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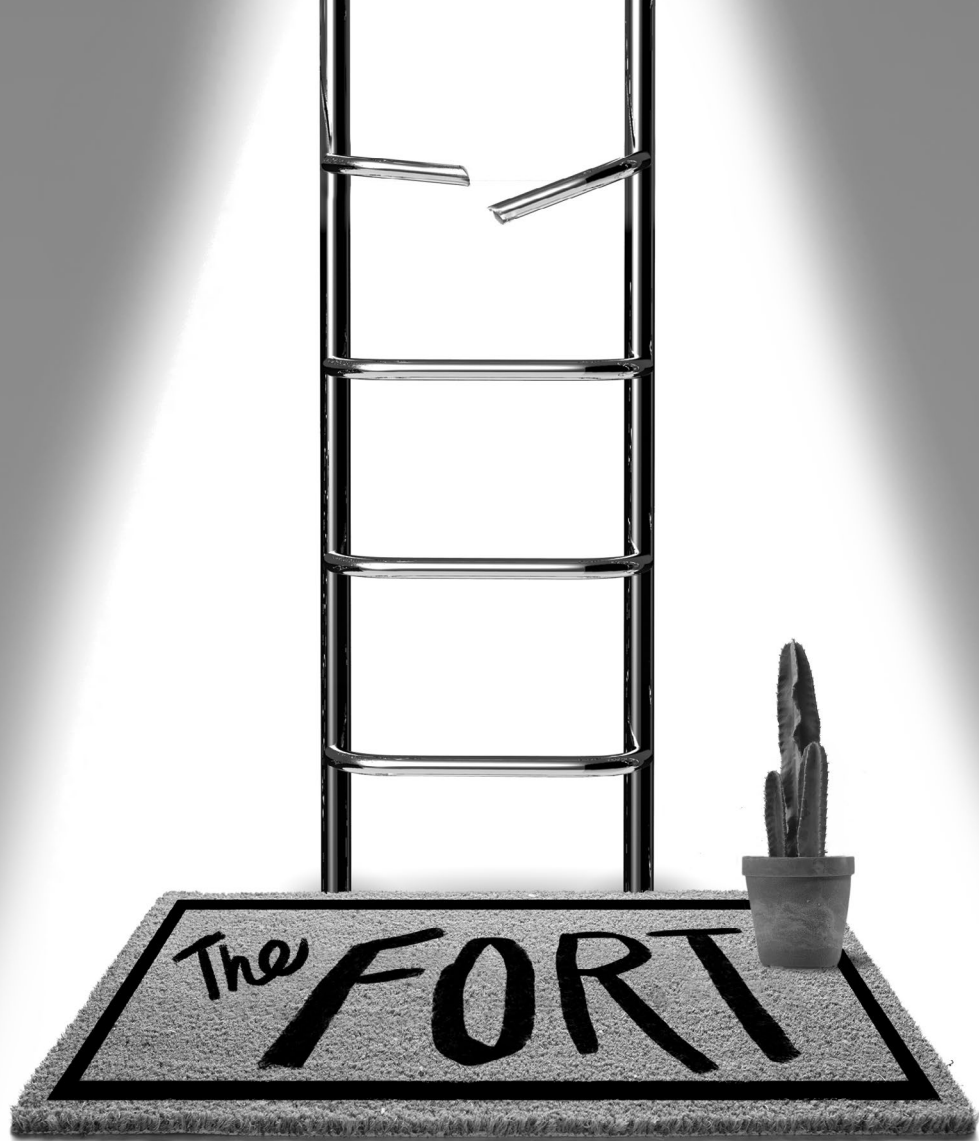
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FOR THE PEOPLE AT SCHOLASTIC CANADA WHO
DISCOVERED A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD WHO THOUGHT
HE COULD WRITE,

AND FOR THE SCHOLASTIC GANG TODAY WHO
KEEP IT GOING 100 BOOKS LATER.

CHAPTER ONE

EVAN DONNELLY

I get stuck with Ricky the morning after the big storm. A tree branch the size of the Loch Ness Monster blew in through his bedroom window, so his parents need him out of the way while they get everything fixed up.

By the time I haul myself out of bed and struggle into shorts and a T-shirt, Grandma's already feeding him breakfast downstairs in the kitchen. I take a seat on the opposite side of the round table, and she pops a plate in front of me—two pieces of white bread with a little bit of butter.

"Raw toast?" I complain.

"The electricity's out," Grandpa supplies with a swig of orange juice. I catch the bitterness in his tone. No power equals no coffee. "You should see town. Branches in the streets. Mangled lawn furniture all over the place."

"The one in my bedroom took out the whole window frame," Ricky comments. He's short and slight, with huge eyes that always make him seem super serious, whether he is or not. "The carpet's soaked, and there's glass everywhere."

I turn to Grandma. "When can he go home?"

She shoots me a stink eye—a look she normally reserves for

my older brother, Luke. "Mrs. Molina asked this favor of me. We're glad to have Ricky."

