

sticking up all over his head. He looks past me at someone on the other side of the Dumpster where I can't see.

"What are you doing here?" Jack calls out.

"I want my money back."

I untangle myself from my blanket and peer around the edge of the Dumpster, watching Jack approach some skinny, bent-over guy standing in the alley, hands fisted at his sides. He wears a filthy flannel shirt and his face is like an old man's, all sunken in against his skull. The guy from the train station men's room.

He reaches into the pocket of his shirt, pulls out a plastic baggie, and waves it in Jack's face.

"I don't know what you cut this with, Jack, but it's not right. I want my cash back."

"I don't have the money, Simon. I already gave it to Magpie."

"So get it back from Magpie."

A pause. "I can't do that."

Simon shoves Jack against the Dumpster. Jack's skull slams against the metal, clangs like a muffled bell.

"This is bullshit, Jack."

Jack sits crumpled on the ground, holding the back of his head. I help him to his feet, then turn to face Simon. "Leave him alone," I say. My voice is steady but my heart slams against my ribs like a manic bird in a cage.

"JACK, YOU SON OF A BITCH. GET OUT HERE!"

I lurch awake, and for a long blank moment I have no idea where I am or what woke me up. *Walden* lies next to me on the ground, where it fell when I went to sleep. There's a good dream lingering behind my eyes and I grasp at it, but it vanishes before I can remember. My heart sinks when I realize where I am. The alley looks even dirtier and more depressing in the first white light of morning.

Then I realize what woke me up. Some guy is shouting in the alley.

"Jack!"

There's a confused rustle inside Nessa's shack, and then Jack emerges, squinting in the morning light, hair

Simon cuts bloodshot eyes at me. "Stay out of this." He holds up the baggie and throws it onto Jack's chest. "My money. Now."

The baggie bounces off Jack's chest and lands at my feet.

"I swear, Simon, Magpie said it was pure," Jack says. Leaning hard against the Dumpster, he pulls himself to his feet. "He never cuts, you know that. And I didn't do anything to it."

I pick up the baggie, open it, and peer at the white powder inside, not sure what I'm looking at.

"Do it," Simon says to me.

"Do what?"

"Taste it."

*Taste it?* The guy is staring at me with his crazy hollow eyes, and it's freaking me out. So I wet my finger, dip it into the powder, and touch it to the end of my tongue.

"It's sweet," I say, surprised. "Like—" I search my memory banks for the thing that reminds me of this taste and consistency. "Powdered sugar or something." And there's another taste too, sharp and bitter.

"Exactly," says Simon, all triumphant. "You cut it with powdered sugar. A lot of it."

"But you tried it," Jack says, desperate. Even his dirty blond hair is trembling. "You said it was fine."

"I was wrong."

"I think *you* did it," somebody says to Simon. And I realize that someone was me. "You cut the stuff so you could sell it and make more profit. And you're trying to blame it on Jack."

Both Simon and Jack stare at me. Simon's left eye twitches. "You're fucking crazy," he says.

"I don't think so."

Simon hesitates. Then he grins at me with those gray-black nubs that used to be teeth. He reaches under his shirt and pulls something out of the back of his belt. A knife. The blade is slender and long, with a black handle. The metal gleams in a shaft of morning light.

"You don't want to do that," I say.

"Actually," says Simon, "I do." He lunges at me, poking the knife at my gut. I dodge and try to kick the knife out of his hand, an unsuccessful karate move. Better just try and pound the crap out of him. I clench my fists and Simon thrusts the knife at me again. This time the blade catches the side of my sweatshirt. There's a ripping sound and I feel a sharp pain in my side. The knife, when Simon pulls it back, is streaked with blood.

Before I can respond, I hear a growl from somewhere behind Simon, and then Jack is jumping on the guy piggyback, wrapping his skinny arms tight around

Simon's neck. Simon bellows, tries to shake Jack off, slices the air with the knife. He manages to break Jack's hold on him, flings him off onto his back, knocking the breath out of him.

