



TWO CHAPTER
PREVIEW
NOT FOR SALE

DON'T BREATHE THE AWORD

HOLLY
CUPALA

“*Don’t Breathe a Word* is a gorgeously written, intense page-turner about one girl’s extreme quest to save herself. This is a beautiful book.”

—Courtney Summers, author of *Cracked Up To Be*, *Some Girls Are*, and *Fall for Anything*

“If I could go back in time and give my teenage self one book to help her survive, it would be *Don’t Breathe a Word*. Nothing has hit me so hard since Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*.”

—Stephanie Kuehnert, author of *I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone* and *Ballads of Suburbia*

“The author’s considerable narrative gifts will keep readers engaged throughout. Cupala knows her venue inside out and renders this harsh but lively world with a lot of heart.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“[A] tense, riveting story. The characters and setting are tangibly and impressively rendered.”

—*Publisher’s Weekly*

“A compelling story of courage and survival, and a young girl who rose from the ashes.”

—VOYA, *Voice of Youth Advocates*

“Cupala has done it again. Heart pounding and gut-wrenching, a story of intense emotion with a phenomenal climax.”

—Pamela van Hylckama Vlieg, book reviewer, *Bookalicio.us* owner, and resident blogger for Hicklebee’s Bookstore, San Jose, CA

“So packed with emotion, so full of voice, so intense.... SUCH a phenomenally done book.”

—Kari Olson, YA blogger at *AGoodAddiction.com* and *The {Teen} Book Scene*

HOLLY CUPALA

**DON'T
BREATHE
A WORD**

HARPER TEEN

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a new novel by Holly Cupala.

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**DON'T
BREATHE
A WORD**

ONE

Slyt. Slyt.

Sliding metal cut through the still night, spiraling ribbons of hair into the sink.

But better the sound of scissors than the rattle of my lungs. One wrong breath would set off the alarm.

I scooped up the strands and thrust them into a plastic bag, right next to what was left of the Manic Panic bleach kit and the sack full of dirt from the garden. An unknown girl stared back in my bathroom mirror. Jagged white bob. Pale eyebrows, oddly light against fading summer skin. Black rings around the eyes, transforming her...me...from a suburban girl into a hollowed-out specter.

That's what I'll be, if I'm lucky. Invisible.

And silent. I had to be. There was only one chance for escape.

Headlight beams flashed through my open window, putting me on alert. Earlier today, my mom had asked if I needed some new curtains, with Dad's job and everything going so well. As if new curtains would make me forget this beautiful birdcage, suffocating my beating heart. As if they could keep me, now that I'd come to the edge.

No.

I'd already fallen, and there was no one to catch me. Not here, anyway.

I took a harsh swig of my inhaler and suppressed the cough. As long as I was angry, I wouldn't have to feel afraid.

Even in August, it was cold enough in the middle of the night to pull Asher's flannel close, over the T-shirt and ragged PVC pants I found at the thrift store. His smell—hand sanitizer, cigarettes, clean custom scent—still permeated the fibers. I would leave everything else, but at least I'd get the flannel out of the deal.

I ran a tissue across the sink to capture any lingering strands. Who knew what forensics team they might call out when they found me missing? It would be worse than when I'd almost died of pneumonia. The only trail they'd find would be the one carefully laid by me—a scrape of mud, a smudge on the windowsill. No note. No fingerprints.

My eyes scanned the bedroom one last time for anything I might have forgotten. My window was open to the breeze and my bed unmade, as if I were snatched right out of it. The clock read 1:26 a.m. A muddy pair of men's work boots waited

next to my old backpack, stuffed with water bottles and Clif bars and inhalers. I only took a handful so they wouldn't notice what was gone.

Those were the things I'd prepared for, but now that I was leaving, the unexpected reached out to hold me back. Not the laptop or the closet brimming with clothes. Not even the cluster of photographs of me with my best friend, Neeta, at mock trials or by the pool. Or me with my two brothers, a trio of J's: Jesse, Joy, and Jonah. I was always crushed between them, as if they could put the air right into my lungs.

They were a collection of poses, like everything else. A smokescreen, veiling the truth.

Then there was the picture of Asher.

Asher stared up at me, leaning back, arms crossed, with a look at the same time blank and challenging. The look that made me ache with hot dread.

Neeta couldn't have known why I'd finally given into a girls-only trip with her. The photos didn't tell the real story. We hadn't talked, really talked, since I'd been with Asher. You can know someone your whole life, and a year later they know nothing about you at all.

"You're different, Joy," Neeta had said on the way back.

Maybe it was because we'd just gone to see the oldest J at college. Maybe it was because I'd left Asher behind.

But when Neeta said it, I had to push back tears.

The me in the photos mocked the one reflected in the mirror: two of us, divided. J2. *Joy*. That name didn't even fit me anymore. I would become someone she could never be.

