**17  
  
A dark figure lumbers out of the shadows as panic rises in my throat like bile. It’s got to be Magpie after all, probably with Watchdog and Ginger backing him up in the weeds behind the school, ready to get their revenge, to kidnap or torture me or just** [**shoot**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/17.html) **me in the head and be done with it.  
  
“Who the hell are you?” Cameron asks.  
  
“Don’t talk,” I whisper in a tight voice. God, he’s going to get his ass killed, just for being the idiot he is. The figure shuffles into the light, and with a flash of relief that leaves me weak, I see it’s not Magpie or one of his men after all. Jack takes two steps forward, something clutched in his fist. His hand twitches and the streetlights gleam off the metal of a blade.  
  
“Leave Hank alone or I swear I’ll cut you,” he hisses at Cameron.  
  
All the bravado drains out of Cameron’s face, along with the color, leaving him pale and ghostly. “Holy shit.” His voice is high like a little girl’s.  
  
Good, I’m thinking. Scare the crap out of this weasel. He deserves it. I’ll make sure nobody gets hurt, but I might enjoy the show before I intervene. Jack takes another step toward Cameron, knife pointed in the direction of his nose, then suddenly Jack collapses before he can even put out his hands to break his fall, smacking his head on the pavement with a sickening thud. The knife falls out of his hand with a clatter.  
  
I hurry to his side as his crumpled body contracts into a fetal position. “Jack!” Blood trickles out of his hair onto his forehead.  
  
“I don’t feel so good, Hank.” Then Jack’s entire body jerks and convulses and his eyes roll so far back in his head, all I can see is white. I shake him, but it does no good, and then foamy stuff starts bubbling out of his mouth.  
  
“Holy shit,” Cameron says again, gaping down at Jack.  
  
Leaning down, I place my ear near Jack’s mouth to listen. “Christ, he’s not breathing.” I reach up and shove Cameron to snap him out of his trance. “Call nine-one-one! Now!”  
  
As Cameron fumbles for his phone, I dredge up a long-ago memory of learning CPR in Boy Scouts. Immediately, I** [**start**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/17.html) **chest compressions, then** [**wipe**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/17.html) **the foam off his lips, trying to blow air into his slack, reeking mouth without puking. I have no idea how long I’m doing this when I hear the sirens. Then I see the lights and my own heart stops beating.  
  
Flashing lights. Blue, red, blue, red. Blinding me. Like that day with Rosie. In the intersection. In the car. I** [**close**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/17.html) **my eyes against the lights, the noise, and Jack’s blood. When I open them again, I see the accident all over again. Gray truck getting close, closer, then slamming into us. An explosion of color and terror, shattering glass and grinding metal. Ambulance. Police car. Lights. Blue, red. And my God, so much blood.  
  
Scrambling backward now, away from the lights and sirens and the blood, I find my feet and spin away. Escape, the beast snarls in my ear. Run. Now.  
  
I turn and run smack into a man in a blue uniform who grasps my upper arms in an iron grip.  
  
“Hold on there, son. You’re not going anywhere until we figure out what happened here.” I struggle against him, but unable to bolt, my body surrenders and I crumple to the ground near Jack.  
  
From somewhere far away I hear Cameron’s voice and the shouting EMTs, but I’m slipping away, the last forbidden memory detonating within me like I stepped on a land mine.  
  
The gray truck is coming at us, at the passenger door, can’t stop in time, trapped in Mom’s Toyota with its growling muffler and Rosie inside, thin door of metal and glass not enough to protect her. My world collapses on impact, my forehead smashes into the windshield, breaking glass. Rosie is screaming. Save her. Little blond ballerina in pink is broken. Legs twisted under the crushed front of the car. Bone and torn flesh, one leg is cut and bleeding. The other, somehow, is not there. Broken ballerina, crooked one-legged ballerina in a jewelry box, music tinny and distorted before it grinds to a terrible, silent halt.  
  
“Hey, buddy, can you** [**open**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/17.html) **your eyes for me?” A stranger’s voice. “It’s going to be okay. We’re taking you and your friend to the hospital.”  
  
My eyes fly open to stare at the silhouette of a man in shadows leaning over me, blue and red lights swirling behind him.  
  
“Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth which is the true wealth.”  
  
Strange. Someone is quoting Thoreau. “What did he say?”  
  
“I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.”  
  
Then I realize I’m the one quoting Henry, to calm myself, to make space from the memory of the accident, the ballerina, alive but broken.  
  
“If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”  
  
“What is this kid talking about?”  
  
From somewhere near his left shoulder, I hear Cameron telling another officer. “His name’s Hank. I don’t know his last name.”  
  
“Hank,” says a police officer, “Did you take anything tonight that might have made you sick? Have you been drinking?”  
  
Henry’s words are beads in a rosary, my desperate prayers. “The universe is wider than our views of it.”  
  
“He might have just passed out when he saw what bad shape his friend is in,” says an EMT. “He doesn’t exhibit signs of drug or** [**alcohol abuse**](http://www.freebooksvampire.org/Other_novels/Being_Henry_David/17.html)**. I think the kid is just in shock.”  
  
“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” I whisper, shutting my eyes tight. So sorry, Rosie. Mom. Dad. So sorry. I failed you all. And I will myself to just slip away, just die, in that moment on the ground outside Henry David Thoreau Regional High School. Let me die.  
  
“Not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves.”  
  
Someone wheels a gurney over to where I’m lying on the ground, and the EMTs reach burly arms down, ready to lift me onto it and shoot me off to Emerson Hospital.  
  
