

CHAPTER

ONE

You won't believe it. I wouldn't either, except it happened to me. That's so wrong. It happened to him—and to me, too, since I've gotta live with it. And so far, not so good. But I need to loosen the knot in my stomach. And someone needs to know things can't be erased, even if you could live one day twice.

I keep telling myself I made things better. But they're not better enough and I feel like I'm gonna puke—or like I already puked and now I should cry, but it won't come out. I'm so tired, but I can't sleep. I'm worried who might show up in my dreams.

The sound of footsteps out in the hall scatters the images of my nightmare. The metal door groans and opens with a short, thick policeman attached, bull neck and buzzed hair. His face is wider at the jaw than the temples. Bad shave.

The radio is on out there. "We have got to find some way to protect kids from the prevailing popular culture."

Another media talking-head sounding like he knows something. Like the whole thing happened just to give him something to talk about between commercials.

The cop lets a guy into the little room. He steps toward the table, then turns back, like maybe he doesn't really feel like being here.

"Thanks, Officer," the guy exhales to no one because the cop's already swinging the door closed, silencing radiohead.

It's like I'm seeing without watching. He's wearing a brown suit. Jacket's all rumpled like he's been sitting on it for days. Doesn't fit across his gut. His tie is crooked. Not enough hair is plastered across his white, shiny head. And what there is looks greasy. He sits down across from me and puts a ragged yellow notepad on the metal table. He leans his forearms on the edge, and pushes up his glasses at the middle with one finger.

His nametag says "**SAM GURTON, PUBLIC DEFENDER.**"

"Hello, Reginald. I'm Sam Gurton, your—," he swallows.

"Public defender," we say in unison.

He squints one eye at me, not sure how I knew. Sticks out his hand, but not like he really means it, extending and holding back at the same time. Looks clammy. Nails bitten down jagged, cuticles frayed. Dead fish with horse teeth. Are mine that gross? His hand hangs there too long, and then shrinks back. He balls it up and wraps his other hand around it, shielding it from the exposure and rejection. He smells like days-old cigarettes.

"Does that mean you're my lawyer?"

"You're under suspicion, so they assigned me to your case."

“But you’re not into it.”

“I’ll do my best for you—that is, if you want me. You don’t *have* to have me as your lawyer.”

“Whatever.”

“Have you spoken with your parents?” Spit sprays on the “p”, but misses me. He glances at me, then down. Finding some droplets on the table, he wipes at them.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Do you want to?”

“I guess. They aren’t going to like how this looks.”

He nods, “I haven’t spoken with them, but the police have called them.”

I shrug.

“How old are you, Reginald?”

“Almost sixteen.”

“Almost?”

“Next month.”

He jots it down on his pad.

“Tell me what happened when they arrested you.”

“They cuffed me. Made sure I didn’t hit my head getting in the car. Brought me here.” The cuffs had killed my wrists, but I’m not telling him. I didn’t care anyway.

“Did they search you?”

“They patted me down at school. Took everything out of my pockets.”

“They ask you any questions?”

“A few.”

“Like what?”

“How to reach my parents. Did I know Lance was going to do this. Did I give him the guns.”

“Anything else?”

I shrug.

“They read you your rights?”

“Yeah. Right after ‘Suspicion of conspiracy to commit murder at school.’”

“Okay, good.”

“Good? You kidding?”

“Don’t talk to anybody. I’ll come back later. Tell me about it then, and everything you say will be privileged. You know what that means?”

“Kind of.”

“It means that I can’t, and won’t, tell anybody anything you tell me. And no one can make me tell.”

No way this guy’s ready for what I’ve got to tell.

“What about the mirror?” I look over to the large mirror on the wall to my right. “That’s probably not there so we can look good.”

“You’re right, it’s for observation, but they can’t hear us.”

“You sure there’s not some hidden microphone?”

“There is, but they won’t have it on.”

“Right.”

“Would you rather meet in a different room?”

“Whatever.”

He pushes against the gray metal table with both hands to scoot his chair out. Only the chair doesn’t move. The table moves, instead, stopping against my ribs. His mouth twitches, like he’s thinking, “It figures.” He hoists himself, walks to the door and knocks a couple of times.

The door opens.

“See you later,” he says and plods out.

The radio spews, “desensitized by explicit violence, portrayed with ever more realistic graphics.”