“Goodbye, Joy,” I whispered. “It’ll be better out there. I promise.”

The new me would not be powerless. The plan would work. It had to. No one would believe I could do this—least of all Asher.

I did feel a little bad for what I was about to do to the carpet.

J1 had been out of the house for a year now, his old bedroom an empty cage. He didn’t have to watch over me any more, now that the job belonged to Asher. J3 slumbered like the dead—or at least like an exhausted four year-old, his breathing even and thick. My parents had nothing left to keep them up at night.

Even still, I held my breath against the earthy smell as I put on the work boots and dumped out the bag of dirt, smearing its contents from the window to the bed and wrestling with my pillows. Dirt could trigger an asthma attack, and that would bring my mom flying into the room. I crammed the boots into the bag, then swiped my feet through the mud to give the illusion of a struggle. I would leave no other trace. Soon, police would be crawling this room for evidence.

And then—

Crunch.

Pain stabbed into my bare arch, and I clutched my foot to keep from crying out—a Lego wagon from J3, which he’d left here to blackmail his way into my room. The crushed driver dangled pitifully. He’d have no one to watch over him once I was gone. I stuffed the little Lego man into my backpack before he could make me change my mind.

Nobody would be up and about in our neighborhood at this hour, at least in theory. But that didn't mean I wouldn't get caught by some guy up late with his laptop, who happened to see the ghost of a girl in the night. What the neighbors saw and what went on behind closed doors were often two different things in suburban paradise. I should know.

But I didn't when I met Asher. He dazzled me as much as he did everyone else.

To my parents, he was the perfect replacement for my brother—even better, he could protect me for the rest of my life. From pneumonia, from poverty, from abandonment.

To me, he was an escape from my parents' obsessive worry. That, and he could shatter me and put me back together again with one tender, electrifying breath, leaving me gasping for more. Delicious danger wrapped in a package of utter security.

Except for everything he gave there was a price. If Jesse hadn't been at college, if Mom hadn't been consumed with the details of my medicines and schedules, if Dad hadn't been unemployed for six months and Asher hadn't gotten him the job at Valen Ventures...maybe someone would have noticed that I'd stopped breathing.

I didn't even notice, until the night we reached the edge.

Neeta and I were home from our trip. I was still reeling from Jesse's rejection. If I could count on anyone, it would be him. But he slammed the door in my face.

Asher would be angry—that much I could count on. But I couldn't have guessed the punishment. He took me to his

apartment like he'd always done, only this time there was a candle burning. The calmness in his grey, grey eyes conflicted with the set of his jaw, made even sharper by the flickering glow. He drew back the sheets. Something metal gleamed in the candlelight.

I don't care if anyone else knows...I only care if you know, Joy.

That night, I sacrificed myself on an altar of skin and ashes. But I wouldn't bow down.

I skimmed the darkness toward the community entrance: elegant by day, spiked by night. My skin pulsed in that secret place, a blistering reminder that everything Asher did—good or bad—was about power.

My parents were always complaining about the Hopkins girls wedging the gate open for their boyfriends. But this new me was counting on it. I would slip through the bars before anyone knew I'd escaped. I didn't dare glance back.

What drew me forward was a glimmering, singular thought. A memory, a promise.

Help was out there, if only I could find him.

TWO

The twinge in my lungs was the least of my problems as I passed from shadow to shadow. I would have to take a shortcut through the woods to make the two a.m. bus. If I didn't, I was completely screwed. The next one didn't come until dawn.

I tore through the evergreen belt where Jesse and I used to build forts and where I first met Neeta, long before Jonah was even imagined. *J1, J2, J3.*

Jesse left for Western last summer. J1 would be fine without me. Better, even—he said so himself.

J3 would forget me soon enough. What did Mom always say about memories? Mine began when I was five years old. Jonah had one sweet year left.

The dried-out creek at the bottom of the ravine plunged me through more memories, but I would erase them with every gulp of mossy air. The dirty Vans I found at St. Vincent's would leave the trail of some other girl in some other life, and I would vanish in a flutter of dirt and leaves.

1:52 a.m. on my cell phone. I would turn it off as soon as I hit the city. Life would be in a new time zone, synchronized with a different speed of flight.

At 2:02 a.m., Metro Bus 216 rolled up to the Issaquah Transit Center and I flipped up my hoodie, ready for action.

The bus door jiggled open, illuminated by a fluorescent glow. I had a crumpled ticket in my pocket, torn out of my parents' *Eastside Savings* book. I held it out to the driver, who looked like he hadn't eaten anything but greasy drive-thru noodles for a very long time.

Runaway teen, I could see on his face. I wondered if he could see the desperation on mine. *I didn't look too closely, officer. But no, it wasn't this girl. She had blond hair, not long and dark, and the eyes... black and empty.*

The driver sniffed impatiently at my outstretched hand. "Just put it in the slot," he sighed. *Stupid suburban kid, doesn't even know how to ride the bus.* How was I going to survive on the street?