But no, I can’t give in. Waving away their arms, I scramble to my feet. Can’t let them take me. It’s not time yet. There’s that thing I still have to do. What was that again? Hailey. I promised Hailey. Something.  
  
“I’m okay,” I say quickly and make my rubber legs hold me up to prove it. “Really, I’m fine.”  
  
The cop and the EMTs look at each another. “You need to get checked out at the hospital,” the cop says gently.  
  
I shake my head adamantly. I clear my throat and gather my wits. “Is Jack all right?” I finally say.  
  
“He probably will be,” the EMT says. “His vital signs are stable now, thanks to you. Do you happen to know what he took?” I tell them everything I know, which isn’t a whole lot, about the pills from Magpie and about the prescription drugs he stole from Thomas’s medicine cabinet.  
  
“We’re going to need to take a statement, so even if you refuse medical care, we need to take you to the station,” the cop tells me, then turns to say something into the radio on his shoulder.  
  
“But I have to perform. I need to get inside.” I jut a thumb toward the school, indicating the muffled pounding of bass and guitar, the wail of a singer’s voice. “I’m probably up next. Can’t let my friends down.” My voice lacks emotion, a stiff robot version of myself.  
  
The cop pulls off his cap, wipes sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his jacket, and looks at me doubtfully. “You sure you’re up to this? You look like you could collapse any second.”  
  
“No, it’s cool. I’m fine.” But my hands are shaking, and in truth, I wonder how I’ll manage to play guitar now. Still, I need to get away from these cops and avoid talking about Jack, which is just going to lead to a can of worms I’m not ready to open. As soon as I tell the police my story, everything will be out, and I’ll be done.  
  
“Just give me your name, and we’ll talk immediately afterward. Okay?”  
  
“Yes, sir. I’m Hank,” I say. “Davidson.” He writes this down. Still not ready to be Danny, not yet. When he asks for an address and phone number, I go ahead and give him Thomas’s. Can’t think of any lie that sounds reasonable. Besides, by the time they come looking for me, it won’t matter.  
  
I watch as the EMTs roll Jack’s gurney into the ambulance, close the back doors, and drive off, blue and red lights still rolling, making me queasy. I press back the memories of Rosie and the accident, push them far away, and there’s nothing more to do. So I turn toward the school in a daze. Hardly feel my own feet shuffling through the gravel or my hand on the cold metal door.  
  
As soon as I enter the back hallway of the school, I’m bombarded with bright lights and amplified music. It’s like stepping into another world, unconnected and unaware of what just went down outside. With the loud music coming from the stage, it’s unlikely anybody heard the shouts or the sirens. I feel like an alien, stumbling with squinted eyes into a surreal universe where I don’t belong.  
  
Ms. Coleman spots me in the hallway and gestures at me like crazy. “Hank, there you are!” she shouts in a shrill voice. “Come on, you’re up next!”  
  
She ushers me toward the wings, where Ryan, Sam, and Hailey are standing together waiting for one of the bands on the stage, a heavy metal group, to wrap up. Waiting for me. Panicked looks give way to relief and anger as soon as they see me. Ms. Coleman hands me my guitar, and I stand next to the members of Carpe Diem. I sling the guitar strap over my shoulder and avoid looking at anybody.  
  
“Jesus. About time,” Ryan says.  
  
“Hank,” says Hailey. She’s standing there in her slinky black outfit, trembling hands clutching a plastic water bottle. Afraid, beautiful, angry. “Where the hell have you been?”  
  
“Just…” I gesture vaguely. “Outside.”  
  
She squints at me in the muted backstage light. “Oh my God, look at you. You’ve got dirt on your face. Did you and Cameron get into a fight?” Furious, she yanks a tissue out of her pants pocket, saturates it with water from her bottle, and wipes at my face. I wince as she finds some scraped spots on my nose. “I knew it,” she murmurs to herself.  
  
“It’s not about Cameron,” I tell her.  
  
She reaches into my messy hair, tries to make me look presentable, flicks angry green eyes at me. “Then what happened to you out there?”  
  
“Too much to tell right now,” I whisper, and my eyes burn with acid tears.  
  
Hailey finishes finger-combing my hair and looks into my face. I don’t know what she sees there, but the anger lifts, replaced by concern. “You okay, Hank?” She presses her red lips together.  
  
I look into her pretty face and find myself unable to lie. “I don’t know.”  
  
She grabs my hands and squeezes tight. Concern gives way to something deeper and she presses her forehead against mine. “Listen, Hank. When we get out there, pretend it’s just us, together in the white room, okay?” she says in a soft, soothing voice. “Just you and me, me and you, making music.”  
  
I nod, absorbing her words but unable to respond.  
  
“Okay, Carpe Diem,” Ms. Coleman says, practically pushing the four of us onto the stage. “Get out there. You’re next.”  
  
We walk onto the darkened side of the stage and find our places just as the group on the spotlighted half begins to play. I can’t seem to register anything they’re doing. Can’t identify the music, can’t hear progressions or lyrics, my senses paralyzed.  
  
As if in slow motion, I turn my attention to the guitar, Thomas’s butterscotch Telecaster, and plug it into the amp. Try to get centered, focus. Can’t screw up. Have to push everything else on my mind away. My past, my future. Everything. Put it all in a box, lock it shut and place a beast on guard in front of it. I know how to do that, right?  
  
The group before us finishes their tune, and I’m vaguely aware of applause while I go through the opening chords of “Blackbird” in my head. Come on, I can do this. I know this song in my sleep, even knew it in the strange sleep of amnesia when I didn’t know my own name.  
  
