

10TH ANNIVERSARY

Leaving
paradise

SIMONE ELKELES

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Return to Paradise*

Caleb

I've been waiting a year for this moment. It's not every day you get a chance to get out of jail. Sure, in the game of Monopoly you just have to roll the dice three times and wait for a double, or pay the fine and be free. But there are no games here at the Illinois Department of Corrections–Juvenile complex; or the DOC as we inmates call it.

Oh, it's not as rough as it sounds. The all male juvenile division is tough, but it's not like the adult DOC. You might ask why I've been locked up for the past year. I was convicted of hitting a girl with my car while driving drunk. It was a hit-and-run accident, too, which actually made the judge in my case royally pissed off. He tacked on an extra three months for that.

"You ready, Caleb?" Jerry, the cell guard, asks.

"Yes, sir." I've been waiting three hundred and ten days for this. Hell, yeah, I'm ready.

I take a deep breath and follow Jerry to the room where the review committee will evaluate me. I've been prepped by the other guys in my cell block. *Sit up straight, look full of remorse, act polite*, and all that stuff. But, to tell you the truth, how much can you trust guys who haven't gotten out themselves?

As Jerry opens the door to the evaluation room, my muscles start to twitch and I'm getting all sweaty beneath my state-issued coveralls, state-issued socks, and yep, even my state-issued briefs. Maybe I'm not so ready for this after all.

"Please sit down, Caleb," orders a woman wearing glasses and a stern look on her face.

I swear the scene is out of a bad movie. Seven people sitting behind six-foot-long tables in front of one lone metal chair.

I sit on the cold, hard metal.

"As you know, we're here to evaluate your ability to leave here and begin your life as a free citizen."

“Yes, ma’am,” I say. “I’m ready to leave.”

A big guy, who I can tell is going to play “bad cop,” puts his hand up. “Whoa, slow down. We have a few questions to ask before we make our decision.”

Oh, man. “Sorry.”

Big Guy checks my file, flipping page after page. “Tell me about the night of the accident.”

The one night in my life I want to erase from history. Taking a deep breath, I say, “I was drinking at a party. I drove home, but lost control of the car. When I realized I hit someone, I freaked and drove back to the party.”

“You knew the girl you hit?”

Memories assault me. “Yes, sir. Maggie Armstrong ... my neighbor.” I don’t add she was my twin sister’s best friend.

“And you didn’t get out of the car to see if your neighbor was hurt?”

I shift in my chair. “I guess I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“You *guess*?” another committee member asks.

“If I could turn back time, I swear I would. I’d change everything.”

They question me for another half hour and I spurt out answers. Why I was drinking while underage, why I’d get into a car drunk, why I left the scene of the accident. I don’t know if I’m saying the wrong thing or right thing, which puts me on edge. I’m just being me ... seventeen-year-old Caleb Becker. If they believe me, I stand a chance of getting released early. If they don’t ... well, I’ll be eating crappy food for another six months and continue rooming with convicts.

Big Guy looks right at me. “How do we know you won’t go on another drinking binge?”

I sit up straight in my chair and direct my attention to each and every one of the committee members. “No offense, but I never want to come back here again. I made a huge mistake, one that’s haunted me day and night since I’ve been here. Just ... let me go home.” For the first time in my life, I’m tempted to grovel.

Instead, I sit back and wait for another question.

“Caleb, please wait outside while we make our decision,” the woman with the glasses says.

And it’s over. Just like that.

I wait out in the hall. I’m usually not a guy who breaks under pressure, and the past year in jail has definitely given me an invisible piece of armor I wear around me. But waiting for a group of strangers to decide your fate is majorly nerve-wracking. I wipe beads of perspiration off my forehead.

“Don’t worry,” guard Jerry says. “If you didn’t win them over, you might get another chance in a few months.”

“Great,” I mumble back, not consoled in the least.

Jerry chuckles, the shiny silver handcuffs hanging off his belt clinking with each movement. The dude likes his job too much.

