

Kneeling in front of me without a word, she removes the guitar from my hands and leans it against the couch, and I let her do it. Then she puts her hands on both sides of my face. Her lips are soft and sweet, like cherry candy. I get lost completely in that kiss, the same way I got lost in our music.

"So we're doing this thing, right?" Her breath is warm in my ear and makes me shiver. With where my mind is heading, I'm taken totally off guard by the question.

"Uh. Doing what?"

"The Battle of the Bands. After we sang together in the band room that day, I actually started thinking I might be able to do it if you'll help me. Will you, Hank?"

So. Hang on a second. Only a few days ago I realized I can play guitar, and I'm already going to perform in public? Am I crazy out of my mind?

Well. Yeah, I am. For Hailey, I am.

I nod, and she makes this happy squealy sound. Then she kisses me again.

No matter what I've done or who I am, it's clear that this funny, talented, pretty girl really likes me. So maybe, just maybe, when it comes right down to it, I'm not such a bad person after all.

"HERE YOU GO. I FOUND A COUPLE MORE." THOMAS BRINGS over two more books and sets them on top of the stack he already gave me. Jesus. The guy is just way too into this research thing.

Sitting in the Thoreau room at the library, I flip through books on memory and memory loss, hopefully to get a handle on how this thing happened to me and, maybe, how to reverse it. I'm not sure the answer to that lies in these books, but Thomas is all about research, so whatever.

Amnesia can be caused by physical trauma like a crack on the head, the books say. Or, it can be a result of emotional trauma. Like if something really terrible happened, too traumatic to deal with, your brain blocks it out. It's the brain protecting itself, a defense

mechanism. Kind of cool and weird at the same time, when you think about it.

Basically all the books agree on one thing: the brain is a mystery. And what causes memory loss and what brings it back are things people don't completely understand. Great. That's no help at all.

What if I never get my memory back? I figure I have two choices: Create a life with no past, starting here and now. Or go to the Concord Police Department and turn myself in. They'd call the media and put me on the news, and eventually someone would see me and identify me. I'd be taken home to parents I don't remember, a life that I apparently ran away from. If they want me back, that is. Then there's the chance that I'm facing jail time. All of which make option number one sound like the best choice: creating my own life, on my own terms, something like what Thoreau did.

"Did those books help?" Thomas asks me, setting one more book on top of the pile, which threatens to topple over.

"Basically they say I might remember a little at a time, remember everything at once, or never remember another thing for the rest of my life."

"Hmm," says Thomas, scratching his bearded chin. "Well, that leaves things pretty much open, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," I say, leaning back with my feet straight out and my arms crossed over my chest, shutting down. "Sucks."

"Listen, Hank, I have an idea. There's this database for missing kids. We can bring it up on the computer and see if you're on it."

He signs me up for one of the library computers, and together we go online. And there it is, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. My heart jumps in my chest, just looking at those words. Missing. Exploited. Which am I?

"Any particular state you'd like to start with?" Thomas asks.

"How about New York," I say. Makes sense. It's where I woke up.

A few swipes on the keyboard, and he has opened up a page of missing kids from the state of New York. Over a hundred of them.

"Okay, Hank, go to it," Thomas says. "I need to get back to work. Let me know if you find anything significant."

"You're brilliant," I tell him.

"I know. Although, of course, if you don't find yourself listed there, it's just one more bit of evidence to prove my little theory."

"That I'm the second coming of Thoreau," I say dryly.
"Exactly." He heads back toward his desk, then stops and says quickly, "*If a man loses pace with his companions—*"

"Perhaps it is because he bears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured, or far away. Oh come on, Thomas. That was an easy one."

Leaning over the computer screen with sweaty palms, I scan the pictures and read the listings. Date of birth. Age. Date the kid went missing. There are endangered runaways. Endangered missing. Family abduction. Non-family abduction. A John Doe with no picture is a possible homicide victim. This is a scary world to be visiting, even online, and somehow I'm a part of it. Creepy.

I'm confused when I see pictures of adults, with ages like forty-five or fifty-seven, until I realize they've been missing since they were kids. Somebody did age-progression computer imaging and some of the people look weirdly unnatural. I guess it's not easy to take a picture of a four-year-old and try to figure out what he or she would look like at age fifty-seven. God, there are families who never give up, ever. Is my family one of those? Or were they glad when I disappeared? *Nobody will miss you.*

I check all the pictures of the missing children from New York, and I don't find myself there. So I decide there's nothing to do but start from the beginning with Alabama and go through every single state in the country, look at every single picture of every single missing kid, to see if I pop up.

Two hours later, my back is cramping up, I've only made it as far as Connecticut, and all the faces are starting to look the same. What a depressing task this is. All these kids with families who can't find them. Or even worse, all the John Does and Jane Does who have been found, probably dead, and nobody even knows who they are, or were.

If I were to turn myself in to the police, is that what they'd call me? John Doe? A chill prickles down my spine.

