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Hi-Lo
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SIX TO TEN

by

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CHAPTER ONE

FALLING

MONDAY MORNING. Mom and Dad drive us to school. I can't dry my face anymore. The sleeves of my shirt are too wet.

Abby cries, too.

I knew this day was coming. But I hoped it would never get here. Dad goes to court for sentencing today. From there, he will go to jail.

Mom turns right. We stop at the curb in front of Longfellow Elementary School. Dad gets out and opens the door for Abby. He

looks sharp in his suit. I'm not going to see him again for a long time.

He takes Abby's backpack and helps her climb from the car. I can't hear what he says as he hugs her. His eyes are wet. I've never seen him cry before.

He gets back in the car. Mom pulls away from the curb. Abby waves. She gets smaller as we drive away.

Four more blocks. We stop in front of Edison High School. I try to open my door. But I can't move.

Dad opens the door for me. I get out and face him on the sidewalk. I don't want him to go to jail.

"Miles, don't forget what we talked about," he says.
"You have to be strong."

I'm crying again. I'm fifteen, but I can't help it. He hugs me. I don't want to let him go.

I watch from the sidewalk as they pull from the curb. Mom turns the corner. They're gone.

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BEFORE SCHOOL. I go to the outdoor basketball courts.

The first shot goes in. I miss a short jumper from the right and grab the rebound. I put up another shot. Dad told me to be strong.

The tears start. I can't hold them back. I go to the soccer field and sit on a bench where nobody can see me. He's my dad. I love him. I don't want him to go to jail.

* * *

SCHOOL STARTS. My sleeves are still wet. But my eyes are dry. I walk to first period. I wish I didn't have to be here.

Ms. Gulliver gives us an article from the *Conroy Beacon*. I read the words. But they don't mean anything to me. Mom and Dad are probably getting close to the courthouse by now.

My next class is history. Mr. Rubio talks to us. But I don't hear any of it.

I picture Dad standing in front of the judge. The judge

sentences him. I'm glad I'm not there.

I go to science. I picture Dad being handcuffed and led from the courtroom. Mom cries. I try not to think about it.

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LUNCH. I walk to the food court. I reach our table and take out my sandwich.

Gino sits down and takes out his brown lunch sack.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm trying not to think about it. He's probably in a holding cell by now."

Hector and Cam sit down. They're always joking about something. I don't want them to know about Dad.

"I was working a lot on my outside shots over the weekend," Cam says. "I feel pretty good."

"What about your head?" Hector asks. "Did you work on that too?"

"I tried," Cam says. "But the hammer broke."

It's funny. But I can't laugh.

* * *

HOME. I sit at the kitchen table, trying to do my math. I look at Dad's chair. He knows how to help me in math. I wish he was sitting with me.

I look out the window. It will be dark pretty soon. Mom parks at the curb. I watch as she and Abby come up the walkway. Mom's face is tired. They come into the kitchen and sit down.

Mom reaches out to hold our hands. Something more is wrong.

"I need both of you to be strong," she says. "It did not go well in court today."

"What happened?" I ask.

"Dad got ten years."

"How can that be?" I ask. "I thought he was getting six years because he pleaded guilty."

"The judge gave the maximum sentence because of what

happened to the fireman."

"What was that?" Abby asks.

"They showed a video from the hospital," Mom says.

"The fireman had red burn scars all over his face. He was sitting in a wheelchair with a breathing tube stuck down his throat."

Tears come down Mom's face. "Dad was crying. He admitted setting the fire. But he never meant for anybody to get hurt. He turned to look at me. They led him from the courtroom."

I close my eyes and put my head in my hands. Dad's in jail now. His sentence went from six to ten years. I feel like I'm falling.

CHAPTER TWO

LOCKED UP

TUESDAY MORNING. Abby and I walk to school. I dribble my basketball, trying not to look at it.

"I was waiting for Dad to wake me up this morning," Abby says. "Do you think he'll get good behavior?"

"Probably," I say. "But even with that, he still won't be out for six years."

My ball hits a crack in the sidewalk and shoots sideways. I grab it before it reaches the street.

I'm fifteen now. When Dad gets out of prison, I'll be twenty-two.

* * *

BEFORE SCHOOL. I go to the P.E. yard and begin shooting baskets. Tryouts start next week. I have to be good, or I won't make the team.

I move from side to side, practicing inside jumpers. I only make half of them.

Next, I work on dribbling, trying to use both hands without looking. The ball keeps getting away from me.

Usually, I do better.

* * *

ENGLISH, PERIOD ONE. Ms. Gulliver comes to the front of the classroom.

"Take out a piece of paper," she says. "I want you to describe a fun experience you've had. Write one-half page for a C, three-quarters for a B, and one page for an A."

I put the heading on my paper and begin writing:

Miles Pruitt

English 10

Basketball

I remember when Dad would play basketball with me. He taught me everything I know. We would play here at Edison on Saturdays and Sundays. It was a lot of fun.

