**13

Thomas is sitting on the front landing of the library, waiting for me. I’m sure I look like crap, with dirt on my clothes, a sweat-stained shirt, and red eyes, but Thomas doesn’t say a word about my appearance. Slowly, I climb the stairs to the concrete landing and collapse next to him, every muscle in my body on fire. We sit in silence, just watching the residents of Concord walk or jog by, generally enjoying the day. I envy them. So much.

“So, I suppose this is where you tell me you’re not actually Thoreau reincarnated.” Thomas says at last.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” I say.

“It’s okay. It was a crazy idea anyway. Would’ve been cool though.”

“Yeah. Cool.”

Thomas offers his water bottle to me, and I take a deep swig. The water is cold and feels good going down my dry throat.

“My name is Daniel,” I tell him. “I live in Naperville, Illinois.”

“Illinois? Wow, you’re a long way from home.” Thomas nods, salutes me with his water. “Pleased to meet you, Daniel.”

I shake my head, and a dead maple leaf falls into my lap. “Well, you shouldn’t be. I’m a really horrible person as it turns out.”

Thomas considers this. “Try me.”

I run my fingers through my hair, pull out pine needles, a dead moth. Then I turn to Thomas. My face is heavy and I feel about a hundred years old.

“My name is Daniel,” I repeat. “I live in Illinois. And I think I killed my little sister.”

Thomas pulls hard on his water bottle to mask his shock and swallows. “Why don’t you** [**start**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/13.html) **at the beginning and tell me what you found out.”

But I can’t speak. My head slumps forward and I’m afraid I’m going to start blubbering, right in front of Thomas.

“Hank,” Thomas says. “Come on, let’s find someplace more private to talk.” He takes me to the side of the library, to a** [**park bench**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/13.html) **partly hidden from the street by shrubs. We sit on the bench, and I lean over, stare at the ground, watch an ant carry off a breadcrumb. I wish I were an ant…or a breadcrumb.

“Hank, look at me,” Thomas says.

So I do.

“Tell me about Daniel, but do me a favor, and tell me as Hank. Daniel is some kid I don’t know, who had something bad happen to him, far away from here. I’d like to hear my friend Hank tell the story. Okay?”

I nod, wipe my stupid drippy nose with the palm of my hand.

“So there was this kid, Danny Henderson,” I begin. My voice comes out all** [**wobbly**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/13.html)**, so I clear my throat, take a deep breath, then** [**continue**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/13.html)**. “He was one of those kids who just did what he was supposed to do, you know? He did his homework, ran track, pretty much did what his parents said and tried not to make trouble for anybody. I mean, sure, he partied with his friends and all, but I don’t know, he just never got too crazy. Just a typical kid, trying to get by.”

I tell him how Daniel went to the House of Blues in Chicago that night with Matt and Joey. How they crashed into a stupid snowbank and damaged the undercarriage of the car without even knowing it. How he and Rosie plowed into that intersection and couldn’t stop. A big gray truck was coming, too fast.

Blood. Pink shoe.

A wave of dizziness breaks over me and without any warning, I barf right into the bushes next to the park bench. This is as far as the beast will let me go. Everything that happened up to the accident is clear, but I can’t remember the actual accident or the days after, except for a few sickening flashes. My memory goes straight from a gray truck bearing down on Mom’s Toyota, to me sitting on the floor at Penn Station in New York City with Frankie staring into my face, saying, “You gonna eat that?”

Wiping my mouth miserably with the back of my hand, I choke out, “I don’t even know if Rosie is alive or dead.”

I’m afraid to see Thomas’s response, expecting to see anger maybe or disgust. And I would deserve it. But instead, I see something that looks a whole lot like sadness. And even more amazing, sympathy.

“Hank,” he says in a gentle voice. “You need to call your parents. No matter what happened that day, you have to call them and let them know you’re okay.”

“But I’m not okay!” I shout at Thomas.

“Of course you’re not,” he says quietly.

“God, Thomas. Why would they want anything to do with me ever again?”

Call your mother, Sophie said. I guarantee she would sacrifice her own life just to have you home.

