

Boy at Risk

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by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my husband, Jeff, and my son, Blake, who lived through “Boy at Risk” with me.

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I would like to thank my teachers, readers and fellow writers for their encouragement and support, especially Maile Field and Tim Denevi. Special thanks to thesis advisor and mentor Kyoko Mori for making me believe that I, too, could be a writer.

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ABSTRACT

BOY AT RISK

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This thesis is about my relationship with my foster son, which began years before he came to live under my roof through my friendship with his mother. “Boy at Risk” is a highly personal account of my brief foster parenting experience. It is a story that would no doubt be told very differently by the boy I fostered and by his mom. I could not write this memoir without including my impressions of the Fairfax County child welfare system and the people who tried to help this family. In “Boy at Risk,” there are no heroes, villains or easy answers to the problems of child abuse and neglect. Instead, there is my chronicle of my ever-changing feelings about this boy and his mother. Although the story is true, the names of everyone, except my husband and son and me, have been changed.

CHAPTER 1

When I picked Drew up at the group home, he was wearing the army fatigue jacket that his mom had given him for Christmas. He was growing out his buzz cut—the style his mom favored—and an uneven fringe of brown hair grazed his collar. He had just started shaving and had missed a few soft hairs on his cheek.

Drew threw his sneakers and clothes into the back of my car along with a duffel full of dirty laundry. Then he tucked his gangly frame into the front seat. If there were any goodbyes to his fellow inmates—all of them teenagers, some of them repeat offenders—I didn't hear them.

He began texting as soon as he fastened his seatbelt. At the group home, electronics were considered a privilege, and since Drew no longer played by the rules, he hadn't had his cell phone in a while. I had no idea what he was telling his friends about his electronic nonexistence for the last three months.

Clad in cheap siding with a yard more dirt than grass, the group home was near an army base in Northern Virginia. The neighborhood looked like it had been elbowed out of the way of the more prosperous areas of Fairfax County. It was rush hour and traffic was moving at a crawl, but I was almost happy it would be an hour before we pulled into

my drive, 30 miles west and an economic rung or two up. It gave me plenty of time to think about who this kid, whom I had known since middle school, had become.

From the court documents, there was the most recent version of Drew: a troubled adolescent who had physically threatened his divorced, disabled mother. There was also Drew the son who, according to his mom, had turned from a loving and obedient child into an angry and defiant teenager almost overnight. Then there was the Drew I had known since seventh grade: energetic, outgoing, bright, seemingly deprived of nothing but a father, who was a no-show in his life. I believed so firmly in my Drew that when the Department of Family Services took custody of him, my husband and I agreed to become his foster parents.

#

My friendship was with Drew's mother, Ally. I met her the way countless moms meet one another: sitting around waiting for our children. In our case, it was on a bench at the local Y, where our boys swam on the team. The Waterwolves practiced every Monday through Friday, during the school year. Team members were required to show up at least a couple of afternoons each week. Because practice was scheduled during the height of afternoon traffic, most parents stuck around, flipping magazines or pecking at their computers or cellphones.

This was the third YMCA I had joined with my son. Blake started swimming at a Y in Tacoma, Washington. That's where I signed us up for "Mommy and Me." The class was designed to get preschoolers used to being in a pool. Mothers or caregivers

sang songs and played water games with their toddlers, encouraging them to learn the skills they would need to swim.

“Look, Mommy, I can bob!”

“Yes, you can; you’re not afraid to put your head underwater, are you? You’re bobbing like a pro, Blake. Now why don’t we try something else, like floating?”

“I like bobbing.”

“Blake, you can’t just bob. We’re taking swimming class to learn new things, like lying on top of the water. Floating’s part of swimming, and it’s fun, too. Come on, just try it; I’ll hold you up.”

The instructor, a middle-aged woman who had been teaching this same class for years, waded over, looking concerned. Apparently the tone of my voice was conveying something other than fun. She was not aware that Blake could get stuck on an activity, flatly refusing to move on. I had bought a book called *The Difficult Child*, which attempted to explain the behavior of children like Blake. I learned not to mention it to other parents, many of whom were aghast at using any adjective in relation to their child that wasn’t positive. My reason for reading the book was not just to find some coping strategies, but to assure myself that I wasn’t a bad mother; that I hadn’t done something horribly wrong.

When Jeff took a position in the development office of the University of Puget Sound, I quit my full-time job in Seattle and we moved 30 miles south to Tacoma, where the college was. Now I was marketing part-time as a freelancer, trying to muster the energy I needed for my son. I had had my son at 42, and I knew how lucky I was to have

a child who was bright, happy, and enthusiastic. But trying to get Blake dressed and out of the house when he wanted to do something else often involved wrestling him to the ground. Inevitably, it would bring one or both of us to tears. To my husband, I called Blake “the defiant one,” but my little joke was not enough to quell my anxiousness.

I kept Blake in day care four days a week, even after I quit my job. Although I missed him during the day and was happy to see his smiling face when I picked him up, I often felt a sense of relief when I dropped him off. Blake liked preschool and did what his teachers told him, most of the time. Perhaps it was the example the other kids set. I told people that my son was in preschool because my freelance work was so unpredictable that I couldn't get reliable childcare when I needed it. Also that, as an only child, he needed the socialization daycare provided. But both rationales were only partially true. There were times when I could barely cope with my son's desire to run headlong into the street, hide in crowded stores, venture away from what was known, safe, away from me. Jeff and I had installed a fence around our backyard with an extra-high latch so that he could run outside, but I still checked on him obsessively because one day, he would figure out how to open it. Then what?

After “Mommy and Me,” Blake started taking swimming lessons without me. At first he looked more like a caricature of someone attempting not to drown than a boy executing a recognizable stroke. He was always the tallest one in his swim class, and his lanky arms and legs seemed harder for him to control. The boys who were more compact seemed to have an easier time coordinating their limbs. Still, I continued to sign him up

for lessons. When he got most of his strokes down, I signed him up for swim team, thinking it would strengthen him and help his coordination. And it did.

Seven years after “Mommy and Me,” Blake was now a beautiful swimmer, if not a fast one. Just as his stroke had smoothed out, becoming graceful and seemingly effortless, his personality had mellowed considerably. It was hard for me to believe he was the same boy as the toddler who had been ready to take on the world at three. He still liked to argue, particularly with me, but now he was quiet, thoughtful, and well behaved. I missed the toothy grin of his childhood. Blake now wore braces, though he liked to surprise people by changing the color of the hardware whenever the orthodontist refitted them, he didn’t smile as freely or easily. Sometimes I found myself missing his little-boy bravado, the same daring recklessness that had given me so much grief, but now, I’d finally been able to relax in my role as a parent.

Watching him practice with the Waterwolves was like watching a synchronized water ballet. Blake skimmed the surface of the pool in tandem with dozens of other kids, arms and legs moving to the rhythm of an internal metronome, back and forth, lap after lap. The repetitive movement and the heaviness of the air—almost as humid as a sauna—made me languid and pensive.

We moved to Northern Virginia a few years ago to be closer to my husband’s aging parents. The freelance work I had—all West Coast based—had dried up. I had put out a couple of half-hearted feelers for a job, even sent out a résumé or two, but my life as a Marketing and Communications Director was over. I no longer had the drive or the desire. Now I had to remind myself that I had worked for two opera companies, a

museum, and several theaters. I had loved connecting audiences to art, something that was important to me. I was proud of my career, yet I didn't miss it. What I did miss was something causal in my life.

Then one day I saw Ally. She sat alone on a bench, two wooden canes resting by her side. She wore a t-shirt and jeans—standard mom wear—but instead of sneakers or flats, her feet were incased in heavy black lace-ups like the Dominican nuns at my grade school wore. When she crossed her legs, thick white socks peaked out from beneath her jeans. Her right ankle was bolstered by a heavy silver brace that worked its way down inside her shoe.

To walk, Ally formed an arc with her right leg, held rigid by the brace. She moved it out to the side, then forward from her hip. She used her canes much as a cross-country skier uses polls: to give her some forward momentum as well as balance. The other parents made sure she had the room she needed to walk. They'd shove their swimming paraphernalia—floats and flippers and sometimes their towel-wrapped kids—out of her path as she navigated herself to a bench, making a point of not turning away, and of not watching, either.

No one looked except the littlest swimmers: the kids who had just finished their lessons in one corner of the pool. They would stop and stare, mouths slightly open, until their mothers gently directed their attention elsewhere. Ally was too busy working her canes to notice these kids. She pulled her right leg out then around in front; following up with her left, an exertion that demanded all her attention.

When I saw her silver brace, my first thought was polio. But Ally was young, not much older than 30. That disease, from my parents' childhood, had been all but eradicated by the time she was born. Cerebral palsy perhaps, but cerebral palsy is linked to brain damage, and Ally's right leg looked as if it had been shattered, then badly pieced together. It must have been an accident.

Most of the waiting moms and dads managed to carry on conversations while keeping their eyes on their kids in practice, talking sideways to whom ever was sitting next to them. A lot of their chitchat seemed to be about the crazy schedules they were shoehorned into, commitments that had them driving their mini-vans all over Northern Virginia with their kids and a raft of athletic equipment in tow. They nodded emphatically to each other's stories of soccer or lacrosse, straining to catch one another's replies before the echo chamber of the pool swallowed them up. They were the dedicated sports parents: the kind who happily laid aside their own interests, devoting all their free time to their children's activities. I didn't dislike them; I just didn't get them.

But perhaps that's because I didn't have a sports kid. Blake had learned to swim more than competently, but he was not quick or coordinated enough to be really good at it, or at sports in general. He had learned where he could excel: the classroom, and that's where he made his mark. Blake sailed through grade school without much difficulty and did his homework without prompting, but there were never any illusions about him being the next Michael Phelps. The Waterwolves was exercise, pure and simple.

Surrounded by sports parents, I felt like an outsider, but that doesn't explain why I was drawn to Ally. She seemed to have this aura about her, or at least a story different

from the other parents at the pool, including me. I told myself that I would never ask what happened to her, but if she wanted to talk, I would listen.

#

Ally's interests were her son and the rock star and humanitarian Bono. Her love for Bono was so great that she named Drew after a character in one of U2's songs. We bonded over our boys as moms do, although it was clear when I first saw her that I was old enough to be her mother. She had Drew at 18, but our age difference didn't seem to matter when we talked about our sons, both of whom were only children.

She had an accent I couldn't place. Her appearance didn't smack of the latest fashion, nor did it reference any particular cultural heritage or religious belief. Pants—usually jeans—covered her braces. If I had to describe her style, I would say it was pressed and polished, perhaps a little preppy. When she told me she always hit Victoria's Secret when they had their annual sale, replacing all her worn underwear, I shifted uncomfortably on our bench, tugging at my sagging bra strap. When I complimented her cable sweater, asking if it was new, she said that she ironed it. Ally ironed everything she wore. I thought about my iron languishing on a shelf in my laundry room. My husband wore a dress shirt almost every day to work, but took them to the dry cleaners to be laundered and pressed.

“Five feet nothing” was how tall she said she was. She envied the six and one-half inches I had over her. Still, she was striking: shiny black bob and big dark eyes accented by the longest lashes I had ever seen on someone who wasn't a child. She had a beautiful smile, and when she broke into a grin she looked girlish, younger than her 31

years. Her shoulders and upper arms were muscular from using her upper body to propel herself forward.

Ally's only stylistic signature was her rings. Big and showy, she wore them singly—her only adornment other than her black nylon backpack, which served as her purse. Admiring a silver ring adorned with a large chunk of amber, I asked to try it on. It looked heavy on my hand and swam on my ring finger. Ally's hands were outsized for her petite body, but they were a gift. I never realized how much until the first time I visited her apartment.

We drove to her complex—a dozen nondescript buildings arranged around some parking lots—tucked among the offices near Dulles Airport. She pulled her gray Toyota into a handicapped parking space in front of her building, took her canes out of the back, then produced a pair of men's black leather gloves and put them on. I'd assumed we were going to one of the ground floor units, and I had no idea what the gloves were for. Instead, Ally went to the outside stairwell then asked me to hold her canes. Grasping the railings on either side, she bumped herself up, one step at a time, negotiating two flights until we reached the top floor.

I offered to help, but she said she was fine as she went about the business of getting up the stairs. The pace was excruciatingly slow. I kept up some meaningless banter as if this was perfectly normal, and it was, for her.

#

The wreck, which totaled the car in which Ally was riding, took place when she was 13. A drunk driver T-boned the passenger side of the vehicle. The woman behind

the wheel received only minor injuries; Ally took the brunt of the impact. Although Ally called this woman her aunt, she wasn't. She was not related to Ally, she was the in the family with whom Ally was living. This family never adopted her. Why she was living with them was a question for which Ally had no answer because nobody had ever given her an explanation.

The father was the only person Ally seemed to have an emotional bond with. She remembered him coming to visit her in the hospital. He'd sit by her bed, holding her hand, keening, "Akela, Akela," Ally's given name. The sound of his voice coaxed her back from whatever netherworld she had been cast into.

For a long time, her doctors thought she wouldn't make it. Her recuperation was counted in years, not days or even months. Finally, after many operations and lots of physical therapy, she was able to walk again, after all the necessary pins had been planted inside her and the muscle grafts completed. The metal brace made her right leg useable, but just barely. That she could walk at all was considered a miracle. From this time on, Ally would have what she called her "good" leg and her "bad" leg. By the time I met her, almost two decades after the accident, the muscles in her right leg had atrophied, deflating her thigh to the size of a child's.

I thought of Ally walking up her stairwell when it was raining, wind whipping around it, snow and ice making the steps slippery. Of heavy groceries—bags of sugar and flour—and bulky items, like packages of toilet paper and paper towels. All the stuff we move in and out of our house in the course of a month. Things too big and cumbersome to fit in a backpack. And her canes ... how did she hoist them up when

someone wasn't with her? Did she tuck them in the belt of her jeans? Wedge them under the flap of her backpack? When I asked Ally how she carried stuff, her answer was Drew. It was the first time I realized that he was more than just a carefree boy. Without him, Ally could not live in her third-floor walk up.

#

Drew was like a pinball in motion. He liked to eat and watch TV and mess around on the computer like other teenagers, and of course he slept, sometimes. But when he wasn't sleeping or eating or in front of a screen, he was goofing around, entertaining anyone who happened to be within earshot, and usually bouncing all over the place. He didn't walk, he bounded forward on his toes. My son—thoughtful and deliberate—was on the Waterwolves because he needed more movement. Drew was on the team to work off steam. His energy was matched by boundless enthusiasm for just about everything, including his mom.

When I first met him, he looked me in the eye and said, "Hi, Linda!" No hesitation whatsoever. While I had to coach Blake to look at people and smile when introduced, Drew exhibited none of the reticence so many adolescents showed around adults. Most of my son's friends called me "Mrs. Prather," which wasn't technically correct. I had kept my maiden name, which made me "Ms. Prather," but I never really cared enough to correct anyone. If they called me Prather and not Johnson, my husband's surname, they were more-or-less correct, and that was good enough for me. Ally had introduced me as Linda, so I would always be Linda to Drew.

At twelve years old, Drew had light eyes, a shock of brown hair, and a belief in his mom that was unconditional. “ My mom knows that,” he told me confidently when I asked what to buy Blake for Waterwolves practice. It turned out Ally was just as confused by the long and perplexing list of swim gear that Waterwolves parents were given at the beginning of swim season. Her solution was to buy Drew everything, mine was to buy Blake flippers and a kickboard, the things I had actually seen the team using.

I thought it might be fun to carpool with Drew and Ally to swim meets. Although their apartment wasn't near us, they did live near a major thoroughfare, and Jeff and I were happy to drive the two of them along with Blake. On the appointed Saturday, as we were walking out the door to pick them up, Ally called, sounding harried and abrupt. Drew was finishing a project at his middle school; they'd go to the meet on their own.

The meet was being held at Madera, a private girl's school in McLean not too far from our house. Drew missed the opening heat. His absence from his assigned starting block was noticeable at least to me, and no doubt to his coach. Finally, over an hour into the meet, Drew snuck into the swimmers' bullpen. He dropped his bag and hustled to his assigned lane, tugging on his goggles as he mounted the block. I looked around for Ally. She was sitting in the very top row of bleachers. When the meet was over, I walked over and said hello, still perplexed by what had happened to them. Ally seemed evasive on the subject. These things happen, I told myself, maybe more to Ally than others, although I hoped not.

#

Ally revealed her background to me in bits and pieces, leaving me to put it in order and try to make sense of it. She came to the U.S. with a family who had lived overseas. She did not remember her parents and was told by the people who raised her that they had both died when she was an infant.

She knew Farsi, so she may have been born in the Middle East. The people with whom she spent her adolescence were of Persian ancestry, although they emigrated to the US from France. They were a different family from the one Ally spent her childhood with, who were stationed at a host of military bases overseas. Both families had careers in the French service which may be how they knew each other.

Neither family adopted her, however, and by the time Ally was old enough to do housework, she was treated more like a maid than a daughter. Her pseudo-parents sent her to a public high school in Northern Virginia like their biological daughter and two sons, but Ally's primary responsibility was to cook and keep house for them. Worse than the housework was the verbal abuse: the mother and siblings constantly denigrating her, never letting her forget she was not really part of their family.

After her car accident, Ally missed a lot of school but managed to get her high school degree, or the equivalent. She escaped from home as soon as she could by marrying John Harmon, fresh out of the Army. "Aliyeh" became "Ally" about the time she changed her surname to her husband's, although she still went by her given name officially. When I asked why she preferred Ally, she said the kids in high school used to call her Tequila. I could never figure out if the nickname was meant to be some kind of racial slur, a reference to her immigrant status, or something else entirely.

Then Drew was born. It's hard to have a baby and not marvel at your body. No matter how imperfect it is, it has somehow made something that graces perfection. I think Ally was especially thrilled that her body, which had been mangled so badly, was able to give her a child of her own. Now she was surrounded by people who loved her, and she was happy with John for a while. But her new life dissolved after only a couple of years when she came home and found John snorting cocaine with his friends, the lines of coke laid out on the coffee table while Drew toddled around in a soggy diaper.

Ally could rail against the life that fate had dealt her, but most of the time, she did not. The Ally I befriended seemed reasonably happy, although she had few advantages and experienced some horrific turns of fate. Her life did not have the upward linear narrative that characterized Northern Virginia residents—highly educated, white collar careerists whose parents may have struggled, but who now had the best of everything. With all the affluence around her seemingly out of reach, Ally could still focus on what was good about her life: mainly Drew, but also the little apartment she had made into a home.

“Come to my house for dinner. I make you my special meatball.”