From somewhere outside my peripheral vision, I hear Nessa scream Jack's name. Simon looms over him with a lunatic grin, hand fisted on the knife handle, the blade with my blood still on it glimmering and I'm thinking, *my God, he's gonna do it, he's gonna kill Jack*. There's a brick on the ground. I snatch it up without thinking, lift my arms, and crack it on the back of Simon's skull. He turns to me, eyes wide, shocked surprise, aiming his knife at my face. So I hit him again, brick against forehead. His mouth moves like a beached trout, but there are no words. Blood comes oozing through his hair. He growls in the back of his throat and falls forward.

Jack and I take two steps back and stare at the fallen body of Simon, both of us struggling to catch our breaths.

"Is he dead?" Jack's entire face is white, even his lips.

*Dead*. The word echoes in some chamber of my brain and my whole body seizes up like I'm paralyzed.

"I don't know," I say in a whisper, unable to take my eyes off Simon's motionless body. "I just wanted him to leave us alone."

Nessa stands with us, staring down in horror at Simon. As we watch, his right hand twitches and he takes a deep, shuddering breath, like his soul had started slithering away then decided to return to his pathetic body after all. He moans. I didn't kill him. Thank God. I messed him up bad, but I did not kill him.

"We need to bolt, Nessa," Jack says, still not taking his eyes off Simon. "Get our stuff. We'll find a new place."

Nessa nods and ducks into the shack. She comes back out with a stuffed backpack slung over her skinny shoulders. The last thing she grabs is the colored plastic bead necklace decorating the front of the shack.

"Hank," she says then in a quivery voice. "You're bleeding."

A circle of red darkens the side of my sweatshirt. I lift it up and look at my stomach, to the right of my belly button, below my ribs. A trickle of blood slides down my side and into the waistband of my pants.

"He just nicked me. I'm okay," I tell her, but everything is getting blurry around the edges. *Blood. So much blood.*

From somewhere up above there's a clanking sound and the muffled voices of men shouting to each other.

"The construction guys are showing up for work," Jack says in a panic. "Let's get out of here." But first he kneels

down and reaches shaking fingers into Simon's pockets. Simon groans, but doesn't struggle. Jack pulls out a thin wallet and opens it to see a small wad of cash and a couple cards. He stuffs the wallet into his back pocket.

"Hey, what are you kids doing down there?"

Jack, Nessa, and I freeze. A man in a yellow hard hat leans out of a second floor window. I imagine the scene he sees below: Simon crumpled on the ground by the Dumpster, head oozing blood, Jack rifling through his pockets while Nessa and I stand there and watch. Accomplices. Immediately the three of us scatter, almost tripping over our feet to escape that reeking alley and the dark nameless thing that happened here.

The worker shouts something else, but we don't stop running until we've hit one of the main avenues where morning people crowd the sidewalk, hoping we can blend in. We make ourselves slow down, calm down, walk in rhythm with the stream of anonymous, innocent city people.

"Where we going, Jack?" I ask, pushing back the panic rising in my throat. There's a spatter of blood on Jack's ear, more on the front of his T-shirt. Simon's blood. I press my right arm hard against my side to hide the growing circle of my own blood, so dizzy I can't see straight.

"Somewhere safe," Jack says through clenched teeth. "Don't pass out on me now, Hank. We're almost there."

People, buildings, dogs, telephone poles, mailboxes pass in a blur, colors and blending shapes. I concentrate on moving one foot, then the other. Just keep moving. Jack and Nessa lead me to a side street, then down a set of stairs leading to a below-street-level apartment. My knees almost buckle as I scramble down the stairs behind them. I scan the street for anyone who might be chasing us, as Jack pounds on a graffiti-covered black door.

"Magpie, let me in," he shouts at the door. "It's Jack."

The sound of sirens rises from a short distance away, getting louder. Jack pounds harder on the door. "Magpie, we're in trouble. You gotta let us in."