How can I believe Thomas or Sophie? If I had one kid who killed or hurt another, I could never forgive that. There is not enough love and forgiveness in this world to make up for such a thing. Especially not after all my family has been through in the past five years. But I definitely can’t talk about that.

“They’re your parents. They love you.”

“They love Rosie too,” I argue back.

“Hank, they need to know where you are,” Thomas says softly. “Facing up to this is better than running away.”

No. Can’t face it, not yet. What if I call and they tell me Rosie is dead? I almost puke into the bushes again, empty stomach seizing, and I just want to die. The beast still lives inside me, razor teeth and claws, resolute in protecting me from these final truths. I’m not ready yet. Threatening to swallow me into permanent forgetfulness, the beast insists that I run from this last horrible thing. For now.

I hide my face in my hands for a long time, smelling dead leaves and black dirt on my skin. Finally, I manage to say what Thomas wants to hear. “I’ll call them,” I say. “But after the weekend.”

“No, Hank. My God. This must be torture for them. They need to know you’re safe. And you need to know… about Rosie.”

I fight the urge to curl up in a ball with my hands over my ears like some little kid in a nightmare. I just want to scream at Thomas to leave me alone, to understand that the bad stuff belongs to Danny, and I need to be Hank for just a little longer. “Thomas, three more days is not going to change anything,” I say as evenly as possible through my clenched jaw. “I need to play for Hailey at the competition on Saturday. I can’t let her down.” Not one more person. Not Hailey.

Slowly, reluctantly, Thomas nods. “Okay, Hank. Three days,” he says, holding up three fingers just in case I need the clarification. “And listen to me. You’re not a bad kid. What happened back in Illinois, that was an accident.”

“Thanks,” I say, but I can see through the bullshit and platitudes. I’ve screwed up, and there’s no way I can make it better. “Can you give me a ride back to your place, Thomas?” I ask. “I just need to lie down for a while.”

In the parking lot, I climb on the back of Thomas’s** [**motorcycle**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/13.html)**, and as we ride to his house, I watch the horizon turn purple in the** [**western sky**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/13.html)**. The end of another day in Concord, Massachusetts. And I know my days here are numbered.

That night, Thoreau visits me in the blue bedroom at Thomas’s house. He’s wearing his dark gray jacket and sitting in the same chair where Thomas was when I woke up that first morning here. Keeping vigil.

“So, now you know,” he says.

“Yeah,” I whisper into the half-dark. “Guess you knew all along.”

He nods and tugs thoughtfully on his beard, which is longer than the last time I saw him and streaked with gray. Henry is older every time I see him. It’s like he’s slipping away from me, getting ready to leave me for good.

The thought of Henry leaving me now, just as I’m forced into the disaster that is my real life, makes me furious. God. I don’t want pseudo-ghosts or dream visitations or whatever you’d call this. All I want is oblivion. Numbness. I’m not Thoreau reincarnated. Not even close. I’m just some screwed-up kid from Illinois who did something terrible and ran away. And he’s just another crazy dream.

“Go away, Henry.” I whisper.

He turns to look out the window into the sky, like he’s trying to decide which star to inhabit in his next life. “You know where to find me,” he says at last.

I turn my face toward the pillow, closing my eyes to the figure in the bedroom, denying him. When I open my eyes again, he’s gone.**

**14

Somebody is hammering on the door. I roll over in bed and bury my face in the pillow, ignoring the sound. Why doesn’t Thomas answer his friggin’ door? The doorbell rings next, and I open one bleary eye to see the sun glaring into the window from somewhere high in the sky, above the house. It’s not morning anymore. What the hell time is it?

I have a vague memory of Thomas trying to wake me up earlier to take me with him to the library, but I told him to leave me alone so I could go back to sleep. It’s all I want to do. Just stay in this bed with the covers over my head and sleep and sleep…and let the dreams come.

