

They discovered the first one in the cupboard. The second one hinted at subterfuge, considering that it was deep within the sock drawer. The third sealed the deal. Hidden behind Volume Three of an animal encyclopedia set on the upper half of the bookshelf. They only found it because Laurence was intent on showing Zachary a picture of a camel. No one would put pill bottles behind untouched books unless the intention was for the pills to never be seen. And no one would hold such intentions unless the pills were bad.

Zachary and Laurence Rooks were both in elementary school, and both trusted their mother with their lives. She was sweet, kind, hard-working, perfect.

Then why the pills?

The two boys hardly knew what to do. Zachary had only just learned to write the letter Q, and Laurence was proudly reciting all seven continents.

The pills could not be explained. They were therefore ignored.

Ten years later, Zachary was a sophomore in high school with a more educated, though rather pessimistic, perspective on life. His mother had long since given up hiding her addiction, resorting instead to frequent tears and apologies. Laurence had escaped to an inexpensive community college. The only support Zachary gained from his older brother was the meager donation Laurence scraped from his weekly pay, courtesy of diligent burger-flipping. At least it helped pay the bills.

Not that their mother was unemployed. Brittany Rooks worked eight hours a day at the local shoe store, earning an acceptable amount and the occasional free pair of sneakers. However, the job was not completely stable, and if the shoe company were to drop into financial troubles, Brittany would be one of the first to go. A precarious position, to say the least.

Zachary, at fifteen, had no job and no hope of one until his next birthday. He gained what he could from lawn-mowing and pet-sitting.

It seemed to Zachary as if life was determined to drag him downhill. His grades were barely average, his chances of making the soccer team were next to zero, and though his friends were great in number, they lacked in reliability. His mother's condition had grown exponentially worse, climbing to an unbearably high peak.

Back in the good old days of elementary school, the pills were taken no more than once a month, at the times of greatest stress. Or when his unremembered father died overseas serving military duty. The instructions were followed religiously. But as the years progressed and the bills became harder and harder to pay, the pill bottles in the trash can increased in number. By the time Zachary stumbled into middle school, his mother's "mystery" became "The Problem." Zachary could clearly recall Laurence's expression at seeing the empty bottles tainting the waste basket. The pained eyes, the pale face, the blank expression.

Zachary was sure his face mirrored that of his brother's as he contemplated yet another pill bottle on the bedside table next to Brittany's sleeping form. She murmured inaudibly and shifted position. He hesitated, before turning to silently leave for school.

He had to do something.

His mother was out of control. She needed help, no matter how many times she denied it. Her own frantic attempts to push away the pills were numerous, short-lived, and completely ineffective. She couldn't save herself. Which left Zachary to play superhero.

But what could he do? Brittany wasn't accepting her addiction, so convincing her to go to a clinic would be next to impossible. He couldn't ask his friends for help. They were good

buddies for daily conversation, but he knew that a word to them would lead to a ridiculous string of far-fetched rumors. Telling his teachers felt like betraying his mother's privacy. Besides, who in their right mind would want to listen to the skinny and unremarkable sophomore boy's pathetic tale?

There was only one person. One last resort.

Laurence would listen. After all, Laurence's tale was parallel to his.

Zachary's hand clutched the kitchen table as he glanced at the clock. Two hours until his mother came home. He was unexpectedly nervous as he listened to the ringtone. He called his brother all the time, but the focus of the conversations was always Laurence and college and drama in the dormitories. They never mentioned their mother's "Problem." It was forbidden, taboo.

"Hello?" Zachary jerked in surprise at the sudden voice. Though he should have foreseen it coming.

"Laurence? It's me. Zach." His voice sounded strange, tense, even to his own ears.

"Hey! How're you? What's up?" Laurence's voice sounded so much lower and mature compared to Zachary's. In control. Happy.

"I'm good," Zachary began, then stopped. "Actually, no. I'm not good. I haven't been good for the past five years." Now his voice was taking on a tremor.

"Zach? You okay?" Laurence asked. Zachary imagined his brother's strong eyebrows furrowing in concern.

