

NICKEL BAY NICK SAMPLE CHAPTER

CHAPTER 1
December 25

THE STRANGER IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

Crash!

From where I'm standing in the pitted parking lot of the condemned Nickel Bay railroad station I can hear glass from the broken window shatter as it hits the concrete floor inside. If I could get up there, close to those high windows -- what is that? twenty, thirty feet up? -- I would smash them all with my fists. BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! Glass everywhere, falling like sharp snowflakes. Instead, I do my smashing from down below, using chunks of the crumbled asphalt that's poking up through the snow at my feet.

My breath makes small, quick puffs in the night air. Despite the cold, I'm sweating. Long wet, strands of brown hair are hanging in my eyes, and I'm still panting hard from running so far so fast. I hadn't meant to head for the old depot. It's just where I happened to end up when I ran out of run.

I heft another lump of asphalt in my cold, ungloved hand and wonder: how many can I break in a row? Three? Four? More? And once I do, would I feel any better? Would I feel any less angry? Less betrayed?

You want the truth? This has got to be the Worst. Christmas. *EVER!*

And I'm including the Christmas when I was almost four, the one I spent in a hospital bed, hooked up to a hundred tubes and surrounded by racks of beeping machines. I had just had a heart transplant. Seriously, a holiday heart transplant!

And yet this Christmas is way worse. Otherwise I wouldn't be standing out here in the freezing cold dark, shaking with fury and throwing stones.

Dad closed the shop today - the Nickel Bay Bakery and Cupcakery. He usually keeps it open on Christmas, but he's been having a bad month. After Thanksgiving, he had to lay off his staff. Extend his hours. Cut his prices. But business was still lousy.

And guess who Dad got to help out around the store.

Yup.

I've been there every day for three weeks, after school and on weekends. Sweeping floors. Washing bread pans. Folding pastry boxes. Last Saturday I folded too many, and he flipped out. "We'll never sell this many cupcakes!" he barked. "Unfold these now!" So I pushed over a stack and told him to unfold them himself, and he warned me to watch my mouth, and I shouted that he's hardly one to talk. That's pretty much the way it goes these days. Slam doors, throw things, and yell, yell, yell.

Bash!

Window #2. The headlights from a lone car rake across the railway station parking lot, and for a brief moment my shadow sweeps over the

building's brick walls. What do I care if somebody sees me here? I've been picked up by the police enough times that I know the name of every cop in Nickel Bay. Dad reminded me of that this morning, when we were opening presents.

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"I don't see anything under the tree from you to me," he said, and I snapped back, "You cut off my allowance, remember?"

"Because you stole my car, remember?"

Okay, wait. That's not how it sounds.

It wasn't *me* who stole the car. I'm eleven, so there's no way I'm gonna drive. I just took the keys from Dad's jacket. My friend Jaxon's the one who drove the car away from the bakery. I only went along for the ride. Me and Jaxon's girlfriend Ivy.

And I wore my seat belt. So there.

Jaxon's fifteen. Maybe he doesn't *technically* have a driver's license, but he's already started driver's ed. He and Ivy are both older than me, but we've been a team ever since we met in the Peanut Room.

You don't know about the Peanut Room? That's where kids at my school with medical problems have to spend lunch period. Jaxon's the only one of us who's actually allergic to peanuts. Ivy's got diabetes, so she has to take an injection at lunchtime, and with this heart thing of mine, I get stuck in there so I don't get hit in the chest out on the playground.

Ivy's fascinated by anything scientific. She's way smarter than a lot of teachers, so she gets a bad rap for being difficult, but that's only because she gets bored in class. Did I mention she's also kind of gorgeous?

Jaxon does impressions. He can mimic just about any faculty member at school, but he can also make a lot of other crazy sounds. From the first day I laughed at his impression of a spoon caught in a garbage disposal, the three of us have been hanging out.

I soon learned that even though Jaxon's dad is a rich lawyer and always buys Jaxon everything he asks for, Jaxon still loves to take things that aren't his. At first we messed around in small ways - a little shoplifting here and there. No big deal. But then we got bored. And Jaxon got inventive.

Unless you're a pale fifth-grade runt with a medical condition, you wouldn't know how awesome it feels have a couple of eighth-graders be your friend - one who's beautiful and one who's funny. Even if the funny one sometimes suggests you do things that cross the line.

Around Thanksgiving Jaxon said he wanted to practice his driving and asked could I maybe help him borrow Dad's car? How could we know that Dad had deliveries to make that afternoon? Or that he'd call the police when he saw the empty parking space in the alley behind the bakery? Even after the cops pulled us over and I explained the whole situation, they still took us down to the station.

The next day, Dad cut off my allowance. So that's why he didn't get a Christmas present.

Serves him right.