Mostly, they’re memories in dream form, seeping back into my consciousness. Some of them are good—like remembering Christmases and birthdays. There was the year I got a new mountain bike and the time I got my first computer. And there were all those big holiday meals when my mom cooked a turkey, with grandparents and cousins crowded around the table. I dreamed about being in Boy Scouts and camping trips with my dad, mostly going up to Wisconsin into the north country, miles and miles from anybody and anything. Those were the best times of all.

The bad memory dreams are the ones where I see myself going through the motions of being a “good kid,” when in truth I’m holding so much inside that I want to break furniture and throw things at the wall and scream until I burst a few blood vessels in my head. I’m the phoniest person around, putting hundreds of miles on my running shoes to escape, playing guitar till my calluses bleed because that’s an escape too. On the outside, I’m the perfect kid—like a statue of perfect marble, serene and unreal. Inside, it’s all snakes and maggots and broken glass.

And something else came to me in my dreams, something my whole family pretends to have amnesia about. I dreamed about Cole.

Closing my eyes against the sun, I try to go back to sleep.

The doorbell rings again, over and over, really insistently this time, and then I hear someone calling my name. A girl’s voice. Uh-oh.

I get up and pull on a pair of jeans and pad barefoot to the front door, raking fingers through my wild bed hair. Open the door, and there she is.

“We have practice this afternoon. Did you forget?” It’s Hailey, hair pulled back in a tight ponytail,** [**car keys**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/14.html) **in her hand. One of her earrings is a dangly gold starfish, the other a seahorse. Her eyes snap with anger and I don’t blame her. But then, when she gets a good look at me, her eyebrows crunch together in concern. “Hank, are you sick or something?”

Of course I forgot the band practice. With my memory banks under siege, I only have room for so much in my brain right now. But there’s no way I can explain that to her without telling her everything.

“Hailey, I’m so sorry. I, uh, didn’t sleep well last night and was just trying to catch up. What time is it?”

“Three thirty,” she says, and her eyes blaze again. I was supposed to be at her house at three o’clock. “Sam and Ryan are already there. Are you coming or what?”

I don’t know how to make any of this better other than to scramble and pull myself together and focus on her instead of my own pathetic life.

“Look, give me ten minutes to take a shower and get dressed, and I’ll go with you. Ten minutes, I promise.”

Hailey rolls her eyes and sits down in a** [**wicker chair**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/14.html) **on the porch to wait for me, tossing her keys from one hand to the other.

After my shower, I comb my hair and** [**peer**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/14.html) **at my face in the fogged-up mirror, trying not to see any trace of Danny there. When I’m with Hailey, there’s no room for Danny. Only Hank.

The guys already have their gear set up in Hailey’s basement when we arrive. Quickly, I hook up my guitar to the amp, and we start right in on our song. Even with the turmoil shredding my insides, I try to focus on the** [**music**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/14.html)**. The smooth feel of the polished guitar under my hands. Electric buzz in my chest as I strum calloused fingers across the strings. My music, my escape.

As for the band, Sam is solid as always on the drums. Ryan, I don’t know. The dude still struggles.

“I thought you were going to practice this at home,” I say.

“I did,” he says. “At least, I meant to. I had a whole lot of trig homework to do this week.”

I shake my head. “Just do the best you can, okay? Let’s go through this again.”

After about the fifth time, he sounds a few degrees better. At least it’s progress.

“Okay, you guys,” Hailey says during a break. “Ms. Coleman asked me again about the name of our band. Any ideas?”

The room goes silent as we ponder this important detail.

“I know of this band called Seratonin. I always liked that name,” Ryan says.

“Nah. That sounds too science geeky to me,” Hailey says.

“Hailey and the Comets?” asks Sam. He smirks.

Hailey rolls her eyes. “I think that’s been done, Sam.”

“How about Carpe Diem?” I suggest. Everybody is quiet for a moment, thinking this over.

Carpe diem. It’s the philosophy I want to embody. Seize the day. It’s about putting all energy and attention into the present moment. This. Music and Hailey, and now. It’s what Thoreau meant by sucking out the marrow of life, but it sounds way less grisly than something like Marrow Suckers. Although that could work too.

“Hm. Carpe Diem. I like that,” Sam says. Slowly everybody nods in agreement.

