

CALEB

Sitting next to a bleeding, pissed-off Tyler outside of Principal Steven's office was bad enough, but sitting in this unfamiliar waiting room alone, waiting for the ax to fall, is *torture*. Things could have been way worse at school—all we got was a one-day suspension and we have to clean all the science labs for the rest of the semester (though not together, thank god)—but somehow, this entire messed-up situation has led to me sitting here, in a therapist's waiting room. It's eerily quiet, the muted walls and low light making me forget what time of day it is. I begged off when my dad asked me if I wanted him to come in with me, but now I'm wishing he was here. I need something to focus on other than the dread of what this is going to be like and how stiff this couch is.

The office door groans open and a petite, perfectly dressed woman steps out. She looks a bit like the waiting room—simple and subdued.

“Caleb Michaels?” she calls, her voice soft but strong.

“Uh, yeah.” I stand up, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans. “That’s me.”

“Come on in, Caleb.” She steps to the side, ushering me into the room.

“Please, take a seat,” she says, gesturing to the couch, which thankfully has more pillows than the waiting room. It’s lighter in here—daylight streaming in from the window—and I move cautiously towards the couch, sitting awkwardly. Am I supposed to lie down? Is that something that people still do?

“My name is Dr. Bright,” she says as she sits in the chair opposite me. “I’m very glad you’ve come to see me.”

“Yeah.” I shrug. “I mean, I didn’t exactly choose to be here.”

“Do you know why your parents wanted you to come?” Ugh, she sounds so earnest. Why does she have to sound like that? My skin itches and I can’t figure out why.

“Because I hurt someone,” I mutter when it’s obvious she’s just gonna stare at me until I say something.

“What happened?”

“This guy in my grade was being a jerk, so I hit him.” I shrug, not looking at her. There’s something in her face that puts me on edge—like she pities me. I hate that.

“What was he doing that made you want to hit him?”

I’m thrown off by the question. No one else asked that. Not the principal or the school counselor or my parents. No one asked anything. They just assumed we got into a fight because

that's what teenage boys do. No one brought what *I* wanted into it.

What I want has not factored into this situation at all. Last time I checked, getting into a fight at school didn't mean you had to go to fucking therapy, but here I am, sitting across from some woman called "Dr. Bright" like she's a Sesame Street character, pretending I don't want to crawl out of my skin.

"I don't know. I don't know that I *did* want to hit him, I just . . ." I trail off, shrugging again.

"Did you feel like you *had* to hit him?"

I nod.

"Why is that?"

"Like I said, he was being really uncool."

"How so?"

"He—Well, he sits next to me in math class. And he's a total dirtbag—he's always texting and interrupting the teacher, and I'm pretty sure he cheats off the kid in front of him. And we got our tests back and I did . . . well, I did really fucking badly to be honest—oh, shit, sorry—can I swear in here?"

She seems totally unfazed by the back-to-back cursing, but says:

"People often use profanity to distance themselves from their feelings, so I think it's important for you to find new ways to express yourself." She talks like she's reading from a textbook until a small smile comes onto her face. "But you're not going to get in trouble for it. You can say anything you like in here."

I believe her. I don't know why, but I'm actually starting to feel a little comfortable with her. I guess that's what therapists are supposed to do—make you feel safe—but it's like

someone's thrown a heavy blanket over me and I'm getting a little **too** warm.

I must be, like, staring into space as I sort through this because she clears her throat and prompts me to continue.

"You were saying you didn't do well on your exam?"

"I don't—" I stammer. "I'm not good at tests."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's always too quiet, you know? Like, too quiet **and** too loud."

"How do you mean?" Her face scrunches up a little, like she's trying to read something far away.

"I just get, like, stressed out. I have a hard time concentrating." Dr. Bright's face crinkles in sympathy and it gives me the courage to say more. "I don't know, maybe I have ADD or something. I feel like I get distracted by the other people in my class."

"What about them distracts you?"

"I dunno." I shrug one shoulder. "They just . . . everyone's always focusing so hard and they're nervous about passing and it just—it gets under my skin."

"Do you feel nervous when taking tests?"

"I guess. I didn't used to. But now . . . I don't know, other people make me nervous sometimes."

"Is that what caused the fight? This other student was making you nervous?"

