

Her hair was pressed against her face, clinging to the tears that streamed down her cheeks. Instinctively, I was about ready to run across the room, grab her by her shoulders, and ask her why she was crying. I knew, however, that asking her why the brown hair that framed her face even had tears to cling to in the first place was pointless.

“Why do you think she’s crying?” Tim asks me. I shrug my shoulders. I have an inkling that she didn’t do all that well on her math test, one I promised her weeks ago that I’d help her study for. I broke that promise, despite my hatred for people that break promises.

“Beyond me,” I lie, not taking my eyes off her. I really wish I hadn’t broken my promise to Merrick, because now a wave—no, a tsunami of guilt has just washed over me. I could be the reason she has to retake a semester of Geometry, and I’m not sure I could live with that burden.

“Well, ask her,” Tim urges. I feel my eyes widen, an involuntary reaction to such an idea. I quickly begin to shake my head back and forth, glancing across the hall at where she stood, her back against her locker and her eyes shut tightly, like she was trying to stop the flow of the tears.

“Why me?” I ask, frowning at Tim. Tim was a boy that I frowned at more than once a day. He often said things that made you feel unsafe to be around him, but with his long, thin limbs, you could never really take him seriously. He was also very often wrong, which contradicted his smart appearance; he was always in a button-down shirt and a pair of glasses.

“Because she’s *your* best friend, Ezra,” Tim says matter-of-factly. I want to tell him that, no, Merrick isn’t my best friend, not anymore, anyway. We were pretty much raised together, friends since almost birth. However, I may have just ruined all of it, with one very important promise, broken.

Tim looks at me expectantly, and I think that maybe I should tell him about our fight, but I don’t. I stay quiet, and I sit there, and let him judge me. He probably thinks that I’m mean, or that I just don’t care, but I don’t see how I can go up to her and ask her what’s wrong, when it’s probably my fault.

“I have to go,” I tell him. That’s a complete lie, because I have just as much a place to go as he does. I don’t have a bus to catch or a carpool to run and join. I grab my

bag, nonetheless, and quickly walk away and out of his view. He doesn't try to stop me, which probably shouldn't make my chest pound with sadness, but does anyway. I can't breathe, and my heartbeat starts to pick up. Watching Merrick cry gave my heart an audible reaction.

The guilt was almost unbearable. I felt like there were thousands of eyes, watching me as I walked, all angry with me. There was a little voice inside my head, yelling for me to go back, to talk to Merrick, to apologize. I thought I might pass out; there was so much going on inside my head at once. I was overwhelmed, and I felt trapped in a box that just kept getting smaller and smaller.

Once I'm outside, I feel like I can breathe again, and I suck in breaths like I was drowning or being suffocated. Slowly, the box I felt like I was trapped in was expanding, giving me room to move again. Honestly, watching Merrick cry felt like having someone hold a pillow over your face, and I was happy that some of that feeling was cured by the fresh air.

I regret leaving Tim the moment my bottom touches the seat of my bike. Without him there to talk my ear off about the latest episode of his favorite crime show, my mind was free to wander into my memories. When my mind isn't busy worrying, I find myself remembering everything I've ever done wrong, feeling the guilt all over again, and attempting to jump back out of that mindset, to no avail.

At this moment, I begin to think about my fight with Merrick. How could something so silly tear us apart like that? It was entirely my fault, as most things that go wrong tend to be. I shouldn't have said such mean things about her other friends, and I certainly shouldn't have said such mean things about her.

I kept hoping, as I pedaled home, that Merrick would appear next to me on her bright blue bike and smile at me. She'd challenge me to a race to my house, and then continue on without me, disappearing off into the horizon.

But, Merrick never appeared behind me, and I was left pedaling home alone, wishing that we never got into that spat. Maybe if I found a magic lamp with a genie inside, I could wish to reverse the last few days, and everything would go back to normal. I leave my bike outside my house, propped up against the garage. I toss my backpack onto the porch before I go inside, because I'm planning on coming right back outside to

do my homework. I don't live in a dangerous neighborhood or anything, so it's not like anyone will steal it from me.

"Hey, Mom," I call out. I hope she's home, because I could really use some advice.

Mom pops her head out of the doorway to the kitchen and smiles at me. "Salutations," she says, laughing a little. "Nice of you to join us."

"Us?" I ask, walking down the hall and into the room. When I turn the corner to face her, I notice the giant dead bird sitting in a pan, feathers and all. "Mom, you know you're supposed to pluck the feathers, right? Like, before you season it and stuff."

"What?" Mom asks, looking at me as if I'm from another planet. She's never been the best at cooking. As long as I can remember, Dad's done all the cooking in the family.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah," I say. "How are the seasons supposed to get in when there are feathers all over it?"