Grandma works at the same law firm as Ricky's mom—Grandma as a secretary and Mrs. Molina as a paralegal, whatever that is. The Molinas are new in town, and Grandma is being extra nice to them because she's extra nice to everybody. It's kind of annoying, but I guess I have no right to complain. She took in Luke and me when our parents went into rehab—and kept us when they left it without bothering to come home. That's different, though. We're family.

"I'll probably be here all day," Ricky advises me. "Mom says the glass guys are swamped. Half of Canaan has broken windows."

I take a bite of untoasted toast and chew until it's a tasteless paste in my mouth. The one good thing about having Hurricane Leo lay waste to your town is getting a day off school. I polish off my juice and stand up. "I'm going to track down the guys."

"Good idea," Grandma approves. "You can take Ricky with you."

"He probably wants to hang out with his own friends."

"I don't have any friends," Ricky admits.

"You mean you don't have any friends *yet*," I amend. "Don't worry—you'll make some. A day like today is the perfect chance to . . ." I wilt under Grandma's red-hot gaze. "Fine. Tell me what I have to do and I'll do it."

"You *know* what you have to do," she replies, her eyes speaking paragraphs.

Grandpa is oozing sympathy in my direction. He can relate. He's been married to Grandma for over forty years. That's a lot of time to be stationed under the supreme commander.



When I step out of the house, it's with Ricky Molina by my side. Lucky me.

Grandpa wasn't exaggerating about the state of the town. The streets are an obstacle course of downed branches and shingles that blew off roofs. Debris is everywhere, and power crews move from pole to pole, patching and replacing. On our block alone, three big trees have been completely uprooted from the soggy ground, flipping whole slabs of concrete from the sidewalk and curb.

The entire side of Grandma and Grandpa's house is purple from a bombardment of wind-borne blueberries. You can actually smell the crushed fruit like somebody's got a pie in the oven.

Ricky wrinkles his nose. "Disgusting."

I swear I was just about to say the same thing. But hearing it from Ricky makes me offended on behalf of my grandparents' home and blueberries, which are now my favorite fruit.

"It could have been worse," I tell him. "We could have been pinned to our beds when a giant branch came through the window."

He shrugs. "It didn't hit me. I just got some cuts from the broken glass."

I should say I've got nothing against Ricky. He's not even a total stranger. He's in some of my classes at school, although I think he's a little younger than me—not sure how that works. But in a town like Canaan, you've known your boys since pre-school. That's a lot of history compared to some random kid who shows up the first week of eighth grade. I'm sure he'll make friends eventually. I'm just not going to be one of them.

I lead him along Peacock Avenue as we pick our way around the branches and debris on the sidewalk. Some of the stuff we step over is pretty amazing—a weather vane, a smashed skylight, a baby swing, the rusty grill of a barbecue. I reach down and pick up the top half of a two-piece bathing suit, then ask, “How did this get here?”

Ricky shrugs. “Somebody hung out their laundry, and it blew away. I'll bet the bottom half is on its way to Bermuda.”

“More like Canada,” I muse, picturing the TV news projection of the path of Hurricane Leo.

Mitchell Worth and C.J. Sciutto are waiting at our meeting place by the trail that leads into the woods. Wiry, dark-haired C.J. is narrating the play-by-play of his latest “death-defier”—a skateboard drag down the railing at the front steps of the Canaan Public Library.

“... I'm sliding along, wind blowing through my hair, when this little old lady grabs hold of the banister like it's a tug-of-war and starts up the stairs. Well, I can't just plow her down, right? So I jump her and I nail it—*almost*.” When he's telling a story, his mouth moves a mile a minute.

Blond Mitchell examines the scabby scrape on the whole

right side of C.J.'s face. "Did it hurt?" He wants more details. Mitchell always wants more details, especially when they're gory.

"No, it didn't hurt," C.J. snaps sarcastically. "It felt like landing on a feather bed." He turns to me, his brow furrowing as he takes in my companion. "What's with him?"

"You guys know Ricky from school," I explain. "His mom works with my grandma."

"Yeah, but what's he doing *here*?" Mitchell probes. He's staring at Ricky like the kid's in a specimen jar or something. Mitchell has obsessive-compulsive disorder—OCD for short. It hits different people in different ways. In Mitchell's case, it means he doesn't like unexpected twists. Among other things.

"Am I late?"

The voice is distant, but it booms like thunder. Tall, athletic Jason Brax rides up, bent over the handlebars of his silver racing bike. "Sorry! I'm with my dad this week. I had to help him mop out the kitchen. We left the window open last night because we burned the chili. The smoke went out, but the hurricane came in!" Everything about Jason is larger than life: His voice; his mane of windblown brown hair. Even his shoulders are broader and more adult-size than the rest of ours.

He falls silent when he sees Ricky standing with us.

"The hurricane came into my house too," Ricky supplies. "A big branch blew through my bedroom window."

"Ricky's with me," I confess. "You know, while his folks get his room fixed up."

"But, Evan," Jason protests, "we're going to—you know it's supposed to be a secret, right?"