We wait a half hour for someone to come out of the room and give me a sign of what’s next. Freedom or more jail time?

I’m tired of being locked in my cell at night.

I’m tired of sleeping on a bunk bed with springs pushing into my back.

And I’m tired of being watched twenty-four hours a day by guards, personnel, cameras, and other inmates.

The lady with the glasses opens the door. “Caleb, we’re ready for you.”

She isn’t smiling. Is that a bad sign? I’m bracing myself for bad news. I stand up and Jerry pats me on the back. A pity pat? Does he know something I don’t? The suspense is freaking me out.

I sit back on the metal chair. All eyes are on me. Big Guy folds his hands on the table and says, “We all agree that your actions last year concerning the accident were reprehensible.”

I know that. I *really* know that.

“But we believe that was an isolated incident never to be repeated. You’ve demonstrated positive leadership qualities with other inmates and worked hard on your jobs here. The review committee has decided to release you and

have you finish out your sentence with one hundred and fifty hours of community service.”

Does that mean what I think it means? “Release? As in I can leave here?” I ask the Big Guy.

“You’ll be meeting with your transition coach tomorrow morning. He’ll arrange your community service duties and report your progress to us.”

Another member of the committee points a manicured finger at me. “If you screw up, your transition counselor can petition the judge to bring you back here to serve out the rest of your sentence. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We don’t give breaks to repeaters. Go back home, be a model citizen, finish your community service requirements, and have a good, clean life.”

I *get it*. “I will,” I say.

When I get back to my cell, the only one here is the new kid. He’s twelve and still cries all the time. Maybe he should’ve thought twice before he buried a knife into the back of the girl who refused to go to the school dance with him.

“You ever gonna stop crying?” I ask the kid.

He’s got his face in his pillow; I don’t think he hears me. But then I hear a muffled, “I hate this place. I want to go home.”

I change into my work boots because I get the pleasure of having to clean the dumpsters today. “Yeah, me too,” I say. “But you’re stuck here so you might as well suck it up and get with the program.”

The kid sits up, snuffles, and wipes his nose with the back of his hand. “How long have you been here?”

“Almost a year.”

That sets the kid plunging back into his pillow for more wailing. “I don’t want to be locked up for a year,” he cries.

Julio, another cell mate, walks into the room. “Seriously, Caleb, if that kid doesn’t shut up, I’m gonna kill him. I haven’t slept for three nights because of that crybaby.”

The wails stop, but then the sniffles start. Which are actually worse than the wailing.

“Julio, give the kid a break,” I say.

“You’re too soft, Caleb. Gotta toughen these kids up.”

“So they can be like you? No offense, man, but you’d scare a serial killer,” I say.

One look at Julio and you know he’s a tough guy. Tattoos all over his neck, back, and arms. Shaved head. When my mom comes for visits, she acts like his tattoos are contagious.

“So?” Julio says. “They gonna let you outta here?”

I sit on my bed. “Yeah. Tomorrow.”

“Lucky sonofabitch. You goin’ back to that small town with a funny name? Wha’s it called again?”

“Paradise.”

“So I’ll be stuck here alone with crybaby while you’re in Paradise? Ain’t that a bitch.” He gives the kid a wide-eyed stare. If I didn’t know Julio better, I’d be afraid, too.

This sets the kid off again.

Julio chuckles, then says “Well, I’ll give you the number to my cousin Rio in Chicago. If you need to hightail it out of Paradise, Rio will hook you up.”

“Thanks, man,” I say.

Julio shakes his head at the crying kid, says “Later, *amigo*,” and leaves the open cell.

I tap the kid on his shoulder. He jerks away, scared.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” I tell him.

He turns to me. “That’s what they all say. I heard about what goes on in jails.” He scoots his butt towards the wall.

“Don’t flatter yourself, kid. You’re not my type. I like chicks.”

“What about the guy with the tattoos?”

I fight the urge to laugh. “He’s hetero, too. Dude, you’re in a juvenile

facility.”