The door closes on Gurton and radiohead.

So, I'm in trouble. But I didn't do anything. And I'm not crazy. At least I wasn't. Now I don't care. Except I want to live today again. Twice was not enough. I need another shot at it. Sorry, bad choice of words.

Here's a better choice *Truth*. I'm gonna be honest with you about everything. Not everyday honest with things worked 'til you can face them. Not what-I-think-you-want-to-hear honest with things molded to fit a mask. And not I'm-setting-myself-up-for-what-I-want honest like Lance was always doing. Just straight and real. I'm not used to it. Probably you're not either. But I don't care anymore. I'm used up. I've got no shape. Nothing left to preserve. So here's what's true.

I don't even remember meeting him. He was just always there. The news guys call him Lance Henry Cummins, like he's so important he needs three names, or he's so toxic we need his full name to avoid contamination. "Lance-No-Chance" they used to call him.

We moved into our house when I was five. My memories of our neighborhood under construction are like black and white stills. Piles of dirt. A tractor. A lonely old farmer in coveralls. Seemed like he was from the past, like he didn't belong anywhere. It was probably his farm that was being scraped away to spread more suburbia. Maybe he sold it along with his way of life. Or maybe someone else had owned it, and he was being moved aside, obsolete, a living fossil, but significant to no one. I don't remember his face, what else he was wearing, or anything he said. Only that he had this sadness about him. I've never felt right about moving onto his lifelace. I wonder if my parents even remember him.

So Lance lived around the corner and he's just there in my memories. Like the big tree out front.

You know when you're little, how you somehow just know kids and it's not complicated. Some are smart, some are mean, some are tough, some are nice. You sense it. Some you can trust. Some you can trust until something better comes along. That's Lance—sharp edged, sharp tongued, out for himself. He could be cunning or intimidating, pushy or patient. Whatever it took. And the truth was always his putty. As long as he got what he wanted, he didn't care.

Lance didn't throw his weight around for the fun of it, like some bully. Maybe he would have if he'd had some weight to throw around. But he was real skinny, and he was missing something on one side of his chest—the left side. Like there was no muscle there, so that side was sunken. He was so wiry, though, even the right side was a little hollow. Anyway, Lance was okay to be around sometimes when nothing else was going on, as long as you were doing things his way. And you had to watch out, 'cause you could never trust him.

The door groans again. This time it swings the officer into the room. His shirt buttons are under major stress from his spread.

“Get up, son. Come with me. Back to your holding room.”

Nice name for a cell.

“And hustle. After what you've done—don't push your luck.”

“I didn't do anything.”

“You'll keep your mouth shut, if you know what's good for you.”

I nod my head, keeping in mind what's good for me.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"You said something. I heard you."

"I didn't say anything."

"You'd better keep your mouth shut."

I nod.

"What'd you say?"

"I can't answer you *and* keep my mouth shut."

"Don't backtalk me."

The radio guy talks as we walk down the hallway. "My next guest is Dr. Glenda Chapin, author of a new book called *Divorce Can Improve Your Marriage*. Welcome."

"Thanks for having me on, Dave."

The genius cop escorts me into the holding room with a little shove between the shoulder blades. He closes the barred door. I sit on the metal cot that's bolted to the wall.

"Now, Glenda, my divorce was clearly more fun than my marriage." Radiohead laughs. "But divorce ends it all. How can it possibly improve something it terminates?"

"The next one, Dave. Divorce helps the next marriage."

"I see. Having failed once makes you an expert on how to succeed?"

"Oh, I've got more experience than that, Dave. I've been divorced four times."

"So you really are an expert."

I'd do anything to change it. The best I can do is to drown it out. Or distract and divert. That's what my mother would do. Nothing head on, no confrontation, no straight talk. But the longer things go unsaid, the heavier they become. I know, because I'm so quiet, everything is heavy. No, that's a truth molded to my mask. I'm not just

quiet. I'm timid and crippled by it. I've been trying to hide that for so long, saying it feels like spitting out something live and watching it wriggle. People used to say, "When are you going to come out of your shell, Reginald?" These, you might guess, were really sensitive people and enormously insightful. Not very helpful, though, since I didn't know what they were talking about. I was just inside myself. They don't say it much anymore. I guess they've given up. Or maybe it's 'cause I'm older now. Like they're free to say those things when you're younger, emotionally and verbally defenseless. Or maybe I hide it better now. I don't know. But it's easier to ignore when nothing's said. Like my scam is working, and I don't want to break the spell.