The lights come up, and it’s time for me to play. The crowd is quiet, expectant, a blur of faces. So many faces waiting for me to do something. Anything. My fingers are cramped, curled like claws above the guitar. Can’t play a note. Can’t do it. Can’t move. A dark wave threatens to take me under.  
  
The crowd is silent, holding its breath. They don’t realize it’s me who’s falling apart in front of them. Instead, they’re probably wondering if Hailey’s going to have an insulin reaction and pass out again. I imagine Ms. Coleman with her cell phone in hand, ready to dial 9-1-1.  
  
Heart thundering in my ears, I screw my eyes tight, try to concentrate, try to move my frozen fingers and conjure music that won’t come. I’m failing Hailey and I can’t do a thing about it.  
  
But then, the silence is broken by the sound of a voice. A girl’s silky alto voice. At first, I’m so lost in my own head that I don’t recognize the voice or the song. But it cuts through my panic and I recognize that it’s Hailey. Singing “Blackbird,” a cappella, without me. Her voice soars to the rafters, so beautiful.  
  
I’m mesmerized along with the rest of the audience, just listening, until she reaches the end of the first verse. Then, as if they have finally come to life, my fingers relax and start to move. They form chords across the frets, hover above the strings, and then come in perfectly for the intro of the second verse. The music consumes me and the magic takes over at last, transcending my fear. Hailey joins in and starts singing the second verse like this is exactly how we planned it all along. Whatever fear had a hold on her for the past year has completely loosened its grip. I look over the crowd and see people’s astonished faces. See them talking to each other, and I know what they’re saying. She’s doing it this time. She’s doing it. And damn, she’s good.  
  
I glance over at Hailey and her eyes say, you and me, me and you. I knew we could do it.  
  
We get to the end of the ballad verse, blackbird fly, into the light of a dark black night, and then, with an explosive crash of cymbals, the band comes to life and we launch through the song a second time, rocking it hard. Colored lights burst onto the stage with that first crash, and the crowd goes nuts, screaming and whistling and hooting. Hailey wails out the vocals, Sam plays the hell out of the skins, and even Ryan plays almost every note perfectly. By the time we finish, people are on their feet, pumping their arms and shouting.  
  
I glance at Hailey, at her pink cheeks and shining eyes. The girl is glowing, the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life. She blows me a kiss and a smile takes up my entire face. I want to capture this amazing moment like a photograph to tuck into my heart and brain forever. Remember every single detail. Carpe Diem. Seize the day, this moment. Trap it. Keep it. I wish it would never end.  
  
But it has to. The lights go off on our half of the stage and up on the next band, some folkie guitar-and-fiddle group that assaults my ears. For me, this is the beginning of the end. But what a way to go. What a rush.  
  
Backstage, Sam, Ryan, and I congratulate one another. None of us even care about winning anymore. The fact that we got through it was victory enough.  
  
“I told you losers I could do it,” Ryan says to nobody in particular and throws his fedora in the air. Sam snatches it and runs away, making Ryan chase him with a whoop.  
  
“You were incredible,” I whisper in Hailey’s ear.  
  
“You too,” she says and gives me a kiss that almost knocks me over.  
  
God, there’s so much I want to tell Hailey. So many lies I need to straighten out. I want to tell her how scared I’ve been this whole time, how scared I still am, and how much I need her. Tell her how I feel like I’ve always known her, like maybe we were lovers in a previous life, maybe several past lives. That’s how I feel about this girl. But how can I tell her any of this?  
  
Before I get a chance, the final band finishes its two-song folkie set, and all the bands are gathered back on the stage for the voting. In the back of the auditorium, I see a pair of policemen standing by, watching and waiting.  
  
One by one, Ms. Coleman calls out the names of the bands and each group steps forward to stir up the crowd and drum up the highest-decibel support. The loudest response, not surprisingly, comes for Cameron’s band. But ours sounds like a strong second.  
  
“And the winner is—Red Tide!” Ms. Coleman announces. Lights go wild, the crowd shrieks, the winning band comes forward for their trophy and check. Cameron throws me a triumphant look, and I give him a cheesy salute in congratulations, which obviously confuses him. Okay, we’re not exactly friends, but not enemies either. My time has almost run out and there’s no energy left for grudges. At least I know he’ll be watching out for Hailey after I’m gone.  
  
Everything else is a blur. Somehow I manage to let Hailey take me by the hand to accept congratulations from her mom and dad and Danielle, who says something flirty in my ear that I can’t make out. Somehow I accept pats on the back, people yelling in my ear, “You were incredible!” and random girls giving me hugs. I wish I could enjoy some of this.  
  
But I know that the good stuff is dwindling fast. Soon, everything will be out. The cops are waiting right now to ask me questions. Bad stuff is waiting for me and I can’t put it off much longer.  
  
I spot Thomas, Suzanne, and Nessa near the foot of the stage, and the three of them rush forward to congratulate me. They tell me how great the guitar sounded, how our group totally should’ve won the award, and I make myself smile through it all, dreading what has to happen next. I manage to mumble my thanks, but once they stop gushing and stand there blinking and smiling at me, I don’t have it in me to muster one syllable of small talk. I blurt out what has to be said.  
  
“I found Jack outside, behind the school,” I tell them. “He’s real messed up, but an ambulance came and he’s at Emerson Hospital by now. They think he’s going to be okay.”  
  
Nessa buries her face in her hands and starts to cry, a mixture of fear and relief. Suzanne puts an arm around her and strokes her hair.  
  
The happy noise of the crowd, people talking and laughing, swirls and bends into a muffled rush of chaos that excludes us. Over there are the normal people of Concord, who have just enjoyed an evening of music and friends and entertainment and safety. And then there’s us.  
  