“He said he’ll *kill* me.”

“He says that because he likes you,” I assure him. Julio has a sick sense of humor. “Now get off the bed, stop the crying, and go to group.”

Group is group therapy. Where all the inmates sit around and discuss personal shit about their lives.

Tomorrow I’m getting the hell out of this place. No more group. No more cellmates. No more crappy food. No more cleaning dumpsters.

Tomorrow I’m going home.

Maggie

I think physical therapists like their job a little too much. I mean, why do they always look so happy and smiley as they make you sweat and wince from pain?

Sure enough, Robert, my physical therapist, is waiting for me with a big white-toothed smile in the lobby of the outpatient area of the hospital.

“Hi, Maggie. You ready to work that leg of yours?”

Not really. “I guess so,” I say, looking down at the floor.

I know it’s Robert’s job to try and make me walk better. But there’s no use in helping me walk normal because my leg is all messed up inside. The last surgery I had to fix my tibial plateau fracture lasted over seven hours. My orthopedic surgeon jokes with me and calls it a bionic leg. All I know is that I have more nails and plastic inside me than the average tool box.

When I go to Spain next semester the screeners at the airport are going to have a field day with me. They’ll probably ask me to climb inside the x-ray machine to make sure I’m not concealing a weapon inside my knee.

Robert escorts me into the physical therapy room. I have to come here twice a week. Twice a week for almost a year and still people stare at me when I walk.

“Maggie, lie down and put your foot on my shoulder,” Robert instructs, getting down to business-as-usual.

Sighing, I lay down on the mat and put my foot on Robert’s shoulder. He holds my foot in place and leans forward. “Put pressure on it.”

After the accident, all I can do is a little baby push.

“Come on, Maggie. You can do better than that. I hardly feel it.”

I put my forearm over my eyes. “It’s never going to get better than this.”

“Sure it will. Look, you never believed you’d be able to walk again and here you are.”

I put more pressure on my foot.

“Thatta girl. Rate your pain level right now from one to ten, ten being excruciating.”

“Eight.”

“An eight?”

It might even be a nine.

“If you work hard now, the payoff will show later,” he says.

I don’t answer, but keep the increased pressure on my foot. He leans back and lowers my foot. Phew, that’s over.

“Great. Now keep your legs straight and alternate bending them one at a time.”

I start with my right leg. The accident didn’t mess it up too much and the scars have healed. For the most part.

But when I have to bend my left leg, it feels like a weight is attached to it. I bend it an inch at a time. Just lifting my leg makes me sweat like a long-distance runner. The word *pathetic* pretty much sums up my seventeen-year-old life.

“A little more,” Robert says just as I’m about to lower it. “What’s your pain level from one to ten?”

Before I can answer a nine, his cell phone rings. And rings. And rings. “Aren’t you going to answer it?” I ask.

“Not while I have a client. Keep bending those legs, Maggie.”

“Maybe it’s important,” I say with hope in my voice.

“If it is, they’ll leave a message. Dr. Gerrard tells me you’ll be leaving us in January,” he says as I alternate legs.

“Yep,” I say between clenched teeth. “I got a scholarship to go to Spain for a semester. I had to petition for an extension because of the infection.”

Robert whistles appreciatively. “Spain, huh? You’re a lucky lady.”

Lucky? I am *not* lucky. Lucky people don’t get hit by cars and have to go through painful physical therapy. Lucky people don’t have divorced parents and a dad they see once a year. Lucky people have friends. Now that I think about it, I’m probably the unluckiest person in the entire universe.

I endure leg torture for another twenty minutes. I'm so ready to leave, but I know it's not over. The last thing Robert does in physical therapy is massage my leg muscles. I pull down my workout pants and sit on the metal table in my shorts.

"Is the redness fading?" Robert asks as he rubs medicated cream on my leg with gloved hands.