Slowly the black door opens, and the three of us fall inside. The lights are dim in the apartment, which smells of rancid garbage, cigarette smoke, and aftershave. The weird combination of smells makes me gag. The apartment is a mess, piled nearly to the ceiling with stacks of books and newspapers and trash.

Sirens grow louder until they pass in front of the apartment. We stand motionless and silent as the wailing sound fades.

"This better be good," says the tall man standing beside the door. He has an English accent and is wearing

a blue satin robe. With his beak nose and slicked black hair, Magpie resembles his name. "Talk to me."

So Jack tells Magpie everything. By the time he gets to the part about Simon and the brick, and the construction worker seeing us, my legs won't hold me up for one more second. I slump to the floor, remembering the blood, remembering the bitterness mixed with powdered sugar on my tongue. A black, heavy wave sweeps up behind my eyes.

Just before the wave crashes over my head, I hear Magpie curse at Jack, followed by a sickening smack and a cry of pain. Then I am gone.

THE CABIN IS TUCKED UNDER THE PINE TREES, JUST UP THE embankment from the lake. It's small, just one room, no bigger than a walk-in closet with windows and a fireplace. But everything is right where I need it. Just enough space and no more. There's a narrow bed with a rough wool blanket. A small green table and work desk. Three chairs. A fireplace for warmth and cooking.

A large bird with a sleek black head and long blue tail feathers is perched outside on the windowsill. He pecks against the glass, like he wants to get in. I lie still on the bed, try to ignore him. Inside the cabin with doors and windows shut tight, I believe I am safe.

But the bird pecks harder, faster, like a jackhammer against the glass, his head a black blur. Finally, the

window can't hold up. It cracks, jagged fault lines pointing fingers of lightning. Then the window breaks into a million pieces, shatters in on the bed, on me, and the big black bird swoops into the cabin, wingspan so large it fills the room, and he comes at my face.



Flailing, I fight off the bird, push his black wings away, throw fists at his sleek black head.

"Young man, stop. I'm trying to help you." Man's voice, English accent.

My eyes fly open, and there is the guy with the beak nose, holding my arms down on the floor, his black beady eyes shining with irritation. Behind him are Jack and Nessa, white-faced, concern creasing their foreheads. Jack's eye looks red and swollen and there's a fresh bruise on his cheek. I sit up too quickly and my heartbeat swishes loud in my ears.

"Tell me, do you always faint at the sight of blood?" Magpie asks. "Clearly, you have quite the delicate constitution." He rises to his feet, throwing a red-stained dishtowel over one shoulder. "You have a wound, but you were very lucky. It's not too deep. We stopped the bleeding and patched you up."

Lifting up my torn sweatshirt, I see a square of gauze taped onto my skin with a stain of blood in the center. "Thank you," I murmur.

Jack and Nessa help me stand. "What happened to your face?" I ask Jack. He glances at Magpie, at his straight back as he walks past a chaos of cardboard boxes and plastic bags into an adjoining room. Jack shakes his head at me. Nessa just looks terrified.

"Come into the kitchen," Magpie says. "I'll make breakfast and we can have ourselves a nice little chat."

Unlike the rest of his disgusting apartment, Magpie's kitchen is as neat and tidy as he is, or at least as he appears to be. Countertops are clean, silver appliances glimmer. There's actually a vase of white flowers on the table. Somehow, this guy is a neat freak and a total hoarding slob at the same time.

He makes us pancakes and sausage links, and even though I don't have any appetite at all, I take a few bites so I won't insult him. While we try to eat the food he cooked, Magpie calmly discusses our future options with us.

"In short, you are completely screwed," he says, sounding ridiculously formal with his British accent. "So what are we to do with you? The cops will likely be searching for the three of you together, so the first thing

you need to do is split up." He dunks a tea bag into a flowered teacup. "Jack, go to Port Authority and look up Ginger and Watchdog. They'll know what to do with you." Jack slumps slightly but doesn't say a word. "Miss Vanessa, I've called my connections uptown and they're prepared to give you a makeover within the hour. I think blond hair would suit you." Nessa pokes at a sausage with her fork.