That chill climbs up my neck and into the roots of my hair when I look at the last page of pictures from Connecticut. That's when I see a face I know and almost fall right out of my chair. The kid's hair is combed and cut shorter and the clothes are actually clean, but I still know him. I know the straight nose, the strong mouth and that stubborn tilt of his chin, like he's daring someone to smash him in the jaw.

Jack.

John Alexander Zane, the listing says. Endangered runaway. His date of birth tells me he turned sixteen last week. He has been missing from Bridgeport, Connecticut, for about a month. So he and Nessa had only been on the streets for a month?

One picture beneath his is the female version of Jack. It's Nessa, smiling in what looks like a high school portrait. I hadn't realized how much they look alike. Vanessa Lee Zane. She's barely fifteen.

For a second, I want to call the number listed and report that I've seen them, so at least one of these desperate families can know what happened to their kids. Maybe there's an aunt or somebody who would take them in, get them away from Maggie and off the streets. But then I remember the look on Jack's face when he said he'd never go back home. Something bad happened with their dad, and I can't be the one to potentially send them back to it.

Thomas pops in to check on me. "Anything yet?" I decide not to tell him about Jack and Nessa, figuring it would do nobody any good.

I shrug. "Not yet. My neck is starting to cramp up from all this computer stuff."

"So close it down for now and come help me," Thomas says. "We've got a bunch of shelving to do over

in fiction. I could slip you a few bucks if you'll help me out. Sound good?"

I grin at him. "Money always sounds good."



The Battle of the Bands is only one week away, but Hailey is able to pull together a couple musicians to play with us. The drummer is this laid-back stocky guy named Sam who plays in the school jazz band, and the bass player is a friend of hers from English lit class, named Ryan. Ryan, a short, thin guy with glasses, has never played with a band before, but she says he's taking lessons and is ready to play. So we all show up together to rehearse for the first time Monday afternoon on the high school stage. Hailey introduces me to everybody as a new transfer student. I wonder how long I'll be able to get away with that.

Secrecy, as it turns out, is a big part of the Battle of the Bands event at Thoreau High. The windows on the auditorium doors are covered with black paper so nobody can peek in from the hallway, and only one band at a time rehearses with the stage crew to keep everything a surprise until performance night.

Bands are allowed to play one to three songs. Of course we choose just one, "Blackbird," hoping we can

even pull *that* off. Sam, Ryan, Hailey, and I set up our gear on the stage and take a few moments to tune up.

"Okay, let's try it like this," I suggest. "It'll start with Hailey and me, guitar and voice, for the first part of the song, nice and easy like a ballad. But as we go into it a second time, you guys join in and we totally rock it out through the end. Want to give it a shot?"

We start the song just like Hailey and I had been practicing in the white room. Guitar and voice, the two of us together. Hailey starts out strong, with that gorgeous voice of hers. But then, she starts to waver.

She stops singing, swallows hard. "Can we start over?" she asks me.

"Of course."

"Need something, Hailey?" Ms. Coleman asks from the auditorium seats. "I brought a few candy bars along just in case."

Hailey looks embarrassed but shakes her head. "No, I'm fine," she says. "Just nerves."

I begin the intro again, cutting her a meaningful look. *You can do this, Hailey.*

Even though her voice is tentative, she makes it through the song the first time through, and the rest of the band comes crashing in. It's total chaos. We sound like crap.

"Whoa. Hold on, hold on," I say, waving my arms to

stop them. "You came in too soon. And Ryan, you have that progression wrong. I don't know what that last note was, but it wasn't right."

Ryan's face turns bright red, but he nods. "You're right," he says. "Sorry, just a little nervous. I'll get it."

I take a deep breath and remind myself this was our first time through. Not a total disaster, not yet. Relax. "Let's start from where you guys come in, okay?" I count it off, and we sail into the next verse. Sam gets it immediately, adding just the right touches on snare and cymbal. Ryan screws up again, but at least we finish the verse.

"I'll get it," Ryan insists.

We take it from the top again, and this time, Hailey sounds stronger. We limp through the part with Ryan, then do it again. And again.

"Okay, it's almost time for the next group to come in." Ms. Coleman comes up and joins us on the stage. "That's... really coming along." Which is probably the nicest thing she can think of to say. "So let's talk staging and some really basic special effects. What did you have in mind?"

I shrug. All my focus was just on the music, but clearly Hailey has been thinking about the rest. She and Ms. Coleman sit on the edge of the stage, and Ms. Coleman makes notes on a yellow legal pad.

"Sounds great, Sam," I tell the drummer. "Ryan, well, dude, you're getting there."

Ryan's face burns as he puts his bass in its case. "I'll work on it at home. I'll get it," he says again.

"I know you will," I say, hoping like hell.

"One more thing," Ms. Coleman says. "What's the name of your band?"

The four of us look at each other. We hadn't given that detail any thought at all.