"I don't know," I say. "I don't like to look at it." In fact, I'd look anywhere except my scarred left leg. It's ugly, as if a two-year-old drew red lines with a crayon up and down my calf and thigh. But the marks aren't from a crayon. They're from my various surgeries after Caleb Becker hit me while driving drunk.

I try to forget about Caleb, but I can't. He's embedded into my brain like cancer. My nightmares of the accident have stopped, though, thank God. Those lasted for over six months. I hate Caleb. I hate what he did to me and I'm glad he's far away. I try not to think about where he's gone. If I think about it too hard, I'll probably feel guilty. So I don't think about it and trudge through my life ignoring the parts that'll pull me under so far I won't be able to get up.

As Robert studiously massages my leg muscles, I wince.

"It shouldn't hurt when I do this," he says.

"It doesn't." It's just ... I don't like people touching my scars. I can't even stomach touching them.

Robert examines my leg. "The deep redness will fade eventually. Give it a few more months."

Robert finally announces he's finished. As I put my workout pants back on, he writes something down in my file. His pen moves faster than I can talk.

"What are you writing?" I ask warily.

"Just evaluating your progress. I'm requesting Dr. Gerrard come visit during your therapy next week."

Don't panic, Maggie, I tell myself. "Why?"

"I'd like to switch up your program."

"I don't like the sound of that."

Robert pats me on the back. “Don’t worry, Maggie. We just need to come up with a physical therapy plan you can do in Spain without me.”

Physical therapy in Spain? Not exactly what I imagined myself doing while overseas. I don’t tell this to Robert. Instead, I give him a weak smile.

After my appointment, I head to Auntie Mae’s Diner where my mom works. I know it’s not glamorous, but she had to get a job when my dad left two years ago. Her boss, Mr. Reynolds, is pretty nice and gave her time off a lot when I was in the hospital. We’re not rich, but we have a roof over our heads and Auntie Mae’s Diner food in our stomachs.

I sit down at a table and my mom goes in the kitchen to get dinner for me. I’m about to read a book when I look up and see Danielle, Brianne, and my cousin Sabrina enter the restaurant. God, they look so ... perfect.

I used to be friends with Danielle and Brianne. Leah Becker and I used to hang out with them all the time. The four of us were on the high school tennis team and inseparable since our first tennis lesson at the Paradise Community Center when we were nine years old. Sabrina was the outsider, the non-athlete. I remember Mom making me ask Sabrina to tag along with my friends when we went out.

The accident turned Paradise upside down. When Caleb hit me, he not only destroyed my leg, he also destroyed my friendship with his twin sister, Leah, and Mom’s friendship with Mrs. Becker. There’s an invisible fence now between our house and the Beckers’ house where there once was an open-door policy.

At first I didn’t have time to miss Leah; in the hospital my phone rang constantly. My mom kept busy answering calls and urging me to cut my conversations short so I could concentrate on healing. But as the months passed, the calls dwindled, then finally stopped altogether. Everyone else got on with their life while I recovered at home.

Sabrina used to come over and give me updates on school gossip. Now my cousin is close friends with Brianne and Danielle, which is totally strange because before the accident they didn’t give her the time of day.

I’ve never asked Sabrina about Leah ... and Sabrina never offers any information. Leah’s brother went to jail because of me. I was sure she hated me because of it. We’d literally gone from best friends to strangers overnight.

Every time I think of going back to school on Monday, my stomach starts to do flips. I've been home-schooled by public tutors assigned by the school district almost my entire junior year because of the infection in my leg after my first surgery. Now I'm a senior. I don't know which will be worse; getting out of the house or going to school and facing all the kids there. What if I run into Leah? What should I say?

My cousin and old friends are standing at the hostess stand, waiting to be seated. Okay, so it's times like these I wish Mom didn't work as a waitress. Knowing she wears a pink polyester uniform with buttons that read *ASK ME ABOUT MY DOUBLE DECKERS* doesn't usually bother me. But that, on top of having her serve my former friends, makes me want to hide under the table.