"No, he was pissing me off!"

I don't mean to shout, but it happens anyway. Guess I'm not totally over it yet.

"Why were you angry at him?"

"He—I guess he saw my test, and when we were leaving class he started railing on me

about it. And I told him to shut up but he just kept going—calling me stupid and stuff. It really ticked me off.”

“That’s understandable, Caleb.” She nods. “It can be very difficult to deal with bullies.”

“Yeah, exactly, he *is* a bully!” I say, relieved that she seems to be on my side. “He’s always picking on people for stuff they can’t help. Like this kid who’s pretty good at math—Tyler started picking on *him* too. But like, making fun of him for getting a *good* grade and being chubby. And I just got so mad.”

“Is that when you hit Tyler?” she asks, and there’s nothing judgmental about it. It’s refreshing.

“I guess. I don’t know, the whole thing is kinda blurry.” I swallow as I think about the white-hot anger that pounced on me like a wild animal. “Tyler was trying to get a rise out of me, I think, and I was just getting really upset, I guess, and, I don’t know, it was like—like I couldn’t control it. And then he started teasing Moses and I just . . . I went into, like, complete Hulk mode. And I hit him.”

“What happened after you hit him?”

“I don’t really know.” I shake my head. “Like I said, it’s all a bit of a blur. I guess he hit me back though, and we, you know . . .”

“Got into a tussle?”

“A tussle?”

Based on the look on her face, she doesn’t have people questioning her a whole lot. I think I caught her off guard, and it feels like a little victory.

“Is that not an apt description?”

God, “apt.” Where the fuck am I?

“‘Tussle’ makes it sound like we’re kids on the playground. It was a fight. You know, between men and stuff.” Even as I say it, I’m not convinced.

“Of course,” she agrees. Her mouth stays completely still, but her eyes light up with a small smile. She’s not buying my bullshit. It’s nice.

“I mean, I did give him a black eye. And his nose was bleeding pretty bad,” I add, like that somehow makes it better. The smile in her eyes goes away and her mouth gets tight.

“How do you feel about doing that?” she asks quietly.

“Not good,” I admit after a second. It’s not like I’ve never gotten into it with someone before. I mean, football is already a really physical sport, and then you add trash talking into the mix and things can get kinda rough.

This was different though. Instead of running to tackle someone on the field—pumping my legs, bracing my body for the impact—it was like someone else got behind the wheel and threw my fist for me.

“Caleb, are you all right?”

“Huh?” I snap out of my daydreaming to see her watching me with concern. I realize my whole body has tensed up and I’m clenching my fists by my legs, driving them into the couch. I stretch out my hands, feeling the stiffness in my knuckles. “Uh, yeah, I’m fine.”

“What do you mean by ‘complete Hulk mode’?” she asks, tilting her head.

“I went total rage monster on the guy,” I say, thinking that oughta cover it.

“Does that happen to you a lot? You turning into a ‘rage monster’?”

The way she says it makes me want to laugh. But the laugh dies in my throat.

“Uh, yeah, sometimes. Lately. But it’s like—” I stop myself, trying to find the words while also wondering how much I should tell this lady. I’d already put on a big show about how

it was just a fight, no big deal, but there's something **not** normal happening to me. I can feel it. And even though grown-ups are always telling us that hormones make us crazy, this feels . . . worse than that. More dangerous.

I look at her again, weighing my options. She's been pretty chill so far—way chiller than every other adult that's tried to talk to me about this. Maybe she won't even try to lock me up in some kind of loony bin.

"It's like I've got split personality or something," I say.

Jesus, Caleb, why did you lead with the craziest way of explaining this? Keep it together, dude.

"I mean, no, not split personality," I rush to say. "I'm not crazy." Her eyebrow raises the tiniest bit. Oh god, now I've said the one thing that all actually crazy people say. Nice going. Well, if she already thinks I've lost it, I might as well tell try to actually explain things, I guess. "It's that—well, I dunno, I feel like it's coming from somewhere else, you know?"

"What do you mean, somewhere else?" she asks calmly, like I'm making any sense at all.

I feel prickly all of a sudden, like there are little tiny ants underneath my skin. It makes me want to jump up and down, but I really **would** look crazy if I did that, so I just clench and unclench my fists a few times before continuing.

