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## The Morning

### Brief summary:

The Morning centers around Baxter Jones, a teenage boy with a hard home life and a lot of resentment. Baxter's tense relationship with his father serves as the catalyst for a lot of reckless behavior in the novel. It begins with him shattering his father's windshield. Baxter is very close to his older sister, Caroline, who is a mother figure in his life. Caroline struggles with her mental health as well. Throughout the novel, she assists him with conflicts with friends and his first high school breakup. Near the end, Baxter, alongside his best friend, witnesses Caroline's attempted suicide. Baxter's life comes apart and he learns a lot in the process.

### Excerpt:

#### Chapter One

#### In the Middle of Things

My parents were sitting in the kitchen, right by the window. They were perched on the kitchen table. This was back when it was new. My mother had her hands on her temples and she looked all stressed and it was because I made her all stressed. My dad was talking all hushed and I know that cause his lips barely moved. I bet he was hissing his words. I'm always hissing my words because you can pass down hostility to your kids just like you can pass down your blue eyes.

My dad stacked up bricks in our garage. I guess they thought nothing of me going outside. I thought nothing of it either. They'd yelled at me till my ears rang. I needed a walk. I said, "I'm just gonna go get some fresh air." Fresh air does me no good and brings me no calm because I stared at the bricks and then grabbed one and then I hurled it right through the windshield of my father's red car. I hurled it like I hurled baseballs when I played pitcher in the second grade.

It made a big, awful sound. It was so loud it cut right into the noise of outside, silenced the crickets and froze the birds. Glass, in horrible little triangles, ones that would take forever to clean, crashed onto the ground and poured into the car. All the shards just sat there on the driveway, glimmering blue in the light. I just looked at them.

And then my dumbass screamed like I wasn't the one who threw the brick. I looked at the kitchen window, saw my mom standing with her eyes wide enough to pop out of their sockets. I was just thinking, *I am going to get killed. I am really going to get killed.* My dad came bolting out the garage door and I knew it was going to happen because he's never been a man to ponder things. Neither have I. I grabbed a brick and before I even really realized I picked up a brick, my windshield of my dad's red car fell into shards. That's how level-headed I am. That's how well I think things through.

He came out storming, with his tie blowing behind him, looking too angry to fit his malice in a button down shirt. I looked at him and then I looked at the pieces of glass on the driveway and they started to look sort of blue in the light. Caroline was in the kitchen now, with her hand over her mouth. I bet she was praying for me.

"Baxter!" He was standing right in front of me now.

I wanted to laugh. I clenched my jaw so I couldn't. I clenched my fist, didn't even think to. It does it by instinct, completely on its own.

"Why do you do shit like this? When are you going to understand things have consequences?" He shoved me, pushing my shoulder. "Why isn't that clicking, Baxter? Why isn't that clicking?" He shoved me again. He dragged me by my arm, through the garage, past his neat pile of bricks, into the kitchen. Caroline was standing at the edge of the table, opening her mouth to speak.

He pushed me again and my body rammed into the counter, stomach first.

"Dad," Caroline began.

My father just kept on screaming, but I wasn't listening.

He shoved me forward, let me jolt my forehead right into the wood, probably revelled in the thud. He yanked me by my shirt, pulled me back, then pushed me forward. The back of my head just kept on slamming into the cabinet, and I prayed not to hit the knob. It felt like my brain was rocking inside my skull, like I could hear it swish.

"Paul," My mom choked out her words, kind of whiny. He pushed me harder. He grabbed my wrists, began twisting them, holding on so tight I would have fingerprint bruises. I knew how bruises bloomed. I would turn black then blue then gray then green. I'd feel like a mood ring.

"Paul, stop it!" She sounded almost intimidating, nearly there. He kept on slamming my head. He grabbed fistfuls of my shirts and shook me, the way they tell you not to shake a baby. My head throbbed.

He paused. He took a moment to look at me. He just looked at me. My father looks just like me. My father has my same eyes and it's not the color or anything. He has beady, angry eyes. Eyes are the window to the soul and all that. We had angry eyes.

He pulled his fist back and shot it right at my cheek. My mother began to cry, and she put her hand over her mouth to muffle herself. That made a bigger show of it. My mother cried rivers then, I remember. And there's no sound I hated more than my mother's cry. My father heard it and began to back away.

My mother went to the guest room or something. My father left, drove my mother's car somewhere. They disappeared so fast. I didn't care. Caroline lingered and stared at my face. Her eyes welled up, big and babyish. She had eyes that were meant to sympathize. She looked most like my mother when she cried. I sat down at the kitchen table and she just studied me.

"I hope it doesn't bruise." She spoke gently like a mother.

"It won't." She wiped her face.

"Quit." I whined.

