

Fault Lines

“The Columbia River!”

My hand is still poised over the buzzer, fingers trembling. Caleb and Ryan are frozen. I don’t think they’re breathing.

The “Quiz Master” slowly looks up from her podium. A smile breaks over her face. “That is...correct!”

Finally taking in some much-needed oxygen, I can feel the boy on my left sigh in relief and lean back against the biting metal chair, while the one on my right slaps me on the back a little too enthusiastically, pain reverberating between my shoulder blades. “*Get it, Juniper!*”

My hand is released from its spider-like pose, falling into my lap with a heavy thud. “Thanks, Caleb.” Searching the crowd, I see my mom standing up in her seat, her “proud mother of a Whiz Kid” pin securely on her trademark cableknit sweater. Dad is still sitting, with a vague “I don’t really know what just happened but Brenda is happy so I am too” look on his rugged face. And then...there’s Aspen. Sitting ramrod straight in her chair, misty gray eyes moving rapidly back and forth, closing with each flinch the deafening clapping produces. *Oh, God, Aspen, not now*, I think to myself, and hurry away from my teammates and into the crowd.

“Congrats, Junebug!” Mom’s embrace smothers me before I can get a word out. Sure, winning the district Whiz Kid competition is important, but from the look on her face, you’d think I’d just received my PhD in American History or something. I pull away after a few moments, crossing my arms in front of me to ward off another dive into my mother’s chest. “Thanks, Mom.” She’s smiling so wide she can barely move her mouth enough to form the

words “We have to celebrate! Does ice cream sound good?” I start to reply but glance to my right. Aspen hasn’t moved, dark clumps of perfectly straight hair blocking her face from my view. Dad follows my eyes and puts a hand on her knee, ignoring her flinch. “I think that sounds great, right, Juniper?” He silently begs me to agree. *It’s okay. There’s just a lot of people and noise right here. She’ll be fine as soon as we leave.* I want to believe him badly enough that I say “Yeah, yeah, ice cream is perfect.”

The scuffed marble tables at the local ice cream place are mostly empty; it isn’t too busy for a Friday night. A waiter with a cheesy red-and-white-striped paper hat bounces up to us, smiling through his acne. He’s a year or two older than me, probably around Aspen’s age. “Welcome to Frozen Freddy’s! How may we make your day?” We dictate our frozen dairy demands (two butterscotch sundaes, a chocolate-dipped cone, and a plain dish of vanilla) and watch as he practically skips away. Aspen meets my eyes for a moment. *That’s a good sign.* “I could never work here, huh, Asp? I couldn’t be this peppy.” I give her my most encouraging smile, and she offers a tiny one back. “Maybe. But you could practice. The human mind is remarkably adaptable.” She sits up straighter, and I know she’s about to go off on a tangent about the intricacies of the human brain. Normally I would suppress an eye roll and try to divert the conversation, but I don’t tonight. *Let her talk. If she’s talking about something she enjoys, she’ll be okay. We’ll be okay.*

As Aspen opens her mouth to begin, a rush of pure chaos enters the restaurant. It appears that the entire Whiz Kid team thought that ice cream sounded like a good way to celebrate, too. Caleb, Ryan, and a few other members descend around the table, pulling up chairs and squeezing in between my family. Their voices are loud, their movements exuberant, jerky, and unpredictable. *Not good.*

“Regionals here we come!”

“I swear, Juniper, your buzzer reflexes are ridiculous.”

“How do you even *know* this stuff? Like, really? I don’t even know where Columbia *is!*”

I try to respond to all the voices assaulting my ears, but my eyes are trained on Aspen.

She's already begun to curl up, her thin hands shaking, slapping against the table in a desperate *one-two-three-one-two-three* rhythm. *No no no no no, Aspen, not here. Not now.* I glance at my mother and father. Dad sees what is happening and starts to speak, to ask everyone to go back to their own tables, that this is family time, that I can talk to them later, maybe.

But it's too late.

"StopstopstopstopstopstopstopstopSTOP!" Aspen's voice quickly disintegrates into a sobbing cry. Her hands are fish, two fish out of water, thrashing against her legs, the table. She's rocking back and forth so fast she can barely catch her breath enough to scream again. "Stopstopstopstopstopstopstop!" The group surrounding us is completely still, staring the way bystanders do while they wait for a cop to show up at the scene of a car accident. I look up and see our waiter Happy McHappyson standing behind Aspen, his mouth open in an uncertain *O*, clutching a tray of rapidly melting sweetness in his hand. Aspen is still rocking and crying, curled up so tightly on her seat that she almost disappears.

My dad clears his throat. "Um, we'll take that to go, please."