Magpie's glance reaches me, and his eyes sweep me from head to toe, as if I'm some racehorse he might consider buying. "Thank you, Jack, for bringing Henry to me, although obviously, I would've preferred less dire circumstances."

What does he mean by "bringing" me to him? I slide narrowed eyes at Jack, but he won't look at me.

"Now, what shall we do with you, Henry?" Magpie taps a shiny fingernail against his china teacup.

I glance at Jack's bruised face and the black eye that's turning purple, then at Magpie. His fancy robe gaps open at the chest and I glimpse what looks like a grayish T-shirt underneath. I bet he sits around in his dirty underwear all day and only covers himself with that classy-looking robe when someone comes to the door.

Not waiting for me to respond, Magpie blows on his steaming cup of tea and takes a sip. "I believe it's fair to

say you work for me now." He sets his cup back down on the polished wood table. "Understand?"

Magpie sits all formal and proper at his table, but I sense sharp talons, a razor-sharp beak, black wings beating at my face. I know I should pretend to agree with him, but instead I shake my head and whisper, "No."

Out of the corner of my eye I see the desperate, warning glances I'm getting from Jack and Nessa, but I ignore them.

Magpie smiles and tilts his head to the side, like maybe he's really fond of me. He stands and gets something out of a drawer next to the sink. There's a flash of metal and before I can react, the barrel of a gun jams into my cheek so hard I swear it almost knocks out a molar. There's a loud click as Magpie cocks back the hammer.

"Maybe you woke up yesterday morning on your own, but things are different now. You know the kind of business I do, or at least you have an idea. You assaulted one of my clients in that alley. And now you know where I live. We are in this together, Henry. Do we understand each other?" Cold metal invades my face. Slowly, I nod.

Magpie grins at me and removes the gun from my cheek. "Good boy. Welcome to the family." He smacks me on the back like a kind uncle. "Now first off, you need to bathe and put on some different clothes. I think

you'd clean up quite nicely, given half a chance." He looks me up and down. "Yes, indeed. You'll do just fine." He turns toward the sink and places the gun back in its drawer. "Vanessa, darling, do the dishes, won't you? Jack, get Henry cleaned up. I think you'll find something just about his size in the bedroom closet."



Without a word, Jack leads me into another room, presumably Magpie's bedroom. Except for a fancy four-poster bed in the corner covered with a shiny smoothed-down purple bedspread, every surface of the room is buried in more junk. There is broken furniture and piles of old clothes, cardboard boxes overflowing with empty wine bottles and fast-food wrappers. And strangest of all, clusters of moldy-looking teddy bears and a broken baby crib.

Magpie is as much a neat freak in his bathroom as his kitchen, and when I step into a sparkling shower stall, I have my choice of shampoos, conditioners, and scented soaps. I choose the least girly-smelling products, and vince as they come into contact with the cut on my side. I pull off the soaked bandage, and it doesn't look good. It's deeper than Magpie led me to believe and it's starting

to bleed again. After I get out of the shower, I see a fresh bandage laid out on top of a dry towel. Magpie—or at least the neat-freak organized part of him—thought of everything. I dry off, put the new bandage on my cut, and tuck the towel around my waist.

Even if I'm forced for the moment to play nice with Magpie and his gun, I know one thing for sure: as soon as I get the hell out of this apartment, I will run and run and never look back.

Jack leads me into an enormous walk-in closet attached to the bathroom. On one side of the room are men's clothes and shoes. Pressed dress shirts are lined up by color. On the other side of the room are shelves with neatly folded pants and sweaters. A freestanding full-length mirror fills one corner. I wonder when Magpie last wore any of these clothes or wore anything besides old underwear and his fancy blue robe.

