's good hand.

"Quite a kid you got there, Hal," he said. "Listen, I'm taking the boys out for pizza, before they go off and do what boys do after they win a game like this. Why don't you come along?"

I must have really been a hero that night, because it was the first time anyone at school had invited my dad anywhere.

Before he could answer, a sonic boom roared through the air and threatened to burst our eardrums. We all looked up into the sky at the source of the thundering noise. A group of objects flew across the stratosphere in a perfect pattern.

To no one's surprise, it was a flying formation of people, not jets. It was the League. I spotted Uberman's cape. I always looked for his bright yellow cape first; it stood out best compared to the other heroes in the sky.

"Wonder who they're off to save tonight?" my coach said.

The entire parking lot of spectators craned our necks and watched the colorful saviors streak across the sky. I watched the wonder light across everyone's face, and then I caught my dad looking down at a crack in the pavement. He jingled the keys in his pocket.

After the heroes had disappeared into the horizon, Dad looked up and saw the New Parents standing in front of him.

“I thought it was you,” she said, eyeing the mangled hand in his pocket.

He knew what usually came next, but he didn’t betray a hint of shame. It was bad enough that it would happen in front of his son. Dad stood his ground.

The mother raised her hand and smacked him on the side of his face with all her might. You could hear the slap echo off the brick gymnasium wall. It made my whole team turn around.

“My *father* worked in the Wilson Tower,” she hissed, her face streaked with tears. Her husband quickly pulled her away and moved her to their car.

“We’ll catch up with you at the restaurant,” I told my coach and team. I always tried to cover up the awkward silence that ensued after these encounters. I walked over to Dad. I knew everyone was watching. The sound of the slap still rang in my ears.

“Throw me the keys, Dad,” I said, like nothing had just happened. “My turn to drive.”

I could never have predicted what would happen next. I was too busy trying to save my father’s dignity.

The Trojans sauntered past us toward their bus. The Gary Coleman point guard pointed at me and announced to his buddy, in the three seconds it took for him to pass us, something that changed everything.

“Oh, that’s the gay guy.”

He didn’t say it with venom. He didn’t need to. He said it loud enough so we could hear it, like it was just so obvious. You

don’t make an *accusation* that the sky is blue; it’s simply a matter of fact. The coach’s smile dropped, my teammates looked uncomfortably in other directions and tried to pretend they didn’t hear what they all had obviously heard.

My father stared forward, a fixed expression on his face. I think he was afraid to look at me. Afraid of what his look would do to me. I heard the keys jingle against the change in his pocket again.

“See you guys later.” My voice wavered on the word “later.” The slight rattle in my voice betrayed me. It was a sign of shaken confidence, proof that what that little punk said was true.

I saw Dad’s eyes widen just a fraction when he heard my voice catch. He glanced at me but quickly turned away. He didn’t want me to see his reaction, but I did, and I’ll never forget it. In that brief glimpse, I could see what he was thinking behind that fixed stare. There would be no grandkids, there would be no more Creed family bloodline, nothing else to look forward to. From that point on I’d become the last, most devastating disappointment in what he thought his life had added up to—one overwhelming failure.

I looked over to him, a little boy just wanting his dad to look back on him with approval. I wanted him to make some joke about what a loser that other kid was, about how I’d really kicked ass tonight, about how he’d never seen a high score like that. I wanted him to muss my hair and take me home and pop some popcorn so we could stay up late and watch *Saturday Night Live*. I wanted him to tell me everything would be okay.

“We should get going,” Dad said, and shook hands with

the coach. He couldn't bring himself to look at me. I felt a tiny spasm in my pinky finger as a tremor slowly rippled up my hand.

I howled and spun, and the last thing I remember was wetting myself before my head hit the pavement.