The only other passengers were a woman leaning across the handicap seats and a suit guy in the back. I claimed a bench near the middle and curled into a ball around my backpack.

All I had to do was get to Bellevue, where I could wait for the first Seattle-bound bus. Then it would take another to get to the Capitol Hill neighborhood, where I would disappear into the ample teen homeless population. Until then, I had to blend into the scenery. That wouldn't be too hard. No one I knew rode the bus.

We rumbled away from the Transit Center and onto the highway. I looked out the back window, past the businessman and into the blackness of my receding life.

“Let's go for a drive,” Asher had said, just a few days ago.

We didn't talk about what happened the night before. His anger was expended, once I'd fallen asleep at his apartment and spent the night raging with fever and chills. He took care of me and brought me back to life. He bandaged my wounds and took away the hurt. Now we were at the tender point, the part I hungered for. He was always so kind afterward.

But this time, he'd gone so far. My skin throbbed at the memory.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked, once we were settled into his DeLorean, detailed every week to keep it satiny and fingerprint-free. He could have any car he wanted, but he chose one that required constant care. Like me.

He gently lifted the seatbelt away from my hip and offered me my inhaler, then tilted my mouth to his so that I could taste his familiar mix of smoky and sweet. A warm

tingle spread through me—even after the last twenty-four hours, he could still have this dizzying effect.

“How about you choose, Joy.”

Normally this kind of statement would be a test. If I could navigate the land mines, I wouldn’t be punished. Not this time. A couple of crows picking at roadkill shot us curious looks, giving me an eerie chill.

I tucked my head onto the thickness of his shoulder, feeling it soften under my weight. He touched my hair, my shoulder, everywhere but where the pain was, as if soothing me. It was over now, and I wouldn’t run off with Neeta again without telling him. It was going to be better...he would stay close, watch over me.

If I could walk this balance, everything would go back to the way it was in the beginning.

We passed a Starbucks on the way out of the neighborhood, where I used to go with Neeta. She could be there now with Ellerie and Ari, her new friends since Asher came along. They’d be sipping Frappuccinos, maybe talking about the trip. I hadn’t gotten a chance to ask Neeta what she meant, if she saw through it all. *You’re different, Joy.*

I couldn’t risk running into them with Asher. As long as I stayed away, I could make sense of what happened, first with my brother and then last night. Seeing Neeta would jeopardize everything. I would crumble with one look, which would only make things worse.

“We could go to the city,” I said. “Maybe get something to eat?” Though food was the furthest thing from my mind.

He nodded, tipping his aviator sunglasses down over his eyes. I let out the air captured in my lungs. It was what he'd wanted all along.

Seattle unfolded before us, the Puget Sound and the mountains and the entire city crammed into the low, wide windshield. The last droplets of summer rain strained to hold on as we sat in silence.

"You haven't talked much since you got back," he said. I fingered the Tiffany bracelet he'd given me, the one with the crow dangling from the edge of the plate. It identified me wherever I went, even to the ends of the earth.

"It wasn't a big deal. It's just...Neeta and I haven't hung out in a long time, and she thought we could visit Jesse at Western." The truth was, I didn't even know why I was going to see my brother until I got there.

We got off at the Olive exit, taking us into Capitol Hill. As we drove toward Broadway, the landscape changed from shiny to gritty, silk to leather, boutique to clothing exchange. Street parking became dense, and we circled to find a spot.

"I thought you didn't hang out with Neeta anymore," Asher said, with a hint of disdain. It was no secret he didn't like Neeta. The words *annoying* and *know-it-all* came to mind, even if he had only ever treated her with the utmost politesse.

"We're about to start senior year together," I answered. "She thought we should go on a trip." My skin felt like it was on fire, and I shifted for relief.

The DeLorean growled to a stop at Olive and Harvard. Asher opened the winged door and left it up while he came for me, coolly noting the attention it attracted.

“So what did you do there? It had to have been good if you didn’t want to tell me about it. A party?” His question skewered me with dead calm.

We joined the stream of pedestrians, dodging students and people talking to themselves, grimy homeless kids who probably hadn’t changed clothes in weeks. When my brother still lived at home, he would be down here all the time, handing out food and socks. Asher stayed close to protect me from the mumbling, smoking, unpredictable flow, the softness of his hand contradicting his words.

“No, no party,” I backpedaled. “We just stopped by to see Jesse, hung out, and came back.” Asher waited for more, for the point that would betray me. Usually I didn’t see my error until it was too late.

What I couldn’t tell him was that Jesse, the brother who always watched out for me, the one who found me when I’d stopped breathing, didn’t want to see me. He would feed the homeless and build houses in Mexico, but he’d had enough of me. There would be no help from him.