“Why don't we meet somewhere? We'll treat you and Drew to brunch or dinner.”

“Linda, you done that too many times. Now it's my turn. You have to come, Linda. How 'bout Saturday? Are you and Jeff free Saturday night?”

“I don't think we have anything going on, but I'll have to check with Jeff.”

“I see you Saturday. Jeff like meatball?”

“Yes, but let me make sure we can make it.”

“What else you like? You like rice?”

“Yes, but—”

“Come over at 5:30.”

“How about six? Let me call to confirm—”

“See you at six.”

Jeff, Blake, and I showed up at Ally’s on the assigned evening. Blake immediately disappeared into Drew’s bedroom to play video games with him. I could hear them laughing and talking, and I was happy they got along well even though, separated by two-and-a-half years, they weren’t close friends. Jeff took a place on the couch in front of the TV, entranced by a soccer game.

Ally had set a beautiful table using her Fiesta ware. I sat in a little nook off the kitchen, examining her large breakfast full of dishes and glassware. She had held various jobs over the years: translating for the police department, working at a nursing home, manning a switchboard, and the few times she had been flush, she treated herself to some china or a ring.

She was a good cook; not surprising, considering she had been the unpaid chief for the family she grew up with. Now, she loved to show off her culinary skills, although I gathered she rarely had the opportunity to cook for anyone other than Drew. Her kitchen was a galley, with the sink on one side and the stove and refrigerator directly across. Its narrowness enabled her to move with ease, using the counters instead of her canes for support. She insisted I chat with her instead of helping with the meal. I’m not sure I would have fit in the kitchen with her, but Ally didn’t need any help. She had no

problem hoisting an enormous pot of rice off the stove with one hand and stirring it with the other.

I thought of my counters when I cooked, everything covered with drips and splashes, dirty pots spilling out of the sink. A certain amount of swearing was expected by my husband and son whenever I prepared dinner from scratch, but Ally laid out the elaborate meal with ease. Then the four of us squeezed around her dining room table and started eating, Ally insisting we not wait for her. When she finally did sit down, she insisted that we eat some more.

I offered to bring wine. Ally didn't say anything, so Jeff and I showed up with a bottle. All of our friends drank wine. Asking Ally if she drank never even occurred to me. She found a couple of small glasses and insisted we open the bottle, but didn't touch any herself. I volunteered to do the dishes, but Ally wouldn't hear of it. That evening, we left toting most of our wine along with a couple of foil-wrapped paper plates full of leftovers.

The evening had gone fairly well, although the lapses in conversation became more pronounced after swimming, school, and the boys' futures were covered. There was Ally's comment about men being worthless—probably a reference to her ex or the philandering spouse of another mom we both knew. It was the sort of thing I would have laughed at if we were sitting around the pool at the Y, but Jeff and the boys, who would soon be men, were there.

“Except these fine fellas here!” I said, covering her gaffe. I didn’t like to think of her deriding men, or even her ex-husband, who was not a fine fellow, around her impressionable son.

For Jeff and me, the restaurant meals we had with Drew and Ally were easier. We usually met them at Reston Town Center, halfway between our homes. The boys could order their favorite—cheeseburgers and fries—and Jeff and I could order a mimosa or a glass of wine without imposing a bottle. There was the tussle over the check, but we were usually able to retrieve it, Ally protesting, Jeff and I relieved that she didn’t have to fit a restaurant meal into what we knew was a tight budget. Then the boys would go to the Apple store and check out the latest electronics while Ally and I window-shopped and chatted on our own. Sometimes something would happen that seemed meaningless at the time, but in hindsight, was a sign. Like the time Drew revealed to Jeff that he had a girlfriend.

Drew was now thirteen years old, so it was hardly surprising that he was interested in girls. I had seen him try talk to a few at Waterwolves practice. But what was strange was where Drew chose to make his revelation: in the men’s room of a bistro, out of earshot of Ally, me, and Blake. Jeff had excused himself from the table, then Drew did the same a few moments later. I didn’t realize he was intentionally following Jeff. He and Drew weren’t particularly close, but it was as if Drew was dying to tell a man about this new development. Perhaps he wanted to tell the person least likely to tell his mother. By now, Drew was putting off his homework, at least some of it. I knew

Ally wanted more of his attention focused on his classes. She considered girls a distraction from what was most important—first school, then swimming and Boy Scouts.

“These teachers, they don’t do nothing,” Ally lamented, recounting a meeting at his middle school. She had somehow managed to get Drew’s principal, counselor, and teachers to sit down in the same room with her, a feat I didn’t think was possible, considering the bureaucracy of the Fairfax School system, the tenth largest in the country. Ally was hoping that together, they could change Drew’s academic trajectory. I understood her concern, but when I asked what she thought Drew’s teachers could do that she could not, she had no answer.

At the time, Drew’s confession to Jeff and his slacking off at school were totally unrelated events, at least in my mind. It didn’t even cross my mind to mention it to Ally. It had been made to Jeff privately, and it seemed totally innocuous. Drew still seemed more or less willing to play the role she expected him to play: the smart, outgoing, and energetic golden boy who had been chosen to attend a magnet grade school.

Now he was on his way to Chantilly High School, a better school academically than the high school he was supposed to go to. Ally had managed to get him in Chantilly by lobbying the school administration, calling administrator after administrator until someone finally said “yes.” I had been told by more than one parent that, on this issue, there was no leeway: letting parents change their kid’s assigned school could only lead to anarchy and chaos in the minds of those who ran the system. But amazingly, Ally had done just that. When she told me about her victory, I remember thinking that I gave in

too easily; I should fight harder for what I believed in. This was the Ally that I admired: the woman who was willing to give her all to achieve a goal.

#

Even when Drew was underperforming in school, he still had Boy Scouts. Drew was a member of a troupe near his home. They were an active bunch that hiked and camped and did a lot of outdoorsy things, the kind of activities that Drew loved. Scouts gave Drew access to brothers he didn't have and dads who had not abdicated their familial duty. Ally revered the organization and took their platitudes of honoring God and country as seriously as any scout or scout leader.

When she talked about Drew's scouting forays, Ally always asked why Blake was not a scout. At times like this, I wondered if she knew my son at all. Blake didn't like loud noise and needed his time alone. Boisterous as he was when he was younger, he had never wanted a birthday party with more than six kids—that was about all he could handle. Now in middle school, he had a couple of friends he palled around with. They were not the class clowns nor the boys whose names girls penciled dreamily on their notebooks. These were indoor guys who played card games inspired by Japanese anime. In other words, the nerdy boys. Jeff and I saw nothing wrong with being a nerd: my husband had appeared regularly on his high school's football field, not as the quarterback, but as the trombone player in marching band. I edited my high school's newspaper, *Tower Echoes*, whose corny name was indicative of its status at my high school. Jeff and I were living examples that being cool had nothing to do with being

happy or successful as an adult. I told Blake that a few good friends were all anyone needed.

Scouts wasn't cool either, but it was definitely a brotherhood. My vision of scouting came from having three brothers and knowing how they behaved *en masse*. I imagined a lot of arm punching during meetings. On overnights, a fair amount of roughhousing, with the kind-but-no-nonsense scout leader telling the boys to cut it out just before their good-natured wrestling turned into actual fighting. It was the sort of thing Blake would hate.

Ally would finish her praise of scouting by telling me how many Congressmen had been Scouts. I did not say that, considering the state of Congress, it was hardly an incentive to join. Still, I could see the benefit of scouting for Drew, who loved the outdoors and had no father figure in his life.

Somehow, Ally had managed to find the money to send Drew camping with the troop in Colorado. But there was always somewhere else they were going. By now, I knew the bulk of Ally's income came from public assistance. Her husband owed her thousands of dollars in child support—money that she had little hope of seeing, considering his sporadic employment history. She was a scrimper and a saver so she managed to live fairly well, but Drew seemed to live much better. I could understand Ally wanting to give her son a life similar to the boys in the troop—those with fathers and two incomes—but it was more than that. It was as if she had to prove herself worthy of her golden boy.

“This snorkeling trip to Florida is killing me,” she lamented one day. By now, I knew “killing me” meant financially.

“Then why are you sending Drew?” I replied.

“He’s begging to go.”

“Of course he wants to go. Who wouldn’t want to go snorkeling in Florida? Sign me up right now! But I’m not snorkeling anytime soon, and *you’ve* never been to Florida, Ally. For what this trip is costing, the two of you could vacation for a week down there.

“All the other boys are going.”

“I can’t believe all the parents in Drew’s troop are coughing up money for this trip. How many Boy Scouts in Virginia get a badge in snorkeling, anyway?”

I was trying to give Ally my version of tough love, but I realized this trip was as much about Ally’s self-esteem as it was about Drew. During his brief tenure as a sax player in his middle school’s marching band, Ally had insisted on buying him a uniform. Before that, she had bought a piano to accommodate Drew’s short-lived interest in learning to play one. To make the payments for this Florida trip, I had no idea if she was denying herself things she needed, but it certainly seemed plausible.

Drew had never cried in front of me before but, for some reason, I pictured him bursting into tears if he could not go. Once Ally refused to buy him an expensive pair of sneakers. She told me he started crying in the middle of the shoe store, something no teenager would resort to. Drew refused to look at the cheaper brands and Ally didn’t know what to do, so she capitulated.

“Maybe I could take out a loan,” Ally mused.

“Using what for collateral? Your ten-year-old car? No bank’s going to give you a loan for a vacation, Ally. Drew will survive if he stays home.”

The conversation was certainly more blunt than our chatty bench talk at the Y. A chill descended on our friendship that had a lot to do with Ally’s quixotic way of not showing up and insisting we do everything her way. Things came to a head one hot June morning when Jeff, Blake, and I tried to find the designated picnic site for a birthday cookout—another event that Ally railroaded me into even though it wasn’t her birthday, it was mine. Still, I talked Jeff and Blake into going. Jeff found the directions to Bull Run Park and we took the main road to Centreville, a town that bordered it. We could see the big patch of green right in front of us just as the map showed, but we could not find the park entrance. It was not where it logically should have been. Jeff was getting more and more frustrated, driving around the periphery, looking for something that had to be there, somewhere, while from the back seat, Blake kept complaining that he was starving.

I alternated feeling sorry for myself, then angry that I had somehow gotten sucked into this ill-fated outing. After twenty minutes of searching, I called Ally and told her we were giving up. I felt guilty about canceling when they were already at the site, waiting for us in the noonday sun.

Then I thought of the archery lessons I had arranged for Blake and Drew in Manassas. The outing was scheduled a few months before, over Drew and Blake’s spring break. It wasn’t easy finding a place that would give the boys a private lesson, but I

finally found one in Manassas. The morning of the outing, I called Ally and asked her to meet me at the mall so that I wouldn't have to drive all the way to their house, then circle back toward Manassas. She refused, curtly, putting an end to the outing, and leaving my son in tears. After that time, I vowed I would never plan on meeting her anywhere.

And here I was, painfully aware that I was letting her take advantage of me, mainly because I had everything and she did not. I made it easy for her not to follow through on her commitments by never being honest with her. But my privileged guilt, which had made our relationship way too one-sided, wasn't the only problem: the same single-mindedness that had gotten Drew into the high school of her choosing could also leave her deaf to others, including me. Finally, there was the dynamic she was unwittingly setting up with Drew, where she did all the giving and Drew did all the taking. Witnessing it made me angry on her behalf but also anxious. I had this feeling that somewhere along the way, it was going to backfire.

#

Drew's freshman year came and went without us seeing Ally and Drew. He no longer swam with the Waterwolves, so there was no bumping into them at the Y. Yet I couldn't stop thinking about her. Then one day, I got a friendly email from Ally. On impulse, I invited her and Drew to join us for brunch the following Sunday. I had no plans to renew our friendship as it had been, but I still cared about her. I was sorry about the abrupt way things had ended between us, and I wanted her to know that if she ever needed help, I would be there. When I saw them walk through the door of the restaurant

on time, I was happy that Ally had decided to show, but my expectations didn't go much further than that.

Drew had clearly gone through a growth spurt and he seemed more subdued, almost preoccupied. Maybe adolescence was affecting his personality as well as his height, I thought. He was now a sophomore, with his own group of friends and interests. Things between us were still a little awkward; perhaps Ally had dragged Drew to this brunch, I thought. Over coffee and omelets, I asked Drew about Chantilly High. Neither he nor Ally had much to say about his experiences there. Reading between the lines, I assumed his academic performance had not improved. Blake was in his second year of middle school, and earning straight As. More important than the grades was Blake's sense of accomplishment and his happiness with his teachers, who treated him more like a young adult than a kid. I wasn't about to tout my son's academic performance but I did want to get Blake and Drew talking.

"Blake really likes Thoreau. The teachers are all young and energetic, at least they seem that way to me. Hey Blake, tell Drew that funny thing that Mr. Ayers, your Science teacher, said to you the other day."

"Middle school's a picnic compared to high school, Blake," Drew said abruptly, barely looking up from his cell phone. It was the standard wisdom passed down by jaded high school kids but spoken with an edge by Drew.

We moved onto swimming, a happier topic, and Ally shared how well Drew was doing on his new swim team. The Fish were in a different league than the Waterwolves. They competed with the best teams in the region—the ones that were turning out

Olympic hopefuls, or at least athletic scholarship material. Their coaching was more professional, and they honed techniques designed to turn out winners, according to Ally.

Not surprisingly, the Fish required a lot more practice from their swimmers. Drew was swimming most days after school and getting up at four to practice a couple of mornings a week. With all that swimming, he had started to bulk up, and both Ally and Drew seemed proud of his chiseled arms. I wondered when Drew had time to do his homework or, if after a 5 am practice, he was too tired to crack a book after school.

Ally couldn't grasp why Blake would want to stay on the under-achieving Waterwolves. I talked about the April Fool's practice when all the high school girls showed up in their bikinis instead of their Speedos. It was part of the good-natured kidding that went on between Coach Andrew and his swimmers.

"Coach Andrew's such a good guy. He makes swim practice fun, and that's what Blake needs," I said. I immediately knew I'd made a mistake. I had forgotten that Drew had gotten into an altercation with some kids at a Waterwolves practice the year before. I didn't know the details but Ally thought Andrew had taken the side of the other kids, whose mom happened to be an assistant coach. Shortly after that, Drew joined the Fish.

It was a beautiful day in early fall, and even with the slight awkwardness around our table, the world seemed full of hope. We were surrounded by families fresh from church. Groups of young women laughed and chatted about their jobs and boyfriends. So when Ally tried to sell me on the Fish, I didn't reply that no one in our household would be getting up at four unless the house was on fire.

When I remarked that there were many paths to greatness, not just academic, Ally wouldn't hear of it. It was as if I had just called Drew stupid. Yet we still cared about each other enough to keep our feelings in check. Then Ally told Drew to get her canes. It was a declarative statement: not a request; there was no "please" at the beginning or end. In the confines of the wood-paneled restaurant, Ally's command was hardly audible. Nobody but Ally, Drew, and I heard it, but it kept rattling around my brain: Ally expected Drew to do his duty—to give her the canes. He was doing this and no doubt many other things that caregivers do, not children. Drew handed Ally her canes without a word.

The incident made me ponder but it didn't prepare me for my next meeting with Ally. Two months later, we were sitting across from each other in Starbucks and I was looking at a completely different woman—careworn, her face full of pain and trouble. She had called me that morning with an urgency in her voice I had never heard before. Without Drew, all pretenses were dropped, and I found out that he had gotten his first F. As she had in the past, Ally blamed the teachers, but I wondered if she was even convincing herself at this point. Even worse, the snorkeling trip that Ally had scrimped so hard to afford had gotten her son kicked out of Scouts.

The details of what happened in Florida were secondhand, coming to Ally from Drew and his scoutmaster. Apparently Drew got into a fight with another boy. Drew claimed it was the boy's fault, and the boy's father, who was along as a chaperone, took his son's side. The scoutmaster believed the father, and Drew's scouting career was over, at least for the time being. Perhaps that's why he seemed so subdued at brunch.

Grappling to understand what had happened to her son, I mentioned that Drew had seemed different, not just physically, but emotionally. I had attributed it to maturity.

“Oh, you don’t know Drew,” Ally said, ominously. “There are his friends, they don’t study, and these girls in their short shorts. They throw themselves at boys.”

There had to be more than that, so I pressed Ally further. According to her, Drew had fallen in with the wrong crowd at Chantilly. There were late-night parties supervised by parents who were partiers themselves and saw nothing wrong with their underage kids breaking curfew and drinking; there were girls who snuck around with Drew at movie theatres, doing everything they could to avoid meeting Ally; there was Drew stomping out of the apartment when she told him to stay, Ally kicking Drew out when he mouthed off to her, Drew turning up the car radio to drown out whatever Ally was saying.

Tamer versions of these stories I had heard before, when Drew was in middle school. Then I had thought, “Typical adolescent stuff. Testing the bounds of authority.” Now the drama had been heightened, alarmingly so. I could hardly believe that Drew could treat Ally meanly, yet I knew his relationship with Ally had become adversarial. Also, how frail and tired Ally looked, sitting across from me, barely touching her coffee. Finally, Ally told me what I did not want to know: how Drew had dragged her across the apartment by her hair one morning because he wanted to hang out with his friends before class, and she wanted to check his grades on her computer. How she had called the police because she was afraid of her own son.

Even before this incident, it was clear to Ally that things between them were at the breaking point. Ally realized that she and Drew needed to be separated, at least for a

while. She talked to Drew's former scout leader and made arrangements for Drew to stay with him and his family for a week. Shaken by what I was hearing, I offered to have Drew stay at our house, too.

But it was too late. That night, Ally called me, saying that Drew had been taken away. She was sobbing so violently I could barely understand her, so I rushed over to her apartment, still wearing the clothes I had just worked out in. Reverend Dave was already there. I hadn't met him but I knew he was the minister of the church Ally attended.

I found out that Ally had tried to seek therapy for Drew through Fairfax Family Services, but that she had called the police about Drew's behavior more than once. The calls seemed to be Ally's way of scaring Drew but to the police, they demonstrated a pattern of violence. They notified Child Protective Services, who is required to investigate any family situation the police deem volatile. Two social workers came to Ally's home, and Drew—who was now chronically angry with her—told them that Ally was abusing *him*. That evening, I wasn't sure if Drew had been taken away for his safety or for Ally's.

"Look what my son did to me!" she cried. She had a bruise on her arm that she claimed was from their most recent altercation.

But the bruise was nothing compared to the damage to Ally's self-esteem. As quickly as the car accident had taken away Ally's mobility, Protective Services had taken the only thing she really loved. Reverend Dave and I both knew she shouldn't be left alone, so I offered to stay the night, trying to comfort her as she cried and raged against

the police and the county and most of all the fates, who had brought her, once again, to the brink and left her dangling there.