"Can we get back to you on that?" Hailey asks.

"All right, just let me know as soon as possible so we can put it in the program," says Ms. Coleman. "Good work today. Be here at seven on Saturday, ready to play."

"We will," Hailey says. She turns to the rest of us.

"Can you all practice at my house Wednesday afternoon? Like three o'clock?" Everybody says yes.

Her cheeks are pink and she looks excited, but there's this wild thing lurking behind her green eyes and I know she's also terrified that this year will be a replay of what happened last time. I want to tell her to relax, it's going to be great, that she's going to be amazing.

But I never get the chance, because just then the back door of the auditorium crashes shut like a gunshot. This time, thank God, I don't collapse onto the floor. But then I see who came in, letting the door slam like he did

it on purpose: Cameron. And he looks pissed.

"Uh-oh," I hear Hailey breathe beside me.

"Cameron, you know the rules," says Ms. Coleman.

"You're supposed to wait in the hall until someone from the crew comes to get you."

Cameron's eyes are locked onto Hailey's, but he responds to Ms. Coleman. "I'm sorry. Guess I forgot."

"That's okay, I think these folks are done." She shoots Hailey a questioning glance, and Hailey nods. "You can bring your group in now, Cameron."

"Cameron has a group?" I whisper to Hailey.

"Yep," she says, biting her lip. "It used to be my group."

While Sam, Ryan, and I gather our gear together, Cameron pulls Hailey over to the side of the stage and I try to eavesdrop. They talk in hushed tones so it's hard to hear, until the voices rise in argument. Coiling a cable, I draw closer to listen.

"Why the hell should you care? You have another lead singer now," Hailey says.

"That's only because you said you wouldn't do it," Cameron argues, yanking his cap off, as if his anger makes it too tight on his head. Their voices lower again and I can't hear the rest.

"Hank."

Someone calls my name from the auditorium doorway. Sophie the janitor stands in the hallway, waving me over with a blue rag in her hand. What does she want? Am I in trouble? Did she or the dread-lock janitor decide to turn me in? Pushing aside my nervousness, I hop off the stage to join her.

"Hey, Sophie," I say, all casual. "What's up?"

Sophie's kind brown eyes scan my face like she's trying to absorb that part of me that reminds her of her son.

"Did your friends ever find you?" she asks. Her gray-black hair is wild today, full of static electricity. Like if I touch it, I might get a shock.

"What friends?"

"They came into the school asking after some new kid, and from their description, I knew immediately it was you." She wipes her hands on the blue cloth and stuffs it into the back pocket of her overalls.

Ice-cold fear trumps the nervousness in my gut. "What did these people look like, Sophie?" I fight an urge to shake her.

"They were two young men, like you," she says. "But of course, most people look young to me these days." Her smile creates a web of wrinkles around her eyes, but my face is frozen and I can't smile back.

Could she mean Maggie? Was it naïve of me to think

Maggie would just give up and let me go? After all, we know too much about each other. I know he's into drug dealing and taking advantage of street kids, and he knows what I did to Simon in that alley. But it's not possible that he tracked me all the way to Concord. Is it?

"Are you doing okay, Hank?" Sophie looks like she wants to check me again for signs of a fever. "Ever since you left the school, I've been worried about you."

"Oh, sure," I say, forcing a smile. "I'm fine, really." She's a sweet lady, but I just want to be done talking to her. In fact, I want to bolt out of this room. "Thanks for letting me know about my, uh, friends."

The auditorium door slams shut again, jarring me to the bone, and there's a flurry of voices as the rest of Cameron's band files into the room, pulling Cameron away from Hailey to set up. The lead singer is this skinny girl dressed all in black with straight blond hair, dyed pink at the tips. She gives Hailey a superior smirk, like she's proud that she's taken Hailey's place in the band. Whatever. There's no way she's as good.

Ms. Coleman shoos us out of the auditorium so Cameron's band can set up. Out in the hallway, we say good-bye to Sam and Ryan and they take off, leaving Hailey and me alone together. Her cheeks are red after her exchange with Cameron, and her green eyes flash.

"Let's get out of here," I suggest. "You want to go downtown?"

"Yes. Need ice cream, stat," she says and manages a tight smile. "By the way, what did the janitor want? I saw her talking to you."

"Nothing. She just kind of likes me, I guess."

"Of course she does." Hailey reaches over, so easy, and takes my hand. Hers is warm and soft and fits perfectly into mine. "She's a sweet lady, but a little crazy," she says with a shrug. "That's what people say anyway."

"Yeah." But I know she's not that crazy. Still, it's not possible that somebody really did come looking for me, not here in Concord, Massachusetts. Is it?

Don't think about it.

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HELEN'S RESTAURANT IS PACKED WITH THE AFTER-SCHOOL crowd. A hum of laughter and conversation floats in the small space like smoke, punctuated by scraping forks on plates, the clink of soda glasses behind the breakfast counter. We sit in a booth across from each other, and Hailey orders a strawberry sundae with extra whipped cream. I'm not hungry, so I just get a root beer.