"We have ice cream in the freezer." Mom gingerly takes a seat across from me at our kitchen table. I suppress a glare. *I don't care about the freaking ice cream, Mom.* But "No, thanks," is all that comes out of my mouth. We sit in an awkward silence, her lips pursed slightly as she stares at the old cuckoo clock ticking away on the wall. "Your sister's upstairs. In her room." *Of course she's in her room, because heaven forbid we force her to come downstairs and interact with the rest of us.* A shot of guilt stabs through me at the thought, immediately followed by, *It's not her fault.* That sentence comes to me reflexively, like pulling your hand away from a hot stove. I don't think it as much as I feel it. Mom glances at me out of the corner of her eye. "You should go talk to her." I lock my eyes on the table in front of me, suddenly bent on memorizing the wood grain. "Why?"

Her gaze is hurt. "You should tell her that it's all right, that you're not mad at her." My arms are crossed against my chest, and my voice doesn't sound like my own when I mutter back "Well, what if I am mad at her?" Mom's look sharpens. "Juniper, you know she can't control what happened. It wasn't her fault and I'm sure she didn't enjoy the experience

any more than you did. It's not her fault." *It's not her fault.* I've uttered those words to myself so many times, and meant them too, but tonight they force me to my feet. I stand so fast that the chair I was sitting in clatters to the ground. "Oh, really, Mom? Because I'm pretty sure she isn't the one who's going to have to go to school on Monday and answer all the questions- again. She's not going to have to deal with all the awkward stares and pity and curiosity. Whose fault is it that we can't ever just go get ice cream together and not have to worry about someone having a mental breakdown? Whose fault is it that we have to find excuses to cancel all of our plans every time she's having a bad day? Because I'm pretty sure it's *hers!*" Before my mother has a chance to reply, I'm already running up the stairs, angry tears burning tracks down my cheeks. I wonder if Aspen could hear my shouting, and for a moment I don't care if she did. *It's her fault.*

My door slams shut with a *bang* that feels final.

Aspen. Asperger's Syndrome. Man, my parents really didn't see that one coming. I've thought about the coincidence of my sister's name a lot, but it comes back to me in bed that night, trying to sleep despite the itchiness in my eyes, a constant reminder of the way I'd lashed out at my mom a few hours before. In a lot of ways, Aspen's name is perfect for her. Like the tree, she's tall, thin, and pale, with perfectly straight dark brown hair and eyes the color of an early morning storm. We could be twins, almost, except my hair is lighter. People used to think we were.

At least, until they got to know Aspen.

I didn't even realize my sister was "different" for years. I thought it was normal for sisters to refuse to look you in the eye, and flap their hands when they got nervous, and scream whenever Mommy or Daddy tried to vacuum. I even started to pick up a few of her habits, slapping my hands against my first-grade desk when I got frustrated with my addition worksheets. I think I was about seven when my parents sat me down and tried to explain that "Sissy doesn't think the same way you and I do. People make her nervous, and so do some noises, and sometimes she won't understand what things mean." Back then, it wasn't that big of a deal. But as we got older, I learned that "People make her nervous" meant no

sleepovers in middle school, because Aspen couldn't handle strangers in the the house. "Some noises" meant no going to the movie theater, no turning up the radio in the car no matter how much you liked the song, and having my parents rush home from work at any hint of a storm because their twenty-year-old daughter was scared of the thunder. And "sometimes she won't understand what things mean" translated into being called down to the principal's office in the second grade to explain to my sister that when a bully in the class says "bite me," he doesn't actually mean it.

It's not her fault had become our mantra. All of ours. Aspen rambled on about a single subject for two hours straight at the family Thanksgiving and no one else got to talk? Not her fault. Threw a fit in a grocery store and knocked over all the cans because one of them was red and the rest were green? Not her fault. And it's not. I know that. But somehow it doesn't seem to matter whose fault it is or isn't when I'm stuck at home babysitting my older sister on a Friday night.

And I love her. God, do I love Aspen. She's the smartest person I know, really. When she talks for hours about one subject, it's because she really does know just about everything there is to know about it. You want to know anything about psychology or the properties of light (her latest obsession), just ask. She's helped me study for almost every Whiz Kid meet. And she's honest. If you ask Aspen for her opinion, you're going to get it. I don't think there's anyone else who will honestly tell you if your breath stinks or whether that pimple is noticeable or not. And sometimes, when she does look me in the eye, well, she makes me feel like I'm the most important person in the world at that moment. If she reaches out to grab my hand while we're talking, I almost forget about how just last weekend I had to hunt her down at the fair because she got scared by the carnival music and hid in a port-a-potty.

Almost.