That night, all I could do was hold her and say, “It’s going to be all right,” over and over, even though I didn’t know it. The only thing I knew for certain was that Ally and Drew had completely derailed. Nobody could have kept it from happening because Ally had been too ashamed to reach out and speak truthfully about what was going on under her own roof.

That night, Drew called Ally from the juvenile lock-up where he had been taken. In the morning, he would be transferred to a group home for boys under the county’s supervision. In a few days, a judge would hear the Harmon case. Under the jurisdiction of the court, Fairfax County Child and Family Services would decide what steps should be taken next. That night, Ally told Drew she loved him and that she was going to get him out, but not now. She couldn’t do anything that evening, even though he was begging her to fix things for him, like she always had. Feeling helpless, she gave the phone to me.

“I know you’re in a place you don’t want to be, Drew, but you’ve got to be strong, for yourself and your mom,” I told the crying boy, who sounded nothing like the confident kid I had come to know. If Drew had any idea of what I was talking about, he gave no sign. Still, I did my best to sound calm and resolute.

That night, Ally insisted I sleep in her bed while she took the couch. Her bedroom was Spartan. Not much more than a bed and a nightstand to fill the large beige space. The only thing on the walls was an old-fashioned photograph, the kind you see for

sale in antique shops. It was a formal portrait of a woman from the neck up, in black and white, set in a walnut oval frame. Ally told me someone had given her the picture, that the woman in the photo was her mother. The woman had dark hair and dark eyes, like Ally. But beyond the coloring, I could see no resemblance.

The woman in the portrait looked off into the distance. The expression on her face was enigmatic, unreadable. I kept staring at it, thinking maybe she could tell me the future, but she chose to give nothing away.

CHAPTER 2

The affidavit was brought before the Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court on December 14, 2011. It was a cold December morning, a week and a day after Drew had been taken from his home. I had driven by the Fairfax courthouse many times, but I didn't even know what the complex was until now. My only time in a working courtroom was when I was chosen for jury duty. Then I was selected because I was impartial—independent, objective, detached, affiliated with no one. Now the plaintiff in this case was my sole reason for attending this hearing. Sitting behind Ally, I was a tangle of emotions, alternating between sympathy and bewilderment, anger and despair. How had her relationship with Drew gotten to the point where a judge and a whole slew of professionals were now required to sort it out? At this point, all I could do was listen.

The affidavit read, in part:

On December 2, 2011, Fairfax County Child Protective Services (CPS) received a referral alleging the physical abuse of Drew Harmon by his mother Aliyeh Harmon. The Report alleged that Drew had been elbowed in his mouth by his mother, causing his lip to bleed.

On December 6, 2011, this social worker (Leslie Summers) conducted an unannounced home visit. By the time this social worker

arrived, Drew had been arrested for assault and had been taken to the less secure shelter. This social worker spoke with Mrs. Harmon who reported that her son had physically assaulted her. She reported that Drew had punched her, pushed her, and dragged her by her hair across the apartment. She also reported that Drew took a pillow and sat on her face in attempts to suffocate her. She denied physically disciplining Drew and stated that she is only physical with him as a means to protect herself.

On December 7, 2011, Drew was released from the less secure shelter into the custody of his mother.

On December 7, 2011, this social worker conducted an emergency removal due to the safety concerns in the home. Drew and his mother appear to have a volatile relationship and have difficulties with appropriately communicating with each other. An Emergency Removal Order was not filed immediately due to this social worker need to complete the affidavit.

“This Social Worker” was Leslie Summers. She delineated the physical altercations in the Harmon household in eight short paragraphs. They told the story of a mother and son who bore almost no relationship to the Drew and Ally I knew. Apparently another social worker, Susan Sweeney from the Department of Family Services, had been trying to work with Drew and Ally for over a year, shortly after Drew entered Chantilly High School. Ally and I had not been in contact at the time, so it didn’t

surprise me that I was not aware of what was going on. Still, I doubted Reverend Dave or any of Ally's acquaintances were either.

It was Susan who first red-flagged the Harmon household. After Drew was arrested for assaulting his mother, she notified the investigative arm of the Department of Family Services (DFS). Leslie Summers interviewed Drew and, seeing faint scratches and bruises on his body, she wrote the Preliminary Removal Order, giving her the authority to remove Drew from his home, pending a judge's after-the-fact approval. Judge Mary McBride signed off on the order with the brisk efficiency of someone who had other cases on her docket.

There were at least a dozen people who witnessed Judge McBride approve the separation in the interests of Drew's safety as well as Ally's. On our side of the courtroom were Ally and Drew and their court-appointed lawyers, one for each of them. Reverend Dave was also there to lend support. On the opposite side sat Adele Almanza, the social worker assigned to the Harmon case, as well as her boss, Fariba Odili. Both were with the Foster Care and Adoption Division of DFS. They shared a bench with Leslie Summers and Margaret Jones, the DFS's lawyer.

Drew's father, who was considered a stakeholder in the outcome of this case, was also at the hearing. John Harmon had a court-appointed lawyer as well. There were also two court-appointed overseers, professionals who were supposed to protect children from a system that could be corrupt, uncaring, or incompetent. The representative from CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) was trained to advocate for children in custody. Attorney Benedict Junco was appointed Drew's guardian ad litem, or "guardian of the

suit.” His job was to give recommendations, independent of any agency, that were in the best interests of Drew, not the system. Counting Benedict, there five lawyers in that courtroom that morning. With the exception of the county’s attorney, they were the background players, the lawyers who managed not to get too involved with their clients, or cause too big a ruckus in the courtroom, in order to dispatch cases as quickly and efficiently as possible.

This hearing ended with the judge announcing there would be a dispositional hearing in two months, after the county had filed a Family Action Plan. At the second hearing, scheduled for February 8, 2012, the county would present the judge with the specifics plan and how it was being executive. It would include counseling and classes for Ally and Drew. A psychiatrist would perform a mental health assessment of both of them. Tentative steps, starting with supervised visits, would be taken to determine whether Ally and Drew were ready to live peacefully under one roof. The Judge asked a few questions about the proposed plan then asked Ally if she understood that the ultimate goal was reunification. She nodded in agreement.

What was going on behind the scenes is at that the stakeholders were forming two sides. There were the defendants—Ally and Drew—who wanted be reunited immediately. Then there was the plaintiff—the county, represented Leslie, Adele, Fariba, and the county’s lawyer—who felt that Drew and Ally needed treatment and training before they could live together again. Considering the life-threatening nature of the accusations in the affidavit, the judge had no choice but to separate them. But once Ally left the courthouse, her thinking seemed to change. A couple of weeks of separation

were enough; Drew had learned his lesson. She had made a “stupid mistake.” Now she and Drew should be allowed to put it all behind them.

According to the affidavit, Ally was the main problem, not Drew. Even though they both claimed physical abuse by the other, Drew was the minor. At this point, I felt I knew them and their problems as well as anyone; it was clear that without treatment for both of them, nothing in the Harmon household would change. Still, no one in that courtroom, save for Reverend Dave and me, was aware of the emotional turmoil Ally was going through. In the county verses the Harmons, my sympathies still lay with her, even though I thought the county was right.

Ally’s ex-husband, John posed a big question mark. Normally, he would have been considered an alternative caregiver for Drew, and would have been written into the action plan. But John had been an absentee parent most of Drew’s life. He was a diminutive, prematurely balding man somewhere in his thirties. I would have overlooked him if Ally hadn’t pointed him out, standing with his court-appointed lawyer outside the courtroom. He and Ally’s relationship had become so adversarial that she was sure he showed up mainly to gloat over her troubles.

My guess was that the only reason John was in the courtroom was that he had been served a summons. He had done jail time for refusing to pay child support—not for Drew but for another child he had fathered out of wedlock—and he couldn’t afford any more trouble with the law. I knew he had insisted on setting up visitations with Drew, yet he hadn’t made it to most of them. At the courthouse, he kept looking at his son with what seemed admiration, although he knew next to nothing about him. Drew was now

six feet two inches tall so maybe John was in awe of Drew's stature. But when John went up to him, Drew broke away, a pained look on his face.

The closest thing to a father figure in Drew's life was Dan Duffy, his scout leader. Dan was the type of man that boys looked up to and parents respected, and Drew and Ally were no exception. I was not surprised that he and his wife, Susan, had been named as possible foster parents for Drew. Although Dan had suspended Drew from Boy Scouts, he was sympathetic to Ally's plight, and both Dan and Susan were fond of Drew.

"He was the only Boy Scout who came up to me after my surgery and asked me how I was doing," Susan Duffy recalled. It was one week after the hearing, and Susan, Ally, Adele, and I were sitting around a table at the FCS offices for what was formally known as a Family Partnership Meeting. Adele, now Ally's liaison with the county, had put together the Family Action Plan, the list of actions approved by Judge McBride that needed to be completed before Ally and Drew could be reunited. Since the Duffys were listed as potential foster parents, one of them was required to be at this meeting.

Like other foster care systems, Fairfax County's seeks family members to be caregivers when children need to be separated from their parents. But the only immediate family Drew had, other than Ally, was his father. Drew knew Tim—he had clearly recognized him at the courthouse—but Ally's hatred of her ex-husband had been passed down to her son. It seemed obvious that a man with a sporadic employment history—who had done drugs and jail time and never bothered to return his son's phone calls or send him a birthday card—was not a suitable parent. Still, DFS was duty-bound to find out if John really was a deadbeat dad or if Ally's rancorousness had forced him

out of the picture. I was never told if Drew's dad was formally scratched off DFS's list or if he declined, but it would have to be someone else. The Duffys were Ally's first choice.

Susan was a well-dressed and -coiffed older woman with a lovely smile. She was also rail thin and fragile looking. It was not hard to believe she had undergone a recent battle with breast cancer. At the meeting, she was doing her best not to seem shocked by some of the accusations leveled at Drew, physical violence that Ally had undoubtedly glossed over when she asked the Duffys to take Drew for a week.

That request had been informal: an agreement between two families. What the Duffys would be undertaking now would be entirely different than the arrangement they had worked out with Ally. Now there was a court-appointed overseer: Fairfax County. Wondering aloud if Drew could go to Oakton High, the school closest to their home, Susan found the answer was no: the county's policy was not to disrupt a foster child's life any more than necessary. Drew would continue to go to his high school. That was the first time I wondered who really made the decisions in a foster care home.

Susan must have been wondering the same thing even before the extensive foster vetting and training process was spelled out. It was time-consuming, demanding, and intrusive—it had to be—and I could feel her pulling further and further away with the explanation of each step. Ally was disappointed when Susan declined, but I had told her I would step in if Susan and Dan decided not to go through with the application. When I said it, I didn't think it would happen, yet my offer wasn't made idly. I had my issues with Ally but I could not turn my back on her. I had come this far with Drew and her, but

somehow, I knew that if I accepted, the most challenging part of my relationship with them was only beginning.

Up to now my husband had been supportive, even though he felt that Ally acted more like a child than an adult, particularly where our friendship was concerned. But he also knew that my relationship with Ally had shifted. I had set friendship aside in favor of helping her. My son was only peripherally aware of what had happened in the Harmon household. Blake was now twelve and going through puberty. He was full of himself and the possibilities that his life held but not mature enough to fully understand the nature of the physical abuse that occurred between Drew and Ally.

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We were not the kind of household that held family meetings. There were just three of us and, if there were matters to be discussed, we talked about them casually over the dinner table. But the week before Christmas, I pitched foster parenting to Jeff and Blake in the living room, a space we usually reserved for company. I don't remember exactly what I said, except, "We talk about being good citizens."

We actually never talked about it, at least not in so many words, but we did try to acknowledge the world beyond our privileged lives that deserved a little of our attention. We did attend an Episcopal Church, but we certainly didn't make a big deal of it. I considered my religious beliefs to be private and, although they centered more on a sense of spirituality than any particular doctrine, I thought of church as a kind of spiritual balm and weekly retreat—a place where I could think about my role in the world. Still, I knew that thinking wasn't enough.

Jeff wasn't as committed as I was but, then again, he couldn't possibly be because he wasn't as involved with Ally and Drew. He was fully aware of the violence that had taken place under their roof but, like me, he saw it as a massive parenting failure rather than a reason to feel uncomfortable about taken Drew in. As supportive as he was, Monday through Friday, from 7:45am until 6pm, Jeff was gone, either commuting or at his job in DC. I was the one who was the full-time caregiver. Still, I knew Jeff would attend foster parent training and do whatever he had to do.

What I really needed from my husband was his patience. Our joke was that if there was a fire at our house, I'd be the one to get everyone out, but Jeff would be the only adult calm enough to call the fire department. I knew Drew was going to be a fire of sorts. He'd require both quick action and more measured reaction. I was confident that, between the two of us, we could make it work.

I couched the foster question to Blake in the guise of having a temporary brother. As an only child, my son had no way of knowing how such a sibling might affect him. He'd never gone to overnight camp. He'd had one sleepover with Drew at Ally's. He was an introvert, and he was certainly aware that Drew was more social—and rowdy.

There was only one time I recall Drew hitting Blake and I didn't consider it serious. The boys were goofing around at the mall, Drew yelling, "Come on, Blake!" every time he took off running. I remember them racing down the stairwell of a parking garage, laughing and yelling, their voices echoing against the concrete walls. Drew was always ahead, since he was the faster and more adventurous of the two. I didn't find out until later that, somewhere along the way, Drew had punched Blake. Blake wasn't happy

about it, so I said something to Ally. I had no way of knowing for sure whether Drew was simply horsing around or whether it was more serious, but I chose to believe the former.

My son had been bullied only once, in fourth grade. It was on a bus ride home from school. A boy in Blake's class taunted my son, then he and his friend ganged up on him. One of the boys punched Blake, and for the first time, my son walked in our front door scared. I knew this boy and my son did not get along, and I didn't like the two on one. So I called the boy's mother and, to her credit, she sent her son over to apologize. The incident with Drew did not seem to have the malicious intent that the bus incident had, nor was Blake's reaction as notable. Drew and Blake were not the best of friends, but they had things in common and generally got along well.

At six feet tall, Blake was now too imposing for bullies. He had started shaving in sixth grade, and looked much older than his age. He was also witty—verbally quick—and not afraid to speak his mind so I knew he could defend himself with words. But I also knew he was not physically aggressive. With Drew in our home, things would be a lot less genteel than they had been. I could see many positives of having Drew around—for one, he would give Blake the opportunity to interact with a boy who was high energy and physical, very different than himself and his friends. But I didn't want Blake to come to resent Drew or, worse yet, me.

“Yeah, sure, as long as he doesn't touch my stuff,” was my son's answer to the Drew question. Then he dashed off to play a video game. Blake didn't care, at least not at that moment. I felt guilty about my son's blithe acceptance of what, in all likelihood,

would not be a blithe. He was not prepared, although the truth was, none of us really could be.

At least Jeff and I were aware of the seriousness of what we were getting into. He was the person to whom I vented my frustrations and who I used as a sounding board, particularly when it came to Drew and Ally. He had not been at the court hearing, but he had read the affidavit, then the Family Action Plan.

Although we took Drew mainly for Ally, there was definitely something in it for us. Foster parenting gave Jeff and me the opportunity to model what being a good citizen really meant, to show Blake that we were willing to put our time and resources, not to mention our hearts and minds, behind our values. In addition to being Ally's supporter and confidant, I would be caring for her son under the auspices of the county. At first, Ally could not thank us enough.

#

Not surprisingly, Ally was not handling her separation from Drew well. After a few weeks, the reality of not having her son around set in. Without Drew, the holidays were a sad and lonely time for her. She talked to Drew almost daily on the phone and was able to visit with him once a week, but only at the DFS offices, with Adele's supervision. She wasn't allowed to go to swim practices or pick Drew up after school.

Ally understood that she and Drew had to complete counseling and Drew had to take an anger management class, but the thing she could not understand is that even after doing everything the county asked, they could delay reunification if they deemed that she and Drew were still a danger to each other. To Ally, that made the reunification plan

seem totally arbitrary—at the whim of Adele. The real problem was that she was not in charge anymore. Ever since she had escaped her childhood home, safety meant being in control, so Ally married, left her husband, and raised her son all on her own—for better or for worse. Now the county had ripped Drew from her and, since they would not give her a definitive date when she could have them back, they became the enemy.

Sometimes she lamented, “How could my son do this to me?” Often, she wailed, “I just want Drew back.” The events that led to Drew being taken away seemed to whirl around in her head, with Ally always finding somebody to blame. Usually it was a social worker.

“You understand why they took him, right?” I said.

“I know I made mistakes; now I want him back.”

At that moment, I thought about the affidavit that claimed Ally had bloodied her son’s lip. In it, Drew stated that he was afraid of her. Ally told me, and anyone else that would listen, that she never struck Drew except to defend herself. I knew her upper body was strong, and her canes could be used as weapons. But take them away, and you could knock her over like a cardboard cutout.

“Ally, the county’s not trying to punish you,” I said, “they’re trying to keep you and Drew safe. Remember how scared you were when we met for coffee that morning? You were so afraid that Drew might do something that would ruin his life forever.”

“I just want my son.”

In her mind, she had made a crucial error by enlisting the county’s help, then calling the police. Now she was being unjustly punished for it. Still, Ally’s anger at the

county was not completely without merit. The two perceived villains were Leslie Summers, the investigative social worker responsible for taking Drew, and Susan Sweeney, the service provider that was supposed to get Drew the help he needed. The court documents stated that Susan had offered Ally “intensive home-based services, outpatient therapy, Family Intervention Resource and Engagement, a Family Partnership meeting, and Nurturing Parenting classes. It was certainly a long and comprehensive list of services. But according to Ally, all Drew had been given was a counselor he did not like. Ally had asked for someone else and Susan had not fulfilled her request. Ally claimed Susan had dropped the ball on a family intervention meeting and at home counseling.

Leslie’s partner and backup was Nick Caruso, who escorted Drew out of Ally’s apartment. Drew had told Leslie his tale of abuse at Ally’s hands after he spend one night in lock-up for assaulting Ally. I wasn’t exactly sure from the muddled, sometimes contradictory, reports Ally gave me, but I did know this much: after Drew was released, he went to a Fish practice with Ally, where Summers and Caruso had shown up, much to the embarrassment of Ally and Drew. Then the two social workers had tailed mother and son back to their apartment. Summers and Caruso were upset when Ally took a circuitous route home, avoiding the toll road, which she always did to save money. Their assumption was that she was trying to lose them. The fact that Summers and Caruso showed up at practice, confronting Drew and Ally in front of the coaches, parents, and other swimmers, may have led to a particularly antagonistic—perhaps violent—confrontation at their apartment.