“It’s perfect,” Hailey says and gives me this warm smile that shows me all is forgiven and she’s crazy about me again.

Carpe Diem rocks into the song one more time and for once, even Ryan doesn’t screw it up.

Hailey drops me off at “Uncle” Thomas’s house just as it starts to get dark. She stops the car at the curb, turns off the motor, and turns to look at me.

“Is everything all right, Hank?” she asks.

No, Hailey. Things are not all right. They’re bad, worse than you can imagine. “Well, I’m a little worried about Ryan.” I’m amazed that my voice sounds calm, even with my insides shattered into a million pieces. “He keeps messing up the bridge, no matter how many times I remind him of the chords.”

“He doesn’t want to look like a fool up there. He’ll get it.” She taps the** [**steering wheel**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/14.html) **with purple polished nails. “Are you worried about me too?”

“No,” I say. She looks up at me, all hopeful, her eyes gleaming. “You have the most beautiful voice anybody is going to hear in that room on Saturday, Hailey. I know it, the band knows it, Ms. Coleman knows it. Anybody who’s ever heard you sing knows it.”

She wipes a tear from her cheek. “I feel so stupid,” she says.

“You’re not stupid, Hailey. Just take care of yourself this time.” I rub the back of my index finger across her soft cheek. “And if you get scared, just pretend it’s you and me, me and you, all alone in the white room, making music.”

Hailey tucks her arm into mine, snuggles her face into my shoulder. “Yeah. I like that. You and me, me and you,” she murmurs. “Maybe it’ll be okay after all.”

“Of course it will.” I lean my head against hers, breathe in the clean shampoo smell of her hair, trying to memorize every detail of this moment. I could love this girl so easily. If only I could be normal and allow that to happen.

Hailey nuzzles her cheek against my shirt in silence for a moment, then gazes up at me as if she’s trying to read me with those intense gold-flecked eyes. “What else is wrong, Hank? I know there’s something. Talk to me, please?”

So here it is. My chance to tell Hailey everything. To let her, for real, into the chaos that is my life. She slips a warm hand into my sweaty one and squeezes. I squeeze back until I’m afraid I’ll crush her hand, and I let go.

“You’ve always had this evasive, mysterious thing about you that’s kind of sexy, but it’s different now,” she says. “To tell the truth, it’s scaring me a little.”

Oh, Hailey. It would be such a sweet relief to let her hold me and tell me it’ll be okay. But what am I supposed to say? That I’m a loser criminal who robbed and assaulted some guy in New York and maybe killed my sister in a car accident that was totally my fault? She’d probably run away screaming and be afraid of me forever. How can I possibly tell her who I really am or what I’ve done?

God, I’m tired. No more fight in me, no more strength. Hailey and music are the only good, pure things in my life right now. I can’t spoil them too. Everything will turn to shit soon enough.

“Look, these next few days are all about you and the music, Hailey. Let’s just enjoy them, okay? After that, we’ll talk and I’ll tell you everything. I promise. Okay?”

I’m not even sure what I mean by after that. Anything that might happen after the Battle of the Bands is a huge void. My future is as blank and formless as my past used to be. So I’m buying time, just a couple more days.

She nods reluctantly, and before she can speak, I give her a soft kiss, hoping she doesn’t notice my lips trembling.

“See you tomorrow, Hailey.” Then I get out of the car and gently shut the door.

It’s Thursday and I’m at the library shelving nonfiction on the second floor, breathing in that old book smell. I figured I might as well live these last days in Concord as normally as possible. Doing work makes me feel something like a normal person with some kind of normal purpose. It’s hard to stay focused, though. I have to re-shelve a whole pile of books I stuffed into the biography section, when actually they belong in history. Whatever.

One more day until the Battle of the Bands. And after Saturday night, I promised Thomas I would call my parents and face the truth about what happened in Naperville. Face the truth about New York City. Like, what about the crimes I committed? Will the police conclude I was acting in self-defense when I clobbered Simon with that brick? Of course I fled the scene of a crime, and that doesn’t look good. And I did take the guy’s money. Indirectly, but I still took it.