"No. I'm not okay, either. I need help."

"Anything, Zach. Just say the word."

"More specifically, Mom needs help."

Silence.

The pause was long before Laurence spoke. "Mom can take care of herself."

"Not anymore."

"If you tell someone, she could lose her job. Lose her custody of you."

"If she keeps this up, she could lose her life," Zachary said, hearing a sharp intake of breath as a response. "Laurence, it's worse. Three a day. Sometimes more. And she's still not sleeping for more than a couple hours a night. She needs help," Zachary explained in a rush. His hand was shaking and he felt an irrational urge to cry. "You've got to help me. Convince her to start rehab, call a hotline, anything." Tears started to spill. Good thing he chose the phone over the webcam. "Please."

Another pause, even longer this time. "I... I can't. I've tried, Zach. I have. But people become dependent on sleeping pills, and you can't just take them away; it doesn't work like that. She needs to help herself." Laurence was pulling away, retreating into his turtle shell. Zachary's heart sank. He slumped in his chair.

What was the point? He was running through a maze, blindfolded, with no chance of finding an exit. And he had just run into a spectacular dead end. No more hope. No more point.

"I'm sorry, Zach. I'm doing what I can."

Something within Zachary snapped, something that had been wearing thinner and thinner ever since his father's death so many years ago. Something that had taken a hit every time he saw the deep shadows under Brittany's eyes. Something that had taken a blow for every pill she cried over. Something that had been pulled tighter and tighter with every day he saw her restlessly tossing in her bed, night after night after night.

Something inside him couldn't take any more, and it snapped like an old rubber band, recoil and all.

"Stop running away!" Zachary screamed. "Stop avoiding everything! You can blame Mom for being weak, or Dad for being reckless, or the doctor who told her to take the pills for being just plain stupid, but it's not going to *fix* anything! Stop brushing it off, stop pushing her away, stop acting like you don't *care!*" His voice broke and dissolved into uncontrolled sobs.

Laurence did not speak while Zachary cried his heart out. As Zachary pulled his emotions back in control, he guessed that Laurence was giving him the chance to release all his pent-up feelings. His brother had always been like that. "Let it all out," he would say, "feel better, and move along."

But moving along was not an option anymore. Moving along meant ignoring the problem. It was now or never. He had to face his mother, help her face her addiction. Before it was too late. Maybe it was already too late; maybe he had put this off for too long. But he had to try.

*Try.* Zachary's sobs stopped abruptly. How hard had he been trying? How hard had he *really* tried? Could his subtle comments on Brittany's condition, his quiet removal of the pills from her bedside, his indirect suggestions for rehabilitation really be called trying? Hadn't he been running away, just as much as Laurence?

His mother had had the sweetest smile. She had done the kindest actions. She had worked the hardest a mother could for her sons. She had been perfect. Until sleeping pills had turned her life upside down, throwing the lives of her sons into turmoil in the process. How much did he want his mother back? How hard was he willing to try in order to take back his mother from the clutches of pills and empty bottles and restless nights? What would he give to resurrect that smile?

What would he *not* give?

"Zachary, I care." Laurence's voice was hushed.

"I know, Laurence. I know." Zachary's voice was a coarse whisper, a sound pathetically weak compared to the truth he felt in his statement.

"I was scared. I couldn't deal with it. After losing Dad, seeing Mom like that was... I couldn't take it anymore. So I left you to make do, pretended that the problem wasn't there. I'm so sorry, Zach." The low toughness had faded from his brother's voice, leaving only vulnerable sincerity.

"I know." Zachary took a deep breath. His resolve wasn't solid, but it was gaining strength. "I'm going to do something, Laurence. I won't sit back and watch anymore. I'm going to get her to a clinic, even if I have to carry her on my back. And I'm going to get her off of the pills, even if it takes ten years."

"Thanks, Zach." Some of the strength returned to Laurence's voice. "Do you want me to come? I can borrow someone's car, take—"

"No, I can do this." Zachary bit his lip. "But... Come home when you can? I don't think I can do everything alone."