I had no way of knowing for sure since the court documents gave only the most basic outline of what had happened that evening. I felt Summers and Caruso had done what they had to do, but in a manner that was unnecessarily, maybe even unwittingly, cruel. Ally's anger was fueled by the lack of anything constructive to keep her occupied. Drew wasn't around, and not only couldn't she take him to swim practices, she couldn't watch him practice, which had always been part of her daily routine. She had been going to water aerobics at the Y to help strengthen her leg, but now she refused to attend classes. All she wanted to do was sit by the phone, waiting for some new development in her case.

Used to cooking for two, she wasn't eating. Dark circles rimmed her eyes. I treated her as someone in mourning, for she was. At first, I came by every day or so with a bag of her favorite cookies or a carton of soup, sometimes a plant or flowers. I tried to get her to eat something with me while I listened to her moan and accuse. Ally never really acknowledged that she and Drew had initiated the sequence of events that led to him being taken away, which gave me pause. I wasn't sure how she could learn to parent Drew better if she refused to admit past mistakes.

Almost immediately, she formed an aversion to the group home where Drew was staying. She had met Mark Gerstein, the young man who managed the home, at the second court date. Mark was bright and affable. If I had to guess, I'd say he had majored in social work in college and really enjoyed the challenge of working with wayward boys. Ally admitted that Mark seemed nice enough, but she knew the boys at the home

had arrest records, many involving drugs. I did not say that Drew would have an arrest record as well if she had not dropped charges against him.

As for the drugs, Ally was convinced these boys brought pot and pills into the home. Drew was not about to clear up this misconception. He was also not above exaggerating or even lying about the circumstances at the home. According to him, the boys were always fighting and the one computer that he needed to do his homework never worked. He told Ally that the weekend caregivers took the boys to an R-rated movie. Doors could not be locked so stealing was rampant. Every time Drew called Ally, he offered some new story then he'd admonish her for not getting him out. Ally chose to take Drew's descriptions verbatim. She would become outraged at the way the home was being run, calling Adele, Adele's boss, Drew's guardian ad litem, and me. That took up some of her time but it only intensified her anger.

#

In January the therapy started. Ally was assigned to a therapist named Patty Falone. Drew was going to see Howard Cornish who managed the Youth and Family Services Division for the Northwest Center for Community Health. Howard was held in high esteem by the social workers at DFS. Ally joined Drew every other week for joint sessions with his therapist, which I hoped would help their communication skills.

Much like Ally, Drew refused to acknowledge that his behavior had put him in the home. After only a few weeks there, he confessed to Howard that the claims of physical abuse he had leveled at his mom were all a lie. I wanted to ask him exactly what he thought would happen after he made his accusation, but I never did. Even though I

felt confident that Ally had never touched Drew except to defend herself, I had no idea what had really gone on in their household, and I knew Drew was never going to tell me.

Meanwhile, Jeff and I started the foster parent vetting process. We filled out extensive “tell us about yourself” forms, were interviewed by a social worker at our home, had our doctor certify our good health, and found people to give us references. We started the process of obtaining background checks—local, county, and federal. We set up appointments: to have our home inspected by a social worker and our well water—which we had been drinking for six years—tested for arsenic. It was easy enough for Jeff and me to receive clean bills of health from our doctor and for all three of us to get TB shots. I had no trouble lining up two people who were willing to put in a good word for us. More challenging were the questionnaires we had to fill out.

CPS wanted to know everything about us: what Jeff’s and my childhoods were like, what kind of marriage we had, how we disciplined our son. For me, the real answer as to why I was foster parenting was nuanced and complicated but, knowing the county wanted short and easily digestible answers, that’s what I gave them. They sounded stilted and simplistic to me, even though they were truthful. I wondered if I was shaping my history to match what I thought was their foster parent profile.

Dutifully outlining my family’s background, I wrote, “We were a traditional, middle class family. Both my parents were college-educated.” What my parents had in common were their fathers, who both died when they were young. Also Springfield, Illinois, where they were both born and raised. But my dad grew up wealthy and my

mom grew up on the proverbial wrong side of the tracks. Mom went to University of Iowa on a partial scholarship; dad went to Princeton, then Northwestern Law School.

In Springfield, the railroad ran near the Illinois State Fairground, a stone's throw from the white clapboard house my mom grew up in. Across town was Leland Grove, the neighborhood of gracious homes and wide boulevards, where my dad was raised. In mom's neighborhood, people vied to park the most cars in their yards when the state fair was on. In Dad's, they fed the park's white swans and listened to the carillon concerts at the nearby park.

Even after I outgrew boasting that my family had its own private parking for the fair, which drew everyone in and around Springfield, I knew which grandmother I loved best. My mother's mom gave us hugs along with homemade chocolate chip cookies. Our birthday cakes, which she baked, were as beautiful as the store-bought ones because she learned to make rosettes and write our names in icing. My father's mom set up our college trust funds, no doubt with the chilly efficiency with which she did everything. I was grateful to them both but I knew early on that money could never trump affection.

I noted on the form that I had gone to Catholic school, including an all-girls high school. I chose to stay in the parochial school system long after my parents had given up on it for my brothers, although my loyalty was to my school friends, not to any religious beliefs. I didn't mention the Dominican nuns, who were still plentiful at Sacred Heart Academy when I was in high school. Nor did I list the one incident that brought my Catholicism into direct opposition to my upbringing.

It happened sometime in 1972 or '73. It was my junior year and I was taking Humanities from Sister Leo Mary. Like many of the younger nuns, she was teaching under the heady influence of Vatican II. The most obvious sign of Vatican II was mass was now celebrated in English. Less obvious was the active participation of religious orders in the social issues of the day. Nuns and priests protested and joined marches. Younger nuns went to college, Notre Dame being the school of choice for the Dominicans at Sacred Heart.

Sister LM, who had a degree in history, was one of the smartest. During the Watergate scandal, she dragged an old TV into her classroom, closed us close our dusty books and watch the hearings. She said Watergate was history in the making. She took us to a Jewish synagogue where the rabbi explained the history of his religion. I grew up fully aware that Jesus was a Jew, a fact that seemed to have gotten lost in the bells and smells of mass for many Catholics.

I don't remember how the topic of the Country Club came up in Sister LM's class. Perhaps we were talking about how Nazism took hold in Germany while so many people looked away. But when Sister LM mentioned that the Illini Country Club did not allow Jews, it was as if someone had dropped a large brick on my head. Instead of knocking me out, it made me sit bolt upright. Sister LM became aware that I was a member of a Country Club because my face, which always seemed to betray me, had turned bright red. She didn't directly call me out. She just said, "You know what I mean, Linda," at the end of her little lecture on anti-Semitism.

At that instant, I saw exactly what she meant and it shamed me. Still, Sister LM showed some discretion and mercy. She chose not to question me about my family's apparent bigotry in front of the 30 or so other girls in class, at least one of whom belonged to the club as well. If she had, I have no idea what I would have said. That I was born while my father was playing golf on that course?

For my Dad, the club was his church, wide open and green. On Sunday mornings, while my mom drove us to mass in her wood-paneled Country Squire—the station wagon of choice for suburban moms—my brothers and I vied to be the first to spot my dad on the golf course. Ever watchful as we barreled down Illini Road, which separated the front of the course from the back, we were on the lookout for him. Whoever saw Dad first shouted, “There he is!” Then my mom would honk her horn as my dad raised his club, waving it in the air as a kind of benediction.

It was no accident that our house was built on the sixth fairway of the Club's golf course. For my Dad, golf and the Club were one and the same. Still, I could not believe my parents—who were big on community involvement and open-minded enough to subscribe to the Chicago Democratic newspaper as well as the local Republican rag—could be bigots. They may have been a little more conservative socially than they were politically, since I knew they had voted for plenty of democrats. Still, how could they belong to a club so blatantly discriminatory?

Then there was the Betty Hurwitz conundrum. Mrs. Hurwitz lived in the neighborhood across the road from our house. I didn't exactly know how she fit into my parents' busy social orbit, or how I knew she and her husband Ralph were Jewish.

Perhaps Betty belonged to the Junior League, the Art Association, or the League of Women Voters, like my mom. What I do know is that Betty and Ralph had come to my parents' cocktail parties. How could mom and dad square the discrimination practiced by their club with inviting the Hurwitzes to their home?

I had always hated the Illini but I hated it because I wasn't good at golf or tennis, the country club sports my parents forced me to play. Also, I was scared of the mean girl who always seemed to be hanging around the pool. I was certainly aware that the only people of color at Illini—named after a tribe native to Illinois—were the waiters and maintenance crew. Until then, I had never bothered to consciously think about what it meant. None of my close friends, the daughters of more working-class families, belonged, so I realized that members were among Springfield's privileged. But now I had a good reason to hate it and I said so, maybe at dinner one evening. If my parents had any response, it was probably something about other people, not *them*, keeping Jews out of the Club. Whatever it was, it was too opaque, too unsatisfying, to remember.

Filling out the County's forms, I thought of other stories, but I didn't write any of them down. They didn't fit the questions being asked, or were too long and complicated for the space allotted. None of them had anything to do with becoming a foster parent, at least not directly. Yet somehow, maybe they all did. When I was younger, I like to pretend that I had outgrown my upbringing, shaking it off, then metamorphosing into my true self. At age 55, with several decades between me and my adolescence, I somehow felt more connected to my upbringing than ever. The circumstances of my life and its events, big and small, had made me the person I was.

#

We became “specials,” my husband and I. That was the name given to us by the Fairfax County Department of Family Services (DFS). We had agreed to become foster parents not for just any child but for a particular one. Jeff and I would be caregivers for Drew until he and his mom could be reunited.

The qualification process had its own set of players. Ruth Berman was the social worker who interviewed Jeff and me. She was 60-ish and nice in a generic kind of way. Ruth had to be the kind of person you would welcome into your home, because that’s where the interview had to take place. Her report was called a home study and her job was not just to talk to us but also to scope us out as graciously as possible.

Ruth’s report was the stamp of approval that DFS needed to continue the foster care process with us. But even then, I recognized that approval was a two-way street: we were free to pull out any step of the way as well. So Ruth had to subliminally sell us on foster parenting, or at least not put us off. She did that by being as accommodating and understanding as possible, while keeping a feeler out for potential red flags. She ended our meeting by telling me she was available if I ever needed someone to talk to. I didn’t know if she was just being polite but a few months later, I would take her up on the offer.

When foster parent class started in January, we were too busy to talk to anyone. We met for five consecutive Thursday evenings in a nondescript room in one of the county’s office buildings. Two seven-hour Saturday sessions were thrown in for a total commitment of just over 22 hours. The class was a semester’s worth of college crammed into five weeks.

I remember very little about the classes themselves, except they were taught by three women: Sheila, Daisy, and Valerie. Their last names now allude me, and much of what they discussed didn't apply to us: we weren't taking in little children, those who had special needs, or children of a different race. Because we knew the birth mother, our relationship with the biological parent had already been established.

Valerie was not a social worker but an actual foster mom. Somehow she had managed to care for multiple children while holding down a full-time job as an event planner. I don't remember any of the takeaways from Valerie's stories about her life as a foster parent, except one: she was unflappable. Perhaps the most important trait that a foster parent could have was unflappability. Valerie was nonchalant about it. She didn't give her unflappability any superpower status; it was just something she had learned to do. If she had any credo it was: If I can do it, you can, too. I had no doubt Valerie was a better person than me. Still, I wasn't the only one in the room who took comfort in her belief in us.

In addition to the classes, each couple received a massive three-ring binder that included a mindboggling array of information from organizations such as the NAIC (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse), FCFAA (Fairfax County Foster Care & Adoption Association), and Families Adopting in Response (FAIR).

The first article was entitled "The Adoption Journey," from a publication called *Fostering Families Today*. Many of the people in this class were looking for a way to adopt a child without the agonizing wait of going through an adoption agency. Some people would never be able to parent their children in custody, despite the best efforts of

DFS. A few parents simply did not want their children. The law dictated that these wards of the county could not be in the foster care system much longer than a year. If children could not be successfully reunited with their parents, they had to be put up for adoption. Foster parents—particularly those who had formed close bonds with their foster children—were considered good candidates to become their legal parents.

Most foster care trainees considering adoption wanted a baby or maybe a toddler who had not bonded too strongly with their birth parents and were not as damaged by neglect or abuse. Babies rarely came into the foster care system, but younger children did. Compared to adolescents, young children were more “plastic,” the psychological term for still forming mentally, more moldable behaviorally. Although these little kids could still act out, they were less inclined to scream “Fuck you!” when faced with something they didn’t want to do.

What the best outcome for the foster child—birth parent verses foster caregiver—was the subject of much debate among the social service agencies and those involved with foster care. I felt that child rearing was not a game. As a parent, you got one shot at it; you did not get to try repeatedly before you were declared out. Yet many children preferred their birth mom and dad, and seemed to do better with them, even if they were far from the best parents. Nobody—even people who had been involved with the foster care system for decades—seem to have the definitive answer to what was best for the child.

Understandably, CPS wanted foster parents for every child in their care, no matter what age they came into the system. The trainers were upbeat, yet they had to be honest

about the physical and mental toll that abuse or neglect could take. Still, not every child in the system had these problems. One instructional video showed a fictional scenario: a boy whacking every rose bush in his foster parents' garden with a stick. Foster kids could be angry. There were also children whose birth mothers had been involved with drugs; these children often showed developmental delays. But in training, a lot of scenarios seemed to show the worst cases.

It seemed that drugs were one of the main reasons kids ended up in foster care. These parents were not necessarily abusive; oftentimes, they were well-meaning people who loved their children but could not care for them. They were the ones with the best chance of reunification: the ones DFS tried to get back on their feet so they could once again live with their children.

Still, not all the damage that these parents often unwittingly inflicted on their children could be undone. One image stuck in my mind: it was from the class notebook, and it was the result of extreme neglect of a three-year-old child. The photo was a CT scan of a brain that looked like a like shrunken raisin. It was placed next to one that resembled a ripe, healthy grape. To me, it was more shocking than pictures of bruises or broken limbs. Those external injuries could heal but a brain severely damaged during early childhood or pre-birth could never recover completely.

That image made me realize how lucky we were with Drew. I knew teenage boys were the hardest to place in foster homes because of their potential for violence. They imitated behavior they had seen in their home, as did other foster kids. But only adolescent boys had the potentially lethal combination of strength and bad behavior that

had become hardwired, fueled teenage testosterone. I was aware that Drew had acted out with Ally. But I did not believe he would be violent with Jeff, Blake or me. For one thing, he knew we were a much better alternative to the group home, and Drew was smart enough not to screw up a relatively good placement. But even more important, I felt sure that Ally had been a good mom. Even when she was living in her car when Drew was a baby, between leaving her husband and finding an apartment. Ally had steadfastly cared for Drew, taking him to McDonald's to wash him in the sink of the women's room, feeding him the best food she could afford. I had no doubt that Drew had always been loved, and that counted for a great deal.

CHAPTER 3

Ally was not allowed to be alone with Drew, so I drove him to swim practice, therapy sessions, and anger management class after school. At first, the county had its ride service deliver him wherever he needed to be, but the service seemed to be at the center of a lot of bureaucratic snafus. Foster parents complained the drivers showed up late or not at all. In Drew's case, I was never sure how unreliable the drivers really were because early on, he learned to use the service's dodgy reputation to his advantage. He claimed his ride hadn't come, when in reality, he was hanging out with his friends somewhere other than the pick-up spot. The drivers wouldn't get out of their cars to search for Drew. It wasn't their job to hunt down passengers and, unless they had driven Drew before, they had no way of knowing what he looked like.

But I'd hunt down Drew. If I had to, I'd park my car and scope out every place he could be in Chantilly High. I'd even open the door to the men's room wide enough to yell, "Hey, Drew! Are you in there?" If that didn't work, I'd go to the principal's office and talk the assistant into paging him. Harried and overworked, she'd remind me that paging kids who weren't where they were supposed to be wasn't her job. I felt sorry for her, but I'd stare her down until she did it. Drew would eventually show up, sporting some lame excuse. I'd call him on it, although my admonitions didn't seem to trouble him.

The morning ride from the halfway house to Chantilly High was Drew's longest—at least 45 minutes. It took him across the county at the beginning of morning rush. But going to school was never a problem for Drew, so neither was getting him there. If the driver didn't show, house manager Mark could usually take him to school.

Drew was now failing several of his classes, but that didn't stop him from liking school: it was the place he hung out with friends. In fact, he liked to get there early to pal around with his buddies before first bell. He'd nap or text through his classes, then catch up with his pals for as long as he could after school.

That made picking him up problematic. Final bell meant an end to fun and the beginning of work, whether it was with his therapist or the boys in anger management class. After school, Drew went from being a carefree sophomore to a ward of the county, so it wasn't surprising that he was declared AWOL several times. He thought nothing of standing up his therapist, seemingly unaware that if he missed too many sessions, he risked being reunited with his mom. I knew I'd get a frantic phone call from Ally if he didn't show for an appointment. It was easier just to take him where he needed to be.

Once, when I was driving him to swim practice, he ate some crackers he found moldering in the bottom of my glove compartment. I told him they were stale, that I had no idea how long they had been there, that I would buy him something from the vending machine once we got to the rec center. But I had taken an unfamiliar route to practice and now we were lost. Drew grew hungrier by the minute, so hungry that he ate the crushed crackers, ripping open the cellophane packet and dumping the crumbly bits into his mouth. Then he mimed choking to death.

“I told you they were stale, Drew.”

“Bleeech—these crackers are terrible!”

“Why did you eat them?”

“I’m starving.”

“Spit them out!”

Drew stuck his head out the window like a dog excited by a ride in the car, except he was spitting into the wind, yelling about cracker poisoning to the passing motorists. I couldn’t help but laugh. Perhaps a therapeutic concoction of clear expectations mixed with tolerance for his crazy hijinks could somehow help this boy who sometimes seemed completely out of anybody’s reach.

Every time Drew tucked himself in the front seat of my car, I was reminded how big he was. My son, who was now in eighth grade, was almost as tall but he still rode in back, considered the safest place for kids. Drew knew I was not his friend, particularly now that I was training to be his foster mom. Yet he seemed to think he could talk to me. One of his biggest passions was dub-step, beat-heavy music that sounds a lot like hip-hop to me. Drew did his best to explain it, playing it for me on his iPod. I really liked the way he wanted to share his interests, but the talk was always one way. Whenever I tried to broach school, the halfway house, his mom, or anything he didn’t want to talk about, he’d change the subject or simply not answer. Still, I was relieved that he seemed his happy, energetic self, at least riding with me.