Another thing good about Dad, is that he likes to tell jokes. Most of them are stupid. But they're still funny.

He's also good at helping me in math. That was his best subject in school. But for me, it's my worst. He's not around to help me anymore.

He used to manage a restaurant. It was a good job. But he doesn't work there anymore.

I finish my half page and look around the room. The other

kids are still writing. I can get a higher grade if I write more. But I don't feel like it today. I have enough for a C. That's good enough.

I remember the tears on Dad's face when he told us he set the restaurant on fire. The owner paid him five thousand dollars. Nobody was supposed to get hurt. The owner got arrested, too.

* * *

AFTER SCHOOL. I leave drawing class, go to my locker, and get my basketball.

Gino is already at the courts when I get there. He shoots from the outside, hitting almost everything. I wish I was half as good as him.

I work mostly on my inside shots, missing most of them. I don't know what's wrong with me.

"You ready to go one-on-one?" Gino asks.

"Sure."

I bring in the ball and drive past Gino for a lay-up. It bounces out. He gets the rebound, takes it back, and hits a three-pointer from the right side. It's easy for him.

I get the ball back and hit a jumper from the left. But Gino goes on a scoring run. He wins the first game, 20-8. He also wins the next one.

We go back to shooting.

"Do you know what prison your dad is going to?" Gino asks.

I step right, put up a jumper from twelve, and miss. "He's in county jail now. We don't know what prison it will be."

He's locked up. I can't stand it. I pick up the ball and hurl it at the backboard as hard as I can.

Gino has a surprised look on his face. We continue shooting. I miss another easy shot. Why am I missing everything?

"I never told you," Gino says. "But I have an uncle in prison."

"What happened?"

"He was with some guys who robbed a jewelry store.
They did a smash and grab."

"How much longer does he have?"

"Three years."

"Where is he?"

"Joplin."

We keep shooting. I miss more shots. We leave to go
home at five o'clock.

Dad's in jail now. I keep thinking about it. I can't stop.

CHAPTER THREE

CAN'T THINK

TUESDAY AFTERNOON. It's almost five when I get home. I walk into the kitchen and hug Mom. It feels good to hold her. But the house feels lonely without Dad.

Abby and I set the table.

"I wish Dad was here," Abby says. "I wish he was telling one of his stupid jokes."

"We all wish he was here," Mom says.

"I wonder what kind of food they have where he is?" Abby

asks.

Mom turns away, like she might start crying.

I look at Dad's chair again. He was stupid to set that fire.

* * *

AFTER DINNER. I bring out the laptop to the kitchen table. I have to be careful with it, because the hinge is broken.

First, I get on the *Conroy Beacon* website. There's a picture of Dad walking into the courthouse. Mom walks next to him, staring straight ahead. The kids are going to be talking about it at school tomorrow.

Another picture shows the fireman. He sits in a wheelchair. His face is covered with scars, like scorched leather. It makes me want to cry. There's a breathing tube down his throat.

I close my eyes and see him falling through the roof of the restaurant, into the flames. The news story says he has

two kids. It must be terrible for them.

I have to do my homework. I get on the school website and click on math. I look at the problems but can't do any of them. All I can think about, is Dad.

* * *

LATER. I know I should be doing my homework. But I can't think. I read the news article again about Dad. It's the fifth time I've read it. I don't know why I keep going back to it.

I go to another screen on the computer and get on YouTube.

The first video shows the county jail in Los Angeles. A sheriff's bus pulls into a parking garage. Prisoners get off the bus with chains on their ankles. A deputy says they get a four-hundred new prisoners a day.

I wonder if it was like that for Dad.

The next video shows Joplin State Prison. The cell blocks have guards with rifles. The prisoners look tough, hard. It worries me to watch it. That's where Gino's uncle is.

Mom comes into the kitchen. I click off YouTube and go back to my homework. I don't want her to know I'm watching prison videos.

"How's your math?" she asks.

"I'm still working on it. I knew it in class. But there are some parts I forgot how to do."

"I wish I could help you," she says.

"That's okay. I think I can figure it out."

I don't know why I say that. I have no idea how to figure it out. If Dad was here, he could help me.

Mom leaves. I go back to watching prison videos.

The next one shows a new prisoner who smiles all the time. The other prisoners call him Gummy Bear. They think he's weak and take his food at mealtime. Later, he gets beat up.

What if they do that to Dad?

* * *

MUCH LATER. Mom and Abby are asleep now. I open up the couch and go to bed. I try to sleep. But I can't.

What is Dad doing now? Are they taking his food? Is he scared? Are some guys going to jump him?

What's going to happen at school tomorrow? What do I say if somebody asks about Dad? What if nobody wants to talk to me because of Dad?

I feel terrible about the fireman who fell through the roof. Dad did that to him. I know he didn't mean to. But it still happened.

I got NoPasses on my math and science tests last week. I'm behind in history. I have a big project in English that I haven't started.

My mind keeps going in circles. I can't quit thinking about Dad.

I love him. What if he gets hurt?