Peering over Suzanne’s shoulder, I see two uniformed cops walking toward us. One of them is the guy who took my name. They’re waiting to hear my story, to find out how I’m connected to the boy who overdosed behind the high school. This is where the truth comes out, where all the shit in the world hits the fan. After talking to the police, either I’ll go home to parents who hate me or straight to jail for my crimes in New York. This is where I say good-bye to Hank forever and have to be Danny Henderson full time again.  
  
But I am still not ready.  
  
Hailey catches my eye from where she stands with her family near the edge of the stage. “Hank, can you come over to the house to celebrate?” she asks. “My mother made a cake and everything.”  
  
“I can’t, Hailey.” I grab her hand, tight, and kiss her fingers. “I have to go.”  
  
She blinks at me, green eyes flecked with gold, piercing mine. Seeing me. And I know it’s not my imagination. The girl can read me like a book and she can sense the raw finality there, loud and clear.  
  
“You’re going?” she whispers in disbelief. “Before you even tell me who you really are?”  
  
My eyes prickle with tears. “I have to,” I whisper back. “I’ll contact you, I promise. I’ll tell you everything.” Then I let go of her hand as the cops approach, radios crackling on their hips, handcuffs clinking, badges blinding.  
  
“Oh hey, I forgot the guitar backstage,” I say to no one in particular, giving myself a little smack on the forehead, like oh, what an idiot. “Look, I’ll go get it and be right back.”  
  
There are only a few feet between me and the stage. I turn, take the steps two at a time, push my way behind the curtain. I hear Thomas’s voice behind me, “Hank, wait,” but I ignore it.  
  
The second I’m out of sight, I jog down a long, dark hallway leading away from the auditorium, away from the stage, away from people. As soon as I reach a side door, I open it a crack, and when I’m certain there’s nobody lurking outside in the schoolyard or behind the trees, I slip as silently as possible into the shadows.  
  
Sucking cool, fresh air into my lungs, I sprint full speed from the high school grounds, arms and legs pumping, then straining. Blending into the dark night.  
  
Running, again.**

**18**

**A dragonfly with green eyes lands on my arm and a long-legged spider climbs up the leg of my jeans, but I don’t move. Can’t scare the moose or let him know I’m hidden behind this spruce tree.**

**The moose has long spindly legs, a humpback brown body and a goatee. I don’t know how he holds those huge antlers up. Leaning over to take a deep drink from the pond, he almost looks harmless, like a horse or something. But I know better. A moose could kick a person to death if he’s really pissed.**

**Ow! A black fly bites the back of my neck, and I smack it, which startles the moose and makes the dragonfly shoot off into the woods. I hate these stupid black flies, and the mosquitoes are just as bad. Last night huddled in my sleeping bag with my flashlight, I counted seventy-two bites. No kidding. Seventy-two. And every one of them still burns and itches.**

**Hazards on the Appalachian Trail: Biting flies and mosquitoes. I get it now. Though I’d add moose to that list too.**

**I hold my breath as the moose lifts his huge head to stare at me, pond water dripping off his goatee. If he charges, I’ll climb this tree as fast as I can. All the muscles in my body are tense, waiting.**

**But the moose doesn’t charge. He just stands there, looking at me with his black eyes pretty much the same way I’m looking at him. Like I’m incredibly interesting, but he’s worried about what I’ll do next. When nothing happens on either side, he ducks his head back into the water, yanks up some green pond weeds, and chews calmly, ignoring me.**

**It’s Monday morning, the start of my first full day in the wilds of Maine. The moose sighting is a good omen, I’m sure of it.**

**Now that I’m in Maine, standing in the woods watching a moose, Saturday night seems like forever ago, a weird dream I had once. But it really happened. After escaping from the high school, I sprinted to Thomas’s place to get a backpack, clothes, and all the money I’d saved. From his basement, I grabbed some camping gear and wrote a quick note: “Borrowing some stuff. Promise to bring it back. Thanks for everything.”**

**After taking the last train to Boston, I made my way to South Station, and then caught the first bus in the morning to Bangor. Tried to sleep on the bus, resting my head on the backpack, but that didn’t work. My thoughts were crazy, like bees swarming around in my brain. Hailey, Jack, Nessa, and Thomas were all in there with me, along with my parents.**

**And Rosie. Especially Rosie.**

**Ever since the accident, I’ve been on the run, like a voice inside is telling me to keep moving. But there’s another voice now, getting louder and harder to push aside.**

**You really think you can run away from Rosie and what happened to her? Go face your life, the fact that the accident was your fault. Face Rosie. Face Mom and Dad.**

**I know, I tell the voice. But I can’t. Not yet. Let me do this last thing and I’ll go back. I promise.**

**This final leg of my journey feels right on some kind of bone-deep soul level. I followed Thoreau to Concord to find out who I was, and now I’m following Thoreau to Maine. Maybe here I can figure out who I’m supposed to be next. At least this trip will give me a chance to clear my head before surrendering to the mess I left behind.**

**In Bangor I bought more supplies: a jackknife, waterproof matches, fishing line, and trail food. All those years being a Boy Scout and camping out with my dad definitely came in handy preparing for this trip.**

**At the Bangor Post Office, I bought one sheet of stationery, one envelope, and one stamp, and then stood at the counter for a long time, trying to write a letter to Hailey.**

