

Chapter 1:

It had been three days since I showed up to English class. I hated school. I never fit in. Everyone stared at me like they're better than me. Maybe they were; I don't know. It was two months into my junior year at Clarkson High School just outside of Leigh, Nebraska, where I lived. The kids were getting their folders out of their backpacks, which I forgot to bring. I leaned over to the cheerleader chick next to me to ask for a pencil, but that's when the teacher, Mr. Sanders, walked up with a slip of paper. "Landon, I'm sorry, but the office needs to see you."

He put the paper in front of me on my desk. He was lying; it didn't say to go to the office. It was a hall pass to go see the guidance counselor.

"That's messed up. What the hell?" I bashed my fist against the desk.

Sanders leaned into me like what he had to say was just between us. "If you want to talk about it, let's go outside."

There was a time when I thought he was cool. That was the first day of school. I learned on the second day that he was just another nerdy prick with leather loafers and khakis. That wasn't my style. My style was baggy jeans and a hoodie pulled down over my I-don't-give-a-fuck green eyes.

I looked around the class. Everyone was staring at me. Frozen. Mouths open, with their jaw bones unhinged. I had been in school with most of the kids since eighth grade, because the hell-hole village I lived in is so small that they cram middle school and high school into the same building—but I had never seen them look at me like that before. (I'm not joking about the village part, either. Villages and Nebraska go hand in hand.)

I pulled my hoodie back to look Mr. Sanders in the eye. "No way. I came to class to fix things. You said I could make up my missed work."

"Go to the office and see if they'll help you, Landon. It's not up to me anymore."

He was lying, just looking for excuses. He wanted me out of his class.

The stupid, "Yes, Mommy and Daddy" kids just sat there with their blank faces like they'd never done anything wrong, especially the fat-ass slob that sat behind me. I turned my head to look at him. "What are *you* looking at?"

"Nothing." He jerked his head back so quick it made his double chin double again in size. I wanted to make a stupid joke, but then I got pissed off even more when I saw him look up, over my head, to Mr. Sanders. It was a coward move, like he needed a savior or something. That's what you found in Nebraska: cowards.

The more I looked around at everyone, the more I started thinking about how I knew they talked about me when I wasn't in class. I could tell I was gonna lose my cool, and I didn't care. I was sick of how they all thought they were so much better than me.

When my eyes came back to the fat kid behind me, he was still looking up at the teacher. I leaned into him and dropped my voice. “Does your dad know what a coward you are?” That’s when I felt Mr. Sanders’ creepy pedophile hand grip shoulder. “Landon, please. Don’t disrupt the class.”

I turned around. His bushy unibrow was right in my face. I jerked my shoulder away from his grip. “Get your hands off me. I’m done with this shit, anyway.” I tried to stand but my leg hit the desktop. It’s not like I’m super-tall. I’m barely six feet, almost five ten, but really thin so I knew I looked taller. Anyway, I lost my balance and almost fell to the ground. That’s when the pig-snout kid snickered like he’s all that. My anger exploded. All I remember is flipping my desk over, grabbing a book, and ripping the pages out.

I wish people understood me.

Chapter 6:

“Landon, go to bed.” Bob was sitting in his recliner, trying to make good on his promise in the van to cut back on drinking. It wasn’t a promise I wanted.

“What? No, I’m awake.” I wasn’t, though. It was only nine o’clock, but between the police station bullshit the night before, and then trying to fake a school day when I didn’t have one, I was exhausted. I readjusted myself on the couch and tried to keep my left eye open, the one on Bob’s side, and let the other one shut.

“Landon, you’re falling asleep. Go to bed.”

There was something kind of sad in Bob’s voice. I figured it was because he didn’t have the Jack Daniels flowing through his veins. Bob and sobriety don’t mix, in my opinion. He had this angry side to him, like the world was out to get him, and if something set him off, he was gonna take care of it—sober or drunk. But I learned early on that if he’s drunk, I could get him sidetracked by agreeing with him and telling him I saw the world through his eyes.

I wasn’t too worried about his mood, though. I looked over to the half-filled bottle of Jack on the kitchen counter. I was sure it was only a matter of days until the top came off again. His “cutting back” on the drinking always followed the same pattern: something crazy would happen, like me getting arrested; he’d vow not to touch the hard stuff and only stock up on beer; a few days would pass; by the end of the week, he’d be back to shooting whiskey chasers during TV commercials.

[Portions Omitted]

“No, it’s okay. I’m fine out here.”

“I’m telling you to do something. *Go do it.*” I bolted up before he said anymore. I didn’t want any part of what happened that morning after the police station to repeat itself.

“Wait.” I stopped in my tracks at Bob’s command, turned around to face him. He leaned forward in his recliner making sure his nine millimeter and remote control balanced on his lap.

“Yeah?”

He shook his head side to side slowly and looked over at me through the corner of his eye. “I try to help you do things with your life but you never see it. You don’t take my advice. You think you’re better than me somehow, don’t you?”

“No, that’s not true.” My eyes darted over to the counter. The half-filled Jack Daniels bottle was still untouched. A sober comment about life wasn’t a good sign from Bob. I felt my palms sweating. “I know you try to help me. I just do stupid things sometimes, but I think you know how to –“

He turned his head and looked me straight on. “You were a mistake. One big mistake.”