"It used to be that, when I would get mad, I knew what it was about. But now . . . now it's like there's all this **stuff** that just, like, jumps into my body and makes me go nuts. And it's too much so I get mad and then when I get on the other side of it, it's like I wasn't even there." I trail off, pulling my fists into my lap and looking at them so that I don't have to look at her.

"When did this first start happening?" she asks, her voice totally neutral. She's not mocking me or calling the men in the white coats yet, so . . . so far so good, I guess.

“I don’t know, a couple of months ago.” I shrug. “I only really noticed it at the start of this semester.”

“Do you get angry a lot?”

“What counts as a lot?” I snap, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. It feels like she’s digging into me and I’m afraid of what might come pouring out.

“Do you feel that your anger gets in the way of your day-to-day life? Or overpowers other emotions?” she asks calmly, not rising to whatever challenge I’m throwing down at her. I deflate and decide to cooperate a little while longer.

“I guess. I mean, I guess it overpowers the other stuff. When I’m mad, that’s all I can think about. But it’s not like I’m walking around super angry all the time, it’s—” I stop myself again, unsure about how much I want to say.

“It’s what?” she prods. Guess I’m not getting out of this. I close my eyes for a second, exhaling loudly, and decide to just let everything come out. Maybe if I do, she’ll stop digging and my skin will stop feeling like Pop Rocks.

“It’s *everything*. Like, yeah, I get angry, and when I do it’s like I’m possessed or something, but that’s not the only thing. I get really sad sometimes and I don’t know why or I get stressed during tests but it’s, like, *out-of-control* stress, like my whole body is buzzing and I’m just gonna vibrate into oblivion, you know?”

“That sounds overwhelming.”

“Yeah, it *is* overwhelming!” I nod enthusiastically, unable to stop talking now that I’ve started. “It’s really overwhelming and I can’t rein it in, I can’t do anything about it—things just build and build and then they explode and it’s like I don’t have a choice in it, like my body just reacts without me making a decision!”

By the end I'm practically shouting. I'm out of breath, like I just ran suicides. She barely reacts, pinning me with a completely unreadable expression on her face. It makes me feel calmer for some reason—the itchy feeling under my skin has gone away and I feel something slot into place.

Now that all that's been released, I'm feeling dumb, like I got carried away. I try to brush it off.

“But, like, I'm sixteen, so that's probably normal, right?” I say, faux-casual. “I mean, getting into a fight with someone isn't that big of a deal. Although apparently my parents disagree, because they sent me here instead of grounding me like normal people.”

“Do you think you shouldn't be here?” She doesn't seem insulted, which is strangely a relief.

“I don't know. I mean, I know I shouldn't have hit him,” I admit.

“It sounds like it's not just about that,” she says.

“What do you mean?” I'm feeling unsettled all of a sudden. Nervous. Like some sort of bomb is about to be dropped.

“When your parents spoke to me about you”—the pitying look is back and I hate it—“they mentioned that you've been behaving differently over the past few months. That you've been having mood swings.”

“They told you that?” I ask.

“Yes. And based on what you just described, it sounds like they hit close to the mark.”

“Uh yeah, I guess. I didn't realize that they'd, you know, picked up on that,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck and looking away. “But I mean, everyone has mood swings sometimes, right?”

“True. But your parents seemed to think it was out of character for you. They’re worried that it might be an indication of something more serious.”

“What do you mean ‘more serious’?” I ask. Oh god, I’ve done it. I’ve given her reason to think that I’m totally insane and now she’s going to send me to some kind of special school for boys who can’t control their tempers.

“What, do you think I’m cracked in the head or something?” I joke, trying to play it cool.

“No, Caleb,” she says, the pitying look replaced with something softer. “I think you might just be a little different from your average teenager.”

“Great,” I mumble.

“Caleb, are you familiar with the term ‘empathy’?”

“Uh, yeah, I think so,” I say after a second. She keeps making hard turns in our conversation and I’m struggling to keep up. “It’s, like, being able to relate to what people are feeling, right?”

“Yes, exactly: being able to understand someone’s emotional state. Empathy is something most of us experience, but everyone experiences it differently. Some people have a complete lack of empathy—”

“What, like, psychopaths and stuff?” I ask, my heart starting to race.