Mom walks out from the back kitchen with my dinner. I watch in agony as she spots Danielle, Brianne, and Sabrina. Her eyes light up. "Hi, girls!" She waves at me to get my attention. "Look Maggie, it's your friends and cousin!"

Brianne and the others give my mom fake smiles. Mom is oblivious.

I give a little half wave and look down at a tiny chip in the corner of the table, hoping my mom will get the hint.

"Why don't you sit with Maggie? She's all alone," I hear Mom say.

Why doesn't she just tell them I'm a loser now, too? Maybe I should get a big "L" for "loser" button and pin it to the front of my shirt.

The girls, including my cousin, just look at each other and shrug. "Sure."

Why pretend to be friends and be all fakey? It's not worth it.

"Hi," I say when Mom leads them to my table and places my favorite dinner in front of me: a French dip, split pea soup, and a side of fries with gravy.

"Mrs. Armstrong, what's your double deckers?" Brianne asks.

The rest of the girls snicker while I sink deeper into my chair.

Mom doesn't flinch and goes right into her spiel. "We have a new selection of double decker sandwiches with turkey and bacon layered with lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise, and our special sauce. We also have new roast beef and cheese double deckers. They all come with two layers of bread in between."

Danielle looks like she's going to be sick. "My arteries are clogging up just hearing about all that cholesterol."

"Forget the cholesterol," Sabrina says. "Two layers of bread? Carb city."

Since when did my cousin become concerned about carbs? I look down at my plate. Carbs and more carbs, cholesterol and more cholesterol.

"I'll have a Diet Coke and a side salad, Mrs. Armstrong," Brianne says.

"Me, too," Sabrina says.

"And me," Danielle chimes in.

"We have thousand island, blue cheese, ranch, low-fat Italian ..."

"Thousand island for me," Sabrina says. "On the side."

Danielle furrows her waxed brows, thinking it over. "I guess I'll take the low-fat Italian. On the side."

Brianne cocks her head to the side and says, "No dressing."

No dressing? What happened to pigging out on chips and pizza? I've only been away a year and I'm totally lost.

Mom leaves to enter the orders, and I'm left with my salad-eating cousin, ex-friends ... and my French dip, pea soup, fries and gravy. I was seriously hungry before, but now I can't eat.

Brianne fumbles through her purse and pulls out a small mirror.

"Give me that when you're done," Sabrina says. When my cousin has the mirror, she attempts to check out the back of her head. Which she really can't do with one mirror, but I'm not going to break that news to her.

"What are you doing, Sabrina?" Danielle asks.

"I think I need to get my hair cut before tomorrow."

Danielle laughs. "Girls, stop freaking out. It's a party, not a presidential ball."

"What party?" I ask, then want to die for asking. Obviously I wasn't invited. I don't want to go, anyway. But now it *looks* like I want to go.

The girls eye each other. They don't want to tell me about the party. Ugh, why did I even ask?

“A back-to-school party,” Danielle finally says. “At Brian Newcomb’s house.”

Wouldn’t you know, Mom comes with their Diet Cokes and an extra large piece of pie for me at that exact same moment. “Oh, a party! When? Maggie would LOVE to go to a party, wouldn’t you honey?”

Instead of answering, I bite off a huge chunk of the French dip. It saves me from having to answer, but now I feel like I’m going to gag on the gargantuan piece of beef in my mouth.

Brianne looks like she’s gonna puke just watching me.

“Uh, you can come if you *want*, Maggie,” my cousin says.

It was definitely a pity invite, anyone but a waitress at Auntie Mae’s Diner would realize that. I’m not going to the party. I just don’t know how I’m going to break it to Mom and let my ex-friends off the hook at the same time.

I take my time chewing.

Before the accident I was a sophomore on the varsity tennis team. But now as a senior I wouldn’t even make the freshman squad. Not that I would want to, because then I’d have to wear those short tennis skirts. I’m never wearing a tennis skirt again because I’m never showing anyone my ugly leg scars. Besides, you can’t play tennis when you can’t even walk straight.

