

CATERPILLARS  
CAN'T SWIM

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*For Jamie*

*You left us long before we were ready to say good-bye.*

*Now all we can do for you is dream.*



“NO ONE CARES IF IT’S  
A BOY OR A GIRL.

IT’S JUST A CATERPILLAR  
THAT CHANGED INTO A  
BUTTERFLY.

AND IT’S OKAY AND  
RIGHT AND NORMAL.”



# ONE

*“Go!”*

Steve’s voice shoots straight into my back, pushing me off the starter block and into the water. Arms, head, and body stab the surface in perfect alignment, slipping in silently like a knife into a jar of the disgustingly oily natural peanut butter my mother always buys, even though we like the unnatural kind better. Legs follow the crowd, slapping the water like they’re pissed off at it and making a splash that I know drives Steve crazy every time he sees me do it. I don’t care about him though. All I care about is the water holding on to me so that I can push myself to the limit. It’s cool against my face, and I can feel my swim grin starting. Steve always tells me that the grin makes it seem like I’m not taking things seriously enough and that I should try to look more like the other guys on the team. Since most of them have their faces all scrunched up like they’re

trying to take a painful shit in the deep end, I'm sticking with my own expression.

Besides, I am serious.

I *seriously* love being in the water. All of my parts decide to cooperate once I start to swim, and I basically forget about the whole world. All I can feel is my body moving fast and furious like an underwater street racer...arms slicing, thighs pumping, and lungs holding in air until I feel like I'm going to explode and go flying right into the other end of the pool.

I can't hear anything but the blast beat rhythm of my own heart pounding. I know that Steve is up there somewhere, yelling his face off, telling me that Peter is coming up on my ass, or that my left arm isn't moving the way it should be. When I finish my laps and he tells me I wasn't listening for the millionth time, I'll just blame my earplugs like I always do, and he won't believe me but he won't bug me about it either.

Steve treats me like everyone else when I'm in the water, but the minute I'm on dry land, he usually has a lot more trouble bitching me out than the other swimmers.

Most of the time it bugs me when I'm treated differently from everyone else, but sometimes it's an advantage.

Avoiding Steve's locker-room lectures is definitely one of those times.

"Peter, what the hell was that turn? You took twice as long as everyone else coming out!"

"Miguel, you need to get off the block faster and cleaner. Understand?"

“Cody, your strokes weakened halfway down the first lap. You’re supposed to pick up speed, not lose it!”

Steve stomps up and down between the benches like some kind of frustrated drill sergeant from one of those stupid army movies my dad likes to watch, stopping at each guy’s locker and yelling in his face while he’s trying to dry off and get dressed.

Steve takes being a swim coach very seriously. He doesn’t ever grin.

I’m already dried off and mostly dressed by the time he finishes making everyone else feel like yesterday’s garbage. By the time I’m back in my chair, Steve has usually headed back into his office. Sometimes he nods at me when he walks by.

Most of the time he just walks by.

I can’t prove it, but I think my chair makes him nervous. When I’m in the water, he can forget that I come to school in a handicapped bus and spend my days wheeling around the hallways trying not to run over anyone’s toes.

*Handicapped bus.* As if it somehow isn’t as big and strong as all the able-bodied buses.

Our school’s about a hundred years old and not designed for human bodies, let alone wheelchairs. The halls are so narrow that the principal actually painted a white line down the middle so that everyone will stay in their own lane at class-change time. I don’t fit inside the white line so some of my teachers give me a head start at the end of class so that I can wheel down the hall by myself.

Because being alone is always *so* much fun.

We live in a very small town, and I’m the only person in

my school who lives in a wheelchair. They actually had to build a ramp for me when I started there so that I could get in the front door. I have to use the staff bathroom because the cubicles in the kids' ones are too small for my chair. When I started at the school, I was told they'd be renovating as quickly as possible so that I could be part of the social experience of pissing with the other kids. That was three years ago. Pretty sure I'll be graduated before they do anything.