“Hung out? And you couldn’t tell me about that?” Asher and I stopped in front of the Smoke Shop, the only place around here that imported the cigarettes he liked. A group of crows dive-bombed for a bit of french fry left on the street. He watched them with interest.

Air scraped in my throat like shards. I took a slow breath to calm my voice. I wouldn't cry. I fumbled with my inhaler, and he steadied it in my hand.

"Don't," he said, running his finger along the outline of my jaw and tracing up to the corner of my eye. "Just tell me the truth. Why did you take off like that?"

"Asher, I'm sorry, I didn't think—"

"True. You didn't think," he cut me off. Then he smiled, and I couldn't tell if it reached his eyes under his lenses. "I know it was a mistake. I forgive you." He put his lips to mine, reminding me of that thrilling place between love and danger. I could barely feel the pain anymore. "It's just...I missed you. I love you, Joy."

Internally, something released. *It wasn't all bad*, I would tell Neeta if I could. Sometimes he was incredibly, incredibly gentle. I loved him, too.

What happened last night would never have to happen again.

"Wait here," he said. I'll be right back." Asher slipped into the shop and left me alone on the sidewalk. I knew better than to move.

And that's when I saw *him*. The boy.

No, heard him...

I'd met him once before, in an alley of shattered glass.

I could see him better this time in the light. He was probably about my age, with dark brown hair hanging in pieces. Eyes a deep blue, skin rough and tan from exposure, body all wiry limbs. *If he stood up*, I thought, *he would be well over six feet tall*.

His soft voice, a strain of guitar music reached out like a hand pulling me into an embrace.

He knows the use of ashes...he makes her shine with ashes...

The words sent shivers down my spine.

The boy stopped, meeting my eyes with a strange kind of knowing, as if he'd been a part of my whole conversation with Asher. He must have recognized me, too. Maybe he remembered what he'd said to me, the last time we met.

I saw how he treats you. If you ever need help, you know where to find me.

On the ground, the boy seemed...safe. Even though the words he had once spoken to me were anything but. I didn't know it then, but those words would change everything.

When Asher came out of the shop, I was still standing there frozen—staring at the boy, our eyes locked with an intimacy both uncomfortable and comforting. Like he *knew* me. Could see right through me.

He could see the wounds, forming scars even now. *Ashes*. The words of his song echoed in my mind.

And I wasn't sure I wanted that kind of knowing. I broke eye contact and darted into the nearest doorway. Asher followed, and we found ourselves in Hot Topic, surrounded by net stockings and studded boots.

"What the hell was that about?" Asher hissed, and I braced myself. Until last night, it was only words.

Mercifully, a boot with four-inch heels distracted him. He ran a finger along them as if he were touching my skin. "These would look hot on you."

A band tightened around my lungs. Instantly, I hated the boots.

“I want to see you in those.” Which, if it had been spoken by someone else, might have been completely sexy. But I knew what it meant with Asher. We would go back to his place, and I would put them on. He would start at my neck and work his way down, always leaving the crow bracelet alone. Would he unwrap the bandage? The thought of it made me hurt.

Through the doorway, strains of guitar music drifted in and curled around me like threads of smoke. Meant to choke me or set me free?

He wishes he could cure the scars...

I took out my credit card and gathered the boots. Asher came close enough for me to smell his mint and nicotine. He breathed his soft breath on my neck and his words into my ear: “I don’t like what you did last night, Joy. We’re going to have to fix it.”

That’s when I knew there was no way out.

Read the rest of

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“NOTHING HAS HIT ME SO HARD SINCE LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON’S SPEAK.”

—Stephanie Kuehnert, author of
I WANNA BE YOUR JOEY RAMONE

Joy Delamere is suffocating.

From asthma, from her parents, and from her boyfriend, Asher, who is smothering her from the inside out. She can take his tender words, his cruel words, until the night they go too far.

Now, Joy will leave everything behind to find the one who has offered his help, a homeless boy called Creed. He introduces her to a world of fierce loyalty, to the rules of survival, and to love—a world she won’t easily let go.

Set against the gritty backdrop of Seattle’s streets and a cast of characters with secrets of their own, Holly Cupala’s powerful new novel explores the subtleties of abuse, the meaning of love, and how far a girl will go to discover her own strength.

PRAISE FOR TELL ME A SECRET

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Holly Cupala wrote teen romance novels before she ever actually experienced teen romance. When she did, it became all about tragic poetry and slightly less tragic novels. She has worked with the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators, been a readergirlz diva, and now serves on the board of the University of Washington Writing Program.

When she isn’t writing and making art, she spends time with her husband and daughter in Seattle, Washington. These days, her writing is less about tragedy and more about hope. Ten percent of the author’s proceeds goes toward World Vision’s Hope for Sexually Exploited Girls.

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