"I can't." People talk about a maternal instinct and whatever. Caroline had it. Caroline could make you really believe in it. She was born motherly, born to cradle baby dolls and little boys when they cried. She cradled my mom sometimes when she cried. Caroline tears up fast. She tears up when she's happy too, and that's something you do when you're old. Caroline just felt old.

"No one's gonna tell me sorry or anything?" I smiled a toothy smile.

"You broke a windshield, Baxter." She scoffed that.

"I got hit right in my face."

"It's part your fault."

"I know. I know."

I dragged myself up the stairs and into my room, rested with an Incredibles ice pack sitting right on my cheek. I hated my father and I would change my mind within an hour but I hated him so much in that moment. I heard his voice every morning, every night. I heard his voice in mine. I saw him in me. I saw him in mirrors because I mirrored him. And if there was a single thing I could change about me, it would be that I am more like him than anyone in the world. Thinking of it made my hands shake. I wanted to shatter everything.

The sound of my phone ringing interrupted me. I was sitting, fists clenched, staring so hard at my ceiling I could put a hole in it. But I didn't. My phone chimed and it broke my stare. I let it ring. The ice was starting to melt on my face. It rang again. And I knew it was going to ring a third time so I snatched it off my bedside table. It was Will.

"Me and Mohammad are coming over." He opened with that, without a hello or a how are you or anything.

"You can't."

"Well I told Mohammad we are."

"I'm in trouble with my parents."

"Oh," He paused. "You need out then."

"I'm betting I'm not allowed out."

"We'll sneak you out tonight then, Bax. It's Saturday. Don't be in on a Saturday."

"You've got to come late. I'll be grounded. I'll be grounded till I die." I didn't even feel like I was exaggerating.

"What'd you do?"

"I threw a brick at my dad's windshield. Right through it."

"Oh my God," I could hear Mohammad yell in the background, his voice a little muffled. Hayes laughed a little, then stopped all of a sudden.

"We'll see you around one, Bax. I'll be driving the truck." Will only had his permit, but he didn't care. Will didn't care about most things.

My mother burst through my door maybe an hour later. She made her voice stern. She was trying to scare me, so

I pretended to be scared. I sat up straight in my bed. She stood as tall as Caroline, barely 5'2. I already towered almost a foot over them. She was not intimidating. She was meager and frail-boned. And she crippled so easily, fell into tears so fast. But I listened to her. I thought I owed her that.

"You're grounded for two weeks. No going out." My eyes didn't even widen. I expected that. "And you're paying for half of the windshield." She did not break eye contact with me. She put out her hand. "Give me your phone." I nearly gasped.

"Please, Mama, I just want my phone. I'll be good. I'll do everything else."

"No. Give me your phone." I handed it to her.

She shut the door and I threw a water bottle at it as soon as it closed.

I texted Will off of Caroline's phone. I peered out the window and he sat smiling wide with straight white teeth because we all boasted braces for a good two years during middle school. He liked to hang his head out of the window of his silver Toyota Tacoma that wasn't his at all. People always mistook us for brothers because we had the same blue eyes and not-really-blonde, sitting-right-on-the-line-of-brown hair, and he was only an inch taller than me. I called him fast, and Caroline sat pouting on her bed because she was sick and tired of me using her phone.

"Will, I can't go downstairs."

"Just be quiet about it. Tip toe."

"I might climb out of the window."

"On the second floor?" He huffed. "Gonna crack your head like that windshield."

I tried to keep quiet going down the stairs, but they squeaked. I'm heavy-footed. Caroline snuck out often and she walked gently, swiftly. Caroline walked like she had secrets. I kept thinking, *God, God, please, God, leave them sleeping. Leave them sleeping till I get back.* I slipped out of the front door and flinched when I shut it. I scrunched up my whole face, waiting for my father to come screaming down the stairs, flailing his arms all around, and threatening me. He didn't.

I threw the truck door open and jumped in.

"Hey, Bax." Mohammad and Will sang like a choir. I nodded and grinned my big, stupid grin.

"Fucking idiot." Will muttered and I just laughed, letting my shoulders fall for the first time in hours. I was dumb. God, I was really dumb.

We rode to a gas station that was barely a mile away. Will liked the feeling of stealing his father's truck. He liked being all nervous when he pulled out of the garage and he liked feeling all proud when he sat the keys safe on the counter. That's why Will did half the things he did: for no good reason.

It was that weird time in the middle of the night. It was Sunday, but it didn't feel like Saturday had ended yet. The roads were empty, most houses dim, and everything felt all hushed. We went to a gas station, the only place open. I just bought a slushie, shoved a pack of gummies in my hoodie because I didn't have the money to pay. Mohammad shook his head at me when I did. He got these stupid energy drinks that tasted awful but he drank them like spring water.