**Dear Hailey,**

**Wow. I don’t know what to say to you. I guess “I’m sorry” would be a good place to start. I’m sorry I wasn’t honest with you from day one, but I hope you understand once you hear my whole story. When I first met you, I didn’t know who I was. I mean, seriously. I had amnesia, couldn’t remember my name, or where I lived, or anything. It wasn’t until after I met Thomas (the guy I told you was my uncle) that I finally figured out who I was and why I was such a mess.**

**My real name is Danny, and I live near Chicago. I ran away from home and lost my memory for a bunch of reasons, but the biggest one is that I was in a car accident where my little sister got hurt really bad. I was the driver. Sure, Thomas keeps telling me it was an accident, but it was still my fault and it tears me apart every minute. Anyway, not looking for sympathy here, just trying to explain so maybe you can understand me better.**

**I met you and to be honest, for a while I didn’t even care who I was. I could almost stop thinking about it all. You made me feel happy, and the music we shared was amazing. Thank you so much for that.**

**Hailey, I still need to figure some stuff out, but once I do, I’ll contact you. I can’t stop thinking about you and I want to see you again. Maybe you’re really mad at me and don’t want to see me at all, but I hope you’ll give me a second chance.**

**Don’t know what to say other than I really miss you and I’m sorry.**

**I stopped and considered how I should close the letter. Your friend? Sincerely? Take Care? See ya? But then I decided just to write exactly what I felt:**

**Love,**

**Hank (Danny)**

**From Bangor, I walked or thumbed rides the rest of the way here. The deeper into Maine I traveled, the more natural everything looked. It was honest-to-God wilderness, or as Thoreau called it, “the wild.” Found my way to Baxter State Park early last night and set up camp. The only drawback is the bugs, but I bet there’s not even one black fly up at the summit of Mount Katahdin.**

**The moose lifts its big head and peers into the woods, weeds dripping water from his mouth. Voices approach our hiding place. The moose gives me one last glance, then sloshes out of the pond and gallops into the woods, crunching through the underbrush. He disappears within a few seconds.**

**“I can’t believe we’re just turning around and going home,” says a girl’s voice. “Just like that. Giving up.”**

**“Babe, it’s way too windy. No need to take the chance,” a guy answers. “Look, the mountain will still be there another day.”**

**The two of them come into view, a couple probably in their early twenties, wearing hiking boots and daypacks. They kneel down near the edge of the water. The guy dips his hands in the pond and splashes cool water on the back of his neck.**

**I wonder what to do. Should I clear my throat to let them know I’m here, maybe say hello? In truth, I don’t feel like talking to anybody. So I just stand here behind the tree, feeling like a creepy stalker, watching the girl scoop water onto her face and glare at her boyfriend. Just wanting them to leave.**

**“It wasn’t that bad,” the girl murmurs. “We could’ve made it.”**

**The guy pulls at his sweaty Red Sox T-shirt, takes a deep breath and starts back down the hill, with her close behind. Their voices grow fainter, then disappear into the woods.**

**Glancing up at the sky through the spruce branches, everything looks clear and blue to me. No doubt things are windier farther up the mountain, but it’s going to take some serious weather to discourage me. I’m not sure what I hope to achieve by reaching the top of the mountain, only that I have to get there.**

**Pulling my backpack up onto my shoulders, I continue hiking uphill. Destination: Baxter Peak, the summit of Mount Katahdin at 5,226 feet above sea level. I can’t take the exact route Henry traveled because he did a lot of canoeing and portaging once he got to the wild and I don’t have a canoe. But that doesn’t matter. What’s important is that I’m here, seeing the same landscape he saw, pretty much the way it looked back in the mid-1800s.**

**And just like Henry, I have the same destination: the mountain’s summit. Except Henry never quite made it. He climbed to South Peak, the second highest peak, and even though that’s way impressive, let’s face it, it’s still not the top. My goal is to get there for both of us. Hiking up the side of the mountain, I get a good rhythm going, breathing hard but making good progress. The incline is sharp, a wooded path through trees and bushes and over random rock formations. So far, so good. Conditions are still great as far as I can tell, not a lot of clouds. That’s important when you’re climbing up to where the clouds live.**

**Focused on steady walking and breathing, my brain clears and I’m able to relax and think like when I settle into the cadence of a good run. And as soon as I do, my thoughts fall into that last black hole of time I couldn’t recover, until now. Listening to the pace of my own feet crunching on rocks while climbing the mountain, I’m able in a semi-detached way to examine the missing moments and days right after the accident.**

**When my forehead smashed into the windshield, I got a concussion. Brain sloshing against my skull knocked me out, but not for long. Not long enough.**

**I was aware of people rushing to the car window, saying hang in there, that the ambulance was coming, that it was going to be okay. But it wasn’t. At first, Rosie wailed and whimpered like a baby animal caught in a trap, but then she went silent with her blue eyes wide and empty, and that was worse. My head hurt so bad and everything was blurry and I couldn’t get to her, couldn’t help get her free. Somebody outside the passenger window gasped and said, “Her leg. My God, her leg,” and I had to look. But after one quick glance at the place where her leg was supposed to be, I couldn’t grasp the sight of blood and bone. My brain locked into wondering, what happened to that other pink sneaker? Where did it go? As soon as I get out of this car, I have to find it.**

**The ambulance arrived and I can still see the lights flashing, hear my sister screaming while they tried to free her from the wreck. I kept telling them I had to go out there in the road to find the sneaker, but they kept telling me hush, that I was going to be okay. They didn’t understand. The trip to the hospital is a blur, and for the next couple of days I guess I swam in and out of consciousness while my brain did its best to recover.**