Other than swim practice, the place I took Drew most were the DFS office in Reston. That was where Drew’s anger management classes were held and where he saw

his psychologist, Howard Cornish. It's where Adele Almanza, Ally and Drew's caseworker, supervised their visits, which were part of the county's Family Action Plan.

It was the end of January 2011 and Drew had been in the group home for over a month. Once in a while, I drove him to Ally's apartment to pick up clothes or something he needed. Since Drew wasn't allowed to be alone with Ally, I'd escort him in, chatting with Ally while he rummaged around and found what wanted. Adele knew about these fly-by visits. One day, she asked me if I wouldn't mind supervising a formal visitation between Ally and Drew. She was now comfortable with them meeting at their apartment, which was hardly neutral ground, considering what had happened there. I didn't mind the extra time it required because I thought it might give me some insight into their relationship.

Still, the first time I brought Drew to his mom's for a visit, it felt intrusive, like I was spying on a friend. Drew gave Ally a quick hug but seemed ill at ease, as if he couldn't quite settle in. With him there, Ally's apartment seemed smaller, as if the walls were pressing in. Perhaps Drew felt it, too. His solution was to retreat to his bedroom.

So Ally and I sat down at her dining room table. I apologized for visiting her under these circumstances. Then I asked about her painful foot. Her orthopedic surgeon, who was in Charlottesville at the University of Virginia Medical Center, was advising another operation. I thought this might be a good time, since Drew was not at home, but Ally would not consider the procedure until Drew was back with her.

Finally, Ally called Drew, asking him to come and sit with us. Adele had told me that during the visitations she supervised, their conversations always fell into a familiar

pattern. Ally would tell Drew how much she missed him, then express her outrage at the county for taking away her son. As if on cue, Drew would pipe up about the awfulness of the group home. When Ally changed the subject to Drew's classes, asking why he wasn't doing better in school, he would clam up. Then she'd start nagging, talking at him instead of to him. Drew would tell her that he couldn't study; the halfway house was too noisy, the computers didn't work, or he wasn't getting his assignments. Ally always fell for the bait and another round of blaming the county would ensue. It was apparent to Adele that Drew had become an expert at tuning Ally out, and Ally had no idea how to talk to him.

Just when I was thinking that perhaps Drew and Ally weren't ready for this visit, Drew came out of his room and sat next to his mom. She remarked on his recent haircut, and Drew said that Stacey had cut it. I had seen Drew horsing around with Stacey and his other friends after school. She was the girl whose hair made a statement: brightly colored, spiky, and asymmetrical. Stacey wanted to be a hair stylist after high school and she liked to practice on her friends. I knew that Ally considered anybody who was not college-bound to be a bad influence on Drew but her name seemed to trigger something else. I gathered a party had taken place at Stacey's home. Ally had let Drew go to it, which seemed odd, since I knew that in Ally's mind, parties were bad and girls were trouble. Perhaps Ally didn't have any choice; maybe Drew had gone without her permission. I didn't know the details, all I heard were the accusations.

“Stacey's parents told me what went on at that party, Drew. There was drinking—”

“The party was in the basement. They were upstairs the whole time. How could they possibly know?”

“Oh, they know Drew. They had their cameras on.”

“What?”

“They have cameras all over that basement. They could see what was going on.”

“What are you talking about? There were no cameras down there.”

“There were, Drew. You just didn’t see them.”

“So what are you saying? That Stacey’s parents had a surveillance system installed so that they could see if their kid was drinking with her friends? That they couldn’t be bothered to check themselves because. . . . What? They didn’t want to miss their favorite TV show? Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds?”

“That’s what they told me.”

“Just listen to yourself, Mom. Stacey’s parents, whom you’ve never even spoken to—when you dropped me off at her house, you wouldn’t even get out of the car and introduce yourself—these same people told you that they installed a security system, the super secret kind—costing thousands of dollars—so they could sit upstairs, and *watch* underage drinking going on in their basement. Does that make any sense, even to you?”

“Oh, that’s what they did, Drew.”

“I told you, we weren’t drinking.”

“You lie, Drew.”

“Who do you think I learned it from?”

Without waiting to hear Ally's response, Drew got up and quickly headed for the door. He was upset but he was also angry, on the verge of tears. I followed him out, barely saying goodbye to Ally. *Liar* was an ugly accusation, but Ally's story certainly strained credibility. It wasn't the first time I had doubts about something she said. There were her Bono stories, one of which involved being lifted on stage with some other fans during a pivotal moment at a U2 concert. I had no doubt she had gone to the concert; she went to every U2 performance within driving distance. But the rest of the story seemed like the stuff of girlish fantasies.

The court documents illuminated things that Ally had never told me about her deteriorating relationship with Drew. I knew Ally was proud, anxious to fit in, and somehow those lapses seemed like ones of omission, not outright falsehoods. I didn't really know Drew's gang of friends, but I had seen them horsing around after school. They seemed like perfectly normal teenagers; Drew even introduced me to some of them. With that word *liar*, Ally's stories about the bad crowd Drew was hanging around with began to seem suspect. And as the months wore on, so would other things.

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In the first week of February, Ruth Stanton—the only person with whom Ally had maintained a relationship since high school—sent an email to Roger Parkinson, Ally's lawyer. Ally had hired Roger shortly after the first hearing, when she realized that the court appointed attorneys were not about to raise any objections about the way her case was being handled. The email was in preparation for Drew and Ally's second court hearing, scheduled for February 8. In it, Ruth chronicled Ally's history from 1990, the

year she transferred to Woodson High School's special education program, where Ruth had been a teacher and counselor.

Ruth revealed that Ally's household was investigated by a social service agency after she had come to school with bruises on her arms. Ruth had already been working with Ally's family on her spotty attendance record. Ally told Ruth that her poor performance in school was due to her inability to do any homework at home, where she was expected to be the "chef, housekeeper, babysitter, and laborer." Although she did not say so in her email, Ruth had to be the one who called the agency. However, she did not make it clear why the social service investigators had not done more for Ally.

Ally's family may have feigned cooperating with whatever agency did the investigation because Ally was now their meal ticket. She received disability checks, although she had never actually seen one and had no idea how much they were. The moment they arrived in the mail, Ally's family took them. After high school, Ruth enrolled Ally in the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center, a residential school in Fishersville, VA. Living there, she learned secretarial skills, and her disability checks finally became hers. Away from her abusive family, she was able to meet John Harmon and start a life of her own.

Ruth went on to describe what an exemplary mother Ally was. But her admiration did not extend to Drew. "Drew has become a liar and does not respect authority. ... Aliyeh has NOT caused ANY of Drew's violent behaviors. I've witnessed similar behaviors demonstrated by his dad." The implication was that Ally was an exemplary parent who had been saddled with a "bad seed."

On the “nurture versus nature” issue, I don’t think parents can be blamed for all their children’s behavior, particularly as they gain autonomy and peers become more influential. Yet no one could deny that parents have an enormous impact on their kids’ behavior. Ruth pointed out that Ally gave Drew loads of presents at Christmas and tried to give him every advantage. I believed that Ally overindulged Drew, and that her overindulgence was linked to her impoverished upbringing as well as her physical and emotional dependence on Drew. Unwittingly, Ruth had touched upon the undercurrent of their relationship, pointing out some of the reasons that Ally now had problems with her son.

That said, I realized I might be reading too much into Ruth’s characterization of Drew. I knew Ally had asked her to write this letter so that Roger could make a case in for Drew returning home. With that in mind, Ruth painted what she perceived as a glowing picture of Ally’s parenting skills. But how much of what she said did she actually know to be true? One line in particular gave me pause: Ruth described Drew as “an accomplished pianist.”

In Ally’s apartment, languishing under the pass-through between her kitchenette and living room. It stood in mute testimony to Drew’s fleeting interest in music, along with his little-worn band uniform. Yet Ally still insisted that Drew was musical. One evening, she asked Drew to play for us after dinner at her house. Reluctantly, he sat down at the bench, tentatively curling his fingers above the keys. He played a hesitant, mistake-ridden version of “Claire de Lune,” which wasn’t helped by the piano, badly in need of tuning. Knowing that Jeff had a doctorate in music, Ally looked to him for praise,

or at least me kind of encouragement. After an awkward pause, Jeff asked Drew if he had liked playing the bass clarinet in marching band better.

I had no idea how much that upright cost Ally. I was well aware that how my friends spent their money was none of my business, and I really didn't care. But knowing Ally's financial circumstances, I couldn't help but wonder. The piano, not a well-known brand, was used when Ally bought it. Now the instrument was just a place for Drew to throw his coat when he walked in the front door.

I emailed Ruth a couple of weeks later, telling her how worried I was about Ally's emotional state, saying she was becoming "more vindictive, irrational and incoherent." I received this response:

Aliyeh has many traits common to the people who raised AND abused her both physically & verbally, BUT she has never beat or physically harmed Drew. She does yell a lot because he never obeyed her.... Drew is just like his dad—very stubborn & defiant to authority. He is the villain in this whole mess.

Did Ruth really think a happy, well-adjusted 15-year-old boy could suddenly turn into a "villain"? She had worked for many years at a high school. Surely she knew what teenage boys were like. Or had she come to her conclusion about Drew based strictly on what Ally had told her? I had not known Ally nearly as long as Ruth had, but I was now aware that I could not take everything she told me verbatim. Had Ruth ever thought that, in addition to yelling, Ally might have learned how to lie and manipulate people? Even people she loved and respected?

It had to have crossed her mind that Ally lacked parenting skills because she had never been loved or adequately parented herself.

I knew Ruth had done a lot for Ally. She had kept in touch with her since high school and tried to help her when she could. I was grateful to her on Ally's behalf, yet I didn't like her. With her harsh judgment of Drew, Ruth had made me uncomfortably aware of something I kept pushing to the back of my mind: I might have to take sides. As Drew's foster mom, I might have to choose Drew over Ally.

#

Jeff and I completed our foster parent training the first week of February 2011. It had been two months since Drew had been taken away, and we had cleared every hurdle toward the goal of having Drew under our roof except one: the federal background check, which required fingerprinting. We were first fingerprinted in December at the DFS office in Reston. In police procedurals on TV, the process is simple: someone rolls your fingertips over a pad of ink. Then they record the impressions of your whorls, the coils or spirals embedded in your fingertips, on a piece of paper with ten squares, one for each finger and the thumbs on both hands.

Everybody has whorls, but the loops and patterns they form are as unique as a person's DNA. They make an identifiable stamp, but it takes a skilled practitioner to accurately capture it in a fingerprint. Because fingertips are rounded and padded, they need to be rolled carefully from side to side so that the entire tip is imprinted without smudging. The worker who manipulated our fingers had just been trained in the

procedure. Try as she might, she could not get a good impression and a few weeks later, the results were returned by the FBI, labeled unreadable.

As soon as Jeff and I heard, we raced to the nearest police station, where we were fingerprinted electronically, a more accurate means of capturing a good impression. I was angry that this option had not been presented originally. Then again, I knew nothing about the art of fingerprinting. Ally was angrier still. It was her son who was languishing in a group home because we were not fully vetted. There were boys that had been in the home for months because the county had no other options for their care. The only reason Drew was still there was because of this fingerprinting blunder.

In the meantime, Drew and I had our first outing together at Fair Oaks Mall. The county gave him a clothing allowance, and Adele had asked me to help him pick out some things appropriate for school. Ally was supposed to join us but she cancelled at the last minute. I wasn't upset since it seemed Drew had adjusted to his new temporary life far better than she had adjusted to home without him. Then again, Drew still had his buddies at school, while Ally's apartment—which she now left only to go to doctors' appointments and therapy sessions—seemed like an empty shell without him.

Yet sometime before he was taken away, Ally had determined that the best place for Drew was a military academy, a boarding school for troubled boys. Needless to say, Drew was not psyched about the idea of being spirited away from his friends. I was worried about the loan Ally would have to secure to foot the bill, as well as how Drew would adjust to a place so regimented. Perhaps she had used the academy as cudgel and

Drew had snapped at her, so she decided not to show. No matter; we could get the shopping done without her.

The first store Drew dragged me into was Spencer's. It was not well lit and the walls were painted black, giving it that den-of-iniquity vibe that's so appealing to teenagers.

"This is a head shop," I whispered to Drew, trying to be instructive. Drew nodded as if he knew what I was talking about, even though he wasn't born until 1996 and the term hadn't survived past the 70s.

But even though Spencer's had t-shirts and posters and the obligatory darkness, Spencer's wasn't a head shop. If it were, it would have a lava lamp or two, incense, and elaborate hookahs. Instead of beaded curtains and the smell of patchouli, there was track lighting focused on the t-shirts covering the walls. There were posters, but none of the fanciful Peter Max artwork I still associate with bands like the Grateful Dead. While I was taking a trip down memory lane, Drew kept finding stuff he didn't need and asking if I'd buy it for him.

I pulled myself together, remembering that I was at Spencer's to buy Drew clothes, things reimbursable by the county. We focused on the tees, but the ones he favored had sayings I didn't understand and that were possibly offensive. I kept thinking I should have checked the high school dress code before this outing.

Still, a sweet nostalgia swept through me: anti-establishment stores still appealed to kids of the internet generation. I knew that Drew scorned the Gap but that was ok with American Apparel. Yet Spencer's was a different kind of store entirely: the kind where

a teenager shops with his allowance and without his mother. Yet somehow, Drew seemed fine being in Spencer's with me, perhaps because I was the one with the cash. I acted noncommittal when he pointed to tees that were clearly risqué, and I ignored the stripper lingerie and suggestive briefs.

There were rolling papers for sale, so Spencer's carried the lure of drugs as well as sex, but there was also the stench of something else: rank commercialism. So much of the stuff related to TV shows or movies or music that was heavily marketed. I didn't know if things were really less commercial when I was young, but it sure seemed that way. Drew and I bought a couple of dub-step t-shirts with the county's money, and I bought him an inexpensive key chain to hang from his backpack. Then we went to the Cheesecake Factory for burgers and fries.

The Factory would not have been my choice for a meal, but I let Drew choose and he picked it over the food court. He ate like a man deprived of real food for a long time. I asked him what the dinner situation was like at the group home, and he told me the boys took turns cooking. At least he's learning to cook for himself, I thought, but then he added that if the designated chef doesn't feel like making dinner, they order out. I feared that meant way too much pizza and no vegetables, but there was nothing I could do about it. Between bites, Drew filled me in on his upcoming trip to Chicago with his swim team. This national meet—just three days long—was an opportunity to get out town for a long weekend and forget about his problems back home.

After dinner, we stopped at the Papyrus store next door to look at cards. Valentine's Day was fast approaching and Drew now had a girlfriend named Stevie. I

told him that I'd buy a card for him to give her, but that he needed to pick out one for his mom, too. The one he chose for Ally featured a sad-eyed beagle—puzzling, since she had never shown any interest in dogs. I told him I'd mail his mom's card if he addressed it for me; for as many times as I'd been to Ally's apartment, I still didn't know the number. I asked Drew to do it more than once but he steadfastly refused. When Valentine's Day came around, I bought some treats for Ally. There was no point in asking about the dog card. Drew must have stashed it somewhere, thrown it away, or given it to someone else.

#

By the end of February, Drew was coming to our home several evenings a week. He'd eat dinner with Jeff, Blake and me, and I'd try to supervise his homework. Ally's emails during the first two months of 2012 showed signs of a downward spiral, both mentally and emotionally. Yet they always began the same way: thanking me, thanking God for my friendship, telling me she could not thank me enough. Her thanks seemed overblown and I could not help but feel a certain ominousness in all that gratitude.

Two months after the first hearing, the Judge McBride called everybody back to the Fairfax County Courthouse to ensure the Family Action Plan was being executed by DFS. But Ally had a different agenda for this court date: to get the judge to release Drew into her custody. That's why she hired Roger Parkinson as her lawyer. She and Roger had strategized, and Roger drew up a list of talking points. Ruth contributed by sending Ally's detailed history. I worked half-heartedly with them, knowing that Ally and Drew were far from ready to be reunited. Still, the morning of the hearing, Ally asked me if I'd meet her for coffee at the courthouse cafeteria. She was in good spirits,

partially because she was going to see Drew, who was required to be there, but also because she believed that the judge would see that a terrible error had been made in separating them. Drew would be going home with her, she was sure of it.

I was uneasy about Ally's optimism, which I tried gently to tamp down. In her mind, getting Drew back was something she was due. She was paying a professional who had her interests at heart, she had been maligned and mistreated by an uncaring bureaucracy, and she had prayed for her son to be reunited with her. But at this point, I wasn't sure Roger, or anyone except the county, could reunite Ally and Drew.

The objection to Drew being taken away should have been made at the first hearing, when the removal order was approved by Judge McBride. Even then, it would have been difficult to get the judge to reverse the county's decision. Witnessing her in her black robe on her dais in front of the courtroom, she struck me as being brisk, no nonsense and by the book, not open to hearing anything she didn't want to hear. But Ally wasn't thinking about any of the negatives that morning; they would have jinxed what she felt sure was going to happen.

It was time to go up to the courtroom and I led the way, getting on the escalator first. About halfway up, I heard gasps coming from below. I turned around and saw Ally at the foot of the escalator, clinching the rails as she hoisted her body, stiff-armed, above the moving stairs like a gymnast on the parallel bars. She had dropped her canes and the toes of her shoes were grazing the edges of the steps as they traveled up. At that moment I realized that, even though the escalator was moving, the railings were not, since Ally wasn't going anywhere. I hadn't noticed the problem before because I wasn't using the

handrails. When Ally grabbed hold of them, she lost her balance as the steps moved out from under her. Luckily, she knew what to do.

“Somebody help her!” I yelled. The only thing I could do was run to the other side of the escalator and come down. By the time I saw Ally again, two men had lifted her off the railings and handed her canes to her.

“Are you ok?” I asked, but I was the one who was shaken. People were buzzing around us, trying to get the escalator steps turned off, or the handrails turned on. Yet Ally was an oasis of calm as we made our way to the elevator. It wasn’t calmness exactly, it was more like single-mindedness. She was going to court with a mission. She was not going to be a passive victim. She had a lawyer and a game plan and nothing was going to deter her.

At the hearing, all the questions were asked by Judge McBride and almost all the answers were given by DFS’s lawyer, with the social workers occasionally adding a brief explanation. When the judge asked if foster parents were in place, someone upfront indicated that I was in the courtroom. When Judge McBride asked Drew if he was staying at the group home and Roger tried to add something, presumably about its unsuitability for Drew, she quickly shut him down. It was her show and after she was satisfied that the action plan was taking place, she adjourned the hearing. She had no way of knowing that this was a major setback for Ally, but I knew.