"Don't judge me," she says, her spoon poised above the sundae.

"Why would I do that?"

"Danielle is always lecturing me about what I eat. Drives me crazy."

"I wouldn't judge you," I tell her, wondering what ice cream has to do her health, making a mental note to find out. "Anyway, tell me about Cameron," I say, glad I

have something to take my mind off what Sophie said.

Hailey licks a few drips off her spoon. "It's kind of a long story."

I tie a double knot in the paper left over from my straw and smile at her. "I've got time."

So she tells me about how her parents and Cameron's parents have been best friends and next-door neighbors since the two of them were in kindergarten. They grew up like cousins, with both families really close. His family helped them through the scary time when Hailey got sick, before they knew what was wrong. Then they started a band freshman year, with Cameron on lead guitar and Hailey on vocals. The band fell apart after last year's doomed—her word—Battle of the Bands, but the two of them were still close friends. This past fall, they decided to try dating. It didn't take.

"I don't know. He started getting serious right away, you know? But I realized it wasn't like that for me. He's more like a brother than a boyfriend. So I broke it off. And he was really crushed. Things haven't been the same between us since."

Hailey hands me an extra spoon. I take a bite of her sundae, sweet cold strawberry, and although it's good, I realize hot fudge would have been my choice. Another new detail I know about myself.

"And what was that thing he wants you to do for him, the thing you owe him, or whatever?" I ask, setting the spoon back on the table.

Her mouth twists to one side and she frowns. "Yeah, well, here's the thing. A couple weeks ago, I went to this party and had way too much to drink. It's not something I do very often because it's really bad for me, but I was stupid. Had a sucky day or whatever. Anyway, I was even more stupid to try and drive myself home. I was in my own neighborhood when I took a turn too sharp, and smashed right into a tree at the end of my street. I was totally freaking out. So I went hammering on Cam's door because I didn't know what else to do. His parents and mine were out together at a play in the city. So he came out and saw the car. One of our neighbors had called the police, and we knew they were on their way.

"He said to tell them he was driving, but I said no, I couldn't do that, because then he'd get in trouble. Not as much as you," he said. And he was right. So I did it. I let him get in the car, in the driver's seat. And when the police came, he said he'd swerved to avoid hitting a dog. The police totally bought it. But the thing is, he has a junior license, he's not supposed to have a passenger in the car, that's one of the rules. So his license is suspended for sixty days."

"Well the license thing, that's not your fault," I say, hating that Cameron has any excuse to manipulate her. The waitress comes by and gives me a refill on my root beer, without me even having to ask.

"No, but it still comes down to this: he did me a huge favor and kept me from getting a DUI on my license, and probably having to pay a huge fine and go to driving classes. So I do owe him. To a point anyway." Hailey's spoon clinks against glass as she scoops up the last few spoonfuls of melted ice cream.

"I don't know. It sounds like he's totally taking advantage of the situation."

"No doubt about that. Anyway, let's not talk about this anymore." With a flourish, she takes the last bite of her sundae and then licks her lips. She has no idea what this does to me. Or maybe she does and just wants to torture me a little. I fight the urge to grab her, right here in this booth, and kiss the last traces of whipped cream off her lips.

"Come on, I'll give you a ride back to your uncle's house," she says.

"My uncle?"

"Yeah. Didn't you say that's where you're staying?" She looks at me for a minute like I'm a bug under a microscope. "Seriously, sometimes I feel like I don't

know anything about you, Hank. Mr. Mysterious. Who the hell are you anyway?"

"I have no idea," I say, flashing a charming smile to show her I'm kidding. "It's just that, uh, he's more like a friend of the family than an actual relative. I just call him uncle. Uncle Thomas."

"Is he your teacher, then?"

"What do you mean?"

"For homeschooling. Does he teach you?"

"Oh." I clear my throat, shuffle my feet under the table. "No, I do it myself. On the computer and stuff. That's how it works." God, I hope that's how it works.

She squints at me, but then shrugs, like she's accepted my explanation. *Whew.*

"By the way, I told Ms. Coleman your situation, with the homeschooling and all, to make sure it's okay for you to be in the Battle of the Bands. I didn't want them kicking you out at the last minute or anything."

My stomach drops. "And?"

"And she said it was okay. She's cool like that. Plus, she really likes you."

Whew, again. "Good."

To celebrate these small victories and also because I can't hold back any longer, I kiss her. And she tastes delicious, like strawberries and whipped cream and Hailey.

Letting myself get lost in the moment, the knot in my gut relaxes. Hailey makes me feel like I'm worth something and that I'm safe here. Surely here in this good place with this amazing girl, nothing bad could happen and nobody could hurt me. Not even Maggie. I want to believe this, so bad. And so for the moment, I do.