“Yes, often the people that we think of as ‘psychopaths’—people who hurt others—experience less empathy, which can lead to violent behavior. But that’s not always true for people who lack empathy.”

“Just because I hit a guy doesn’t mean I don’t care about people,” I say, crossing my arms in front of my chest. I don’t like what this lady is suggesting. I know I sometimes fly off the handle, but I like to think I’m a fundamentally good dude.

“That’s not at all what I’m suggesting, Caleb,” she says earnestly. “I think you might be in the opposite position, in fact.”

“Huh?”

“I’m curious—these mood swings that you’ve been experiencing, when do they happen?”

“What do you mean?” I’m thrown again, not following her train of thought. It’s frustrating.

“When you’re alone, how do you feel?”

I have to think about it for a second. I try to remember the last time I was alone. Last night, in my room, reading before bed. My dad has this archaic rule where Alice and I aren’t allowed to have screens on for a half an hour before we go to sleep. So I read. The memory floats into my brain and a blanket settles over me again. Except this time it isn’t too stuffy. It’s light and soft—like this old knit throw that my grandmother made for me when I was a kid. It’s made of this really light yarn—cotton or something—and it’s cozy but not too warm. I loved sitting out on the rocking chair on our porch on summer nights, all curled up in it. Especially when there would be thunderstorms. I’m transported there instantly in my head—I can smell the mix of the rain and the flowery smell of the yarn and it’s like the invisible pressure around me now tightens momentarily, but in a good way.

“Being alone is nice.”

I don’t even mean to say it, not really. I’m not sure I even realize what I’ve said until after it’s out of my mouth. But I open my eyes (when did I close them?) to see Dr. Bright smiling softly at me, like she understands something. It’s both comforting and sorta unnerving.

“You feel calm when you’re alone?”

“Yeah,” I half whisper, realizing that’s what it is. That blanket; that soft, light, barely

there warmth . . . it's calm. The awareness of it yanks it away, and I suddenly become fully conscious of where I am.

"Would you say your mood swings happen only around other people?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess they do," I say slowly. "That's when I get overwhelmed."

"By other people?" she clarifies.

"Yeah." I take a beat, think back on the past few minutes, try to follow the path of her thoughts and start to put some pieces together. "What did you mean by me being in the opposite position?"

"I don't think you have a lack of empathy, Caleb." She closes her notebook and folds her hands. "I think you have an excess of it."

"What . . . what do you mean?"

Dr. Bright shifts in her seat and for the first time, she looks uncertain.

"There are . . ." she starts, her hesitancy making me itchy again, "people in the world who are different. People who are able to do things that the average human cannot."

"What do you mean?" I repeat, my heart beating faster and faster. I suddenly feel like I'm in a haunted house. Walking through hallways where at any moment something terrifying could come bursting out.

"These people are called Atypicals," she says, and I can hear the weight behind that word.

"Atypicals," I echo.

"Yes." Dr. Bright nods. "And I believe you might be one of them."

"So, are you, like, gonna be a total weirdo forever?"

I look up from my bio textbook to see Alice standing in my doorway. I just got back from my third therapy session and I guess Mom and Dad had “The Talk” with her. There’s a prickly kind of nervousness skittering up my arms but it doesn’t make me want to tear my own skin off. It’s familiar. I guess it must be Alice’s? God, figuring this out is going to be a real pain.

“I guess.” I shrug. “I mean, Dr. Bright seems to think it’s a pretty permanent thing.”

“Whoa,” she says, climbing up on my bed, uninvited.

“Hey, c’mon, don’t mess up my pillows,” I groan.

“God, you are such a neat freak.” Alice rolls her eyes. “Is that part of your whole thing?”

“Not wanting your sister’s dirty feet on your pillows is a totally normal thing.” I emphasize the point by hitting her with one of the pillows in question.

“Yeah, but you’re not normal anymore, huh?” she asks, and my breath catches in my throat. She’s teasing me but it doesn’t *feel* teasing. It feels like a genuine question.

“I don’t know that I’m really all that different.” I shrug. “I just, you know . . .”

“Can feel other people’s feelings,” she finishes.

“Yeah,” I breathe.

