

THE EVOLUTION OF ETHAN POE

A Novel by Robin Reardon (Kensington, 2011)

Excerpt from Chapter One

I wish my mom's divorce lawyer wasn't so freakin' *hot*. The man is gorgeous. On the other hand, maybe it helps keep my mind off of what's really going on. In any case, it's distracting.

So is my stupid brother Kyle's recent little outburst, the one where he came up with a totally unique way to gear up for the start of school. I don't have a clue where he got this idea, but just last week, he buys one of those giant bags of ice cubes from the Store 24 next to Nick's Pizza in that string of about five stores out on Route 154. He clears some space in the middle of the toolshed that Dad built in the backyard four years ago, plunks the bag of ice in some old tin bucket he got from God knows where, cuts bag open, shoves his right hand in, and sits there. And sits there, until Mom panics because she doesn't know where he is, makes me call all his friends looking for him—no luck with that—and finally gets in her car to scour the area. I wander into the yard, the phone from the kitchen in my pocket in case Kyle calls or Mom does. And I hear a noise from inside the shed, like broken pottery sliding across a surface.

I pull open the door, and there he is, back against the shaky support for a shelf attached to the side of the shed. Kyle's hand is deep into melting ice cubes, his teeth gritted with determination.

"What the fuck!"

"Ethan! Get out!" His voice is shrill, panicky, and too much white shows around the brown of his eyes.

"What are you doing? Get your hand out of there!" Whatever he thinks he's doing, it can't be good. I step over old green plastic pots, terracotta shards, a bent trowel, swirls of stiff green hose worn in places with the crisscrossed fibers exposed. Kyle is seventeen, a year older than me and just as skinny, but more than one year taller. Or maybe I'm more than one year shorter. Anyway, I'm trying to yank his arm to get his hand out of the ice, and he's fighting me. Finally I give up and instead attack the bucket so I can spill the contents. He fights this too, but he has only the one hand to work with so I win.

Feet sliding on tumbled lumps of ice, he runs from the shed toward the house, his right hand curled against his navy blue *God Is Now Here* T-shirt. From what I can see, the hand looks like the claw of some dead creature. I follow, dialing Mom's cell number as I go, and let her know I've found Kyle. The universe must have been conspiring to bring everything together, because she's pulling into the driveway when I call.

Mom's no lightweight; she's tall like Kyle and solid, and between the two of us we manage to drag him out of his room, down the stairs, and into the kitchen. Mom threatens to tie him to the chair if he doesn't stay put, and she takes the plastic bucket she uses when she mops the kitchen floor and starts to fill it with lukewarm water. You don't spend your whole life in central Maine without knowing how to treat minor frostbite, and she hasn't moved more than a few miles from where she was born.

I can tell by the look on Kyle's face that he's in pain now that his hand is warming up. It couldn't have been too badly frozen, or it would have been longer before the pain set in. Mom doesn't care about the pain, evidently. She rants at him as water fills the pail in the sink, one hand on her broad hip, and the other now flying into the air, now landing on the faucet, now

pushing strands of dark brown, unmanageable hair away from her face, ineffectively trying to tuck them into the frayed red elastic that's holding some of it in check.

"Of all the damn fool things! You boys are supposed to be helping me! Have you forgotten that? Now that that low-life father of yours isn't here. Kyle Poe, what the hell did you think you were doing?" Mom was probably cute when she was young, with a round face and dark eyes that sparkle when she's in a good mood, but right now she looks like one of the Furies we studied in Greek mythology.

Through gritted teeth, Kyle's only response is, "Don't say damn. Or hell."

Of course this sends Mom into a new fit. "I'll say whatever the hell I want to! Ethan, put a chair beside your damn fool brother."

I comply, nervous because Mom doesn't usually swear *this* much; she must be more than mad. She sounds almost afraid. She lifts the pail, now heavy with water, and half waddles to the chair I've set beside Kyle. It hits the wooden seat with a liquid thunk. Mom grabs Kyle's right arm above the wrist, the curled hand now less white than pink with the blood returning, and lowers the claw slowly, half inch by half inch, into the water as Kyle gasps and grinds his jaw.

Water level halfway up the forearm, Mom stands straight, both hands on hips now, and glares at him. "Talk to me, Kyle. What did you think you were doing?"

His words halting with an effort not to reveal his pain level, Kyle says, "Matthew five, verse thirty: 'If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off, and throw it away from you. For it is more profitable for you that one of your members should perish, than for your whole body to be cast into Gehenna.'"

Mom looks confused. "And how on earth did you trip over your right hand, I'd like to know?"