Riding on the back of Thomas's motorcycle on the way to the library the next morning, there's this comfortable hum in my chest. The air is getting warmer and smells like black dirt and new grass. I have a great place to stay with Thomas. I'm making music with Hailey and falling for her more every day. Concord is a nice town, and with the exception maybe of Cameron, it's full of really nice people. It occurs to me I haven't felt the beast attack my insides for days. Not since waking up at Thomas's place last week. To me, that's huge.

Thoreau wrote that we should suck the marrow out of life. Okay, so this may not be the life I started with. But it's a good one at the moment, so why not go ahead and seize the day?

For about an hour, I hum to myself, re-shelving books in the nonfiction stacks at the library. But then I have to

bring a cart of books into the Thoreau room and I stop short outside the room, where the head and shoulders statue of Henry David sits on a pedestal. My heart sinks in my chest.

Thoreau's statue-blank eyes aren't saying anything to me about sucking the marrow out of life or seizing the day. What they're saying instead, is: *what the hell are you doing, Hank, allowing yourself to settle into a life where you don't belong? Have you gotten so unbelievably selfish that you've forgotten all about your sister?*

Trying to ignore a sick feeling spreading in the pit of my stomach, I finish up the shelving and then sit my butt back down at the library computer. I don't want to look through the Missing and Exploited Children database anymore, and I hate that I can't live a normal, everyday life and just be happy. But I have no choice. I have to keep searching for the truth. Not for my sake anymore, but my sister's. And if someone has come to Concord looking for me, I might not have a lot of time.

Picking up where I left off, I look at every single kid in the database who vanished from Delaware. Then Florida, Georgia, Hawaii. So many faces, so many missing kids, so many broken families. The faces all seem to blur together. But I continue, on to Idaho. Then Illinois. Illinois.

That's when it happens. That's when I see the face. My face.

It's me, but somehow it's not me. Same face, same hair, but I'm smiling, confident. A high school picture. High school kid who looks secure in his existence. A guy who seems to know exactly who he is. Or was. A guy named Daniel Henderson. My heart seizes up in my chest.

Daniel Henderson. I say the name to myself, whispering it out loud in the library.

Daniel Henderson, the listing says. From Naperville, Illinois.

So this is me. My real name. I think back to the image I had of my dad, calling my name in Walden Woods. The name I couldn't quite hear him calling was Danny. Yes, that sounds right. I am Danny Henderson from Naperville, Illinois. It says my birth date is May 12, which means I'll turn eighteen in just a few weeks. I must be a senior in high school. Will I miss my own graduation? Was I going to college?

I hold on to the edge of the table, not breathing. Bracing myself, I wait for all of Danny Henderson's memories to come rushing back into me, filling every empty space inside with life and memory and realization.

But nothing comes. I can't believe it. Nothing comes.

I'm not Hank, but Danny. So why do I still feel like Hank?

I look over at Thomas, where he sits at his desk, entering information into his computer. I'm not ready to tell Thomas. I need to take time with this, need to get a grip. Where the hell is Naperville, Illinois? Will I remember, if I research the town where Danny Henderson lived?

I take a break, wander around the room, and stretch my legs. My heart is pounding against my ribs like I'm going to have a coronary. Can't take too much of this all at once. Can't seem to absorb it. I go down to the candy machine. Buy M&Ms. Make myself eat them slowly, one at a time, by color. Red, blue, yellow, green. Then I return to the computer and sit down.

Search: *Naperville, Illinois*.

There's a website for the town. I look at pictures of the downtown area. There's a riverwalk. It's a big town with four high schools, one of them mine. But which one? Pretty houses in the suburbs, sort of like Concord. Danny Henderson lived in this nice suburban town, about forty minutes west of Chicago. Maybe I rooted for the Bulls. The Bears. The White Sox or the Cubs? My gut says Cubs, but I can't be sure.

There's a link on the website to the local newspaper

called the *Naperville Sun*. I take my disappearance date, April 10, which is listed on the Missing and Exploited Children site and I search the archives of the Naperville Sun for a couple days before my disappearance. There are articles about local politicians, church suppers, and ads about local stores having sales. Nothing seems familiar.

That's when I see the headline on the sports page, and a dim lightbulb of memory switches on somewhere in a dark back hallway of my brain.

NAPERVILLE SOUTH BOYS TRACK TEAM FACES RIVALS

The track team is posed in one of those yearbook-type pictures with the guys standing in two rows, wearing team uniforms with numbers. The taller guys are in the back. I scan their faces and stop. One of them is me. Not smiling, just standing there like I want the photographer to take the picture already so I can leave. And then there, right under the team picture is another photo, an action shot featuring some dark-haired guy with arms pumping, legs flying like something's chasing him. His face is a grimace, eyes wide, mouth open like he's sucking air. The guy is me.

Senior Daniel Henderson trains for spring track season at Naperville South. Henderson excelled

last year and is expected to challenge or break long-standing school records this season. The Naperville South runners will face off against their rivals from Aurora West this Saturday at home.