"Here, Hank. I think this is what Magpie was thinking." He pulls out a pair of jeans, folded neatly over a hanger. Then he chooses a white collared shirt and a green sweater and hands them both to me. Without making eye contact, he disappears and I hear the shower running.

I put on the clothes, which are a little loose but fit okay, then I brush the last of the dried mud off my sneakers into a wastebasket and put them back on.

Standing in front of the mirror, I take in my new look. And to be honest, I look nice. Kinda preppy for my taste, but it'll do.

"I knew you'd shine up like a brand new penny."

I swing around, and see Magpie standing at the door of the closet, smiling at me, friendly and creepy at the same time.

"I'll probably have to burn these other clothes of yours, but you won't be needing them anymore." He holds up a plastic trash bag. When he brought in the bandage, he must have grabbed my clothes from where I'd left them on the floor. Along with my book.

Panic prickles my scalp. "My book—"

Magpie smiles again. "Ah, a youngster after my own heart, a true lover of fine literature. I would never get between a man and his copy of *Walden*."

He reaches into the bag and holds out my book. I snatch it out of his hand. "Uh. Thank you," I say to soften my rudeness.

Magpie cocks his head to the side and chuckles. "I, too, am an avid student of the transcendentalists," he announces, loving the sound of his own voice. "Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman. Certainly they are the best of your American writers."

Whatever. Being alone with this guy makes me want

to take another hot shower and scrub my skin raw. I'm relieved when Jack finishes his shower and joins us.

After Jack, Nessa, and I are clean and dressed, Magpie lines us up and takes a good look at us.

"All right," he says. "You know what to do now." He smiles, and for a moment I think he's genuinely pleased with all of us. But then his face turns cold and stiff as a mask. "Now the three of you get the hell out of my house. And don't be so careless again, you stupid little shits."

He waves a hand at us. Dismissed.



Out on the street, Nessa presses her forehead against Jack's before they say good-bye. He whispers something to her, and she nods. Her eyes are full of tears. Then she comes over to me. Those big eyes without makeup are so damn pretty, blue like the sky before twilight. I just want to hold her, imagine her heart beating fast against my chest.

"Thanks for saving Jack's life," she whispers in my ear. Then she goes up on tiptoe and touches her lips to mine. Not just a peck, but a soft, full-out kiss that she allows to linger. She gives my hand a hard squeeze, and then, as if I'd imagined her all along, she vanishes into the crowd.

"Wow," I say to Jack, trying to be casual. "Did you see that? Your girlfriend just planted one on me."

"She's not my girlfriend," he says in a quiet voice. "She's my sister."

Sister. My heart stops beating, and I forget to breathe.

"Hank? You okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

*Sister.* The word stirs something inside me. So far, it's just a word, but I sense it's the beginning of a solid memory, and it doesn't have skin on yet. The beast twitches inside me, and I feel sick. Push the thought away for now.

"So Nessa and your dad..."

"Yeah, he was hurting her too." He swallows hard and his Adam's apple bobs in his throat. "This life sucks, but it's still better than being home. With him."

"So you'd rather get smacked around by Magpie than your own dad?" Man. I feel bad as soon as I say it.

He glares at me, his black eye gleaming like an accusation. "Shut up, Hank."

"Jack, I'm sorry. But I don't get why you're going to do everything Magpie tells you. The guy is a psychopath."

"I have no choice till this thing blows over, Hank. And neither do you. He'll protect us. But at the same time, he's got us by the balls."

"Only if we let him." I shake my head at him as betrayal and wounded righteousness wash over me. "And just because you delivered me to Magpie as some pathetic new recruit, doesn't mean I have to cooperate."

At least Jack has the decency to look ashamed. "You don't know anything, Hank," he murmurs.

We stand on a street corner and after the light changes, Jack tries to lead us to the right, but I go left, back toward Penn Station.