Me? I got the usual crap I get every year, the stuff Dad would have to get me anyway. But when he wraps it in holiday paper and makes me open it on Christmas morning, he calls it a "present." Socks. Underwear. A pair of jeans -- *from Goodwill!* Isn't it bad enough I've got a second-hand heart?

"You have anything to say about your presents?" Dad asked.

"You call these presents?" Maybe that was mean, but he was working my last nerve.

"Watch it."

I bit out each word. "Thank. You. For. My. Presents." I looked over his shoulder. Twisted to peek behind the sofa. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

I folded my arms. "That thing I'm getting."

Dad shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know!" I was getting impatient. "What I asked for."

I asked for a suitcase. A small one with wheels. For my visit to Mom. The day after Christmas, I was finally going to get away from Dad and the bakery and gray, gray Nickel Bay, and go stay with Mom until school started. It had been nine months since I last saw her.

"Your mother and I talked," Dad began carefully.

"About what?" I yelled.

“Temper,” Dad warned.

“What did you say to her?” I demanded.

“We talked about...” I could tell he was choosing his words carefully,
“... about your behavior lately.”

“What behavior?”

“What behavior?” Dad started to count on his fingers. “You
vandalized the teachers’ lounge at school...”

“I accidentally broke a lamp!” I shouted. “That TV screen was
already cracked.”

“...you spray-painted graffiti on the back wall of the Crestwood
Retirement Home...”

“Nobody ever goes back there!”

“...you skipped seven days of school, you missed our last
appointment with Mrs. Atkinson at Social Services...”

“She hates me!”

“...and you stole my car, which resulted in your fifth trip to police
headquarters this year.”

“They didn’t arrest me!”

“That’s because every cop in Nickel Bay has known me since high
school!” Dad’s voice was getting louder now. “But it’s not because you
didn’t deserve it!”

He had run out of fingers to count on. I had run out of excuses. We
stared at each other.

“So, you and Mom talked.”

“We talked,” he said quietly, “and we agreed that your trip was to have been a... reward. And we agreed that...”

That’s where I stopped listening. Blah blah blah blah blah. Long story short? I’m not going anywhere. Two more weeks ‘til school starts back. Two more weeks of sweeping out the bakery and fighting with my dad and hating my life.

Then he had the nerve to add, “And remember, we’re going over to Lisa’s for Christmas dinner.”

“Forget it,” I snapped.

Dad’s been seeing Lisa for about a year now. She used to sell perfume at Dillard’s Department Store until she got laid off.

Dad’s eyes narrowed. “What did you say?”

“You heard me!” It was my turn to count on my fingers. “You ground me for two months. You stop my allowance. You make me work for no pay. You give me underwear for Christmas instead of the rolling suitcase you promised...”

“I never promised you a...”

“...you turn Mom against me and screw me out of my visit with her, and then what? You think I’m just gonna tag along and sit around Lisa’s table with her two screeching little girls and pretend we’re all having a nice Christmas dinner? I’d rather drink gasoline.”

Dad's never smacked me. I'm sure he's scared it would stop my heart or something. But I can tell when he wants to, and that was one of those times.

I spent the rest of the day in my bedroom. It's hardly private, though, since Dad took the door off its hinges last month. He said I slammed it "one too many times."

* * * * *

Smash!

Three windows in a row. I'm on fire!

When Mom left Dad and moved away from Nickel Bay, I was three and a half, and the doctors hadn't found the hole in my heart yet.

"I've got dreams," she told Dad before she left. Mom has a really great singing voice, and over the years, she has sent me postcards saying things like, "I hope you understand, Sam, that I have to follow my star!" So far her star has taken her to Nashville and Los Angeles and tons of other places. I was always certain that, once she found success, Mom would send for me, and I'd finally get out of Nickel Bay. I'd leave Dad, with all his pathetic rules, and I'd leave the kids at school who snicker and call me Frankenstein because of the scar down my chest. I'd start a new life with Mom while she lived her dream. And maybe I'd get a dream of my own.

The last time I saw her -- last spring break -- I stayed with her in a dusty motel room in Memphis, where the temperature was about a billion degrees every day. To stay cool in the evenings, we sat around the empty

swimming pool in the courtyard, and Mom sang me little pieces of songs she'd been trying to write. There was one called "I'm So Ready" that I liked a lot, so she taught me the chorus.

*My heart is strong
My hands are steady
My future waits
And now I'm ready
Whoa-oh,
I'm so ready*

We'd sing at the top of our lungs until the motel manager poked his head out of his office and asked us to keep it down.

I haven't sung that song since I got back from Memphis.

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Before Dad left for Lisa's in the late afternoon, he leaned into my bedroom. "You coming or not?"

"Not."

From across the room, I could smell that he was wearing some yucky cologne Lisa gave him. He had on his stupid Christmas sweater, the one with green holly leaves and red berries on it. Dad played football in high school before he was a fireman, which was before he worked construction and before he opened the bakery. He's still a big, muscle-y guy, and with all those leaves and berries stretched across his broad shoulders, that sweater looked extra dorky. I wasn't going to be the one to tell him.