With detached curiosity I stare at this Daniel Henderson, huffing and puffing his way through a race, examine the contorted face of a stranger. I feel nothing.

But then slowly, a sensation creeps up on me, like a ripple circling from a stone thrown in a pond. It grows into a wave, starting somewhere in the roots of my hair, reaching tendrils into my scalp and neck and face, and I feel the flush, a red burn spreading over every surface of my skin. And then, with a deep shudder to the bone, to the brain, to the heart, I switch places and I become that boy.

Cold April air rushes down my throat, prickles my lungs. Arms and legs pump like pistons and I'm a machine, oblivious to everything but my muscles on fire, my body propelling itself through space, weaving past the other runners, toward the finish line.

Except that in truth, I'm not running around the high school track in Naperville, Illinois, at all. I'm bolting for the library door. Sprinting past Thomas, who looks up in surprise.

His voice, too loud for the library, is like sounding an alarm: "Hank, what's wrong?!"

I almost fall down the concrete steps, vision bombarded with black-red flashes as the beast roars to life from its pit inside me. But it's not just one beast, not anymore. It divides itself into a billion smaller versions of itself, each with curled claws, red eyes, rising, choking, leaping at my throat, trying to kill me for starting to remember what is crucial to forget.

Down the sidewalk, toward town. Feet pounding on pavement. Left on Thoreau Street, right on Walden. Cross Route Two. Arms pumping, keep moving. Running until I reach Walden Pond. Running along the path that rings the pond, then branching off and bolting into the woods. Crashing through the underbrush. Still running, sweat streams down my face, into my mouth, salty. Past the railroad tracks, deeper into the woods. Trying to outrun the snarling beasts, desperate to find the calm that comes with running.

And somehow I find a way to outrun the terror by forcing myself back in time, before the memory of lights swirling red and blue, before the pink ballerina broken, before the blood.

Settling my body into the cadence of running, the steady inhale, exhale pattern that keeps my heart from

beating out of control, I begin to remember my life.



The last good day was cold for early April. My breath came in white clouds as I went for my morning run around the neighborhood, nothing too long or crazy, just a chance to stretch my legs and wake up my brain. When I got home, I wheeled the green trash barrel to the curb, like I did every Friday morning of my life. The sky was milky and the air smelled like snow, but I was sure it wouldn't dare snow, not this weekend. The next day was the big meet against Aurora. That night, I had plans.

The recycle bins went next, overflowing with empty cereal boxes, newspapers, and soup cans. Every week, I counted the empty wine bottles. More than three meant that Mom had a bad week.

After I showered and got dressed for school, I came downstairs and found my mother standing at the kitchen stove, cooking us cheesy scrambled eggs and bacon. I remember the bacon crackling in the pan, how it smelled, how Mom looked at me with her eyes all soft, and the warmth of the kitchen. I remember home.

"Okay, Danny, here's the info," she said, pointing to a sheet of paper stuck to the fridge with magnets. "This is

the hotel where we'll be and here's Aunt June's number in Evanston. Call her if you need help anytime with anything." She turned to me like she still saw a five-year-old standing there. Never mind that I was going to turn eighteen in a month and was six inches taller than her.

"Mom, we're going to be fine," I said. "It's just one weekend, and it's only Galena."

"I know, but it just feels strange to leave the two of you alone," she said, running fingers through her wavy blond hair like she did when she was nervous, which was basically most of the time.

The main reason they wanted to go to Galena this particular weekend was because they got engaged there, exactly twenty years ago. They were obviously trying to bring some magic back to their marriage. I wished them luck on that. Seriously.

"Relax, Mom," Rosie called from the family room, where she was practicing leaps across the carpet in her pink sneakers. "You'll give yourself a myocardial infarction."

Rosie. My sister. Age nine, crazy smart, always dressed in pink. She had this weird habit of throwing big words into normal conversations.

"I think she means a heart attack," Mom said to me. "She must be up to *M* in the World Book."

Rosie loved reading an old set of white-and-green bound encyclopedias my parents had, and spouting off the facts she learned. She had an amazing memory. We both did. Not quite photographic memories—my mom had us tested once—but pretty close.

Dad came down the stairs then, holding that black suitcase he took on business trips. My dad was in sales for a big pharmaceutical company. That's pretty much all I knew about his job. He didn't talk about it. I didn't ask.

"Morning, Rosie Posey," he said, giving my sister a kiss on the cheek. "You going to cheer your brother on at the meet tomorrow, loud enough for all three of us?" "Of course," she said.

Mom placed plates of cheesy eggs, toast, and bacon on the table, and we all sat down to eat breakfast.

"Oh, by the way," I said through a mouthful of toast, like something had just occurred to me. Actually, I'd hoped to catch them in a distracted, generous frame of mind before their trip. "There's this thing Joey told me about last night, and I'm thinking of going." Joey was the drummer in my band.