“So what am I feeling right now?” she goads, whatever weighty thing she was feeling replaced by the desire to irritate me.

“Um . . .” I close my eyes and try to focus on the different sensations, like Dr. Bright has been teaching me the past few weeks. “You’re . . . curious . . .”

“Well, *duh*.”

“ . . . and you’re scared too.” I open my eyes to her surprised face. Saying it out loud makes the fear worse, her feelings making my stomach a bottomless pit.

“But I don’t know what you’re scared about,” I admit. “I just feel the feelings, I don’t

know the why. But I mean, I can guess.”

“I’m not scared of **you**, you dummy.” She rolls her eyes, expertly answering my unasked question while sidestepping any actual talk of our emotions, and the floor comes back to my stomach.

“Wow,” I say dryly, “are you an empath too?”

“‘An empath’ . . .” she echoes. “Sounds so official.”

“Well, yeah, I guess it is official. Dr. Bright even said that I’m one of the most powerful empaths she’s ever known,” I add, my cheeks warming.

“So, what . . . are you, like, a superhero or something?” she asks skeptically, but there’s a little zing in my chest. She’s . . . excited?

“Yeah, because feeling people’s emotions is **so** useful,” I scoff, “‘The Great Amazing Feelings Boy.’ That’s not a comic I’d read.”

Alice laughs so hard she falls off my bed, and I feel normal for the first time in weeks.

ADAM

I poke my head out of my nook and hear nothing but the silence of a school out of session. Nothing new there—it's a library after all, and one that not many people use—but hopefully the halls will be similarly empty by now. Four o'clock, on the dot, the last day before winter break. I'm probably the last person left in the building.

Just like that, another semester is finished. And one with a minimum of unpleasant interactions. Also a minimum of **any** kind of human interaction, but having no friends seems a pretty fair trade for days with no surprises, no fights, no class periods spent crying in the bathroom. Not that I ever did that. Figure of speech.

I step out from behind the stacks and immediately jump out of my skin.

"Jeez," I breathe, just barely stopping myself from clutching at my chest like an old woman. Caleb Michaels is standing on the other side of the shelf, looking far too calm for

someone who was just surprised by another person in a completely silent library.

“Oh, uh, hey, Adam,” he stammers. Caleb knows my name? I try to prevent my face from looking *too* obviously thrilled about that. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” A blush blooms over his cheeks. **Now** he looks caught off guard.

“No, it’s fine,” I lie, heart still hammering in my chest. “I just—I didn’t think anyone else was in here. It’s winter break.”

“I needed a book,” he says simply, waving the copy of the collected works of Shakespeare he’s holding like it’s a novella, not the largest book in the library. I silently curse the long sleeves that are covering up his arms. “Want to get a head start on the reading for next semester.”

“Oh, right.” I’m surprised and charmed by his diligence. He smiles sheepishly and the surprise gets edged out.

“You know,” I start, emboldened by his smile and the quiet cocoon of the library, “you could just check out **Macbeth**. You don’t have to lug around every word Shakespeare ever wrote.” I nod toward the massive tome he’s holding, making even his large hands look small.

“I know.” He laughs softly and my stomach swoops. His eyes dart towards me and he blushes even deeper before continuing. “But I figured, I’ve got some free time over the break, might as well see what the big fuss is about this guy. I’ve heard **Hamlet** is pretty good,” he finishes, eyes sparkling.

“Yeah,” I laugh. “Yeah, that’s a good one.” I want to tell him that it’s my favorite, but Caleb’s eyes are fully meeting mine now and he’s smiling and I’m smiling back and time feels frozen and full of possibility. Caleb, impossibly, gets cuter the longer I look at him. The broadness of his shoulders feels softer, the clench of his jaw relaxes into a beautiful edge, and I

can see flecks of blue in the green of his eyes.

“What are you doing here?” he blurts, looking away and breaking the moment. “Don’t you have a free period at the end of the day? I thought you’d have been long gone by now.”

“Oh, um, I—” I stutter, my brain still stuck on the moment that’s been shattered. Wait, how does Caleb know my schedule? I didn’t even realize he knew my *name* until two minutes ago.