Even if they don’t throw me in jail, then what? It’s not like I’ll just be able to return to my old life. It’s impossible to imagine going home, sleeping in my old bed, going to my old school, and trying to reconnect with friends. Aside from all the bad stuff, I’ve missed a lot of school, so I doubt I can graduate with my class in May. Not that it matters.

My parents don’t know this yet, but I’m not going to college. The day the acceptance letter came from Northwestern University, I hid it in the back of my sock drawer and went out for a ten-mile run. I didn’t think of anything at all for the first five miles except my body moving and sneakers pounding on the asphalt. But finally my mind cleared enough to realize the cold, hard, honest truth: I don’t want to go to college. Not yet, anyway. A few days before the accident, I even called the college and told them I was delaying college for a year so I could figure out what I wanted to do. They were actually really nice about it. But my parents, no doubt about it, they’re going to be pissed.

God. My head is spinning. So much for normal.

When I finish shelving, I slump down in a chair next to Thomas, my long legs kicked out in front of me, exhausted more from the war zone in my head than the work.

“You okay, Hank?”

I shrug. “Just need to sit for a while.”

So I do, just listening to the clock in the library, to Thomas typing on his keyboard, absorbing the quiet, the peacefulness of this particular moment in time, this now.

“I wish you’d been right,” I say after a while.

“About what?”

“About me being Thoreau reincarnated,” I say.

Thomas grins at me. “Me too. I had a lot of questions I wanted to ask you.”

I lean back in the chair, gaze over at the statue of Thoreau near Thomas’s desk. “Do you really think somebody could live like him today?”

“Sure. People do it all the time. There are people in the northwest, like in Montana, living off the grid right now. Of course there’s a lot more grid these days than when Thoreau was around.”

“There’s no way a reincarnated Thoreau would choose to live at Walden Pond now,” I say. “Just the sound of the traffic on Route Two would drive him crazy.”

“You got that right.”

“So if Henry lived today, where would he go?”

Thomas grins at me like he’s been hoping forever for someone to ask that very question. “This won’t surprise you, but I’ve given that a lot of thought. And I have the answer for you.”

“I thought you might.”

He gets up and goes over to a nearby shelf. Peers at the titles through his glasses, then pulls one of the books out and hands it to me.

I look down at the title, The Maine Woods by Henry David Thoreau.

“Maine,” says Thomas. “It’s a huge state, and there are still thousands of acres that are real wilderness.”

“He was there?”

“Yep, he took several trips up there, when a lot of it was still unmapped and uncharted. It might have been a bit much for Henry back then. Here. Listen to this.” Peering through his glasses, he licks a finger and starts flipping through the book.

He clears his throat, reads in a hushed, library-worthy, but dramatic voice: “I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, —that my body might, —but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! —Think of our life in nature, —daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, —rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?”

I take this in, snort out a little laugh. “Wow. Sounds like Henry was freaked.”

“Definitely. He wrote this when he was near the summit of Mount Katahdin, the highest point in Maine. We’re talking true wilderness, the tail end of the Appalachian Trail, the real deal. Concord was a luxury vacation in the Bahamas compared to this.”

I imagine Thoreau standing on this mountaintop in Maine, not the cocky, cranky guy from Concord I’ve gotten to know, but someone out of place, completely amazed by his surroundings. Scared and humbled by his own existence on the planet.

“I keep meaning to go to Maine, retrace Thoreau’s steps, with a canoe and camping gear. I even went out and bought a tent and backpack but never got around to going. One of these days.” He flips through the book, gazes at pictures of sweeping vistas from the top of Mount Katahdin. “You know, sometimes I wonder if it bugged him that he never actually reached the summit. He was close, and at the time he thought he made it. I guess that’s what’s important.” Thomas shrugs. “Anyway, guess we’ll never know.” He hands the book to me. “Here, read it. A modern-day Thoreau could kick ass in the Maine woods.”

I run my fingers over the picture on the cover, thinking of woods and waterfalls and acres of true wildness far away from the sounds of a highway or a train or best of all, people.**