I wanted Roger or Ally to say, “But wait—” as the judge got up to leave. Instead, Roger turned to Ally, talking to her intently as she sat stone still, showing no sign of movement, much less leaving. I wanted to talk to Adele so I dragged myself out into the

lobby. I was tired and just beginning to understand why. Taking care of Ally and Drew had gone from an occasional effort to a part-time job, one that I had taken on willingly because I thought of it only in terms of time. I hadn't considered the emotional demands. The weight of those was beginning to take its toll, and Drew wasn't even under my roof yet.

Outside the courtroom, clusters of people were talking but I preferred to wait for Ally by myself. Adele came up to me with a big smile on her face, telling me how happy she was that the judge had not queried DFS about Drew's dad taking him in. The notion of John parenting Drew was such a preposterous idea that I just gaped at her, completely forgetting what I was going to ask. I kept wondering where Ally was.

I noticed a small group had gathered outside the anteroom that separated the courtroom from the lobby. The space—no bigger than a closet—was there, I supposed, for last-minute consultations between lawyers and their clients. But there were at least three people gathered just outside in this little nether land between the courtroom and lobby. Just when my curiosity was about to pull me to the room, Drew appeared from it. Head down, moving swiftly, he singled me out, saying in a low voice, "My mom's banging her head against the wall." I thought he meant metaphorically—that Ally was distraught at the outcome of the hearing and she ducked inside the anteroom to collect herself. I couldn't imagine any other way Drew's statement could be interpreted. So I followed Drew, and there Ally on one side of a small table. Drew, Roger, and a security guard were facing her, looking as if they were trying to talk someone down from a ledge.

But it was too late; the jumper had jumped. Ally was huddled in a corner, her face misshapen from crying, her forehead already starting to show bruising and a bump.

I had gone through the deaths of my mother and father and I had grieved, but I had never witnessed grief like hers. It was outsized emotion, dramatic and public, like something from the Bible or Greek myth where people rend their garments or pluck out their eyes. It was also an embarrassment, inappropriate and over-wrought, as the faces of Drew, Roger, and the guard made clear. It was not just the wrong place and time, it was the wrong culture, the wrong era, yet I knew Ally well enough to know that this outsized grief of hers was real. I was aware that no words could assuage her. That all I could give her was my physical support. So with one arm around her, I guided this woman, crumpled and defeated, out of the anteroom.

Ally's grief formed a kind of lepers' cloak around us. The little groups of lawyers and DFS workers dispersed or moved well out of our wake as we moved slowly across the seemingly endless lobby. I kept my eyes straight ahead, afraid of what I might say if I made eye contact with anyone. At that moment, I hated the judge, the lawyers, the social workers, anybody who had anything to do with the case. The person I hated most, though, was Margaret Jones, the lawyer for DFS. She was the one who had brought up Ally's psychological evaluation at the hearing. The evaluation, which had had been completed by a Dr. Wiley, was part of the county's treatment plan, but Adele was supposed to review it with Ally and me prior to the hearing. Dr. Wiley had noted that, as a result of her accident, Ally had permanent frontal lobe damage.

No doubt Ally knew this. It have been one reason she was so nervous about Dr. Wiley's evaluation. Proud as she was, her brain damage would have been the last thing she wanted anyone else to know. I could think of no reason to mention it in court. Ally was highly functional and Dr. Wiley acknowledged her ability to parent Drew, which seemed the most salient point as far as anyone at the county was concerned.

Now, in addition to not having her son, Ally felt her dignity had been publicly stripped from her. Drew came over to her and I gave them a few moments to say goodbye. Alone, I suddenly remembered what it was that I wanted to ask Adele but, instead of asking it, I hissed, "Why did the lawyer mention Ally's mental incapacity?" Adele stammered that she didn't know. I told her that I had never imagined that the first person to review Dr. Wiley's report would be the DFS lawyer. Adele's only excuse was that the report had not been submitted until immediately before the hearing. Bringing the report to the courthouse to be picked over by Margaret Jones seemed like an egregious breach of protocol, or at best, another lapse in sensitivity, like Caruso and Summers's confrontation of Ally and Drew at a public swimming pool.

Instead, I hurriedly told Adele about what happened in the anteroom. She seemed worried that the judge would hear about it, which might adversely impact her decision to reunite Ally and Drew. Adele had a good point but I felt her concern should have been for Ally at that moment. Drew went back to school and everybody else went back to their offices. The only thing I could do was pile Ally into her car. I didn't think she was in any condition to drive, but she insisted. So I followed her home, praying that nothing would happen to her along the way.

The Saturday after the hearing, Ally sent me an email:

This is killing me you have no idea inside of me is burning like a fire. Drew is not going to move into your home for a very long time, do you know that? I got anger because Adele doesn't want to communicate with me as an adult and is sending messages thru you. ... I was hoping you would question Drew why he is calling me names when I ring him in the Boys home?

... . [Adele] is not doing anything. I was trying to talk to her Friday she was telling me oh I cannot hear you that well Ally. Adele is playing games with me okay it's only February 11, 2012 I have to wait until June do you know how long this is? MY WORLD IS UPSIDE DOWN BLACK AND BLOODY I CANNOT TAKE THIS ANYMORE!

Please take good care of yourself if there is anything I can do to help please let me know. Have a great night.

When I first read this email, I focused on Ally's over-wrought emotional state, which seemed to overshadow everything. Only later was I able to decode it. "Adele is playing games with me" would become a frequent refrain of Ally's. Her way of dealing with Adele's alleged game-playing would be to curse at her, hang up on her, and make doing things—like scheduling meetings—difficult, if not impossible, for her. Drew's name-calling was clearly a learned behavior. Like his lying, it was a coping mechanism he had gotten from Ally.

Adele had given Ally an honest, accurate indication of when she and Drew would be reunited: in four months. Just a little over twelve weeks to complete classes, make some headway with therapists, and figure out a way to live peacefully with her son. Not a lot of time, it seemed to me, but an eternity to Ally, particularly since two months had already passed without Drew. No matter how hard I tried to make her see the necessity of their separation, Ally just couldn't see the logic of it. After learning about Ally's mental disability, I googled "frontal lobe damage," trying to figure out if she refused or simply wasn't able to comprehend what seemed obvious to me. All she knew was that the separation was not on her terms and she could not control what was happening to Drew. That, and the blatant exposure of what Ally had always kept private, sent her into a seemingly bottomless pit of pain and retribution.

With Dr. Wiley's report now part of the court record, Adele needed to go over it as soon as possible with Ally. She wrote:

Ms. Harmon,

I would like to apologize for arranging last week's meeting through Linda. I was under the impression that you did not wish to speak with me so that is why I did not call you. I now understand that you would like for me to schedule all meetings directly with you. I will honor and respect your request. ...

—Adele

And Ally replied:

Dear Adele,

Thank you for understanding my frustrations I am not an angry person. I would like to communicate with you as adult to adult. Also please understand my position I am Drew's mother **No body will make any decisions for Drew as long as I live, Unless I die!** Please forgive me if I make you unhappy.

—Ally

This may have been the last civil communication that Ally exchanged with Adele. On February 15, the three of us met at the DFS office to review Dr. Lynn's report. Our meeting was scheduled immediately after Ally's appointment with her therapist. It started out civilly, with Adele asking Ally if she understood everything Dr. Wiley had written.

Ally nodded but I wondered if she did. In an email before Dr. Wiley's report, she mentioned that words jumped around on the page, which sounded like she had some form of dyslexia. At one time she had expressed interest in becoming a phlebotomist. This seemed like a brilliant choice, for Ally's hands were not only strong, they were deft. I had witnessed them expertly preparing a meal and I had no trouble picturing them drawing blood. But the phlebotomy course was the obstacle. I told her that if she enrolled in it, tutors could get her through the reading and comprehension. Then Drew's troubles took over her life and the subject was dropped.

Now Adele, Ally, and I gathered around a table in a generic meeting room with nothing to distinguish it but one lone poster placed haphazardly on the wall. It was not that ubiquitous kitty performing a pull up with the words "Hang in there" underneath, but

it was almost as trite. Dr. Wiley's report sat in the middle of the table, equidistant from each of us. All of us were staring at it, waiting.

At first, Adele did all the talking. I don't remember exactly what it was that triggered Ally. It may have been Adele's social worker-speaking style—solicitous yet businesslike—regularly punctuated by “Do you understand, Ms. Harmon?”

No more than ten minutes had gone by before Ally claimed the floor. “I want to say something,” she announced. She began going over past and present transgressions. I didn't understand a lot of what she was talking about, which worried me. Ally was pulling in perceived misconduct by DFS that had happened long before this recent incident. As she was building steam, the report was forgotten and her accusations went from disdain for the county's bureaucratic process to a character assassination of Susan Sweeney to a litany of her personal pain.

I remember Ally using the word “injustice,” but as her rant became more wild and nonsensical, “dumbass” was tossed about. Caruso and Summers were dumbasses, and so were a lot of other people. Before long, she was shouting, not making any sense. When she reached the height of her diatribe, her hands became the gaping maw through which her anger finally exploded, and the report became the visible symbol of all that had gone wrong in her life. She grabbed it, shaking. Then she started trying to crumple it up, as if it were a gum wrapper. Only the report was an inch thick, the size of a small phone book.

Ally's skin was olive but in her effort to destroy that report, her hands turned red. It was almost as if I could see her blood coursing through them. I kept my hands folded tightly over my clenching gut. It was all I could do not to put them over my ears. The

words “I don’t want to be here, I don’t want to be here,” kept pulsing through my brain, a mantra that did nothing to stem the horror of watching Ally lose herself, not to grief this time, but to anger. I don’t know if she went on for 10 or 20 minutes, but at a certain point, I couldn’t sit there any longer. I got up and headed for the door.

“I can’t take this anymore,” I said. By then I might have been hyperventilating. All I knew was that I had to get out of there.

“We have to get through this,” Adele said, calmly.

Adele had precipitated Ally’s meltdown at the courthouse and had grossly underreacted afterward. But now her steadfast professionalism drew me back. She was right; we had to get through this. And finally we did. The meeting ended after Ally wore herself out. When she could no longer scream, she had to listen. I felt slightly queasy but also embarrassed, not only for Ally, whom I had always thought of as a good person. Damaged yes, but inherently good.

When a character acts outrageously in a melodrama, “I don’t even know who you are” is the stock response. What it really means is, “I don’t understand or condone your behavior.” I didn’t understand or condone Ally’s behavior but, at this point, I really did not know who she was. She knew I was upset but not for the reason she thought. Yes, I was embarrassed. I had championed her, and Adele must have thought I was a poor judge of character. But I was also afraid for her. She couldn’t see that her name-calling and histrionics were hurting not only her but her son, who no doubt had witnessed similar scenes at their apartment. After the courthouse and this meeting, I couldn’t see Adele ever reuniting Drew with her.

Ally asked me if I still wanted to give her a ride home, something I had offered before the meeting. We drove mainly in silence, Ally not wanting to acknowledge her behavior, me not ready or willing to call her on it. I let her out in front of her building and quickly left. I could not even bear to see if she made it up the stairs safely.

#

Things were not going much better for Drew at the group home. His electronics and most of his other privileges had been taken away. Not surprisingly, accusations of stealing flew back and forth among the boys since they shared bedrooms and could not lock their bedroom doors. Drew's latest beef with the home was that his ear buds had been broken by some kid. He was adamant about being reimbursed for them, so righteous in his anger that he was considering legal action. Then one afternoon at the end of February, I received this email from Adele:

Hi Mrs. Harmon and Linda,

Drew admitted to stealing a peer's iPod charger at the group home.

As a consequence, he will not be allowed to participate in laser tag this Saturday with his swim team.

#

Since I'd only heard Drew's stories, I called Mark. Drew claimed the charger in question had been given to him by a friend. I knew that friend could only be Drew's girlfriend, Stevie. I often gave Stevie a ride home when I picked Drew up from school. The two of them would sit in the back of my car, holding hands and kissing, Drew admonishing me not to look in my rear-view mirror. The make-out session would go on

until I dropped Stevie off at her house, a five-minute drive from school. She was a pretty, shy blonde who seemed too naïve for Drew.

When it came to ferreting out liars, Mark knew his business. To get to the bottom of the charger accusation, Mark insisted Drew call Stevie. Then he made Drew hand the phone over immediately to him. Before Drew could warn Stevie, Mark asked her if she had ever given Drew a charger. The answer was a flustered no. Drew didn't say a word to me about the incident but he was still talking about filing charges against the boy who broke his ear buds.

#

By now, I had introduced myself to all of Drew's teachers as his soon-to-be foster mother and was getting his assignments directly off Blackboard. He had started doing his homework at our house so he couldn't use the chaos of the halfway house as an excuse for not turning in his assignments. This required more rides and more coordination on everyone's part, but if it got him through his sophomore year, it was worth it.

Drew had no idea of the effort that went into getting him to and from his appointments and activities. Between Adele, Mark, and me, everything had to be reviewed and agreed to, and Ally had to be kept in the loop. Even if he had known how challenging his logistics were, I doubt he would have cared. The moment Drew walked into the halfway house, he seemed to have given up all responsibility for his life. And yet, in an email to Adele, I noted that he could still show some concern for his future: "... when I mentioned that if [Drew] doesn't get with the program, he might have to

repeat his sophomore year, he gets alarmed and says he doesn't want to. There seems to be a real disconnect in Drew's mind between his behavior and its consequences. ...”

My suspicion was that this disconnect had started long before the group home, even before Drew and Ally started fighting. It probably started the day Drew realized he was his mother's keeper and, to some extent, always would be.

CHAPTER 4

Drew finally moved in with my husband, son, and me the second weekend of March. He had been separated from his mother for three months. Now he was finally in “a stable home environment,” in the parlance of foster care. He had been spending so much time at our house that the actual move felt like no big deal. But now he’d be sleeping in our study, which we had converted into a bedroom.

As the months passed without her son, Ally developed two passions: clearing her name of the charge of child abuse and taking out her anger on Adele, Ally, and Drew’s case worker. In Ally’s mind, someone had to pay for what had been done to her, and that person was Adele, who became the embodiment of an uncaring and inept bureaucracy.

Drew admitted to lying about Ally hitting him soon after he started therapy in January. Although it was Drew who had been arrested, Ally’s alleged abuse became a black mark on *her* record. Ally never pressed charges against her son so his arrest was expunged, but Drew’s abuse accusation against Ally would not go away as easily. It restricted Ally’s employment opportunities; she could not work in a Fairfax public school, for instance. I fully supported Ally’s desire to clear her name, but I did not have the time to help her do it.

Ally didn't hate everyone affiliated with DFS; she liked her therapist, Patty Falone, and she loved Drew's therapist, Howard Cornish, whom she saw every other week with Drew. With Howard, Drew had gotten the best the county could offer and, somehow, Ally knew it. Although his demeanor was calm, Howard exuded a sense of authority and Ally responded to it. It helped, too, that Howard was male.

Ally always referred to Howard as "Mr. Cornish." Her lawyer, Roger, was always Mr. Parkinson. It bothered me that she seemed more respectful of men than of women. Still, that deference did not extend to every man in every situation; Ally thought her husband was the devil. I did not know if it was a cultural bias or a mark of Ally's upbringing but when Adele was respectful toward her, Ally saw her as patronizing and when men were respectful, she accorded them respect in return.

Ally would never address Adele as Mrs. or Ms., even though Adele always addressed Ally as Mrs. Harmon. From my perspective, Ally had managed to get a social worker who was smart, committed, and non-judgmental, one who truly wanted to help her. Yet Ally could not refrain from cursing Adele, repeatedly hanging up on her, and demanding things she couldn't give her. Ally's behavior toward her caseworker was not just immature, it was unwise. And after months of hearing "I just want my son back," I lost patience with Ally's unwillingness to be civil to the person who would ultimately reunite her with Drew.

Her outburst over Dr. Wiley's report drove a wedge between us, and I did not hear from her for a while. The meeting over the report, however, had not been the end of our relationship. That happened after I had taken Drew to the mall. In an email, Ally

thanked me for shopping with him, then went on to say, “I am very sorry in putting you in this B.S. with a bunch of stupid low-class people. I cannot tell you how much I hate that Bitch judge she doesn’t have any idea what HELL is going on.”

This was after the second hearing. When she collapsed, she seemed to lose all hope, and a more vindictive side of her emerged. Concerned, I called her, only to hang up on her after getting an earful of invective about everyone in the courthouse that day. By hanging up, I knew I was becoming a persona non grata, but I was not on Ally’s list of dumbasses. Still, I was fed up with her constantly thanking me yet behaving so irresponsibly. I knew now that she was incapable of separating her vendetta against the county from her quest to gain custody of Drew. In her mind, they were tied together; in mine, they were working against each other. My sympathy had not made her any more rational or less vindictive, so I had no choice but to play hardball. I responded to her email and phone call by emailing her: “I don’t ever want to get another hateful email like the one below or hear another rant from you like your last call yesterday. There are limits to my friendship, Ally. And threatening a judge is a very big no-no, so you’d better think before you do anything.”

I was too busy with Drew to think much about Ally. I was either in my car, taking him to appointments and practices, or at my computer, working out the logistics of his visitation and care. It was like parenting a boy in conjunction with two hyper-involved moms. Both Adele and Ally had to be kept in the loop and one of them—Ally—was clamoring for more visits with her son.

Drew and his mom started visiting each other unsupervised—the next step in their reunification. Now Ally wanted more time with him and a say in my decisions concerning him. Ally had a right to both—but her requests were often last minute and her decisions seemed designed to thwart mine.

Often I would test my ideas for Drew on Adele first. Almost all of them had to do with getting him through his sophomore year. If Adele were enthusiastic, I would get buy-in from whomever else I needed. Then Adele would let Ally know what was going on, hoping that, with the approval of others and the ball already rolling, Ally would have no choice but to agree. That meant a lot of emails to Ally, Howard, Drew's teachers, swim coach, and school counselor—everyone I thought needed to be informed about him, particularly Adele:

Hi Adele:

Since he has been here, Drew has had three visits with his mom:

Friday, Mar. 16, 4:15 to 5:30

Friday, Mar. 23, 5:10-5:15 (Drew went to Greenbrier shopping mall with his friends after school; he was supposed to call his mom about the change in visitation time.)

Sunday, Mar. 25, approx. 5 to 7 (dinner)

We are going to start taking him over on Sunday evenings for dinner with her. I will keep a log of his visits.

The petition to take an incomplete in chemistry is in process.