As I swallow the last of the wad of beef, I realize they’re all waiting for an answer.

Umm ...

The hopeful look on my mom’s face makes me realize she feels sorry for me. As if I care that I’m not friends with them anymore. Mom cares. She’s got to deal with paying for half of the medical bills that the insurance didn’t cover. My parents are divorced and I hate feeling like I’m adding to her stress. Guilt, like a big wad of roast beef, settles in my French dip-filled gut.

I want to wince when I hear myself say, “Sure, sounds like fun.”

Mom lets out a breath while the girls suck in theirs.

“Can you pick her up?” Mom asks my cousin.

“Sure, Aunt Linda,” Sabrina says.

Seriously, I feel like a little kid having my mommy make a playdate for me. Especially when I hear my mom ask, “What time?”

“I guess around eight.”

“Grrreat!” Mom says like that tiger in the cereal commercial.

How am I going to get out of this without my mom finding out? There’s no way I’m going to a party and have people stare and gawk at me. It’s bad enough I’ll have to deal with the ridicule in school on Monday.

After Mom brings their side salads and leaves us alone for two minutes, Brianne flashes me a sly smile. “Do you know the big news?”

News? Um, I haven’t exactly been in the gossip loop lately. “That Mr. Meyer wears a toupee?” I heard that about our school principal a while ago.

Brianne laughs. “No, that’s totally old news. I’m talking about Caleb Becker being released tomorrow.”

What?

Danielle dips her fork in her dressing and stabs a piece of lettuce. “Mrs. Becker called my mom today and told her. Early release. I wonder if they’ll let him back in school.”

Early release? He was supposed to be away for at least six more months. I had the perfect plan—to leave for Spain before he got back. A deep, sharp pain in my chest jabs me when I take a breath, and my fingers are shaking. I’m having a mini-panic attack, but trying not to let everyone else know.

“Maggie, are you okay?” Sabrina asks as I push the pie away from me.

No. I’m definitely not okay.

Caleb

As if having my dad stare at me throughout the entire drive from St. Charles to Paradise wasn't torture enough, my mom has been wringing her hands together since I was discharged from the DOC this afternoon. I don't even think she's looked in my direction once.

What the hell am I supposed to say? *Stop being nervous, Ma.* Yeah, I'm sure that'll go over well. Her son is a convicted felon. I just wish she would stop constantly reminding me of it.

Okay, so it'll take some time. She never excelled at being the doting mother to begin with.

When we turn down Masey Avenue, Paradise Park is in front of us. I got my front two teeth knocked out at the Paradise Park playground when I was five and had my first fist fight on the basketball court there when I was nine. Those were the good old days. I can't believe I'm seventeen and thinking about the good old days.

A block later we reach the familiar two-story brick house with four white pillars flanking the front door. I step out of the car and take a deep breath.

I'm home.

"Well ..." Dad says as he opens the door. "Welcome to Paradise."

I nod instead of laughing at the most common greeting to visitors in this town. I lurk in the foyer. The decorating hasn't changed in the past year—I can see that right off the bat.

Strangely enough, it doesn't feel like home.

It smells familiar, though. Like apple spice. I haven't smelled this sweet, tangy scent in what seems like forever.

"I'll, uh, be in my room," I tell them, although I say it like I'm asking permission. Why, I have no clue. It used to be my room, it still is my room. So why am I acting like this place is just a pit stop?

I step up the familiar staircase, but this feeling of claustrophobia overcomes me and I start to sweat. I venture farther up the stairs and scan the hallway.

My eyes rest on a black vision leaning against the door frame of my sister's room.

Wait.

That black vision is my twin sister, Leah. She's not just a silhouette of my sister, that's her in the flesh. And she's wearing nothing but black.

Black hair, black makeup. Damn, she even has black painted nails. Goth to the core. A shiver runs up my spine. It's hard to believe this is my sister. She resembles a corpse.

Before I let out another breath, Leah throws herself into my arms. Then these huge sobbing noises come out of her mouth and nose, reminding me of my cellmate.