The cop comes back. Sweat drips down his sideburns and fills the crease of his double chin.

"Come on, you're wanted in the soft room."

"What?"

"It's a different conference room."

Weird name for an interrogation room.

"What for?"

"Your parents are here."

"Glenda," the radio guy says, "we have a few seconds left before the break. Tell our listeners the secret of marital bliss."

"Well, Dave, that's why they need my book." She laughs. "But really, the key is being selfish, because if you're not selfish, you will begin to resent your spouse. If your spouse isn't selfish, you'll never be sure where he or she is coming from."

"Isn't that contrary to the wisdom of thousands of years that a spouse should be generous, even selfless? You know, devoted."

“That’s the great mistake, Dave. I’ve spent a lot of time re-examining the so-called wisdom of the ages, and I’ve come up with something better. You’ve got to commit to being selfish. There’s just no substitute for it and my book tells you how to do it in every situation.”

“Well, I guess nothing is constant but change,” radio-head passes off another load of bull.

Through the doorway into the soft room, my parents and Defender Gurton are waiting, all standing. The cop closes the door. Finally, the radio guy and Dr. what’s-her-name are shut up.

Nobody moves.

Gurton steps up. “Mr. and Mrs. Poppel, I’ll leave you with your son for a few minutes, but please be careful what you talk about. Conversations between parent and child are not privileged and I haven’t even had a chance to interview Reggie yet.”

“Not privileged?” My father’s face contracts.

“Let me explain.” Gurton cinches up his trousers. “A privileged conversation, like one with your lawyer or your wife, can be kept confidential even against a subpoena. It encourages open, frank discussion between lawyer and client and between spouses, without fear the State can use it against you.”

“And you’re saying our talks with Reggie aren’t privileged?”

“That’s right, Mr. Poppel.” His eyebrows rise like he asked a question.

“Open, frank discussions between a parent and child are discouraged?”

“Well—yes, in a manner of speaking.”

“Great. If you will leave us alone for a few minutes, Mr. Gurton, we’ll try to avoid anything open or frank.”

Gurton bunches his lips and swallows. “Okay, Mr. Poppel.” He knocks on the door, then turns back. “Sorry, Mr. Poppel.” He clears his throat. “I didn’t create the system.”

The door swings open and Gurton leaves.

There’s no mirror in this room. And there’s a couch. The table is flush in the corner. Not set up for across-table confrontation. So this is soft.

“What in the heck happened, Reggie?”

“I didn’t do anything, Dad, except try to stop Lance. He went off pretty bad.”

“Who’s this Lance?” Dad asks.

“You know, Lance, from the neighborhood,” I say.

“I guess. He’s the one who did this?” Dad’s angry.

“I always knew there was something wrong about that boy,” Mom says. But she probably never said it out loud.

“Anyway, I tried to stop him. Now the police suspect me.”

“Oh, Reggie.” Mom bunches a tissue to dab at her tears. “You didn’t do anything wrong, right?”

“Well, I did a pretty bad job of stopping Lance. But I wasn’t in on it at all. I didn’t even know he was planning it.”

“Thank goodness.” Dad wipes his mouth with his palm. “But do you know how this will look to people?”

“I can’t help that, Dad. I had to try and stop him. I didn’t think how it would look to people.”

That’s not the real truth. I did think about what people would think. Otherwise maybe I wouldn’t have screwed up so bad.

“You didn’t know this Lance guy was planning this?”

Dad always doubts me.

“No, Dad.” I look down. I fixate for a moment on a jagged crack in the concrete floor. A tiny ant seeks to navigate the chasm, but it’s too wide. “Not ’til it happened. Not at first.”

Mom starts to cry again. The tissue works side to side.

Dad groans. “Why does everything always happen to me?” He clears his throat.

Mom stops crying to give him a look.

“What?” Dad’s defensive. “I said why does everything seem to happen to *us*? Why couldn’t you have stayed out of it?”

“I did, at first, and a lot more people got killed.”

“You’re not making sense,” Dad says. “You in shock or something?”

“I’m clearer than I’ve ever been, Dad, but if you want to hear more, we’ll have to get into the open and frank stuff.”