"Hank, it's this way. We gotta go to Port Authority to meet up with Ginger and Watchdog."

I keep walking, in the opposite direction of Magpie and his directives. As far away as possible. "Who are they, anyway?"

"They work with Magpie," Jack says, trotting to keep up with me. "They're expecting us, and believe me, the last thing you want to do is piss them off."

I grip my copy of *Walden* tight in my hand and keep walking.

The cabin in my dream was just like the one that Thoreau built. I know as I stare at the cover of the book, at the trees and the pond, *that's where I want to be*, that I will not spend another night in the city. I will not look at the moon through smog, will not breathe taxicab exhaust, or listen to the beeps of a hundred car horns. And in

spite of my dream, if I can make it to the cabin, I believe the black bird will never find me.

I'm walking faster and faster, till I'm running down the street, dodging men and women in suits going to work, parents holding little kids' hands on their way to school. Normal people starting a normal day. People who didn't just get attacked in an alley and crack some guy in the head with a brick. Maybe I can outrun all of it.

"Come on, Hank," Jack shouts after me, but I refuse to slow down. He pleads with me the whole way to Penn Station, to the entrance, down the escalator, into the terminal. Even though the cut in my side throbs with every footfall, it feels so good to run. Escaping. Like I'm running away from something horrible and running to something better. Something different anyway, and different is good.

Finally in the lobby of the train station, Jack grabs my arm and makes me look into his face. "Were you some track star in your former life? Goddamn." He's breathing hard and his cheeks are bright red. "Hank, listen to me. You're in this now. If you run, they're going to chase you, and if they find you, there's a good chance they'll kill you. They might hurt me too for letting you get away."

"Then why would you stay here?" I glance up at the train schedule board over his head, suspended from the ceiling in the center of the terminal. "Get on a train and get the hell out of here."

"I can't, Hank. This sucks, but at least we know how to survive here. We know our way around, you know? Doesn't sound like much, but it's all we've got."

So even if your life is crap, you'll hold on to it just because it's familiar? I almost say this out loud to Jack, but I stop myself. Because in truth, I get it. Absolutely nothing in my life is familiar, and it's like standing on the edge of a cliff every damn minute, rocks crumbling under my feet.

A guarded, suspicious look crosses Jack's face like a shadow. "I thought you said you didn't have any money, Hank."

"I don't."

"Then you're a fucking liar. How are you going to buy yourself a train ticket if you don't have money?"

My heart sinks. What am I thinking? Exhausted, I sink down on the floor of the terminal against the wall, and crack my head against the tile as self-punishment. It makes the lump on my head throb but I don't even care.

"You think just because you're wearing a nice outfit and look like a J.Crew model, they're going to just give

you a seat for free?" Jack shakes his head, like he actually feels sorry for me. "You must be used to your nice, rich daddy paying for everything so you don't even have to think about it."

Wow. Is that it? Do I have a rich father who buys me things so that in real life I take money for granted? I try to create an image of this wealthy, generous father, but nothing comes.

"Maybe," is all I can manage around the lump in my throat. "I don't remember."

Jack sits down on the floor next to me and stares into my face for a long time. "Look," he finally says. "Nessa and me, we can't go home. But maybe where you're from is worth going back to." He reaches into his back pocket and takes out a brown leather wallet. Simon's wallet. "Take this."

My mind's eye flashes to blood, Simon's body twitching in the alley. You'd think the thing was on fire the way I jerked my hand away.

"Take it," Jack says, fiercer this time. "You saved my life. Plus, there's this other thing." He bites his cheek and stares over my shoulder, like there's something really interesting there. "You were right. I recruited you, or whatever. Brought you to Maggie on purpose. And he gave me money for it."

I stare at him.

"What, like a bonus or something?"

"Yeah, exactly like that." Jack won't meet my eyes. "So, come on, take it."