“No, sorry, it’s none of my business,” he says, his eyes getting big. “God, sorry, I didn’t mean . . . dammit.” He’s muttering to himself now and the blush has taken up his entire face. I have a sudden and urgent need to comfort him, to bring back the ease of just a few moments ago, which is the only reason I say:

“I hide out here.”

“What?”

“Um,” I start, desperately wanting to backtrack, “no, not hide. I just . . . you know. Like to wait until the coast is clear.” Caleb’s breathing slows and something close to understanding crosses his face. He’s starting to smile again, softer this time, and it makes me bold.

“You never know what uniformed sociopath is lurking just around the corner,” I say lightly. I’m expecting him to laugh or shrug or *something* at the dumb joke, but he just looks down, bringing his gaze, and mine, to the jacket he’s wearing. His *letterman* jacket.

Oops.

I’m about to say something more—take back the comment—but Caleb just shakes his head slightly before looking back up at me, hurt on his face.

“I’m not—” he stutters, “I didn’t mean to—I, uh, I should get going.”

He picks his backpack up from the floor, puts the book under his arm, and turns away.

“No, wait—” I start weakly.

“Have a good break!” he calls, barely turning his head to look back at me.

Caleb rushes out, leaving the library empty once again.

The house is as empty as the library when I get there, which is the case about ninety percent of the time. That’s what you get when you have two neuroscientists for parents. They’re good people—and *smart*—but most of the time, I think they had me by accident. They love me, I know, but they love cutting into people more. How’s that for a family hobby.

I kick off my sneakers into the front hall closet and make my way into the kitchen, not bothering to turn on the lights in the hallway. The house is wrapped in darkness and hush—the December sun having set thirty minutes ago—and I decide that the weather and the end of school both call for some hot chocolate. The encounter with Caleb still fresh in my mind, I grab our copy of *Macbeth* off the shelf in the library, thumbing my way through it as I put the milk on to heat. The book is well worn, a feat considering I’m the only one in the house who’s cracked the spine.

It’s been a bit of an odd upbringing. Once I was beyond the danger age for swallowing small objects, I was given models of the human body as toys. For my tenth birthday, they handed me an anatomy textbook. A lot of people like their jobs, but my parents love medicine like you wouldn’t believe. They are endlessly fascinated by human beings and all the ways that we can be broken and fixed. Medical journals pile up in every room of our house because new information is being discovered all the time, and my parents have to learn every piece of biological knowledge that is out there.

Thankfully, I did inherit my parents’ passion for knowledge. I just didn’t get the medicine bug. I love books, art, philosophy—all the “soft” fields, as my mother would say. My anatomy

books gathered dust as I scoured through the family's bookshelves for the rare volume on the humanities. They've got philosophers in spades, which is nice (something about having a "full appreciation for the human brain") but the fiction selection basically boils down to the collected works of Shakespeare and some old science fiction, all untouched until I got my hands on them. I read *Frankenstein* for the first time when I was eleven and my entire world expanded outwards. Probably why I have a bit of a fixation on the macabre.

Or maybe it was just having parents who stick knives into people for a living that gave me my love for the grim and gory. Maybe that's why I loved *Frankenstein*. Maybe that's why I—

No, stop it, Adam. Don't go down that road.

I take the milk off the burner and dig the cocoa powder out of the cabinet. I sit up on the counter with my hot cocoa, swinging my legs as I pull out my phone to post a picture of the perfect cup I just made. Not for the first time, I wonder what it would be like to have someone over—to make hot chocolate or bake *with* someone. To have someone light up the dark house.

I roll my eyes at myself and that particular thought and hop off the counter to turn on the kitchen lights. Just because I get emo sometimes doesn't mean I have to sit alone, in the literal dark, on the first day of holiday break. That's a little too macabre, even for me.

They don't like that I'm macabre, my parents. For two people that are elbow deep in brains half the day, they have some funny ideas about how sunny-side-up their son should be. They think I should smile more, have more friends, hurt myself less. And I do. I *do* hurt myself less. That should be enough. I shouldn't have to be legitimately happy on top of it. I'm in high school. No one's supposed to be happy. If kids aren't hurting themselves, they're usually hurting someone else.

I think of Caleb's blush and furrowed brow when I said "sociopath" and feel worse than I have in a long time. Please, please, *please* let next semester be better.