Mom took a sip of coffee. "What kind of thing? When?"

"It's tonight. A concert, actually. And it could be a really great opportunity for, you know, the band."

"Tonight?" Dad asked.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, see, there's this band coming to the House of Blues, and Joey got tickets through his Uncle Phil, who works there. I told you about him, remember?"

Mom and Dad looked at me blankly. Okay, so I never actually told them about Joey's Uncle Phil, who worked security at the House of Blues in Chicago, but they wouldn't remember that.

"He promised we could get backstage after the show to meet the band. And the lead singer is this guy who runs his own recording label, and he's always looking for fresh talent. And we have that CD we recorded in Matt's basement last month."

"It's really good," Rosie set down her glass and wiped off a milk mustache with the back of her hand. "Best band I ever heard."

Mom glanced over at Dad. He took his time crunching into a burnt slice of bacon.

"Danny, I don't think..."

"Do you realize what an amazing opportunity this is?" I blurted. "I mean, this could be big for the band. Huge. It could be—"

"Your big break?"

"Well. Yeah."

"First of all," Dad said, "you have that big competition tomorrow with a lot riding on it, so you need a good night's sleep. Second, we need you here to watch Rosie. You have family responsibilities, son."

His gray eyes were fixed on me, and I searched them for the good-guy friend version of my dad, the one who took me on camping trips and to Cubs games and shot hoops with me in the driveway on Sunday afternoons. But good-guy Dad had left the building.

"Matt already asked Jessica if she could baby-sit, and she said yes," I said. Matt played bass and sang lead in the band, and his girlfriend thinks Rosie is the cutest kid on the planet. "I'll just be in Chicago so it's no big deal. Joey's uncle will be there. The meet isn't until late afternoon tomorrow, so I'll have plenty of time to rest up."

Dad avoided my eyes. "I'm sorry, Danny," he said. "The meet is just too important to take that chance. The whole team is counting on you."

Figured he'd pull that "whole team counting on you" thing. Like my life wasn't my own. Like the purpose of my existence was to fulfill the expectations of other people. And usually, that's exactly what I did.

Well, almost. There was still that one huge secret I was hiding from Mom and Dad. I never did get around to telling them, not after everything that happened.

"But—"

"End of discussion." Mom got up, gathering plates and silverware, clattering them in the sink like punctuation. Period. Exclamation point.

After they kissed us good-bye and reminded us to do our homework and lock up the house at night, they left for their trip and Rosie and I went out into the garage. Mom was letting me drive her Toyota for the weekend, and I needed to drop Rosie off at school before I went to Naperville South.

Rosie peered out the window and grew silent, which was unusual for her. Usually she gabbed away about school and her friends and the solo she was working on for dance class. And maybe this sounds cheesy as hell, but I listened to her too.

"You okay?" I finally asked her. "You're not worried about Mom and Dad, are you?"

"Nah." She loosened the light blue scarf around her chin. "Not more than usual anyway."

Sometimes she sounded more like a sixteen-year-old than a kid who was nine. It made me a little sad, like she was growing up too fast. "I know what you mean."

When I stopped the car at the curb in front of the school, Rosie just sat there, face nestled into her pink parka, not getting out.

"I want you to go to that concert tonight," she said at last, turning to look at me.

"What?"

"I want you to go to that Blues House place. I like your band. And I really like Jessica too." Her face was solemn, determined. "And I won't tell."

I guess it's pretty clear that Rosie and I were not your typical seventeen-year-old guy and his bratty nine-year-old sister. We'd been through a lot together and were the only people in the world who really understood what it was like to be inside our screwed-up family.

"You mean it?"

"I mean it."

Rosie gave me this huge smile as she grabbed her backpack from the floor, got out of the car, and twirled around once, twice, three times on the grass, before skipping up the front steps to school.



As it turns out, the guys and I never did get to meet the band backstage at the House of Blues that night. I have a vague memory of the concert itself—a headbanger of the first degree—but Joey's stupid Uncle Phil was full of shit.

"I never promised I could get you backstage," Uncle Phil told us after the concert, standing at the stage door with his arms crossed like he was made of stone. "All I said was that I could try and deliver your CD if you wanted."

"That's not what you said yesterday," Joey shot back.

"Are you serious, Uncle Phil? Man, I should've just listened to Mom."

"Why? What's she saying about me now?"

"Forget about it." Matt grabbed Joey's shirtleeve.

"Let's just go." He nodded politely at Joey's Uncle Phil.

"Thanks for getting us the tickets. It was a great show."

When a defeated Joey handed Phil our CD, I was embarrassed by how amateurish our cover art looked—some guitar in flames that Joey's sister painted for us in art class. But whatever, our sound was good, and that's all that mattered. Phil accepted the CD and nodded at us, purposely avoiding Joey's blazing expression.

"I'll make sure this gets to the right people," he promised us, like he was this amazingly generous guy instead of a total douchebag.