"Definitely. Weekends, breaks, any time I can." Laurence sighed. "Zach, you can do this. You'll be okay. We'll figure this out."

"I know."

Stress and sleepless nights had made Brittany Rooks a skinny woman. She shared her sons' dark hair and brown eyes, but her paleness had nothing to do with genetics. But though addiction had ravaged her body, Brittany's motherly instinct remained intact. Which was why, as

soon as she entered the house and saw Zachary's tear-stained but determined face, she sat down. Folding her hands, her eyes wide with concern, she prepared to listen.

Zachary began without stalling. "Mom, we have to talk. About your problem."

"The pills?" Brittany drew back the slightest bit, while her expression turned guarded.

"Yes. Mom, you need help. Real help."

"Don't worry, Zach, I'm handling—"

"No, you're not!" Zachary cut in. He wasn't going to let her slip out of this conversation. "Listen." He lowered his voice back to a normal volume. "Mom, you're addicted. Don't try to deny it. You and I both know it's true." The hurt on Brittany's face was painful to see, but Zachary plowed on. Now or never. "You're always thinking about me, or Laurence, or your job, but you never stop to figure out what's best for *you*."

"That's not true, I... I care about myself, too." Her voice was so weak, so fragile, but it stabbed Zachary's heart like a knife.

"But you're blind. You aren't seeing it, Mom. It's like... like you can't see how many bottles are in the trash can, or how many pills you think you need to sleep." She was shaking her head. "Trust me, Mom. There's a problem."

Brittany stared at her folded hands. Her shadowed eyes filled with tears. "Zach, Zach, what have I done? What have I become?" Her words were broken by silent sobs. "When did this happen? How? Why? Look how much I've hurt you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

They were falling back into the usual pattern. Brittany would cry and apologize, Zachary would shake his head helplessly, they would finish the day without really facing the issue. But not today.

"I know you are, Mom. But that's not enough anymore. We have to try."

"I've tried everything, Zach. I've... I've looked on the internet, I've..." Zachary had never seen his mother look so broken before. She was like a child. How had he never noticed?

"You can't do this alone. But I'm here. We can go to a clinic, start rehabilitation, get counseling."

"I've already put you through so much. You're only fifteen. I can't—"

"You can." Zachary forced a smile to mask the last ten years of confusion, hurt, fear. "I can take it. I promise you, it'll help. It'll help you, but it'll help me and Laurence, too. If you can't do it for your own sake, do it for ours."

Brittany slowly looked up, met his eyes. Faced him, for the first time in years. A ghost of a smile graced her lips, holding more hope than every falsely reassuring grin she'd flashed him since elementary school. Zachary had reached her at last, and he was bringing her back.

It was over a year before Brittany Rooks could sleep for a full night without medication. Even then, she woke frequently during the night. But the shadows that had stretched to her cheeks receded until they were almost invisible, a mere trick of the light. Her white skin regained color and her body built strength. Best of all, her smile once again held the brilliance of its former years.

Laurence finished his year of community college before transferring into a university. As Zachary later discovered, the frugality of the money he sent weekly was due to the savings account he had been nurturing in order to pay for better schooling. That, combined with a scholarship he was awarded, paid for a decent degree.

Meanwhile, Zachary finally obtained a job after his sixteenth birthday, where he worked while his mother went through rehabilitation. He also began volunteering at the clinic. Seeing the counselors and specialists there planted the seed in his mind that hinted at a future career.

The following summer, Brittany was almost completely recovered. Only the faintest of scars darkened her eyes. Laurence was home, relaxing after a hard year of study. He, Brittany, and Zachary sat at the kitchen table, laughing over a dormitory anecdote. A healing family.

Upon Laurence's request for coffee, Zachary stood and went to the cupboard. Opening the cupboard door, he removed a mug. Its absence revealed the object behind it: an empty pill bottle.

Zachary froze, then reached out and picked it up, hesitantly. He turned it slowly in his hand, then muttered under his breath,

"Now how did you manage to sneak past spring cleaning?"

Smiling, Zachary turned and tossed the bottle into the wastebasket before closing the cupboard door.