Mom slaps her palm to her forehead in agony. "It should say that in the recipe!"

"It does," I say. I point to the first line in the cookbook, and she groans loudly. "Hey, uh, Mom?"

"Hey, uh, Ezra," she mocks, reaching over to ruffle my hair. She slides her body onto the counter and crosses her legs before reaching over and pulling the pan into her lap. Slowly, she takes the feathers out of the bird, one by one.

"I need some advice," I tell her. I scratch the back of my neck nervously, because Mom gets really excited when I come to her with my problems. I think it's because my siblings stay in their rooms all day and hardly ever interact with the rest of us.

"Really?" Mom asks. She practically flings the bird in her lap across the room, her eyes wide with excitement. She begins to bounce a bit on the counter, grinning so hugely that her mouth looks big enough to swallow me whole. She pats the spot next to her on the counter.

"Yeah," I tell her. I slide onto the counter next to her, suppressing my laughter. "Something happened with Merrick," I explain.

"I was wondering why she didn't come over today." Mom smiles a bit, but it seems almost forced now, like she's already gone from ecstatic that I want to talk to sad

that Merrick didn't come over. Merrick *always* comes over. It's never even discussed anymore. It's just expected that she joins us each day after school.

"I promised I'd help her study for her quiz," I start. "But then some of the popular kids at school invited me to hang out with them. I couldn't say no!"

"Was it fun?" Mom asks.

"Yeah, of course it was," I say instantly. I realize that it sounds a bit defensive when I phrase it that way, so a blush a little bit.

"I mean, was it more fun than being with Merrick would've been?"

"Well," I say. I let my sentence end, because I don't want to say the answer. Truthfully, studying with Merrick would've been better. I wouldn't have had to pretend to not like certain bands, or go along with the mean things they were saying about my friends.

"That's what I thought," Mom says, nodding. She reaches to her left and grabs the cordless telephone from its little charging cradle. "Invite her over."

"What? No!" I say.

"Why not?" Mom asks.

"Because she hates me," I say. I refuse to look her in the eye, but I have a feeling that Mom is giving me the kind of look you give someone when they're being absolutely ridiculous.

"No she does not," Mom says. "Merrick could never hate you, and you could never hate her. Stop being so dramatic and invite her over to help me with this turkey."

"Why are we having a turkey?" I wonder.

"Don't change the subject," Mom says, her tone melodious. She begins to dial Merrick's house, and I can feel my heart rate picking up. "Don't panic!" Mom commands, pressing the phone to my ear for me.

"Hello?" Merrick answers. Her voice sounds thick, like she's sick, so I know that she's been crying.

"Hey, it's Ezra," I say. I mentally scold myself for sounding so uncertain, but I swallow it and try to keep my voice steady. I glance to Mom for support, and she nods quickly, offering a thumbs-up.

"Hey, it's Merrick," she mocks. I cringe, because her tone is venomous. She's usually so soft-spoken and kind, but right now, she sounds like she'd rather be shoving nails into her skull than listening to me.

"Are you mad at me?" I ask. I must sound completely shattered, because she sighs.

"No," she says. "I mean, if Stacy and Hunter asked me to hang out with them, I would've done the same thing. I can't blame you."

"So why the sour tone?" I ask. Merrick scoffs on the other end. I flinch, because it feels almost like a slap to the face. Sweet little Merrick, who would never hurt a fly, is angry with me. She's never angry with anyone, let alone her best friend.

"You saw me crying in the hall and did *nothing* about it!" Merrick exclaims. She says it like she's in pain, like I stabbed her in the side. She spoke with a strained voice, like she was fighting tears, and I started to make noises, trying to calm her down, to no avail. She began to sniffle, and her deep inhale was shaky.

"I didn't know you wanted me to! I thought it would only make things worse," I say. I'm making excuses for myself. This answer was more for me than for her. I needed to convince myself that not talking to her was the right thing to do, even though it wasn't.

"That's a lie, and you know it! Do you understand how much this meant to me? The least you could do is apologize."

"I'm sorry," I whisper. It sounds more like a question than a statement when I say it, and it's welcomed by another scoff.

"Gee," Merrick deadpans. "Thanks."

"I'm sorry! I really am! I don't know what I was thinking. I should've talked to you, instead of avoiding you like that. It was the wrong choice. I was just scared you'd be angry and yell at me... sort of like what you're doing now."

"I wouldn't be angry if you'd at least said something!"

"Will you forgive me? Please? We both know that I'm an idiot," I say. I try and lighten the mood with a joke, but the moment I say it, it doesn't really seem like a joke. It sounds like the truth.