**Flashes of memory: bandage on my head, IV drip in my arm, my parents coming to see me, Mom crying. It runs together, those days in the hospital. Sleeping for hours and eating meals brought on a tray, watching TV shows with my eyes glazed over, barely registering what I saw. Then, about the third day after the accident, Mom came to see me and when the doctor came in, he told us I could go home.**

**As soon as the gauzy haze in my head started to lift, it was all too clear what had happened to Rosie. Her leg was so badly mangled in the wreckage, they couldn’t save it. One legged, broken ballerina. Even after I was better, I stayed in my bed all day, every day, refusing to go to school, pretending my head still hurt more than it actually did. Couldn’t face the idea of what happened to my baby sister. What I did to her.**

**Finally, I couldn’t stand living inside my own body, couldn’t deal with the guilt. I knew I either had to run or I would end up hanging myself in the garage. It was that simple.**

**So I threw some stuff in a gym bag, emptied my savings account, and got ready to run to New York City, the biggest, baddest place I could think of. I was prepared to vanish into the crowds and somehow cease to exist. Disappear off the grid.**

**Before I left, I stopped at the hospital to see Rosie. She was out of ICU now, in a private room. Slowly, like I was walking into a cathedral or something, I stepped into her room and stood by her bed. She looked so little in that hospital bed, with one leg and foot molded by the sheets. The other side was flat from the thigh down. Nothing there.**

**“Rosie,” I whispered.**

**Her eyes fluttered open, and she looked at me, my blond sister with pink cheeks and blue eyes like a little china doll. She smiled. I couldn’t believe it. She actually smiled at me. “Danny,” she said. Her voice was all sleepy and dreamy, and I’m sure they’d been giving her a ton of drugs, so she wasn’t fully aware of her situation. Or whose fault it was.**

**“I’m so sorry, Rosie,” I said. And in that moment, I wanted so badly for her to say something typically Rosie-ish like, hey Danny, bet you didn’t know that the magnolia is both the state flower and the state tree of Mississippi, did you? But she was asleep.**

**I left the hospital with my gym bag slung over my shoulder and caught the train in downtown Naperville that took me to Chicago. From Chicago, all the way to New York City.**

**My head was pounding the whole way on the train. Not fully recovered from the accident, the concussion, the shock of everything, I slept most of the way, sometimes not even remembering where I was or why I was there. It was dark when I got off the train in New York and sometime within the first few hours of my arrival, I got mugged. All I remember is tripping in a mud puddle as some guy on the street hit me, stole my gym bag and all my money except for a ten dollar bill stuffed in my front pocket. The blow, plus the concussion, added to the trauma of the accident. It all worked together to shut off access to my past. It was self-preservation, guarded by a snarling beast that turned out to be a blessing in disguise. For a while, anyway.**

**After about an hour, the path becomes steeper, and it’s harder to catch my breath. My thigh muscles burn and the backpack, stuffed with my gear, feels heavier with every step. Sitting on a rock, I pull sweaty arms out of the pack and stretch my muscles. The wind is picking up, so I pull out a windbreaker and slip it over my head. There’s no way I’m going to be able to carry the pack to the summit. So I pull out a few things and stuff them into my pockets: water bottle, trail mix, flashlight. My book. Then I find a nook under a ledge of granite, and stuff the pack into it, camouflaging it with leaves and pine branches. To make sure I remember where I left it, I tie a white sock on a branch near the path.**

**It’s around noon when a park ranger heading downhill meets me on the trail. I register a gray-beige shirt and brown shorts, a straw-colored hat. “The wind is getting fierce up there,” he tells me. “We haven’t closed down the summit yet, but we probably will. You might want to turn around and try this another day.”**

**He’s a nondescript looking guy. Hair the color of his shirt. Eyes the color of his shorts. It all blends together into a gray-brown blur. “Thanks,” I say, “for letting me know.”**

**The ranger considers this, taking in the fact that I’m still standing there and have made no move to retreat. But there’s not much he can do. “Just…respect the mountain,” he says.**

**“I will,” I tell him. “I do.”**

**He nods at me and continues down the mountain. His job is done. The burden of risk is on me. And that’s exactly how I want it.**

**As I climb higher, the wind moans like a live thing in the pine and oak trees, throws my hair in my eyes. The landscape changes from trees, bushes, and other leafy plants to thin tufts of grass and carpets of moss. The only trees now are small and stumpy, holding on to the windswept ground for dear life.**

**Every few feet I stop to take in the view, feeling like I’m climbing up into the sky. Far below, trees, lakes, and streams spread out below me like a topographical map from geography class. But the higher I climb, the more the world I know falls away around me, along with the security of trees and foliage, and it’s like I’m on some strange alien planet.**

**Step by step by step, the air gets thinner and there are fewer trees, even the stumpy ones. There’s not even much in the way of moss. Just lichen growing like mold on the rocks, green, black, and gray. They’re the only living things that won’t get blown off the mountain by the wind, surviving because they pretend to be part of the rock.**

**My windbreaker snaps in the wind like a flag on the mast of a ship. This feels like hurricane wind, tornado wind. An angry wind strong enough to shove me off a mountain.**

**Just ahead of me lies Knife Edge, which connects Pamola Peak—named after the Native American storm god who supposedly lives on this mountain—with Baxter Peak, the true summit. This is the most dangerous part of this trek. For about a mile, there’s this narrow band of rocks, barely two feet wide. I’ve read about this place. People have fallen off Knife Edge and plummeted 2,000 feet to their deaths. Probably on windy days just like this one.**