I sigh and roll over onto my side, staring at my wall in the quickly dissipating light. I swallow as much of the bitterness in my throat as I can before squeezing my eyes shut. At least *she* won't be worrying about this tomorrow.

A new sort of bitterness assaults my taste buds sometime in the night. I can't tell if

I'm dreaming or not. This must be a really crappy dream if I am, because who wants to dream that their room is full of smoke? I wake up coughing, blinking against the thick fog that obscures my vision. Kicking off my blankets, I stumble out of the bed and find my way to the door. "Ow!" The doorknob is hot. *Really* hot.

This isn't a dream. Our house is on fire.

Aspen.

I move backwards and try to remember what the fire department told us that time we went there on a field trip in elementary school. *Get down. The smoke rises.* I drop to my hands and knees and crawl towards the bed. *Cover yourself.* The comforter on my bed will have to do. I wrap it around my body as best I can and start back towards the door. With my hand covered by the blanket, I gingerly turn the knob and peer into the hallway. It's almost impossible to see through all the smoke, but I can see the fire climbing greedily up the stairs towards my room.

Aspen. I have to get Aspen.

Her room is about twenty feet away from the staircase, but the fire's rising fast. I begin crawling as quickly as I can, the rough carpet rubbing my hands and knees raw while I struggle to see through my stinging eyes. I burst through the door, still coughing, desperately scanning her bed, her desk, her chair. *Where is she?* "Aspen!" My voice is barely a whisper. I can't get enough air in to scream. "Aspen!" A faint, rhythmic sound comes from the closet. *Hands. Her hands.* I rip open the closet door and reach blindly. She's huddled in the back, hands flapping against the wall, eyes wide despite the burning smoke. I grab both her forearms and drag her into the room, starting towards the open door. *No.* It's too late. The fire is dancing at her doorway, filling the hall, inviting itself into her room. She stares at it, mesmerized. Throwing my blanket over her body, I glance desperately around the room. *The window.*

But this window doesn't open. When Aspen was really little, she was fascinated with flight, and my parents permanently shut her window to make sure she wouldn't try to experiment herself.

And we're two stories up.

And there is no way my sister is going to jump.

Sweat is already dripping down my back. The hungry flames have invaded half of the room, including the closet where Aspen was a few minutes ago. I look at her one more time, huddled in my blanket, hands shaking. She looks like a baby deer in one of those Animal Planet specials where the mom gets hit by a car and they have to wrap the baby up and take it away. I slam my elbow against the window, ignoring the firework of pain that immediately spreads through my entire arm. I do it again. And again. And again. A pattern of cracks begins to form. Mustering all the strength a frightened seventeen-year-old girl can, I hurl myself at the glass one more time. It breaks, shattered pieces disappearing into the yard below.

She won't jump. Despite being three years younger, I'm stronger than Aspen. Without a word I snatch her up, making sure the blanket covers as much of her as it can. I maneuver her body to the edge of the windowsill, glancing below me as I do. I can't see them, but I know there are bushes down there. *She'll be okay,* I promise myself, then let her go.

I can hear the gasp as she hits the bottom. There are other noises outside, now, too. My parents' voices. My mother is crying. Aspen has started to scream. A siren is wailing somewhere nearby.

The fire is burning, burning, burning the backs of my calves. I swear I can hear my hair sizzling. Crawling up onto the windowsill, I start to lower myself, thinking I can hang and drop down. *No.* I start to lose my balance. I feel something dig into my face as I fall forward; it cuts through my eyebrow, my cheek, but the pain doesn't register. The fire melts away behind me and the darkness swallows me up as I plummet down, down, down.

Something scratches my arms, the ground gives me the harshest of welcomes, and then- Nothing.

“Mom, you make a better door than a window.” She doesn't crack a smile, or budge from her stance in front of the TV. I point the remote at her, pressing buttons to no avail. “Better door than a satellite, too.” She sighs. “Juniper, you've been planted in front of this screen all day.” I gesture towards the set. “There's a special about the history of the White

House on!” Mom shakes her head. “Have you even left our house this week?”

It's not our house. We've been living with my Great Aunt Taylor in the two weeks since the fire. There are some advantages to having an old spinster auntie in town, such as having a place to live after your house burns down in a freak electrical accident. There are also a lot of disadvantages to this, too- as in, Aunt Taylor doesn't have any clothes to fit two teenage girls. Or books for them to read. Or internet. I've been surviving on donations from my friends and re-runs on the few channels her TV manages to pick up.