My fingers tingle at the touch of the soft, worn leather, but I accept the wallet. It's old and cracked, and there are initials on the front, SJG. Simon must have been a real person before he was a junkie. Someone with initials, who was proud enough to have them engraved on his wallet. I peek inside. There's a paper social security card with the name Simon James Grady. A library card from Dubuque, Iowa. And money. At least two hundred dollars.

"Hey." There's a gruff voice beside us and I smell unwashed body, a familiar odor like onion soup gone bad. "You gonna eat that?"

Jack rolls his eyes. "Frankie, get the hell away from us."

Frankie's bloodshot eyes are lasered in on the wallet.

"Dammit," Jack says.

We try to move to a different corner of the terminal, but Frankie lumbers after us. We ignore him. We don't have much time.

"Jack, you need to leave too. Seriously. Go find Nessa, and get away from here."

Jack shakes his head and nervously scans the terminal.

"Don't worry about us. I'll think of something to tell Magpie. You didn't get to see it, but I think he really likes us. He says we're more special to him than any of the other kids, and I believe him. We'll be okay, I promise."

I bite my lip, and my eyeballs sting. I don't want to leave Jack and Nessa behind in this place. But I can't stay either.

Jack rubs his nose with the heel of his hand. "So where you going, Hank?"

I clutch the book. "*I'm going to go to the woods to live deliberately*," I say. "*To front only the essential facts of life, and see if I can learn what it has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I had not lived.*"

"You're going to *what*?"

I pause. The words are Thoreau's, from the book. I saw them like a photograph in my brain and just blurted them out. "Never mind," I say to Jack.

"You. Gonna. Eat. That?"

We look up in exasperation at Frankie, who is still hovering near us. He won't stop staring at my back pocket, where I stuffed the wallet. "Frankie, stop staring at my ass," I say. He ignores me and keeps his eyes locked.

Jack peers over Frankie's shoulder and freezes. "Shit," he says. I turn and see two transit cops on the other side of the terminal, a heavyset, dark-haired woman, and a

burly guy who takes off his police cap to scratch his head, revealing a military-style blond buzz cut. They stop a kid about our age with dark hair like mine and ask him a lot of questions.

"I gotta go," Jack says, not taking his eyes off the cops. "Be safe, Hank."

"Take care of yourself, Jack. And Nessa."

He gives me a crooked smile. "I always do." He turns and latches on to a family with two little girls who are walking by. "Excuse me," I hear him say. "But do you know when the train to Washington DC leaves?"

Certainly the cops will assume this is his family and not be suspicious, the way he's talking so easy with them, laughing and joking. Damn, he's good. But aside from Frankie, who doesn't count, I'm a kid all alone. And if the word is out about the assault in the alley this morning, they'll be on the lookout for three kids. One of them who looks exactly like me.

The cops have stopped questioning the kid and are heading in my direction. Luckily they haven't spotted me yet, which is good, since I'm gawking at them in full-out panic mode. After all, I now have Simon's wallet on me, evidence to connect me very solidly with a crime. It has his initials for chrissakes. And his ID. I am so screwed. Quickly, I take out all the cash and stuff it into my front

pocket, ready to ditch the wallet. Frankie watches every move with his beady eyes, but I'm too terrified to deal with him.

As I watch them, the woman cop looks in my direction, then gives me a double-take. She looks tough, like she'd really enjoy being the one to nail my ass to the wall. I glance away quickly, but she and her buzz-cut partner are heading straight for me. I won't have a chance to dump the wallet in the trash without them being suspicious.

"You...gonna..."

I stare blankly at Frankie and pull the wallet out of my back pocket. He licks his lips and looks expectant. As casually as possible, with my back to the cops, I hand Frankie the social security card. He grins, takes it from me with a pinky extended, and pops the whole thing in his mouth. In one chew and swallow, it is gone. I hand him the library card, and it, too, vanishes. Digesting the evidence. So far, so good. Bless you, Frankie, bless you.