If she doesn't know what he means by "stumble," I sure do. My right hand has brought me to my back on the bed or pressed against the tiled shower stall many times in the last few years. And the "member" in question isn't at the end of my right arm. But unlike Kyle, I don't have a problem with either member. I *look* for opportunities to stumble, every day. Every night. But Mom doesn't know what Kyle means. She prods, "Well?"

Kyle just shakes his head, and seeing how much pain he's in, Mom finally gives up and practically falls into the fourth chair at our ancient Formica-top table, red with gray and black rounded arrowheads scattered across the entire surface. Most of the stuff in our house comes from other people's yard sales. Only recently has it struck me how out of place the straight-backed wooden chairs look around this relic. The chairs themselves aren't new—far from it. But at least they match each other. And they look more at home on the battered, wide pine boards of the floor than the aluminum legs of the red Formica table. Honestly, you'd think we didn't have any money. We aren't rich, I don't mean to say that. But we could afford some decent kitchen furniture. And I know there's enough money put away someplace to give both Kyle and me a good start at college, though we're both expected to contribute to that. As for the second-hand stuff, Mom's just really big on "living light on the land."

Mom stares at Kyle. I watch her uneasily and glance occasionally at my brother's strained face, eyes shut. Everyone seems to avoid pointing out that Kyle hasn't explained himself further. Maybe Mom has figured out what he means. Finally she says, "Honestly, Kyle, going to church is one thing. Punishing your hand..." Her voice trails off, and Kyle doesn't do anything to fill in the blanks.

We sit there like that, with Mom getting up a few times to add more warm water to Kyle's pail, before I start getting restless. "I'm gonna clean up the mess in the shed," I throw over my shoulder on my way out of the kitchen.

With an ancient stubby broom I sweep the melt-softened cubes and water out through the shed doorway, my mind barely focused on what I'm doing. *Low-life father*. If your father is low-life, what does that make you? Middle-life? And that's only if your mother is high-life. Whatever that means.

I collect the broken pot pieces in the bucket, my irritation with Kyle growing deeper and closer to real anger with the clang of each shard that lands. He'd started to get all holier-than-thou sometime in June, as far as I can remember, not long after Dad left. Dad hasn't gone very far, what with his public works job with the town. He rents the room over the Barstows' garage where Mr. Barstow's mother had stayed until she died, the kitchen nothing more than a tiny sink, a small stove, and a half-refrigerator on a couple of square yards of linoleum in the corner.

Dad gave Kyle and me this big lecture just before he got in his pickup truck to drive away, about being men now and shouldering some of the responsibility around here. I remember thinking, *Do men ever want to cry as bad as I do right now?* But Kyle looked really serious, and he must have taken things quite to heart. Because the first thing he did was start going to church every Sunday. Not long after that, he took it upon himself to commit to paper the chores we'd each always done without the formality lent to them by virtue of being written down and attached to the side of the refrigerator, where they're now held on display by a magnet shaped like the Christian ichthus—that primitive fish symbol the early disciples supposedly used. Then he started ordering me around, reminding me pointedly when my chores weren't done, adding to the list as he felt necessary to make sure everything was cared for. Protected. Right.

It doesn't help that Mom seems to alternate between approving of Kyle's responsible approach to life and being amused by it. I just want him to knock it off. I mean, who does he think he is, my father or something? Maybe she'll think again after today's little exhibition.

I was never into church that much, but in the past year or so it's actually begun to make me nervous. That is, once I realized what the Bible says about me. About people like me.

In a skirmish with the old hose—stiff and unwilling to let me curl it into a mass I can tie and drag to the pile going to the dump—anger wins out over irritation. I curse under my breath, partly at the hose, partly at Kyle. He's ruined things for me, just when I'd got up enough guts to talk to Mom. I've been waiting for the right time, you know? Because, I mean, you can't just dump this onto your parents. Parent. It's hard enough finding the courage to tell your mother you're gay. I don't know if I'll ever be able to tell my dad. And I sure as hell don't plan to tell Kyle, so this afternoon looked like a good time. Mom went out last night to meet Jimmy Korbel, just for a few beers, not a real date; the divorce isn't final yet. But she came home in a great mood. And then when it looked like Kyle was away someplace for the afternoon, it seemed like this would be the day. So I spent a little time in my room, white earbuds jammed into the sides of my head, collecting energy and attitude from my favorite music, but before I could quite bring myself to turn off the iPod and go look for Mom, she found me. That's when she told me that Kyle was missing and I had to help find him. End of my plan. And now I don't now *when* I'm going to say anything.