Mom, however, has other ideas. “You and Aspen need shoes. Why don't you head down to Shoe Plaza and pick some out?” She tosses me the keys to her car and two twenty dollar bills. *No. I don't want to go out there, Mom, there's a reason it's better to stay in this stuffy old house for now. Maybe for forever. Yeah, that sounds good.* “I've got homework and stuff to catch up on, can't you take her?” She shakes her head. “You need shoes too. Go.” Throwing the remote down on the couch, I stomp to the closet and yank my coat out, knocking over a few hangers as I do.

I try to storm past the mirror in the hallway without seeing myself, but it's too late. A canyon runs through my cheek, dragging my eye, my smile, down along with it. Not that I've been smiling too much lately anyway. *Maybe if Mom looked like this, she wouldn't be so eager to venture out.* Dr. Hamitch, the man who treated me at the hospital after the fire, says I'm incredibly lucky. “A few more inches, that glass would've cut your jugular and I don't think we'd be talking right now.” Aside from cutting my face when I fell out of the window, the only other injury I had was some minor burning on my legs and a nagging cough from the smoke. The doctor says the scar will probably fade with time, but it'll always be there. *So lucky.* I turn away from the mirror. Aspen is waiting by the door, bright pink scarf wrapped around her face, one hand already on the door. “Let's go.”

The shoe store is busy today, families crawling all over the shelves, assistants rushing back to the storage room for the fourth time because “I said size 7 *narrow*, this is *clearly* a 7 *regular*!” I take Aspen back to the sneaker section, staking out a tiny padded bench to sit on before one of the soccer moms filling the place can. We stand together in front of the wall

of tennis shoes, eyes trailing over the metallic accents and shoelace designs. “Alright, Asp, what looks good?” Before she can reply, I feel a tug on my shirt. A little girl, no more than six, is staring intently up at me. “What happened to your face?”

“What?” My hand finds my cheek. *Oh. That. That’s what she means. That’s what happened.* I had almost forgotten about the reason I didn’t want to come here. Until now. “I got hurt,” I tell her, letting my arm slowly falling down to my side. “At my house. There was an accident.” Her tiny cupid’s bow mouth screws up. “An accident? It looks like you did it on purpose.” Her eyes light up. “I know! Are you going to be Frankenstein for Halloween?” I open my mouth to respond to her gleeful proposal, but her father drags her away with a flustered “Sorry, sorry, she’s just curious,” before anything comes out. I step backwards toward the bench, collapsing on it and burying my head. *This wasn’t my fault.*

There’s a hand on the middle of my back, a little shaky, but still there. I lift my face from my hands slowly. Aspen is bent over next to me, eyebrows raised in a look of concern and slight confusion. “Juniper, what is wrong?” I just shake my head. “I hate this, Asp. I hate this. This is going to be my entire life, probably, just awkward stares and this weird combination of pity and curiosity. Nobody sees me anymore, just this scar.” She looks off towards the rows and rows of leather, fabric, and mesh. “Oh. I see. You think that *this*,” she traces the line down my face with her free hand, “is all people will care about?” I shrug. “Maybe. Kind of. It’s all anyone asks about anymore these days.” Aspen tilts her head. “You know, the human mind has incredible capabilities. Did you know that at any given time, our brain is only processing about sixty percent of what our eyes can see?” She’s staring at me intently, silvery eyes wide. “Umm, no, I didn’t, but thanks. I’ll remember that one.” “And beyond that, it’s been proven in several psychological experiments that over time, our minds cease to register certain faults in those we care about. Often, physical imperfections become almost nonexistent from the perspective of a dear friend or relative.” She glances down at her other hand, flapping absentmindedly against her jeans. “Other undesirable habits can be overlooked as well.”

The tears that had been threatening a few minutes ago are slowly retreating somewhere behind my eyes. “Aspen, how do you remember all this stuff?” It’s a question

I've asked her a million times, me, the "Whiz Kid" district champion. I grab her hand instinctively to stop the flapping before it cramps up. She narrows her lids slightly, as if she's thinking really hard about what I just said, which is something she doesn't have to do very often. "I remember," she begins slowly, "because this particular phenomenon has had a significant impact on my life. There are those willing to overlook faults, no matter how deeply they may run." My fingers are at my scar, feeling the deep chasm that runs through my face- and my life. *Before and after.* Aspen suddenly breaks out in her classic half smile, but her glance is somehow warmer than before. "There is a technical name for this occurrence, of course, but I believe most of us just refer to it as love."

Aspen sits quietly beside me as I try to compose my thoughts. *She's really good at waiting. I could be here for an hour and not say anything, and Aspen wouldn't mind.* She's staring at the hundreds of pairs of shoes, just as intently as most people would look at a sheet of calculus problems. *Probably thinking about the psychology of why our culture subjects itself to high heels.* The thought makes me smile. Reaching across her lap, I take hold of her other hand and squeeze it.

She doesn't pull away.