Matt thanked him profusely, I managed a non-committal shrug, then we all turned and walked in silence to my mom's car. We got in and started the drive back to Naperville.

The thing that happened with the car, now that was just stupid. I'm not sure who was to blame, but it was probably all our faults because we were being loud, yelling stuff out the windows. We weren't hurting anybody, just letting off steam like guys do. Sure, they were drinking rum or whatever Joey stole from his parents' liquor cabinet and put in his dad's flask. He made us laugh all night because he kept taking sneaky sips from it, like a sketchy 1920s guy during Prohibition. Not that I'm a saint or anything, but I wasn't drinking that night. Not just because I was driving, but because I was driving my mom's car. The guys weren't really drunk, just buzzed, but in Joey's case it made him even more obnoxious than usual, which was saying a lot.

"We should just turn around and start pounding on that backstage door until they have to let us in." He grabbed my shoulders from the backseat and shook me. "C'mon, Danny, let's go back and demand they let us talk to the band. I know how to handle my loser Uncle Phil."

"Quit it, Joey, I'm trying to drive." I pushed his hands away.

Matt reached back to smack Joey on the back of the head, and Joey smacked him back, like some Three Stooges routine. I watched in the rearview mirror, laughing and not watching where I was going.

In my defense, there's no way I could've anticipated there would be a huge snowbank at the side of the exit ramp, right where the road curved. No way I could've realized that if a car veered ever so slightly off its correct path because the driver was distracted, it could go plowing right into that freaky April snowbank, parts of which were solid ice after melting and freezing, and cause a scraping sound on the undercarriage of the car that was a sickening combination of crunching snow and metal.

"Ahhh, shit." The car jerked to a stop and a stunned silence settled over the three of us. After a few paralyzed moments of *okay, now what do we do*, we all scrambled out to stare at the car. Fortunately, it was safely off the road and had no visible damage. Unfortunately, it looked like the car was stuck. Really stuck.

It took us a good half-hour to get the car out. We took turns standing in the snow in our sneakers with our shoulders against the bumper, pushing and rocking the car back and forth over the ice, until finally it roared free and we shouted our relief and joy into the icy night. Never mind that the muffler was making a strange growling, clattering sound all the way home. I'd worry about that later. At least the car worked, and that's all that mattered.

I got home around two a.m., paid Jessica almost an entire month's allowance for baby-sitting Rosie, and then slept in till noon on Saturday. That's when I woke up to Rosie standing by my bed, staring down at me with her hands on her hips. I must have felt those huge blue eyes boring into my skull, demanding that I wake up. Of course, she was already dressed in her white tights and pink leotard.

"I made you lunch," she told me.

"You can cook?" I asked with a yawn.

"I know how to make a baloney sandwich."

"Perfect," I said.

After lunch, we got in the car to go to Rosie's ballet lessons. When I turned the key in the ignition, the car growled like it was complaining, but at least it started, at least it ran.

"The car smells weird. And what's that funny sound?" Rosie asked me.

"Something going on with the muffler, I think. No big deal."

I shrugged at her, and she shrugged back. I figured I'd stop at the service station on the corner to get it fixed after I dropped off Rosie. *Crap, what was that going to cost? After the baby-sitting and car repairs, last night was becoming way more expensive than it was worth.*

"Are you coming to my recital next month, Danny?"

Rosie asked over the muffler sounds as we pulled out of the driveway. "It's going to be really amazing."

"Yeah, of course," I said. "Have I ever missed one?"

Sure, three hours of little girls in tutus is a strange form of torture. But she came to my meets—which were also really long—and I went to her recitals. It was only fair.

"Okay, so my solo goes something like this," she said.

Rosie pointed one of her pink sneakered feet at the windshield and swooped her arms around. "I'm this pretty white bird like a dove or something, who escapes from its cage and has to learn how to fly all over again because she forgot how, get it?"

"Got it."

The dance school was only about ten minutes away by car. All you needed to do was take a left turn out of our neighborhood, drive to the light at a major intersection, and go straight through it and over the hill into downtown Naperville.

The light turned red just as we approached the intersection. I pressed down on the brake, like I'd done hundreds of times. Only this time, nothing happened. My foot on the brake met no resistance, and the pedal went straight to the floor. The car didn't even slow down.

It barreled into the intersection, way too fast, after the crossing traffic had already begun to accelerate. A big gray truck headed straight for us.

Icy snow had scraped the hell out of the bottom of the car the night before. Metal on ice. Sharp smell in the garage—brake fluid draining. The twirling ballerina from the music box broke off, a terrible red wave crashed before my eyes, behind my eyes, everywhere.



No more, says the beast now at Walden Pond, the beast who has become my friend in spite of myself. My protector. Enough, he says.

Red turns to black, total eclipse, and I collapse behind a lichen-covered rock, far from home in the silent forest of Concord, Massachusetts.