"You wanna go up on the parking garage? Like middle school." Will asked in the truck. I loved that parking garage, the one by Dawson Church. It was always kept unlocked. All through the 7th grade, we sat on the very top and ate. Once, Will hung off the edge, and somebody below had called the police. That was the most exciting day of my 13 year old life, and I had to force my jaw to clamp so I couldn't smile when the policeman scolded us. But Will just wore his big, sugary smile, didn't bother to hide it. That was the first drug a kid ever tried, before everything. Will was giddy off defiance. Hanging off of buildings and stealing trucks and breaking windshields, that's all one in the same. And Will and I were so often mistook for brothers. Will and I, we were one in the same.

We had to walk up this spiraling staircase to get up to the top. It was eerie, made of all concrete, and once you escaped the stairs, you were let out to the top and it felt like real freedom. It was a good place to bring girls, and they'd always say something about the view even though all they were seeing was a Baptist church and a few restaurants and a neighborhood behind that. It was where I had my first kiss.

"Yeah," Mohammad nodded with a smile. His eyes flickered with nostalgia. "I haven't been in forever."

We hopped out of his truck, passed the metal gates of the entrance. Will began running up the stairs, spinning round and round till he reached the top. Mohammad and I started after him. It felt like diving into a pool once I reached the top. The air was cold and quiet. I set my slushie down and ran to the edge to look out at all that was below even though I couldn't see much in the dead of the night, just the gas station under streetlights. I beamed looking at it. I heard tennis shoes pattering behind me, and Will laughing. I felt his hand creep on the back of neck and he pushed me forward so that my whole upper body hung off of the garage. I stared five stories down into darkness that led into bushes. I grabbed onto the wall and the breath was snatched out of my lungs.

"You scared, Bax?" Will giggled. He had fun with all these things and I thought about how quickly his fun would cripple if I toppled down the side of the building and slammed onto the sidewalk. My heart raced, speeding all the way up to my throat. He paused and then pushed me a little bit harder, hand only on the back of my neck.

“Will, Will. Will!” I yelled it and it felt like an eruption. I was so panicked. He took fast steps backwards and I sprung up and ran away from the edge.

“I was just playing. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He put his arms up, palms forward.

“Are you okay?” Mohammad yelled. I staggered towards my slushie and brought the straw to my mouth.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

I saw death down in the bushes but that was only for half a second. I didn’t want to sit against the brick edge after that. Mohammad started talking about car shopping like nothing was ever wrong. It all became fine in five minutes. I opened my gummies. Will bought too many Little Debbie Snow Cakes, enough that we could share. In the midst of calm conversation, Mohammad squinted at my face, and said, “Is that a bruise?”

My father hit me hard, enough for me to turn dark purple within a few hours. Skin on the face is delicate, especially right on bone. It still hurt to touch, and I knew it was going to be bad and big, so deep in color that Caroline’s thickest concealer couldn’t cover it.

“I got hit playing baseball.” I said.

Mohammad shined his phone flashlight on my face.

“It’s not baseball season.”

“I was just practicing.”

Mohammad shifted uncomfortably, planning his words. Mohammad always planned his words. He was better friends with Will than me, served as his reason. Maybe I needed somebody to be my reason.

“If something’s wrong, you can say, you know.” He said it gently because Mohammad knew to be careful with me. Heat crept up my face. I bet it got red. I bet it got so red it drowned out the bruise.

“What do you mean if something’s wrong?”

“If someone hit you,”

“No one’s hit me.”

“Like your dad,” he continued.

“My dad isn’t doing anything.”

“Alright.” He nearly stopped.

“Don’t say shit about my dad.”

“You say shit about your dad, Bax.” He wasn’t wrong. “Always say you hate him.”

“Everybody says that.”

“Not like you.” He leaned forward to look at me. “You’ve always got bruises and I’m not going to say anything to anybody. You can tell the truth though. I’m not sayin’ it to pry. You broke a windshield and then you come around with a bruise. You could just say-” I shoved his shoulders so that his chest flew back, head almost hitting the concrete. My voice grew mean and ugly. I stood.

“Shut up,” I spat at him.

“I’m sorry.”

“Shut up.” I screamed. He put more space between us. Will winced. My own friends winced when I was angry, flinched when I lifted my arm. “Stop saying I’m lying. If I said it, it’s true. Were you accusing me?” I was roaring at him. He jumped to his feet.

“I wasn’t accusing anybody.”

“You were accusing my dad.”

“I was just asking.”

“Don’t ask!”

“You know what, I think I’m right, Bax. I think I’m right.” I swayed him. He was so patient, always, and I made him a little angry. I walked towards him and he stumbled back.

“You’re fucking insane.” He mumbled.

“What? What’d you say?” My hands became fists like they so often did.

“I said you’re fucking insane.”

I swung. I swung right into his cheek, right where my father hit me.