I don't think it's affected my social skills in any significant way, and I'm used to it by now, although Cody likes to helpfully remind me on a regular basis that I'm sitting in the same place that probably just held the bare ass of someone who can give us a detention. I try not to think about it.

When I was really young, I don't think I realized that I was different from anyone else. I was a little baby and people carried me around the same way they did with all the other little babies, so I fit in just fine. Then when I was a bigger baby, I started to crawl. My thighs and knees worked pretty well, so it didn't really bother me that my calves and feet didn't seem to have any strength in them and liked to twist around at strange angles without my permission.

When I was around two, I figured out a way to walk fairly upright. I just stood on my knees and ignored the bottom half of my legs. I could move around everywhere I wanted to go. I was fast, too, and pretty cute. My mother has the proof in about fifteen videos she has saved on her computer that she likes to embarrass me with on a regular basis.

It wasn't until my baby brother arrived on the scene that I

started to figure out that something wasn't quite right. It's not as if I'd never seen another kid or anything. My parents took me to parks and stores and all the other normal places that people go. I guess I just never really paid attention to what other kids were doing. Maybe I thought that kids in my house walked on their knees and everyone else used their feet. I don't know.

But when Ricky was born, it all changed. Not right away, but it didn't take very long. By the time he was around a year old, Ricky could walk straight up on his feet and legs. He was taller than me on my knees by the time he was eighteen months. Faster too.

My parents and doctors had tried to get me up on my feet, but no matter how much physio I got, I never could catch my balance when I was on my own. My lower legs would twist over each other and trip me up. The bigger the rest of my body got, the less helpful my skinny little calves were in getting me moving. I could move a little if I was wearing special braces and holding on to a walker, but I had to concentrate so hard on getting my lower legs to cooperate with the rest of me that I kept forgetting to hold on. Then I would fall over like a tree that just met up with a chain saw.

My parents finally took pity on me when I was at home and got me some kneepads and just let me do my thing most of the time.

I got my first wheelchair when I was almost five.

My parents tried to tell me how lucky I was to have my very own chair with wheels—how special it was to be the only kid in my class with my own vehicle.

I don't remember if I believed them or not. I'm not sure if I cared. The chair was comfortable enough, and after some practice I could move pretty fast.

My mom started me in aquatic therapy around the same time that we got my chair, and I fell in love with the water instantly.

Gravity was no longer my enemy, and I could move around like anyone else. Even though my kicking was literally spastic when I first tried to get my thighs to bring my calves and feet along for the ride, I gradually figured out my own system. I could feel myself getting stronger every time I dropped into the pool.

At first I only swam when we went to the city, where I had my therapy sessions in the big pool at the Children's Hospital Rehab Center. But as I got older and better at it, my parents decided to try me in regular swim lessons at the community pool in our town. The teachers were pretty nervous around me at first. I'm fairly certain I was the first kid in a wheelchair they'd ever actually come in contact with. They seemed pretty uncomfortable with the sight of my chair at the side of the pool and even more freaked out when I pushed myself out of it and onto the edge.

I still remember one of them kind of shrieking a little the first time he saw me roll into the water. It was pretty funny. I also remember laughing as I surfaced and then waving at the guy before I took off swimming to the far end of the pool.

Maybe that's where my swim grin came from.

# TWO

We practice for swim team before school three times a week. That means getting up at five o'clock and literally dragging myself out of bed, and then not so literally dragging my mother out of her bed so she can drive me to the pool. My dad gets to snore through the whole thing because he commutes to work so he has to be rested enough to drive. Mom is the principal at the local elementary school. Apparently you don't need to be rested to supervise a couple of hundred kids.

On the days in between, I still wake up at five o'clock no matter how hard I try to persuade my mind and body to stay sleeping. Most days I can't make myself go back to sleep so I just lie in bed imagining graphic novel plots. I know obsessing on graphic novels makes me some kind of teenage-nerd stereotype, but I can't help it. I think the stories are cool and the drawings are art in its purest form.