Drew talked to Megan [his counselor] yesterday and we will both talk to

his chemistry teacher today after school. Megan told him the ways he can make up chemistry over the summer, which include an online class, which may be best for him. She also told him that he cannot take more than one course per summer. I hope that spurs Drew to do better in his other classes so that he does not have to repeat them his junior year.

I have a call into Andrew Patton at Water Mine Waterpark in Reston. I hope he can tell me if Drew is a viable lifeguard candidate and when their training, which is through Ellis & Associates, takes place. I will also remind Drew that he needs to ask his mom about her surgery on Friday. If it is indeed happening next week and she wants Drew with her, we need to plan for that now.

What time do you get to work tomorrow? I'd like to meet you first thing and have you sign Drew's Request for Schedule Change so I can get it to Megan ASAP. ... Please email any changes and I will add them to the document. ...

Having Drew drop chemistry was my last-ditch solution to salvage Drew's sophomore year academically. After I got his chemistry teacher and Megan to sign off on the summer school plan I proposed to Adele, Ally put a stop to it, and Drew was moved out of advanced placement chemistry and into a regular chemistry class instead. Ally gave no reason, but at least Drew was now in a less academically demanding class.

I started getting progress reports after Ally called a meeting with Drew's teachers and counselor. I was there as Drew's foster mom. By the time he was under our roof, I

knew the due dates of Drew's assignments and when his tests were scheduled. I knew everything about Drew and his classes except how to get him to do his homework. At first, I had him study at our dining room table so I could keep tabs on what he was doing. I never caught him web surfing, just looking unengaged and daydreaming in front of his computer. But in reviewing his grades and missed assignments on Blackboard, it was clear he wasn't doing much. Shortly after he moved in, I emailed a progress report to Adele:

It's taken me a while to figure out where Drew is with school. One, he really does hate it. Two, he's not mentally present in class—"there but not there" is how his chemistry teacher puts it. Sometimes he falls asleep, sometimes he listens to his iPod (or someone else's), sometimes he talks to his classmates, according to his teachers. And last but not least, he will not do his homework.

What I've realized is that if one and two are not in place—that is, if Drew doesn't see an immediate benefit to school and won't pay attention in class—the homework is simply not going to happen. I've known students who have gotten by in school by being very attentive in class and not doing their homework. But I've never heard of student who doesn't pay attention in class then does their homework.

More promising was getting Drew a summer job as a lifeguard. He was a good swimmer and Fairfax County needed dozens of guards to staff their water parks every summer. I could see him patrolling poolside in the regulation red swim trunks, blowing

his whistle at the little kids while trying to impress the teenage girls. Beyond earning \$12 an hour, the job would help his self-esteem, which, despite all his bravado, wasn't exactly high at this point in his life.

So I pulled up the online application and helped him fill it out. He was asked to take a test, which required that he swim a few laps and fish something out of the bottom of a pool. With all the competitive swimming he had done, he passed easily. He sailed through the job interview so we signed him up for lifeguard training. I had no doubt that Drew could do everything that was required to lifeguard, but there was one obstacle. He had to fill out a formal application for employment and document his age and social security number. The documentation required that he bring his social security card with him when he presented his application. The person who had this was Ally. Every time I'd drop him off at his mom's house for a visitation, I'd ask him to get it, and every time I picked him up, he'd have a new excuse as to why he didn't have it. Drew's last excuse was that Ally had misplaced it. I knew she had it but what I didn't know was whether Drew was complicit in the dodge, or whether he was covering for his mom.

What was most puzzling was that Drew really wanted to lifeguard and Ally really wanted him to have a summer job. I could think of only one reason that Ally was doing this: control. She didn't have control over her son, but she did have control over his social security card. I had watched her make things difficult for Adele, now she was making them difficult for me. When it became clear that I would never get the card from Ally, Adele managed to get a certified copy and Drew got a job as lifeguard at Water Mine.

Yet Ally was not above seeking my help. She called me one morning, asking me to help her decipher a court document regarding her case. The most startling thing about the request was the tone of her voice. It was cool, calm, and collected, not angry (the new Ally) or happy and animated (the old Ally). I told her that I would decipher it for her but I had to pick up Jeff at Dulles that morning. Since the airport was near Ally's apartment, I decided to swing by her place afterward.

Jeff had been taking Drew out to practice his driving. Ally was pleased that her son was getting the behind-the-wheel experience he needed to get his license. She viewed my husband as a smart guy who took his responsibilities seriously—a good role model for Drew. Although I knew Jeff would be tired after getting up at dawn to fly home from L.A., something told me to keep him with me at this meeting.

So the three of us found ourselves sitting in Ally's living room at around 10:30 on an overcast Thursday morning. The room was sparsely furnished, just a TV, coffee table, and two antique loveseats. Ally loved Victorian furniture and, even though her sofas had curvy backs and fluted legs, they were as hard as rocks. They felt particularly unyielding that morning, with me sitting uneasily next to Ally on one seat, and Jeff trying to get comfortable on the other.

The air seemed dead between us; Ally's rage had been replaced by an unnatural placidity, unnatural at least for her. As I started reading the transcript of her case, she murmured something about the judge.

“What did you say?”

“I said I wish Judge McBride was dead.”

There was no emotion in her voice. She had made this comment before, but her cool, casual way of expressing it made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Technically, it was not a threat, but it was the way Ally said it, so calmly. I told her not to say it ever, under any circumstances. I tried to read the document, but my hands suddenly felt shaky.

I thought of something Adele had told me, and now I had to know if it was true: did Ally wish Adele's two children were dead as well? Had she actually said this to Adele?

I had not known Adele had children until she mentioned Ally's statement regarding them. Since Ally was never going to accept Adele, my next strategy was to give Adele as much insight into Ally as I could. Sometimes Adele asked me to be the go-between when she could not get Ally to listen. Ally sensed the shifting allegiances, once emailing, "I love you as a very dear friend. I don't care if you love Adele or hate Adele. I knew you before Adele came along."

At this point, I didn't want to be anyone's friend, including Ally's, but I didn't wish her any ill will. I did know how I felt about a person who would wish harm on a child. Ally did not give me much time to ponder. She answered "yes" to my question, as nonchalantly as if I had asked if she wanted a glass of water.

"So you wish Adele's two children were dead."

"Yes."

"How could you say such a thing? How could any mother say that about another woman's children?"

I went back to trying to decipher the judge's ruling but I couldn't focus. Something had clearly died inside of this woman—whom I thought I had known and once loved—and now I was sitting next to a person I did not recognize and couldn't like. I felt sick but also angry.

“How could you ... how could you possibly ... not be able to wrap your head around the fact that Adele loves her children as much you love Drew? I get it ... you're hurting ... but do you have any idea what could happen if you issue death threats? Particularly against a judge? This is not a game Ally and I will not be dragged into ... I will not be sucked down into your quagmire of—”

“Come on, let's go,” said Jeff, already halfway out the door. My husband rarely gets angry but, with his jaw tightly clenched, he couldn't leave fast enough. I could hear his footsteps echoing down the metal stairwell, the same one that I had followed Ally up, watching her negotiate it with gloves on, five years ago. I knew that Jeff was doing the smart thing by walking away.

I started to follow him, but then I turned around.

Ally was still sitting placidly on the couch.

I leaned over her so she could not ignore me. Then, wagging my index finger in her face—something I don't ever remember doing to anyone—I issued a warning: “If you don't get your act together, you're going to be sitting on this couch, all alone, spending the rest of your life without Drew, or anyone else. You'd better think about that, Ally. Think long and hard.”

I didn't wait for her reaction. I turned and high-tailed it out of there, slamming the door hard. That slam should have been the final exclamation point in this horrible melodrama, but the latch didn't take and the door immediately sprung back open with a pinging noise that echoed down the hallway. By then, I was running, bounding down the stairs, moving as fast as I could to catch up with Jeff.

My husband drove us home, not saying anything, looking more drained than when he got off the plane. Jeff wasn't all that open about his feelings but after fifteen years of marriage, I could count on his solidarity. I knew he didn't regret us taking Drew in, but he did wish I wasn't so emotionally involved with Ally. He had never had the same issues with Ally because he had never taken her seriously. Yet that's what Ally wanted—what she needed.

I picked up Jeff's phone to call Adele and tell her what happened. As I searched for her number I took a few deep breaths. Growing up Catholic, I had always liked the sacrament of confession. It felt good to admit your guilt; it freed you to move on. But recounting the events at Ally's was not simply an exercise in cleansing my soul; I wanted Adele to hear my version of what had happened before Ally got ahold of her.

#

A few days later, I told Drew that his mother and I had a falling out and were no longer on speaking terms. We were driving somewhere and he had mentioned me contacting his mom about something. I had my eyes on the road but I caught a glimpse of his face. Fleeting as it was, his grimace told me that he loved his mom, but he was also angry. Angry with Ally or at her? I knew it was confusing, even to him. All Drew

knew was that Ally had few people to rely upon and she had alienated one of them. I did not give Drew any details of what happened that morning, and that wasn't just to protect his mom. There was no denying that my behavior had been less than stellar.

In foster parent training classes, we were told always treat birth parents with respect. I realized how much easier that would have been if Ally and I had never been friends. Then again, if I hadn't known her, I would never have agreed to take Drew. Taking care of him had become my mission. I had invested a lot of time in it, and now I was afraid that my angry outburst in Ally's apartment might jeopardize my chance to foster him.

Ally called Adele about the incident in her living room shortly after I did. I was not surprised that, in her version, I had cursed. I could curse, and Ally had probably heard me once or twice, but I didn't that morning. She also accused me of something that totally flummoxed me: she said I had tried to tip over her china cabinet. Eating a meal or having tea at her dining room table, I had often looked at that massive object, mahogany in color, fronted by glass doors, and wondered how Ally managed to get it into her little apartment. I was sure it hadn't moved an inch since it had been squeezed into her dining nook. Neither Jeff nor I ventured beyond Ally's living room that morning. Considering the cabinet contained everything that Ally held dear, the claim seemed somehow symbolic.

I knew there would be repercussions from my outburst. Now, every time I dropped Drew off at Ally's apartment, she would be filling his ears with invective about me as well as Adele, putting Drew in a difficult position. I vowed never to say anything

negative about Ally to Drew, though I did tell him that if things weren't going well with one of his visits, he could always call me and I'd pick him up immediately, no questions asked.

He only took me up on my offer once. When he slunk into my front seat after his S.O.S., made on his phone in the apartment complex's parking lot, I tried to pat his shoulder and tell him I was sorry. He pulled away and we drove back to my house in silence. He didn't tell me why he had ended his visit so abruptly, and I knew he never would. All I could do was show him that I would be there for him.

#

It didn't take long for Drew and me to develop a routine on school days: I'd drag him out of bed; he'd refuse breakfast. I'd insist he drink some juice, which he'd do, sometimes, if I put it in a to-go cup so he could drink it in the car. Even with no breakfast, we were always behind schedule. School started at 7:20, and Drew liked to stay up late, long after the rest of the household was in bed. Sometimes Jeff had to spring the lock on Drew's bedroom door and rouse him out of a deep sleep. Once up, Drew did what he needed to do. He would find something to wear from the assortment of clothes scattered on his bedroom floor, barely pausing between his bedroom and my car to brush his teeth. When he was buckled up and we were moving, he'd start texting.

Then he'd begin saying "good lord," using a fake British accent, repeating the phrase over and over. Instead of yawning or stretching, "good lord" was Drew's way of wake up. He'd good-lord me all the way to school, and good-fucking-lord me when he didn't like my driving. Sometimes he bellowed it, letting a string of o's rip, then roll

mightily into the r. The profanity didn't bother me as much as the loudness, but it was not the worst thing Drew could do. One morning, he turned the radio on. For some inexplicable reason, he cranked up the volume, going from merely loud to earsplitting in the twist of a dial.

“Drew! Turn that down!”

No response, no reaction, so I turned the radio down. He turned it back up, I turned it down. Down/up, down/up, down/up, until I couldn't stand it any longer. We were only four blocks from school but I stopped the car and hit the emergency blinkers. Half a block in front of me, the light turned red but we both knew it would soon be green. I hadn't had my morning cup of coffee and I felt lightheaded, as if I were having an out-of-body experience or parachuting for the first time. I turned the radio down one last time, saying firmly, “I'm not moving unless the volume stays here.”

“Are you crazy?” he snapped, quickly checking his side view mirror for oncoming cars. “This is dangerous.”

“No more dangerous than driving with the radio too loud,” I replied, trying to convince myself that this was indeed the case. “Not above thirty, Drew.”

“Thirty-one,” he countered.

“Thirty,” I said.

Drew turned the volume up one more notch, to 31.

“OK, thirty-one.”

He didn't reach for the dial so I started driving again. My heart was still pounding long after I pulled in the circular drive at Chantilly High and dropped him off.

I often wondered what it was about cars and him. We talked while I was driving, when he had no choice but to be in relatively close proximity to me. But he also acted out in the car. Maybe he fanaticized about getting behind the wheel and leaving all his problems far behind. Whatever the reason, cars seemed to set Drew off.

There was the time when we drove home and he immediately jumped out of the car and locked me out of my house. Then there was the time I was driving Drew home from an event at school. He sat behind me with my son. I could tell Drew was jacked up, like he often was after spending time with his friends. He talked a mile a minute, laughing a little too loudly, being slightly rude and physically manic, all the signs of trouble. Suddenly, I heard the sound of my tires going over gravel and felt a breeze hitting the back of my neck. At first I thought Drew had opened the window, but then I realized he'd opened my car's back door.

“Drew! Close that door!”

He closed it slightly, not enough to let me put the safety lock on. Then he opened it again, this time sticking his foot out, moving as if he were running one-legged, propelling the car forward. He thought it was a lark. He laughed like it was a riot. I couldn't even begin to guess what he was trying to prove.

My sensible son watched soberly, not saying a word. If I had to guess what Blake was thinking, I'd have gone with, “What an idiot.”

“Do you want me to pull over?” Once again, I was strategizing on the fly, thinking he wanted me to stop the car, but there was no shoulder on the road. If only I had put the safety lock on! I could have pulled into a driveway or a side road and told

him that, unless the door stayed closed, I was not moving. But what if he wouldn't close it? What then? I was too tired; I couldn't play this game of cat and mouse, at least not tonight.

I checked my rear view mirror to see if Drew's seatbelt was fastened, and it was. I continued, me driving slowly, simply ignoring what was going in the back seat. Drew was not getting any reaction from the cars going by. If Blake was alarmed, he was not showing it. Drew wasn't going to jump, so I drove us home, certain—as certain as I could be—that with no reaction, he would eventually tire of his foolish game.

#

The most relaxing times for all of us were outdoors. When Drew was outside, he didn't seem nervous or hemmed in. Mindful of his need for lots of exercise, Drew, Blake, Jeff, and I often went for long hikes over the weekends. Drew did parkour, running down paths, leaping over streams, jumping off boulders, moving as quickly as he could, challenging Blake to keep up. His racing ahead spurred Jeff and me to walk faster. I found myself feeling good—happy that Drew was in his element and that the only thing I had to worry about was him accidentally hurting himself, which didn't seem likely, considering how agile he was. Sometimes he walked with one of us, talking the whole time about school, his friends, computers or music. Sometimes he'd try to identify the flora from what he learned in Boy Scouts.

As much as I had discounted the Scouts for Blake, I realized why they were so important for Drew: he needed the fresh air and the random exercise, which seemed as natural to him as breathing. Outdoors he was free to be himself—a bit wild and crazy but

also funny. Drew's sense of humor complimented the general tenor of our family interaction, which often veered into the silly or absurd.

Once we went hiking at Great Falls Park in McLean. The trails, which run along the Potomac, have some breathtaking views of the river. They were not too rugged or steep for me and just challenging enough for Drew. After an hour hiking, somewhere on the way back to our car, Drew managed to find a massive hole at the base of an old uprooted tree. Then he disappeared down in it. He might have been planning on surprising Blake, who was a ways behind him, by springing up from his lair.

"Hey, can you get out of there?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Drew, showing me how he had shimmied down. "Are you coming down?"

"You're kidding, right?"

That afternoon, I was pleased with the way things were going. For some reason, I thought of Adele, maybe because I had mentioned that we were going hiking to her.

"Hey Drew, let me take your picture. I'm going to send it to Adele." I pulled out my cell phone. After considering different angles, I settled on one that made the hole look deeper, with no visible way out. "I'll email this to Adele with the message, 'Hey, was I supposed to get him out?'"

As if on cue, Drew stretched his hands melodramatically and gave me his best wild-eyed look.

#

Our fun weekends could not make up for the fact that things were not going well at school. I knew that Drew's motivation for doing well had to come from within, but there needed to be an immediate reward for good behavior. Spending time with his friends was the only thing I could think of. We agreed that if he averaged Cs or better in all his classes, Drew could see them on the weekends.

His girlfriend's birthday party was an added incentive. Stevie would be turning 16 in a couple of weeks, and Drew talked about her upcoming party as if it was the social event of the semester at Chantilly High. There were actually two celebrations. Drew was invited to a birthday dinner with Stevie and her family the weekend before her big party with her friends. Her two older brothers would be there as well as her mom and dad.

Drew had never met Stevie's father, a former military man, and he wanted to make a good impression, so I bought him a navy blazer to wear with his jeans. Then we tried to think of the perfect gift for Stevie. We settled on pink roses, but we wanted to make them special. Drew told me Stevie loved M&M's, so I filled a glass vase with the pastel version of the candies, carefully tucking the stems into the middle of them. It looked like the flowers were popping out of a sea of pastel pink, violet, and sky blue, the perfect arrangement for a 16-year-old girl. I told Drew that etiquette dictated he take the hostess something, so we also bought Stevie's mom a small bouquet.

After the presents were ready, Drew promised he'd do some studying. It was a warm Friday afternoon and he had the day off from school. Buying and arranging the flowers had been a bribe to get Drew to do some homework, but he couldn't seem to settle down. I gave up trying to cajole him and he ended up in our back yard with his

boomerang, a tin star that had been hanging on my back door. The star had been a Christmas ornament in another life, then a household decoration. Now it was Drew's boomerang. Not the returning kind, just something he could throw at a target.

Drew wouldn't have appropriated my star if I hadn't taken his pocketknife. He had shown me the knife, a relic of his Boy Scout days, when he first moved in. He said he liked to throw it at targets, but I was afraid he'd hurt himself or someone else, so I took it. I told him I'd keep it safe until he returned home, but he insisted I stole it. So he claimed my star, which was fine with me. The five points, with their unfinished tin edges, were not sharp enough to hurt anyone. Yet they could embed themselves in the bark of a tree if the star was thrown end over end. So that's what Drew did that afternoon, over and over again.