**If I stay low, close to the rocks, I bet I can make it in spite of the wind. My first step falls on loose rocks and I slip, grabbing onto a boulder to steady myself. Adrenaline surges through my body as I hunker down low. On one side, there’s a sheer drop. The other side is the same. All that is holding me up on this planet is a narrow strip of rock that I’ll have to climb across on all fours in a heavy wind. Yes, I could turn around and try tomorrow. But the summit is there within sight, so close. I’m going to do this.**

**Halfway across Knife Edge, a crowd of dark clouds drifts in from the other side of the mountain. Instantly, the sun is hidden by clouds and the entire world turns gray. The first drops of rain fall, huge and dense, and the wind begins a low howl.**

**Stuck in the middle of this precarious strip of land, I cling to a flat boulder like a tiny barnacle in a raging sea. Pressing my head to my chest, I ignore the rock scraping skin off my nose, the dirt and lichen lodged under my fingernails. Can’t move forward, can’t move back. Stuck, in limbo, within sight of the summit of Mount Katahdin.**

**So this is it. I’ve run as far as I can go. Ran away from the flat prairie land of Illinois to New York City and to Concord, Massachusetts. Ran away from my parents and away from Magpie. Mostly, I’ve tried to run away from what I did.**

**But it follows me wherever I go, even followed me to the top of this mountain. The rain comes harder now, pelting my skin like buckshot.**

**My sister will never dance again. Hell, she’ll never walk again. Not without a fake leg taking the place of the one she lost. How can I climb back down this mountain and go on living with that forever at the core of me? Such a coward, all I could do was run away on my two good legs. God, I can’t think about this. But I can’t run either. Not this time. I’m trapped here with myself and my thoughts.**

**Wind and rain slap my face, whip across my back, my arms, my legs. The shrieking could be the howling of the wind, or it could be me. Salt tears and fresh rainwater stream down my face, into my mouth. How can I ever go home again?**

**A new realization breaks over me. Truth is, I don’t have to go home. Don’t have to face my parents. Don’t have to feel pain anymore. All I have to do is let go of this rock. Stand up, throw my arms out to the sky, and let the wind take me. This, here and now, could be my fate. This would be a clean ending to my useless life. A good way to die. Slowly, I peel shaking fingers off the rock, imagine the release as I let the wind shove me off the mountain, imagine falling like flying, sweet relief. I tense the burning muscles of my legs, ready to stand. To surrender.**

**No, Danny.**

**A voice rides the wind.**

**I lift my head up and squint against the wind and rain, somehow expecting Rosie to be here next to me, clinging to this rock, blond angel in pink. The voice is that clear, that familiar. But nobody is here. I duck my head back down.**

**No, boy, don’t do it.**

**This time it’s Henry’s voice, carried by a fresh gust of wind.**

**“Where are you?” I cry out. Can’t see Rosie, can’t see Thoreau. I’m alone, peeling myself off a rock on a mountain, about to die. But the voices come again, inside my head.**

**Danny, hold on. You have to hold on. This time it’s Cole, or at least the essence of the little brother who died too soon.**

**“I don’t know how to do this, Cole,” I yell into the storm. “I couldn’t save you, couldn’t protect Rosie. I can’t do this anymore.”**

**Choosing life means facing pain and I’m just not strong enough. Death is the final, ultimate escape for those of us who run. So it has come to this: hold on to the rock and live. Or let go and die.**

**Think of Mom and Dad. It would kill them, and they’ve been through enough. Don’t you see? It’s both Rosie and Cole now, arguing in my head together, double-teaming. You’re no coward, Danny.**

**Yes, I am. I’m the one who runs away.**

**The wind slaps at me like a heavy hand. It hurts and I want it to hurt. I deserve it. It tears my wailing voice away. It would be easy, so easy to let go.**

**I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life…to put to rout all that was not life…and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. Henry’s voice in my head, so real I almost expect to see his face floating in front of me.**

**No, Henry, I haven’t lived. Not really. But I’m done, don’t you see? Can’t suck out the marrow of life when I’m too afraid to live. Too broken.**

**Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it.**

**Another Henry-ism. Damn you, Henry.**

**If I decide to live, all I have waiting for me is a broken family and no idea of what to do with the rest of my life. What do I do with that?**

**Clinging to a rock in a violent rainstorm, there’s nowhere left for me to run, nothing left to do. The thing I want most is to hurl myself into permanent forgetfulness. But for the sake of the voices in my head, I hesitate. I force myself to imagine a life past this moment.**

**Finishing high school. I could do that. Can’t see myself going to college, not now anyway, but maybe I’d work at a music shop for a while. Learn how to repair guitars. Maybe I could even go back to Concord. Be with Hailey and work with Thomas.**

**But what about my family? Can’t keep my parents from splitting up, but maybe we could finally talk about Cole. That would be a start.**

**The wind is just beginning to quiet down when I force myself at last to think of Rosie. Make myself imagine Rosie in a wheelchair, Rosie learning to walk with an artificial leg. Maybe if she forgave me for the accident, I could help her. Be there for her like we always were when things in our family came apart.**

**Whether it’s the essence of Rosie, Cole, Henry, or something wise beyond understanding inside myself, I don’t know. But finally, it gets through to me. I can’t die leaving behind the mess that Danny created. And as long as I have life, there’s hope I can live better, find a way to be the best of Danny, plus Hank. For Rosie, for my parents. For myself.**

**I don’t know how long I lie there holding on to the rock, letting the rain drench my hair, my clothes, my skin, but finally the clouds drift off toward the horizon, and the storm retreats.**

**Hands cramping, knees clutching, everything hurts, but I start crawling forward again. Keep going, listening to the voices in my head that insist I live. Closer and closer to the other side of Knife Edge. When it’s safe, I stand up, stretch sore limbs, take a few steps. Walk toward Baxter Peak, the summit of Mount Katahdin.**