My best friend, Cody, is an even bigger nerd than I am and even has an action-figure collection, which he keeps a secret from pretty much everyone but me because, well, basically they're little plastic dolls that he's afraid to play with in case he breaks one. That might seem cool when TV characters do it, but it's not something you want to share with too many people in the real world—if you want to keep your face intact. At least, not in *our* real world.

On days like today, when I wake up at five o'clock and can't think up any interesting story lines and I don't want to do anything else like worry about my next math test, I get out of bed and head down to the water. Our town might be small and seriously boring most of the time, but it *is* actually really nice to look at. Tourists come here from the surrounding cities all the time, just to look at the old buildings and to sit by the river.

There's an old wooden bridge that crosses part of the river not far from our house. It's barely wide enough for my chair to cross when it's empty, and most of the time it's full of bikes and people. But this early in the morning even the joggers are still in bed, so I like to head down there and just sit on the bridge and look at the water. I sit up and reach over to turn on my light. I transfer myself into my chair and wheel into the bathroom that my dad renovated so that everything is easy to reach and there's lots of room to transfer from my chair to the toilet or shower. I take a quick shower and then get dressed, shoving my legs into their braces before putting on my shoes. Even though I can't really walk on them, my legs still sit better if they're held in place by plastic and Velcro. I have to rub my

feet to relax them enough so that they stop fighting me and let me fold them into the bottom part of the braces. I stick my shoes on over top. I know that shoes seem kind of stupid for someone who doesn't walk, but it's surprising how many things bump into me or drop on me during an average day.

I head for the front door, easing it open so that I don't wake anyone as I wheel out onto the front porch. I reach back and close the door as quietly as I can. It's already warm outside, which means the day is going to be brutal at school. The only places in the school with air-conditioning are the library and the main office. Apparently books and administrators need to stay cool while the rest of us just get to sweat and stink up the place until it smells like the barn at Cody's farm.

The bridge is only a three-minute coast down the street from our place. It's shaped like an arch, with railings that were painted red once upon a time but are now peeling like my back after a bad sunburn. For most of the ride over, there's a railing helpfully positioned exactly in front of my face so that I can barely see the water. But there's spot about three-quarters of the way over where a piece has broken so that the wood hangs crookedly toward the bridge floor, giving me a "window" down to the surface. Since I can't get my chair down to the actual shoreline, this is where I sit and just stare at the water.

I usually sit for about a half hour, or until I hear someone panting their way across the bridge, trying to get in some early morning jogging. As soon as that starts, I'm gone.

It's beautiful here.

I wouldn't say that out loud when Cody is around because

he would say I sound like a girl or gay or something. Cody is a nice guy and a good friend most of the time, but he's like a lot of the guys I know around here—pretty much homophobic, relatively racist, and always saying things about girls that he thinks are funny but would make my mother royally pissed off. Your basic small-town triple threat.

Not that I'm saying *everyone* here is like that. They aren't. It's just that it seems like this town is frozen in time and a lot of the attitudes around here are stuck in the ice. My mother says she spends a lot of her time at school working on thawing out the attitudes of the kids so that someday things will be different.

I don't think it's working yet.

I spent a lot of time with city kids at the rehab center growing up and quite a few of them seem to have different ideas about people than the kids here do. My mother says that it has something to do with the fact that cities are a lot more diverse than most small towns, and that it's easier to learn to accept people you perceive as different if you actually see them in person and find out that they're not so different from you after all.

I don't know if she's right or not. One thing I'm pretty sure of is that everywhere you go, you can find some racist, homophobic, misogynistic jerks who like to stare at people in wheelchairs like we've got a contagious disease.

Anyway, it *is* beautiful here. The river stretches right across the town, kind of winding its way off into the distance, disappearing into the trees that line up on either side like leafy green gargoyles standing at attention.

I like gargoyles. I have a novel plot in my head that features a couple of them who sit on top of our school during the day and then come to life at night so they can defend the rights of students who get picked on by assholes.

The shoreline has been left alone, so it's completely natural with tall grass that almost looks like a wheat field and millions of wildflowers that look like something out of a painting. There are all kinds of birds flying around the trees, and the ducks and geese float proudly on the water, as if they own the place.