Watching him that day, I thought of Drew in the school auditorium. We were there to see Chantilly Drama Club's production of the Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods*, which some of the kids from his drama class were in. I settled myself in back, well out of the way of Drew's friends, who were milling around before the curtain went up. But only Drew was moving like a wild deer who suddenly finds himself in a confined space. There was a lot of excitement in the air, but nobody else was jumping over rows of seats so say hello to someone. It was the first time I thought that he might have a hyperactivity disorder. Now, as I was watching him fling his boomerang around my backyard, ADHD sprang to mind once again. It wasn't that Drew didn't want to sit down, it was as if he couldn't make himself.

Then again, Drew could certainly focus on a computer screen or his electronics. Holed up in his room, he had been practicing turntabling every night after hitting the books. Stevie's party was going to be his deejaying debut. He knew the rules: no passing grades, no party. The day he moved into our house, I set up a contract titled "The Rules." To me, getting Drew to be honest was more important than getting him to do homework. I didn't want him lying, particularly under my roof, so I called the contract, only half jokingly, "The House of No Bullshit," "No BS" for short.

The Rules:

1. All assignments, tests, and other engagements will be written down in your day planner with corresponding due dates and times.
2. You will take notes during class lectures and participate in class when asked to by your teachers. No falling asleep or personal chat with friends during class. All electronics go in your backpack when class begins and stay there until class is over.
3. Homework will be done on time and turned in the day it is due. You will study for tests—at the very least—the night before.
4. Weekend social engagements depend on your earning the grades to which you've agreed according to your teachers biweekly reports plus turning in all your homework when it is due.
5. You will be where you say you're going to be and not keep your driver waiting. Any change in plans requires you reaching either Linda or Jeff

and getting their OK before doing anything or going anywhere other than what was agreed upon.

Drew signed the above, which was written like a contract. The second week after “No BS” went into effect, I felt confident that Drew had done his work, so sure that I almost didn’t open his teachers’ emails.

The contract had been in place for a couple of weeks. The Friday before the big party, I turned on my laptop and read:

“Told me he forgot his homework. Still don’t have it.” —Mr. Tomlinson,
Algebra

“Fell asleep in class.” —Mrs. Sobel, Chemistry

“Do you want all the assignments Drew hasn’t turned in or just this week’s?” —Mrs. Santini, English

I somehow managed to corner Drew hunkered down over his computer in his room. The pile of clothes littering the floor from his bed to the doorway seemed like a barrier designed to keep me from entering, but I managed to nudge his door open wide enough to stick in my head.

“You told me you did your homework.”

“I did!”

“What’s this from your Algebra teacher?”

“I did it, I just haven’t turn it in yet.”

“You think I’m an idiot?”

And so the conversation went, Drew barely looking up from his computer to

acknowledge my presence. It was as if doing his homework and Stevie's party were totally unrelated events, even though I had made it clear: no homework, no party. Yet he had told everyone about the celebration, even his mom. I received this email from her:

I hear that my son will be deejaying a party? I wonder with whom, where, will other adults be present? What equipment and when did he become a DJ? These are questions a concerned parent needs answers to before permission is granted if a child is a minor. As a concerned parent his studies should carry a bigger demand than this extra activity he is now being permitted to engage (*sic*) by you. I noticed when I had him last Friday he slept the entire way to Charlottesville, VA in midday he was exhausted. This is very unusual for Drew. I am very concerned about his living situation and how he is being taken care of.

I had emailed Ally a copy of the contract when we were still on friendly terms and she thought it was a good idea. I had met Stevie's Mom and considered her to be a responsible parent, yet I could not answer Ally's question about chaperoning. This made me feel unsure of myself, stymied in my decision-making. Ally was questioning every move I made. She had taken Drew out of school for a day so that he could accompany her to one of her doctor's appointments in Charlottesville. I suspected Ally needed Drew to help her navigate on road trips, and I knew "party" was a trigger for her. I suspected that Drew slept the whole trip because he did not want to engage in conversation with his mom. I was on a slippery slope from making Stevie's party a carrot for Drew but the truth was, I wanted him to go almost as much as he did.

Stevie was a sweet girl who believed in Drew completely. But it wasn't just that I liked her, I needed her good influence. More than that, I also wanted to show Drew that I could be reasonable. If I showed him some trust, perhaps he could learn to trust me. So I relented, telling him if he did his assignments by Saturday night, he could go to the party.

Then I opened the email from his French teacher, Mrs. Benoit:

I had Drew in study hall today. I spent 15 minutes trying to get him to do a small part of his homework. It was not easy to get him to make an effort. He did not have his text so I had to lend him one. I asked him if he wanted to pass French. He said yes, but that he was lazy. I tried to tactfully encourage him, but he was not open to hearing that from me, I could tell. So I stopped.

The grandmotherly type, Mrs. Benoit looked like the kind of teacher kids could easily take advantage of, if they were so inclined. Most of Drew's teachers seemed aware of the futility of trying to help a kid who would not help himself. Knowing they had gone through this with Ally and Drew before, I could hardly blame them. Only Mrs. Benoit seemed genuinely concerned. I showed Drew her email without saying a word. Her caring showed, at least to me, and I was hoping that her honest words would trigger something inside him. He barely glanced at it. His only comment was "Benoit's breath stinks."

I knew Drew could be disrespectful. He loved to make fun of authority figures, like the school's overzealous security guard, but this time he had gone too far. He was

being unkind, even cruel. I didn't expect him to appreciate or even acknowledge all that was being done for him but I had zero tolerance for meanness.

“If you think you're going to Stevie's party, think again, Mister.”

“I have to go! I'm deejaying.”

“You should have thought of that before blowing off your homework.”

I heard the sound of something hitting Drew's door after I closed it; I told myself Drew was simply acting out his frustration. As long as he didn't injure anybody or himself, I was fine.

But I knew I was on shaky ground, with Ally, with Drew, with my own aspirations. That evening, I tried going over my goals for Drew—what I could do for him and what he had to do for himself. I finally gave up, reaching underneath the sofa for my laptop. The computer needed recharging but the charger wasn't there; in fact, it was nowhere to be found. I asked Jeff to help me look for it. Something lured Drew out of his room. When he realized what we looking for, he made a cursory search beneath the couch, then suggested I look in my bedroom.

At first I didn't get it. Why would my charger—always under the sofa with my laptop—be in my bedroom? *Because that's where Drew had hidden it.* I went into the bedroom wondering, if I were going to hide a charger in an obvious but not too obvious place, where would it be?

My nightstand, of course. The top drawer, where I keep my eye drops, lip balm, and a tangle of other odds and ends, like the psalm book someone handed me on the street, a cork from a bottle of champagne drunk long ago, and a postcard my mother

dashed off a year or so before her death. There was a drawstring to a pair of my pajama bottoms. Also a scented eye pillow, orphaned buttons, a few stray safety pens, and some foil-wrapped condoms that hadn't been needed in years. It was the drawer I'd been meaning to clean out but never got around to. The drawer where the banal mixed with the intimate. Now there was this thing that didn't belong, something I didn't put there, sitting right on top, curled up and waiting, ready to strike.

Even though Drew locked his bedroom door at night, it never occurred to me to lock mine. I wondered if he'd been in my room before, if he wandered around the house in the dark, peering in drawers, peeping through cracks in doors, looking for his knife or things far more dangerous. During my twenty-two hours of foster care training, all kinds of sobering scenarios were presented, yet privacy was never touched upon. With one thoughtless act, Drew had violated mine.

"You put the charger in my drawer," I said.

"The cleaning lady must have done it."

"Nieve would never take something from under the couch and put it in my nightstand. Jeff didn't do it, neither did Blake. It had to be you."

"You must have forgot that you put the charger in the drawer." Drew saw the look on my face when I realized he was not going to admit to hiding it. At least he was smart enough not to mention Stevie's party.

Jeff was the only witness to this confrontation, yet he was not an innocent bystander. He had chosen not to say anything—not knowing what to say or not wanting

to get involved. If he had said something in my defense or even laid a hand on my shoulder, I might have been able to control myself.

But I was alone, facing down this boy who wasn't interested in the anguish he caused me, his mother, or anyone else. I had flattered myself into thinking I could help him. But now I saw who I was in his eyes: an impediment. A great void opened up inside of me and an almost feral anger welled up. I screamed something I couldn't imagine saying: I wanted him out of my house, not next month or next week or next morning, but now— this very minute. But even my messed-up mind knew that if someone were leaving that evening, it would have to be me, for Drew was the one with nowhere else to go.

That evening, I drove aimlessly around my neighborhood for an hour or more, trying to piece together what had happened, where I had gone wrong. I never could figure out the timing. When did Drew hide the charger? Was there any way I could possibly have been wrong? I could not figure out when he hid it, but there was no one else who could have done so. The moon was high and the stars were bright. The beauty and blankness of the night were my excuse for not going back home. I ended up parked in front of my house, trying to look at it objectively. It looked like a nice place to live, but how could anyone really know what went on inside?

By now, the blinds were down, and a faint TVish glow was coming from the back of the house. Jeff must have been watching soccer in the family room. Maybe Drew wasn't holed up in his room, maybe he was watching the game with Jeff. Perhaps they were talking, just a little, Jeff occasionally explaining a penalty or cheering a goal, Drew

cheering with him, or maybe saying that he preferred football, that he had been a tight end for a short time in his barely begun life.

I knew this was a fantasy—the last daydream of the old me, the one who thought she could fix things. Not everything that was wrong with the world, just with this one boy. I was ashamed, not just of my behavior that evening, but of the grandiose assumptions I couldn't admit to, the ones that had driven me all along. Sitting in my car, I tried to tease apart the misguided hubris that allowed me to think I could do such a momentous, impossible, thing.

It's an odd feeling not to want to go inside your own home. I knew I couldn't stay outside counting the stars forever, so I took a deep breath and pulled into the garage. I made it clear to Jeff that he was in this, too. He had to support me, no matter how badly I blundered.

Then I called Adele the next day. The charger incident seemed so small, so insignificant in my retelling, and my reaction so outsized, so overwrought, I was sure she would come by that very afternoon and do the prudent thing: take Drew away. Instead, she told me to take a few days to think things over. During that time, I spoke to Drew only when necessary. He was not happy and I was not happy, but in his unhappiness, I sensed some remorse. I apologized for telling him I wanted him out of the house. I don't remember him saying anything in return, but that didn't matter. I would do my best for him, but I knew I could not change him.

#

It was now April, a few weeks after my big blow up. Drew's sophomore year would be over in two months. He had spent a couple of trial weekends with Ally. Soon they would be spending every weekend together. They seemed to be getting along fine, but Jeff and I had issues with the visitations. Ally thought nothing of making last minute changes in the schedule. It made it difficult to plan anything with Drew, or anything else for that matter. As Jeff said it in an email, "We are not well informed and, frankly, feel a little jerked around by the rescheduling and last-minute changes, sudden weekend stays, etc."

I now knew what divorced couples went through juggling their children's schedules: Who's dropping off? Who's picking up? What's the time frame? Is there any leeway? To cover these questions and others, we needed to have a meeting with Ally. But there were two obstacles: getting her to commit to a time then keeping her focused on the agenda. By now I knew that everyone could agree upon a date, but Ally might change it at the last minute. She often used doctor's appointments or her bum leg as an excuse, but my allegiance was now with Jeff, who had to take off time from his job and travel from DC for these meetings. Adele assured me that she would not let Ally cancel last-minute.

Adele invited Howard Cornish, who couldn't come. We both wanted a man other than Jeff present, but Ally nixed Rev. Dave. However, Benedict, Drew's guardian ad litem, could make the meeting. Ally added Ruth Stanton, since she was now Ally's aide and confidant. I suggested a written agenda so that we could make the most of our time

and not get sidetracked by Ally's vendettas. She now had a new one: Drew's humiliation at being labeled a foster child.

It was Adele who got all the blame, but this latest point of contention had been my fault. I had taken Drew to Water Mine to turn in his paperwork for employment, where I had introduced myself as his foster mom, not thinking of how he might feel about the word "foster." This was a lapse of judgment on my part. I was sensitive enough not to tell everyone I met I was his fostering him. I'd thought Drew's employers might need to know, at some point, that I was Drew's legal caregiver, one who had a right to sign up a 15-year-old for employment. I trusted Drew's boss would hold the foster mom information in confidence.

Drew's boss chose to reach out to him, acknowledging Drew's special circumstances by offering additional help if he needed it. When Drew told his mom, all hell broke loose. Ally called Adele, whom she assumed had branded Drew as a foster child, and screamed at her. When Adele protested she had no idea what Ally was talking about, she called her a liar. Then unbelievably, she handed the phone to Drew, who did the same. Ally's claimed that Drew's fellow lifeguards now knew he was a ward of the state, and the embarrassment was too great for him to work at Water Mine. I talked to Drew's boss and, professional that he was, he assured me that he kept Drew's personal information private.

People often assumed I was Drew's mother, and even though it felt somehow disloyal to Ally, most of the time I did not correct them. When we went to the optometrist to get Drew a pair of prescription sunglasses for lifeguarding, the employee

referred to Drew my son. The few times I did introduce myself as Drew's foster mom, I took care to add that there were medical issues that prevented Ally from taking care of her son, which was now partially true. Her foot was so bad she could no longer drive without pain, so she would have had trouble chauffeuring Drew around. If only I had asked Drew, "How do you want me to refer to myself? Or even, how do you feel about the word, 'foster'?" The truth was, I never even thought about it.

Neither Adele nor I wanted the foster label to be the focus of this meeting, so I drew up an agenda. And somehow, we managed to stick to it. When Ally said, "I want to say something," starting in on how humiliated she and Drew were, she got no reaction: just five blank faces patiently waiting for her to finish. Adele and I high-fived each other when the meeting was over. It had been calm, controlled, contained, the most productive meeting we had ever had with Ally. Yet I didn't feel particularly celebratory. "What factors will determine when Drew returns home?" was on the agenda, yet we never even got to it. I knew this was the last time we would be meeting around a table together, but I did not know how soon Drew would be going home.

#

Drew and Ally were reunited the second weekend of May 2012. That Sunday his 16th birthday; that's why Adele chose the date. It was less than three months after he had moved in with us—a mere wisp of time. He had finished his anger management classes, seen a psychologist, and worked with his mother on communication skills, but what had really changed? My efforts to get him interested in school had certainly not paid off, and

he still didn't seem to trust me or anyone else. He was going home, but part of me could not let go. It was the same part that could not let myself off the hook.

Adele and Howard viewed my attempt at foster parenting more charitably than I did. They seem to think that together, my husband, son and I had showed Drew what a normal family looked like, "normal" being a relative word where families are concerned. It wasn't the effort that I put into managing Drew's life that counted most; it was the three of us—me, Jeff and Blake—being who we are, treating one another as we have always done, with kindness and respect.

#

To a friend, I once tried to describe my relationship with Ally: "She was one of the bravest people I have ever known, but also one of the most damaged. I tried to be friends with her, but she has been abused and neglected for so long...". I left it at that.

As for Drew, I feel cautious optimism mixed with hope. I knew as well as anyone that he could lie. He was careless with other people's feelings and reckless with his own behavior. Then again, he knew how to charm me; how to make me laugh. He had frustrated and angered me, but he had also give me hope, not just for him, but for other kids who found himself in foster care.

On the way home from school one day, Drew asked if I was "in it for the money," a phrase I supposed he'd heard at the group home. The expression conjured up a certain stereotype of foster parents: desperate or dishonest couples looking for an easy way to make a buck by taking in loads of needy children, cashing their child welfare checks, then putting a lock on the refrigerator door. I wasn't in it for the money, but I was

certainly in it for something. Why couldn't I rid myself of the feeling that, if only I had had more time; or been more patient, experienced, or competent; I could have made everything better?

I had to keep reminding myself that Drew wanted to go home, and what I'd always have were my memories. I remember him imitating Chantilly's over-zealous security guard—doing a silent mine that involved a perpetrator almost—but not quite—stepping over an invisible line, Drew insisting that the guard thought of all high schoolers as potential perps. Then there was Drew at Arena Stage Theatre, seeing a professional play for the first time, so engrossed in the characters that he started coaching one on stage, talking under his breath, telling him not to accept his girlfriend's dismissal, whispering to him what we all know—that the girl really loves him, even though she can't say it. I had to gently tap him on the shoulder and whisper, “Shh.” I should have given him more of those experiences, but how was I to know we'd only have two months?

Finally, I remember one of his last days with us. We were driving to his mom's. Drew was behind the wheel. He saw a 7-Eleven and insisted that we stop so he could buy one of his beloved energy drinks. I shoved a few bills in his hand before he bounded out of my car. A few minutes later, he came running out of the store, clearly jazzed about something.

“He called me ‘boss’!” Drew exclaimed.

“Who?” I asked.

“The guy behind the counter. I said, ‘Where’re the Monsters? And he said, ‘Over there, Boss.’”

Drew’s excitement seemed overwrought. He loved the phrase “like a boss,” meaning “like a badass,” almost as much as he liked “good lord.” Once when Jeff was driving him back to the halfway house, he asked Drew what he wanted to be. “I just want to be somebody,” was his reply. Being called “boss” made him feel important, I guess, but why did that feeling have to come from some random guy in a convenience store? Why couldn’t it come from somewhere inside him?

We continued on our way to Ally’s, Drew behind the wheel. It was rush hour, and as the journey wore on, he started to speed up, weaving in and out of traffic. By now, I could read all the signs, so I made him pull into a parking lot.

“I’m going to drive the rest of the way,” I said, miffed.

“Aw, come on!”

“You’re getting too cocky, Drew. You’re not listening to what I say.”

“I’m paying attention.”

“You shouldn’t drive that fast.”

“I’m just keeping up with traffic!”

“You’re speeding and you don’t even have your license. I don’t care how fast everybody else is going. I care how fast *your* going.” I got out, coming round the car to his side, fully intending to get behind the wheel ready for anything, including him taking off without me.

Instead, Drew rolled down his window and said one word: “Please!”

This was my big moment. Do I take the wheel? Or do I let him drive the rest of the way? Do I lecture him? Try to reason with him? Or do I simply give up? I knew I could be a boss; also a badass. Instead, I sighed, knowing that he was almost home again, this time for good.

“OK, you can drive. But slow down and don’t make me so nervous.”

Pulling back into the stream of traffic, Drew said, to himself as much as to me, “You’re all right, Linda. You’re all right.”

BIOGRAPHY

As a graduate student, Linda Prather was a Sally Merton Fellow and edited *Phoebe* and *So to Speak*. She has been a finalist in the Faulkner –Wisdom Competition in nonfiction. She is on the programming committee of Fall for the Book, George Mason’s annual book festival.