Even when Judge Farkus eyed me with disgust and told me I was going to be locked up for almost a year for my gross negligence and stupidity for driving drunk, I didn't let out a peep. Man, when they made me strip and did a full cavity search, I was humiliated beyond comprehension. And when Dino Alvarez, a gang member from the south side of Chicago, came up to me during exercise hour and cornered me my second day in the DOC I almost shit my pants. But I never once in all that time cried.

I pat my sister's head, not knowing what else to do. I've hardly had any physical contact in the past year, and craved it when I sat in my cell for over three hundred days and nights. But now, when I'm getting some from my own sister, it feels like the walls are closing in on me.

"I need to lie down for a while," I say, then gently push her away. What I really need is a break from this old/new barrage of family in my life.

As I walk into my room, the dark wood floor beneath my feet creaks, the sound reverberating in my ears.

It's a kid's room, I think to myself. Sports trophies and my Star Wars Anakin Skywalker lightsaber are still on my bookshelf where I left them, and a Paradise High School pennant is nailed above my bed. Hell, even the picture of Kendra in her cheerleading uniform is taped to my headboard as if we're still a couple.

I cut all ties with her when I got arrested. Kendra is a girl used to being pampered by her parents and would be grossed out by the people I've been

living with for the past year. I could just imagine her snubbing Dino Alvarez's girlfriend during weekly visiting hours. The last thing I needed in the DOC was other inmates kicking my ass because I have a girlfriend who wears designer clothes and carries a two-hundred-dollar purse.

Visiting day for me consisted of Mom wringing her hands nervously and staring at me like I was someone else's kid, and Dad rambling on about weather and nothing in particular just to fill in the silence.

Walking to my bedroom closet, I finger all the new clothes Mom must have bought for me. What was she thinking? My t-shirts and jerseys are gone. In their place are geeky, button-down plaid shirts hanging like soldiers. On the shelves, all folded up like in a Gap store, are different shades of pleated pants.

I pick up a pair and hold them in front of me. They're way too small. When should I break the news to her I'm not the skinny kid who used to live here? I worked out every day for the past year to blow off steam and fend off guys like Alvarez. Muscles don't just weigh more, they change the entire structure of your body.

Sitting at my desk, I look out the window and glance at the Armstrongs' house. My window faces Maggie's bedroom.

Maggie Armstrong.

The girl I was convicted of maiming.

Okay, I know it's unfair. But it's hard not to want to blame her. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't have been locked up. I've thought about Maggie and the events leading up to the accident more times in the past year than I want to admit.

"Caleb, you there?" Dad asks, then knocks.

Gotta love it when people knock. I haven't heard a knock in a year. I open the door and gesture for him to come inside.

My dad walks in and I close the door behind him. He's still got a full head of dark hair and a tailored mustache. He's okay as a dad, but a total wimp when it comes to standing up to my mom.

"Your mom's invited a few of her friends over after dinner." He hesitates, then adds, "For, um, a homecoming party."

A knot on the back of my neck starts to form. I rub it. A homecoming party for a guy who just got out of the slammer? Unbelievable. “Cancel it,” I say.

The veins in his neck tense up and start turning a strange shade of purple. “Listen, it’s what your mother wants. She’s been through a lot this year with you in jail. Just ... do what she wants and put on a show for her friends. It’ll be easier for everyone if you play along.”

“A show?”

“Yeah, plaster a smile on your face and humor the women in her social club. I do it all the time,” he says, then leaves the room as quickly as he entered.

It takes a second to register what he just said. Smile? Show? I feel like I’ve been transported to some Hollywood movie set. But it’s not a movie, it’s my life.

Taking the lightsaber in my hand, I turn it on. Laser sounds fill the room when I wave the saber like a great Jedi warrior. God, how I used to spend hours dueling imaginary demons with this thing when I was a kid.

Now I’ve got new demons to fight.

Ones I can’t make disappear with a wave of a toy.

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