I wish *I* owned the place. I'd force everyone else off the bridge and just keep it for myself. I'd ask my dad to help me build a ramp so that I could get down to the water and maybe figure out a way to get in there and swim without chlorine.

I check my watch. Fifteen minutes gone. I'll stay another ten then head back. I actually do have a math test today so I probably should take a few minutes to do something useful like study for it. Not that it will help much because I seriously suck at math. Mostly because I hate it. I'd rather be reading or swimming or pretty much anything other than trying to figure out why I should care what *x squared* plus *y squared* equals.

I really should go back now. Mom will have a fit if I fail another test. She has some idea that math is important to my future. I don't see how algebra is going to help me. The only thing I'd ever be using math for is keeping track of my swim times, and I can already count and tell time.

I reach over to release the brakes on my wheels so that I can force myself to go home, when a movement catches my

eyes. Someone is down by the water. I can't really see who it is, but it looks like a girl dancing around in the flowers.

That's something I've never seen here before.

She's twirling around like some kind of ballet dancer putting on a show, throwing her hands up in the air and kicking her feet up after each twirl. She's wearing a bright yellow skirt thing that floats up every time she moves in a circle. I think she's singing but I'm not totally sure.

I watch for a while. The wind catches the skirt and swirls it up higher, which makes it interesting for a couple of seconds until I realize that she's wearing jeans underneath it. Nothing to see there.

I shake my head a little, wondering who she is and why she's dancing around like a crazy person at five-thirty in the morning. Of course, she likely thinks she's alone, so I probably should stop sitting here like a stalker and give her some privacy. I reach down and unlock my wheels, then move forward to the end of the bridge so I can turn around and head back over to my house. I glance toward the flowers but I can't see her anymore. I sit for a second wondering about her before heading over the bridge again.

When I get back to the hole in the railing, I take one last look at the water before heading home. And that's when I see her again.

*In* the water.

# THREE

She's in the river, water up to her chest. I can see the skirt floating around her, making a strange swirl of color just below the surface. Why is she trying to swim with so many clothes on?

*What the hell is she doing?*

"Hey!" I try shouting to get her attention, but she just keeps moving forward. She's almost directly under me now and the water is up to her chin. In a second she'll be in over her head. I know the water is pretty deep right there because lots of kids like to jump off the bridge in the summer to cool off and I've never heard of anyone cracking their head open in that particular spot.

"Hey!" I reapply my brakes so I don't roll back. I'm leaning forward, trying to see her better. She doesn't look up at me when I shout.

“Hey! What are you doing?” I’m screaming at her, straining to see what she’s trying to do.

Suddenly I can’t see her at all.

Has she gone under?

She must have.

I wait a second, expecting to see her surface and start swimming. I can see movement under the water. At least I think I can. People naturally start to swim when they get into deep water. It’s a survival thing. She should be surfacing any second.

I watch and wait.

She isn’t coming up.

*Why isn’t she coming up?*

I watch for a few more seconds. I think I can still see movement, but her head doesn’t break the surface. This is crazy. No one stays under that long on purpose.

What am I supposed to do?

“Help! Someone help!” I scream it at no one, fear clawing at my throat as I start sliding out of my chair. I get down onto the ground and push up onto my knees, moving forward into the space made by the broken railing. I get to the edge and brace myself as if Steve is standing beside me yelling that it’s time to swim and telling me to stop being such a wuss.

But it looks really far down. I think I can see where she is, but I can’t tell if she’s still moving or not.

I don’t know what I’m looking at.

*I have to do something!*

“Help!” I scream it again, so loudly that I’m pretty sure my throat has started to bleed, and I push off, smashing my way

toward the water. All four limbs immediately fly completely out of control as I try to use my thighs to pull my lower legs up into some kind of safe position.

*God, I hope I don't land on her!*

I smash into the water, and it punches back at me, filling my mouth as I go down. I fight my way back to the surface and spit it out so I can fill my lungs with air. I take a deep breath and dive down, swimming around in circles, hoping I'm somewhere close to where she went under. I can't see anything. I don't have my goggles and even if I did, the river is a lot murkier than the nice chlorinated pool that I wish I was in right now.

