



yan Coolidge did not want to go to prison.

He'd been going to prison every Saturday for the past eleven months. Without fail, his mother would wake him, she'd put him in the car, and off they'd go. He didn't like the smell of prison, didn't like the feel of prison. He didn't like the drab beige walls, the cold concrete floors, the countless pairs of dark, soulless eyes that stared out from between iron prison bars. He didn't like anything about prison.

The thing he liked least of all was visiting his father there.

"Do we have to go, Mom?" Ryan was holding up his head with his hands, elbows on the kitchen table, a soggy raft of cornflakes floating in the bowl of milk before him.

"You should want to go."

"I don't." He dropped a piece of toast on the floor. His Golden Retriever pounced on it like a half-starved wolf. It was gone in one bite, and then Sam laid his huge head in Ryan's lap, begging for more. Sam was a smart and beautiful purebred, but his table manners had gone right out the door with Ryan's dad.

"A boy should want to see his father," said Dr. Coolidge.

"I don't."

"Your father loves you."

“Well, I don’t love him.”

“Never say that about your father. *Never*. Do you hear me?”

The dog sighed, as if wondering if that next piece of toast would ever drop. Ryan stroked the back of Sam’s neck.

“Did you hear me?” Ryan’s mother said.

Sam sighed even louder. *My sentiment exactly*, thought Ryan.

“Ryan Coolidge, answer me right now.”

“Yes, I heard you,” he muttered, but the cry of a baby in the next room had already stolen his mother’s attention. It was his little sister, Ainsley. Dr. Coolidge popped from her seat as if she’d just sat on a tack, the way she always did when Ainsley made the slightest peep. Ryan loved Ainsley, too, but lately the world seemed to revolve around her. Poor Ainsley doesn’t get to see her Daddy. Poor Mr. Coolidge doesn’t get to see his new baby. If it weren’t for the way Sam shadowed him everywhere, Ryan would have sworn he was the invisible boy.

“Your father is a good man. Shame on you for saying otherwise.” She left him with his dog in the kitchen.

*Shame on me*, he thought. Shame, shame, shame. Being a Coolidge was all about shame. How could you not feel shame when you’d seen your father stuffed into the back seat of a police car? How could you feel anything but shame when your family name was blasted all over the television news, when kids at school shoved newspaper headlines in your face and laughed, or when you came home from school early one day and caught your mother crying? Dads could be doctors, lawyers, or plumbers. Some dads coached football, baseball, or soccer. Whatever they did, they usually came home and sat down for dinner at night. They hugged and kissed their wives and kids and said, “So, what did you do all day?” Ryan’s dad used to do all those things. But not anymore. He lived his days, slept his

nights, and took his meals all in the same dreadful place, a place where a question like, “So, what did you do all day?” always drew the same answer.

Nothing. Not a thing. *Nada*.

So the last thing Ryan felt like doing was visiting his father. Frankly, he didn’t care if he ever saw his father again. And one thing was for sure.

He wasn’t going to visit him today.

Ryan paused to listen for his mother’s footsteps. Silence. She was busy with Ainsley, probably changing a diaper. He gobbled up one last slice of toast, then pushed away from the table. Sam raced toward the back door. His retriever lived for these moments, just him, Ryan, and maybe a tennis ball to fetch.

“Stay,” Ryan said. Sam stopped cold and assumed his most regal pose, sitting tall with shoulders back, chest out, and ears alert. Ryan was guilty of cutting his dog far too much slack at the breakfast table, but when it came to basic commands, he had taught Sam well. With just one word, Sam would “stay” all day. Ryan gave him a bear hug, which was answered with a sloppy wet lick across the chops. It was almost like a cow’s tongue, but Ryan didn’t mind. Sam was the one friend whose loyalty could never be questioned.

“Goodbye, boy,” he said.

Sam cocked his head, as if to ask where Ryan was going.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back.” He glanced toward the hallway that led to Ainsley’s bedroom, and a fleeting thought crossed his mind. “But just in case, you take real good care of them, Sammy. You hear?”

Sam gave him a puzzled look, but somehow Ryan was sure he understood. Then Ryan turned and ran out the back door.