"There's leftovers in the fridge," he said. "You know the rules: no visitors. No TV. Do not leave this house. Do I make myself clear?"

I didn't even look up. "Crystal."

He slammed the front door on the way out. See? I'm not the only one who acts like a child.

When he wants to punish me with no TV, Dad hides the remote. If he hadn't, I wouldn't have gone snooping, and if I hadn't gone snooping, I wouldn't have found the card, so what happened next is totally his fault.

The envelope was hidden in his bottom dresser drawer, behind his unmatched socks and the shoe polish rags. The postmark said Little Rock, AK.

We don't know anybody in Arkansas.

When I opened it, a picture fell out. I didn't recognize the couple in the photo -- a guy with a mustache wearing a tuxedo standing next to a lady in a white dress. She was holding a bunch of flowers, with her hair piled up in curls. They both looked goofy, they were smiling so hard. Across the bottom of the photo, in gold ink, was printed OUR HAPPY DAY - DECEMBER 4.

It took a moment before it hit me that I knew the lady.

"Mom?" I whispered.

The note Mom had written inside the card was short. Just about how quiet and simple the wedding ceremony was...

"Wedding?" I gasped.

...how happy she and Phil and his kids are...

“Who’s Phil?” I wondered. *“And how many kids are we talking about?”*

...and, she wrote, how “this Christmas, as you can imagine, is hardly an ideal time for one of Sam’s visits.”

“Ya think?!” I blurted out in the quiet bedroom. I re-read the caption on the photo. OUR HAPPY DAY - DECEMBER 4.

December 4?

Mom got married, like, three weeks ago and didn’t tell me? I’ll admit that the last few Sunday nights she’s called, I’ve cut the conversation short because I was watching football. And maybe there were a couple times when Dad held the phone out to me, and I waved it away. But isn’t getting married the kind of thing you tell the people you love? And what about Dad? He never said a word, either!

In that moment, I hated them both. With shaking hands I crushed the wedding picture and the card, dropped them to the floor and stood up quickly.

Bad move.

Suddenly dizzy, I slumped against Dad’s bedroom wall. My neck and face were burning hot, and my heart pounded in my chest, straining to pump enough blood to my head to catch up with my feelings. The few times I’ve passed out at school, everybody made such a big deal about it, but that’s just the way my body works.

I don't remember leaving the house. I don't remember running through the snow-covered streets. I don't remember anything before that first chunk of asphalt exploded that first window.

* * * * *

Crash!

And now I'm up to window number four. If life was fair, I'd get some sort of medal for hitting four targets in a row. Maybe I should be a pitcher, I thought for one moment. Or maybe a quarterback. But small, scrawny kids with a spare heart don't get to be pitchers or quarterbacks. They don't get to have dreams. My whole world was crumbling, now with Mom married... and living in Little Rock... with that man, Phil... there was no chance that it would ever, ever get better.

A sheet of newspaper blows across the empty lot and wraps around my leg. I peel off the front page of that morning's Nickel Bay News and read the headline:

WHERE HAVE YOU GONE TO, NICKEL BAY NICK???

As far back as I can remember, there's been this "Nick" person -- nobody knows if it's a man or a woman, old or young, midget or monster -- and every year starting twelve days before Christmas, Nick passes out hundred-dollar bills all over town, like a Secret Santa. At first, the newspapers and TV reporters called him - or her - Saint Nicholas... or Saint Nick... of Nickel Bay. Finally, it became simply Nickel Bay Nick.

Nick started showing up eight years ago, not long after the oldest and biggest company in the county, the Nickel Bay Furniture Works, burned down and never re-opened. Without jobs to keep them here, hundreds of people moved away and tons of businesses closed. The businesses and people who stayed are still struggling to hang on.

Even so, every year until now, when that first hundred-dollar bill of the season showed up and everybody realized that Nickel Bay Nick had returned, this town would cheer up like you wouldn't believe. People would greet each other with holiday hugs and wave at complete strangers in the street.

But this year? No Nick. The twelve days of Christmas came and went, and with every passing day, the mood got gloomier. People walked around with slumped shoulders and scowls on their faces. Finally everybody shrugged and accepted the sad truth that even Nickel Bay Nick had deserted Nickel Bay.

I didn't think that I could feel worse than I already did, knowing that Mom got married and didn't want me to visit. But seeing that newspaper headline reminds me that I'm not only miserable and forgotten. I'm miserable and forgotten in the most miserable and forgotten place on earth.

Then I hear the police siren. Somebody... maybe the headlights that drove by five minutes ago?... somebody must've ratted me out. I take my

last shot, but my heart's not in it anymore. My chunk of asphalt flies too high, thumps against the eaves and drops with a thud into the snow.

I flip up the hood of my sweatshirt and start running.