"I'll say," Merrick agrees. There's a long pause, because I don't know what to say. I figure Merrick is mulling it over, to see if she wants to forgive me just yet. Maybe

she'll never forgive me at all. I glance over at Mom, who is inspecting the bird in her lap, as if trying to pretend she wasn't listening.

"If you forgive me, you can beat me with a stick," I offer. After a moment, she laughs. I can just picture her, crinkles by her eyes as she laughs, head tilted back, and choppy brown hair falling carelessly into her eyes. When I picture her laughing, I begin to laugh too, and by the sound of it, it only makes her laugh harder.

"I don't want to beat you with a stick," Merrick admits. "In fact, I'm willing to forgive you."

"I can sense a condition in your tone of voice," I groan. Merrick is famous for her conditions. In the many years of our friendship, she's been twisting my mistakes around to benefit from them. There's always a condition in order to gain her forgiveness.

"I have a make up quiz on Monday. If you help me study, you're forgiven," she says. She states it proudly, like it's the only way we can ever overcome this obstacle in our relationship.

"Deal," I state, because something is better than nothing.

"Perfect," Merrick agrees.

"Did you want to come over now?" I ask. "Mom doesn't know how to cook, and obviously I don't either, and we could use a bit of help."

"Sure," Merrick says. "What are we cooking?"

"A turkey," I say. "We're going to need to re-season it and everything."

"Why?"

"Because Mom left the feathers on it," I say. I tell her the way you'd tell the punch line to the joke, with a bit of laughter in my voice, anticipating her reaction. She, of course, laughs, which makes me feel a bit less guilty.

When Merrick arrives, she brings her backpack with her. She's carried mine inside, and I can hear the garage door closing, so I figure that she put my bike away for me. She knows that I'm forgetful, and that it would've sat out there all night, had she not done it for me.

"Merrick!" Mom cheers. I've filled Mom in on the situation, and we celebrated with the turkey on my earned forgiveness from Merrick.

Merrick tucks her hair behind her ears and rolls up her sleeves, preparing to cook, I guess. Her eyes go wide when she sees the mess, and I suppress my laughter as I watch her diagnose the extent of the damage.

“What’s the damage, Master Chef Merrick?” I ask, pretending to be scared. I slide back onto my seat on the counter and watch as she inspects the bird. It’s half covered in flour, and the other half is still coated in feathers.

“I say,” Merrick says. She strokes her chin in thought. “We should have pasta instead.”

“I agree!” Mom calls out. She does a little dance, like she’s happy we don’t mind having pasta for the third time this week. With a happy giggle, she takes the pan containing the turkey off the counter and slides it into the oven, like we never even saw it in the first place. There it will sit, I assume, until Dad finds it.

“Game plan,” Mom announces, holding up her hands so that all conversation will stop. “I will make pasta, you two will study, and we will meet the family at the dinner table at 6:30 exactly. Cool nuggets?”

“Cool nuggets,” I agree. I slide off the counter and guide Merrick by her shoulders through the house. I ask her, as we walk, if she’ll give me a ride on her back, but she refuses, so I settle for walking up the stairs myself.

“First things first,” Merrick says, plopping down onto my bed. She practically lives here, so it’s no surprise when she tosses a dirty t-shirt off my pillow like it’s nothing. “I need help with this,” she says, holding up the first page of her notes. “I don’t understand it at all.”

“Wait, before we study,” I say. “Can I just apologize?”

“You already said that you were sorry, Ezra,” Merrick says.

“I know, but it wasn’t good enough.” I sit down next to her on the bed. “I’m really sorry, Mer. It was really rude of me to cancel such important plans at the last minute like that. I wish I could take it back, because hanging out with Stacy and Hunter isn’t as fun, or important, as helping you with your geometry.”

“I understand,” Merrick says. “I get it, I really do. I know that you want to be popular. I mean, everyone does. I would’ve ditched you too, probably.”

“But that’s so stupid! Why do we want to be popular anyway? Why can’t we just be satisfied with what we’ve got? I mean, I’ve got you, Tim, Mom... and Brody,” I say. I motion to Brody, my goldfish, who as always, is swimming in pointless circles. “What else could I possibly need?”

“I don’t know,” Merrick sighs. After a moment of silence, she ads, “I also don’t know what any of this stuff means.” She holds up her geometry notes.

“Okay, okay, I can take a hint,” I say, holding up my hands in surrender. “Let’s help you dominate your retake.”

“How’d it go?” Mom asks, as Merrick and bound down the stairs. Mom’s already seated at the table, along with my brother and sister, who are both on their phones and probably haven’t even noticed that Merrick’s here.

“Fantastic,” Merrick says with a confident smile. “Parallelograms? Easy as pi,” she jokes.