“What do you –” I caught myself, looked again at the whiskey bottle on the kitchen counter. He hadn’t been drinking as in drinking, drinking. I let my hands rest at my side, dropped my head, and relaxed my body, wanting to give him all the signs that I wasn’t there to resist. I tried to pick my words to express the right thought. “I’m sorry, dad. Maybe you can help me fix myself.”

“Too late. You’re too old now. And you’re not worth it anyway.” He turned his head back to face the TV. I stood for a second waiting for any last words, but he didn’t utter a sound. He leaned back in his recliner and focused on watching his favorite war movie while the TV reflection flickered off his face.

I was positive he’d be waking me up in a couple of hours to work out his aggression. *Maybe I deserved it.*

I was dead asleep. The first noise I heard, I think my brain just said, “There’s a weird noise outside,” but I didn’t fully wake up. I was too tired. I don’t think I could have woken myself up to figure out the noise anyway. It was some kind of swishing sound against the outside wall of the trailer, if that makes sense. My arms and legs felt heavy. I was going right back to sleep when I heard the noise again, and realized I knew exactly what it was.

Leaves.

Leaves crunching on the ground.

I threw the covers to the side and sat bolt upright. I thought my ribcage would burst because my heart was pounding so hard.

I looked left. Bob wasn’t there. The blankets were untouched on his side. The gun wasn’t on the nightstand.

I jumped up, moved the blinds away just enough to see out. *Flashlights?*

Then a huge crashing sound came from the living room. I went to run down the short hallway toward the front door but froze before I got out the door as our trailer started to rock back and forth.

“Get on your knees! FBI!”

I dropped to the ground. The first sign I saw of them were the small lights attached to their rifles. Beams of lights were moving and bouncing all over the walls in the trailer. Two men in all black, with their faces behind their rifles, came down the hallway and grabbed me.

I was dizzy, confused.

Chapter 29:

We took the break Tracie recommended. I could feel Drysdale, Tracie, and the Ms. Crandall’s eyes all watching me walk out of the interview room. No one said a word. The silence actually helped. I wasn’t sure where I was going: the stairwell, my room, the atrium. I ended up on the rooftop where the basketball court was. I lay down on the bench that they kept on the sidelines for the spectators that never came to watch. I looked up at the stars, letting my thoughts drift.

Why did I call Bob “Dad”? Maybe it was some kind of made-up belief that I created to help cope with my reality. I thought about that twelve-hour road trip Bob and I took to hand-deliver the Burnside Breech-Loading rifle that he restored. Bob was happy. I was happy. For the two days of the trip, I had a sense that we were father and son. I hated myself now for allowing it to happen. This feeling of embarrassment came over me. I wanted to roll off the bench, crawl over to the corner, and chant, “Why did you let that happen?” I felt utterly disgusting.

I tried to brush the emotions off to the side and stay with the question: why did I enjoy moments like that when something at my core should have been prodding me that he was never my father but always my abductor? Then the thought occurred to me. Maybe it wasn’t about Bob as much as it was about me wanting a father, wanting a parent, wanting a family, wanting closeness, wanting to know I could still connect with another human. Maybe deep down, in that part of my mind that blocked out the pain, I wanted to somehow make sure I stayed able to love if the day of reunion with my real family ever came to be. The thoughts did make sense to me, but I still hated myself that I ever cared about Bob at all, and I feared how I still might care about him.

Chapter 53:

Braide put a heavy hand on my shoulder, making sure I didn’t try to stand up and leave. “But you’re not fine. I see it in your eyes.”

I double checked to make sure my parents weren’t around. It was only Braide and me in the room when I said, “I know what you’re saying about Bob being a sick person, you know. I mean, the memories

explain all that, and my brain gets it. But you don't really see that stuff when you're around the person, you know, and when I lived with him ... I dunno, when he was up there talking, I felt like I was back in the trailer. It's like I feel sick that I care about how Bob feels or how I react to his words. Why do I care at all about any of that? It's stupid. It shows how messed up I am, you know."

Braide sat and stared. Didn't say a word. Within seconds, more of what I felt spewed out. "Look it's ... it's like I spent so much time trying to make him happy, you know, make Bob happy. Sometimes I was able to, and I remember how he would be happy, which meant K.C. and I were happy. Like all I would ever think about was how Bob was thinking about things, how Bob would react. That makes me think I really cared about him. And then he gets on the stand, and he doesn't—he doesn't look at me and the way he talks about me ... jeez, I hate myself. I'm so stupid."

"Why?"

"It hurt me when he wouldn't even call me Landon." I couldn't hold back the sobs, but in my heart I knew they were black tears expressing a sadness that I shouldn't have. "I tried to be there for him, and he just sits there, and he hates me. That's it. He hates me and I don't know why ... or I know why, you know, because the cops got him, but it hurts me. And I'm mad at myself that it hurts me. It's stupid. I wasn't ever trying to hurt anyone, you know."

"I believe you." Braide's voice was sincere. I pulled my shirt sleeve over my hand to wipe the tears. I took in a deep breath. "Tyler, look at me." He nodded at me when our eyes met and paused, like he was about to say something that he wanted to make sure I understood. "Bob gave you life."

I froze. My stare iced over. "What do you mean?"

"Just that. He allowed you to live, and for that, you feel a deep sense of obligation to him. Maybe you define that as love or caring. I define it as an obligation."

"I don't get it."

"Because Bob could have killed you at any moment, but he didn't; he let you live, in a weird way, he saved you from death, he gave you life. You understand? But the flawed logic here is that all those years he was only saving you from himself."