**Nobody is here but me to see the world cracked open, to look out on the world and see hundreds of miles into the distance, to smell the rain-cleansed air. Somehow, I feel clean too.**

**I stumble over to the weathered brown sign that reads KATAHDIN and under that in smaller letters, BAXTER PEAK, NORTHERN TERMINUS OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL. After reading this, I shake my head, thinking of my dad, not sure if I should laugh or cry. Look at me, Dad. I reached the end of the Appalachian Trail before you and I never saw the beginning.**

**Touching the rough wood with both hands, I gather strength from its solidness. Then I reach into the back waistband of my jeans and pull out the book.**

**You know where to find me, Henry had said. And it’s true, I do. He’s at Walden Pond. He’s here in Maine. He’s anywhere nature has the power to make me stop and think. And most of all, he’s in this book.**

**Walden is in worse shape than when I found it on the floor at Penn Station those long weeks ago. Now it’s drenched by the mountain storm. Pages are bent over and torn, and some are missing—the ones Frankie ate and the ones that fell out because I carried it around and thumbed through it so often. I don’t know for sure if it was always mine or if some traveler left it at the train station, but that doesn’t matter now. Thoreau brought me here. I may not be Thoreau reincarnated, but I bet I could live the rest of my life as if I were. Living an authentic, simple life makes a whole lot of sense to me.**

**And there’s one more thing. If I was Thoreau reincarnated, I bet he would’ve wanted me to complete something he couldn’t in his own lifetime: reach the true summit of Mount Katahdin. So here I am, for both of us.**

**I set Walden at the base of the sign like a sacred offering to the gods. Then I take from my pocket the smooth white stone I brought from Walden Pond, and set it on top of the book to keep it anchored.**

**“There you go, Henry,” I say. “You made it.” I stand there for a long time. Then I turn to walk back down the mountain.**

**Luckily there’s more than one route to and from the summit, so I decide to avoid Knife Edge this time by choosing a different path down the mountain. I’ve walked only a few minutes when I spot a man with a crooked walking stick about fifty feet below me and heading my way. He pauses to take off his straw hat and wipe rain and sweat off his forehead with a red bandana. Something about the way he stands, his black goatee and muscular build, look familiar.**

**The man looks up at me, shields his eyes against the sun, and waves, the bandana like a banner in his hand.**

**I wave back in disbelief. “Thomas,” I call out, and I start to laugh. “What are you doing here?”**

**But of course I know what he’s doing here. It wouldn’t take much for a research librarian–historian to figure out where I was going when I left Concord. After all, he planted the idea in my head to begin with. And now, he has come to find me.**

**“Dan!” he shouts back. At first I’m startled to hear him use my real name, and Dan instead of Danny, but it’s okay somehow. In fact, I like it. When I climbed up the mountain this morning, I was still Hank. I’m not Hank anymore. But in truth, I’m not Danny either. For good or for bad, I’ll be Dan Henderson from now on. New name, fresh start.**

**I’m so busy smiling like a goofball and lumbering down the mountain toward Thomas, I almost trip on an outcropping of granite in the middle of the path. By the time I recover and look back to where Thomas waits, there’s another man standing behind him.**

**It’s a tall man wearing shorts and hiking boots with black shaggy hair poking out from under a baseball cap. I can see the logo from here. The Chicago Cubs. We both stand there, frozen, allowing this stunning reality to break over us.**

**“Dad?”**

**“Danny.” My father speaks my name, his voice lifted to my ears by the same wind that nearly pushed me off the mountain. I hold the moment like it’s a paper-winged butterfly, unable to believe the fragile truth of it.**

**Gravity pulls me down the mountain path, to the place where my father stands and waits, his arms open wide.**

**I collapse against my father’s chest and he squeezes the breath out of me with his strong arms. He came all this way to find me. Maybe I can be forgiven after all. I can hardly stand up with the relief of this. His arms hold me on my feet when I want to fall and kiss the magic ground.**

**Dad looks me over with his hands on my shoulders like he’s convincing himself it really is me there in front of him, and all in one piece. “Danny,” he says again, choking on my name. And then he crushes me to himself all over again like it will help him believe.**

**When I pull back and peer into his eyes, I can’t say her name, can’t ask. But of course, he knows.**

**“Rosie’s going to be okay,” he says. “She’s a strong little girl. But she needs her big brother.”**

**Inside me somewhere, the beast shrinks and contracts into itself until it is nothing but pure white light.**

**“All she wants—all any of us want—is for you to come home.”**

**Home.**

**I drink the word like someone who has been lost in the desert without water for more days than I can count and gulp it down.**

**Dad takes a tissue out of his back pocket and blows his nose into it with his signature honk. He stuffs it into his pocket and turns to Thomas, who is standing at a polite distance trying not to look like he’s eavesdropping as he rubs at his own watering eyes.**

**“But first, Thomas, there’s no way we’re going to get this close and not stand at the summit of Mount Katahdin.”**

**Thomas grins at us both. “Well, hell yeah. I’ve always wanted to set foot on the official ending of the Appalachian Trail.”**

**“The ending.” Dad echoes and looks at me. We lock eyes, and I know exactly what he’s thinking. What looks like the ending could just as easily be considered the beginning.**

**That’s when the last words Henry wrote in Walden pop into my head. And I realize the ending of Walden isn’t really an ending either.**

**Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.**

**Dad smiles, pats me on the back, and together with Thomas we turn toward Baxter Peak and the huge blue-gray sky above us and walk.**