"I can keep a secret," Ricky promises.

"You can't keep it, because it isn't your secret," Mitchell puts in with his usual flawless logic.

I sigh. "I have a feeling our secret is blown all over the woods. Just look around you. The whole town is a disaster area. Imagine what the storm did to a few tarps."

"Maybe the trees protected it," Jason suggests hopefully.

"Protected what?" Ricky probes.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Mitchell shoots back.

Not that I'm the world's greatest Ricky protector, but this is working itself up to be a giant fight over nothing. "We built a fort in the woods—"

"A *secret* fort," Mitchell interjects, his voice urgent, like he can stop me now.

"So that's where we're going," I finish. "To check on it and see if it's still standing."

"It won't be," C.J. predicts mournfully.

"Only one way to find out," decides Ricky. "Let's go see."

The chorus of protest is drowned out by the roar of an unmuffled car engine. Louder yet is the pounding bass coming from the beat-up convertible's sound system. The fire-engine-red Mustang comes barreling down the street, swerves to avoid a fallen TV satellite dish, and screeches to a halt in front of us.

"Morning, losers," my brother, Luke, greets us from the passenger seat.

A couple of the guys say hi to Luke, but nobody acknowledges the driver of the car, my brother's new best friend, Jaeger Devlin.

“Gentlemen,” Jaeger greets us in his oily way, his smile oozing fake charm.

Nobody answers except Ricky, who gives him a shy “Hey.”

Ricky’s new in town, so he probably hasn’t heard about Jaeger yet. The guy should come with warning labels about how he’s hazardous to your health. I wish my brother would stay away from him, but there’s no way I can say that to Luke. We used to be close. What choice did we have? When our parents went off the rails and our family fell apart, all we had was each other. But ever since Jaeger’s been in the picture, Luke’s been a straight-up jerk. I haven’t liked being around him much lately. Scariest of all is the look in his eyes—a little bit crazy, a little bit hunted, yet also absent and disconnected, like nobody’s home. Our parents looked like that just before they spiraled out of control and left us. If that’s starting to happen to Luke, I don’t know if I’m going to be able to handle it. That’s why I hate Jaeger—reason number seventeen. There are all kinds of reasons to hate Jaeger.

“What’s in the woods?” Jaeger asks us.

“N-nothing!” Mitchell stammers. “Why would you think we’re going in the woods?”

Without changing his bland expression to indicate any interest whatsoever, Jaeger inclines his head to indicate Ricky, who’s a few yards past us, clearly starting along the trail.

“I want to see the uprooted trees,” Ricky replies smoothly. “It’s got to be crazy in there. So many tangled root systems.”

Luke makes a face. “Sounds boring. Plenty of damage around town. That’s what we’re checking out.”

Translation: They're poking around blown-in doors, missing windows, and broken locks, looking for things to steal. Jaeger's all about the five-finger discount. And lately, everything Jaeger does is just great with my brother.

"Later, gentlemen." Jaeger throws the Mustang in gear and lurches forward ten feet so his twin tailpipes are pointing at us. Then he revs the engine, spewing a cloud of thick gray exhaust that leaves us all choking. Finally, they screech off down the road.

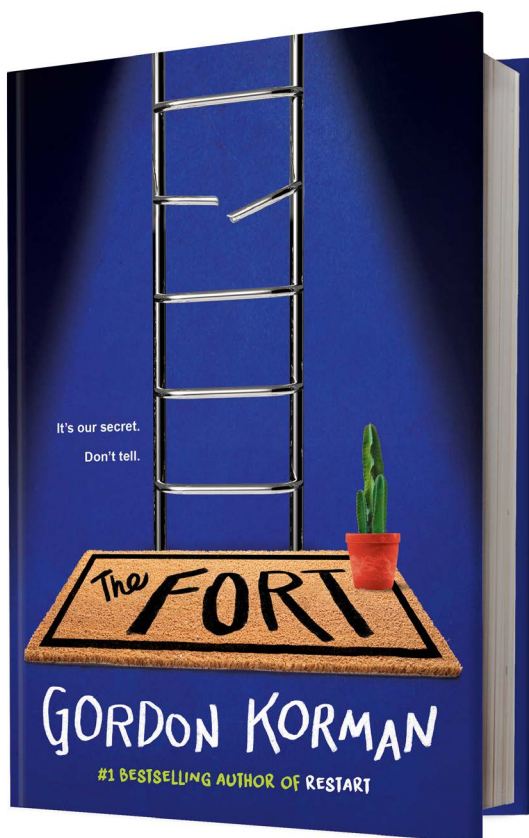
I get a sympathetic look from the recognizable half of C.J.'s swollen face. "Dude, I know he's your brother. But what a jerk!"

"Yeah," Mitchell adds, brushing at his shirt as if he can wipe the smoke off. "What are you going to do about him?"

"Let's just find our fort," I mumble, starting along the trail after Ricky. I know from hard experience that there's nothing you can do when someone you're close to messes up big.

Luke knows too. He was right there with me, watching it happen.

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