Turning back toward the transit cops, I see they're almost on me. But then this lady in a purple knit hat darts in front of them, eyes up on the destination screen, and she smacks right into the burly cop. In the confusion, I grip the wallet, hoping for the impossible. Paper is one thing, but can Frankie actually eat a wallet? "You

gonna..." I drop it on the floor, and kick it to the tips of his dusty black boots.

"Take it!"

And so he does. He reaches down, licking his chops like the wallet is a juicy porterhouse steak, and takes a huge bite out of it. Fortunately, the wallet is old, and this dude has strong teeth. He literally rips a piece of leather right out of the wallet, chews once, and swallows. Then he's back for another. Bite, chew, swallow. The cops are almost on us now, and I can still see Simon's initials on the side, SJG. Faster, I think. You can do it, Frankie. Bite, chew, swallow.

Before they can speak, I turn to the cops like I've just noticed them and manage an expression of total outrage. "Officers, do you see what this man is doing?" I sputter. "I dropped my wallet on the ground—he picked it up, and now"—I gesture helplessly, and the three of us look at Frankie—"he's eating it."

Frankie glances at each of us and grins, still chewing on leather and drooling into his beard. The front of the wallet, the part with the initials, is almost gone, except for the first letter, S.

"Frankie, did you take this boy's wallet?" The woman asks in an annoyed tone. Frankie shakes his massive head and swallows. "Mine."

"What's your name, son?" Buzz Cut asks me.

I almost say *Henry*. *Henry David*. But we are all looking down at the wallet and the remaining initial. "Steven," I say quickly. "Steven David. Son. Davidson." Awkward, but I think I pulled it off.

"Give the boy his wallet," Buzz Cut says to Frankie. Apparently Frankie has respect for authority, because he hands it over, the same way he'd relinquished the book yesterday.

The cop looks over my shoulder when I open the soggy wallet to peer inside. "Looks like he cleaned you out. Come on, Frankie, you need to give this boy his money back."

"No, it's okay, he didn't take my money," I say. "I, uh, before I came into the city, my parents told me I should always keep my money in a front pocket." Stupidly, I pat my front pocket to illustrate. "They said there are a lot of bad people in the city, so you have to be careful." My palms are sweaty and I try not to think about Simon, afraid they'll be able to magically read my mind. "So I'm okay for now, officers. Thank you for your assistance." That last part might have been slightly over the top.

The lady cop looks me over, and I hold my breath.

"So where are you headed, Steven?"

"Home," I say.

"And where's that?"

I conjure a picture in my head of the destination board and spout off the first city on the sign. "Philadelphia."

"Ahh, nice town. Eagles fan?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Her friendly manner vanishes, and she puts a hand on her hip, next to her gun.

"I need to see an ID please, Steven," she says.

"Of course," I say. Sweat is dripping down the back of my neck. I open the wallet again, pretend to search all the sections that might hold an ID. "It's not here," I say, going for a look of distress.

We all turn eyes on Frankie.

"Did you eat this boy's ID, Frankie?" Buzz Cut asks.

Frankie grins and smiles, a little spit shimmering on his bottom lip.

Lady Cop looks me over, taking in my polite smile and my clean, supremely preppy ensemble. If the construction worker's description is out, she'll be looking for a dark-haired kid in a grimy blood-covered sweatshirt and torn jeans. Even so, I hold my breath until she says, "I'm sorry you had a run-in with Frankie here. When you get home, make sure you make some calls to replace your ID and anything else Frankie here might have ingested."

"I will," I promise.

"Okay, kid. Hope the rest of your day goes better." Buzz Cut gives me a fatherly pat on the arm. "Have a good trip home, Steven."

I buy my ticket and as soon as they announce the all-aboard for my trip, I double-time it down the escalator, push past slower people lined up to board the train, and immediately find a seat.

Up until the second the train pulls out of the station, I'm sure someone—Magpie with his gun or a cop with handcuffs—is going to come for me. But miraculously, no one does. No one seems to notice me at all.