Mom lifts her face from her tissue, dabbing suspended. “John, let’s get Mr. Gurton back.” She stands.

My father pounds on the door with the fleshy side of his fist.

I look for the ant. Somehow he’s made it over the divide.

When the door opens, Gurton trudges in.

My father is ready to blast him. Forehead stretched. Lips tight. Jaw clenched. Then he erupts. “This is outrageous. My son had nothing to do with this. They’ve got to let him go immediately. They’ll regret it if our name is dragged through the mud on this. Reggie is so stressed out he’s beginning to talk nonsense and he’s not acting right. He doesn’t need to be in jail, he needs one of those grief counselors.”

Mom snuffles. “Everything’ll be all right as soon as we get this misunderstanding straightened out.” Dabbing resumes.

“I want you to tell the police, the D.A., or whoever, they’d better let our son go immediately or there will be trouble. We’ve got rights.” Dad’s face is red.

“I’ll do my best, Mr. Poppel. Why don’t you go home and try to relax and I’ll call you after Reggie and I have talked.”

“Relax? My business is too sensitive for that. My clients will go elsewhere at the drop of a hat. If you can’t get Reggie out of here, I’ll find a lawyer who can.”

“I’ll do my best, Mr. Poppel, but you should find another lawyer if that’s what you want. In the meantime, I’ll call you after Reggie and I have talked.”

This time, Mom comes to give me a hug. I stand up. She cries quietly with her cheek on my shoulder.

Dad’s feeling big. He nods at Gurton, then slaps me on the shoulder. “Hang in there, son.”

They leave me with Defender Gurton.

“All right, Reggie—by the way, may I call you Reggie?”

“Most people do.”

Actually, my friends call me Rego. You say it like, “we go.” It’s better than Reggie. But I’m not telling him that.

“Sit down, Reggie. Make yourself comfortable.”

Is he kidding? The couch is gross. I sit at the table. So does he.

“Okay, Reggie, tell me about this whole thing.”

“I was not in on it. What else do you want to know?”

“You weren’t involved?”

“No, except by being too lame to stop Lance.”

“So you knew this boy was going to do it?”

“Not the first time. I mean he said stuff about doing it, but I didn’t believe him. The second time I knew.”

“Whoa, wait just a minute. Nobody told me anything about a first time or second time. What happened the first time?”

“Lance had guns and bombs. He killed 14 kids, four teachers, and one custodian.”

“I’ve never heard of that. When did that happen?”

“Yesterday. Well, actually it was today, the first time.”

“You mean today was the *second* time.”

“Yeah, the second time was today, too.”

“Too?”

“Both times were today. I didn’t stop him the first time. Then I got a second chance. And I tried to stop him. That’s why I’m here.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re telling me that today, the first time, Lance killed 19 people and you had nothing to do with it? Is that right, so far?”

“Yes.”

“Then you had a second chance and you knew about it and tried to stop him?”

“Right.”

“And because you knew about it, they suspect you might have been in on it?”

“I guess.”

“Does anyone else know about the first time?”

“Only Lance. And the guy who set up the time travel.”

“Time travel?”

“Yeah. I went back in time one day.”

Gurton nods. “Time travel. Like in the movies.”

“Yeah, except this was real, through a wormhole.”

“Do you use drugs, Reggie?” He looks me square in the eyes.

I look straight back. “No. Never.”

“Reggie, I think you may be suffering some sort of severe stress reaction. Have you ever had any psychiatric treatment in the past?”

“No.”

“Like counseling, medication, hospitalization?”

“No. Nothing.”

“One more thing, Reggie.”

“What?”

“How do you feel?”

“Wasted. Depressed. Sick. But clear.”

“Have you been thinking about hurting yourself?”

“Hurting myself? You mean suicide?”

“Yes.”

“Not that much.”

“I’m going to talk to the judge about getting a doctor to see you. You’ll be okay?”

“I’m not crazy.”

“Of course not, and crazy isn’t even a clinical word. You’ve just been through a very stressful experience and you’re probably having a severe traumatic reaction.”

“Everything I’ve told you is true.”

“I’m sure it seems that way.”

“No, it *is* that way.”

“Okay, Reggie, okay. Take it easy. We’ll work it all out.”

Defender Gurton hikes up his pants and knocks on the door. In moments he’s gone, thinking I’m totally nuts. Am I?

The truth has its costs.