I can feel the panic bubbles filling me up like some kind of rapidly decompressing scuba diver. My thighs are kicking, but it's hard because I have my braces and shoes on and they're weighing me down.

I can't think about that. Can't think about going down. Concentrate on staying up. Floating. I'm in the water. I love the water. It's my friend. It keeps me up and lets me move. It won't hurt me.

I'm on the swim team. We won the county championship last year. Steve would tell me to stop whining and swim.

I would tell Steve to shut up.

I really want to whine because I'm scared shitless. How long has she been under? One minute? Three? How long have I been under?

I grab at anything that comes into my line of pseudo-sight, but it's mostly seaweed. I keep grabbing and grabbing until suddenly I feel a handful of what seems to be fabric. Praying it's

her skirt, I pull on it, hoping that I'm dragging myself toward the rest of her. My lungs feel like they're on fire, and I want to breathe so badly that I have a sudden urge to just open my mouth and let the nice cool water put out the flames.

I fight the urge away as I finally I brush up against her and manage to grab her arm. I twist my body and get one of my arms around her in the recovery position and start to pull her along as I head for the surface. We're not very far down, and I quickly break both our heads out of the water and suck in as much air as I can. I look to see if she's doing the same thing, but she just lies back on the surface, still and quiet, which probably means she's not breathing at all, but I don't really know for sure. I've only ever done lifesaving in training sessions in the pool with someone who's pretending to be drowning and is usually laughing the whole time while Steve yells at us. I don't know what someone looks like when their breath has really gone away.

I swim for the shore, putting everything I have into it. I have to move my legs as fast as I can so that I don't sink us both, and my thighs hurt like hell. My muscles are screaming at me to stop moving while my mind tells them to shut up and just keep going. It feels like it's taking forever, but I don't really have any idea how much time has passed.

I get to the edge of the river and pull myself out of the water, digging my fingers into the ground, trying to get turned around onto my knees so that I can move. I drag her up onto the ground beside me. She's not moving at all. She's definitely not breathing, and I don't know when she stopped or if I can get her started again.

I have to do CPR but I'm shaking, and I'm not sure if I remember how to do it. I start compressions but I'm trembling so much I don't know if I'm putting enough pressure or too much or if I'm even on the right part of her body. This is totally different from pretending with Cody while he makes puking noises every time I lean over him.

Compress.

Check.

Definitely no breath. When did she stop breathing? How long before it's too long?

Breathe for her. Am I supposed to do that? I can't remember!

Scream!

"Help. Someone help!"

*What's the order? How many compressions am I supposed to do? I really can't remember anything!*

"Help me. Please!" Maybe if I'm polite someone will come running.

I keep going and going. I don't know if I'm doing it right. I don't know if she's been out of air for too long. I don't know anything. It all just goes on and on until I'm starting to feel like I'm running out of air too, and we're both going to end up lying in the grass, passed out or worse.

And then suddenly, unbelievably, she coughs, just like in the movies. Just a little at first, but then she starts making choking noises as she struggles to sit up.

"Are you okay?" I ask, which is unbelievably stupid because she obviously isn't.

She opens her eyes and looks at me for just a second, and then they close again. I start another dose of panic until I realize that the cough seems to have jump-started her breathing enough that she's still going.

Okay. Good. She's breathing. Now what?

We're still here alone. No one heard me.

I'm going to have to get myself back up onto the bridge and find my cell phone so I can call 9-1-1. I look up at my chair. It's a long way from here. I don't know if it's safe to leave her long enough to go and get it. What if she stops breathing again? Can that happen? Can she stop again once she's started? What's safer? Waiting or going?

I scan the bridge as best I can from down here. I can't see anyone. I don't know what time it is. It could be an hour before someone decides to start their morning run.

I can't just sit here. I have to get up to my phone.

I check one more time to make sure her breathing is steady enough that it feels safe to leave.

That's when I realize that I recognize her.

Except that she's not a *her*.

She's a *him*.