

1

Later, Seth remembered cold air and red light streaking the western sky, music in his ears, and his own hard breathing. Later, he understood, and the understanding stuck in his memory like a thorn. He never heard them coming.

The trail through Golden Gate Park was rutted and he was riding with his earphones in, tunes cranked high. His guitar was in a backpack case slung around his shoulders. Crimson sunset strobed between the eucalyptus trees. When he reached Kennedy Drive, he jumped the curb, crossed the road, and aimed his bike into the shortcut through the woods. He was a quarter mile from home.

He was late. But if he rode hard he could still beat his mom back from work. His breath frosted the air. The music thrashed in his ears. He barely heard Whiskey bark.

He glanced over his shoulder. The dog was at a standstill on the path fifty yards behind him. Seth skidded to a stop. He pushed his glasses up his nose, but the trail lay in shadow and he couldn't see what Whiskey was barking at.

He whistled and waved. "Hey, doofus."

Whiskey was a big dog, part Irish setter, part golden retriever. Part sofa cushion. And all heart, every dumb inch of him. His hackles were up.

If Whiskey ran off, chasing him down could take forever. Then he'd totally be late. But Seth was fifteen—in a month, anyhow—and Whiskey was his responsibility.

He whistled again. Whiskey glanced at him. He could swear the dog looked worried.

He pulled out his earbuds. “Whiskey, come.”

The dog stayed, fur bristling. Seth heard traffic outside the park on Fulton. He heard birds singing in the trees and a jet overhead. He heard Whiskey growl.

Seth rode toward him. It might be a raccoon, and even in San Francisco raccoons could have rabies.

He stopped beside the dog. “Hey, boy. Stay.”

He heard a car door close, back on Kennedy. Boots crunched on leaves and pine needles. Whiskey’s ears went back. Seth grabbed his collar. Tension was vibrating from the dog.

The birds weren’t singing anymore.

“Come. Heel,” Seth said, and turned around.

A man stood on the trail in the dusk, ten feet ahead. Surprise fizzed through Seth all the way to his hair.

The man’s shaved head ran straight down to his shoulders without stopping for a neck. His arms hung by his sides. He looked like a ball-park frank that had been boiled all day.

He nodded at Whiskey. “He’s a handful. What’s his name?”

The sun was almost down. Why was the guy wearing sunglasses?

He snapped his fingers. “Here, dog.”

Seth held Whiskey’s collar. The fizzing covered his skin, and he had a bright, thumping feeling behind his eyes. What was this guy after?

The hot dog in shades tilted his head. “I said, what’s his name, Seth?”

The brightness pounded behind Seth’s eyes. The man knew who he was.

Of course the man did. Seth was lanky and had coppery hair that stuck up like straw and pale blue eyes that could shoot people the look, the one his mom called the thousand-yard stare. *Just my luck*, she said sometimes. *You look exactly like your father.*

Seth gripped Whiskey’s collar. Just *his* luck. His bad luck. His bad, bad, oh, *shit*—this had to do with his dad.

What was this guy after? This guy was after *him*.

He took off. He jumped on the pedals and bolted like a greyhound,

ninety degrees away from Oscar Mayer Man, riding like a maniac into the woods.

“Whiskey, *come*,” he yelled.

There was no trail, just bumpy ground covered with brown grass and dead leaves. He gripped the handlebars and pedaled harder than he thought his legs could turn. His glasses bounced on his nose. His earphones swung down and bucked against the bike. Tunes dribbled out.

Behind him, Whiskey barked. Seth felt too scared to look back.

Oscar Mayer wasn't the only one. Whiskey had been growling at something on Kennedy Drive, and Seth had heard a car door slam and footsteps on the trail. His throat felt like it had an apple jammed down it. Two guys were here to get him.

He had to warn his mom.

His cell phone was in his jeans pocket, but riding like a psycho, he couldn't reach it. A moan rose in his throat. He fought it down. He couldn't cry. The trees had darkened from green to black. Ahead, a hundred yards away through the branches, he glimpsed headlights passing on Fulton Street.

He had to get home. His mom—God, what if these guys went after her, too?

Ninety yards to Fulton. Headlights glared white through the trees. His hands were cramping on the handlebars, his legs burning. The guitar bounced in the backpack case. The bike slammed over a rut. Seth held it, straightened out, and kept going. There'd be people on Fulton. The headlights drew closer.

Behind him, Whiskey yelped.

He looked over his shoulder. His dog was bounding after him through the brush. Behind the dog came Oscar Mayer.

“Whiskey, *run*,” Seth yelled.

His legs felt shaky but he dug in again, flying toward the street past an old oak tree.

The second man was waiting behind it.

He shot out an arm as Seth rode past and grabbed the neck of the

guitar, yanking him off the bike. Seth's feet swung up and his arms flew wide. He crashed to the ground on top of the guitar. Heard the strings *sproing* and the body crack. The breath slammed out of him.

The man grabbed him. This guy was square with a gray buzz cut, like a concrete brick. He was old but covered with acne. He dragged Seth to his feet.

Seth kicked at him. "Let me go."

It came out as a scream. Seth swung a fist and kicked for the man's knees.

"Jesus." The man twisted Seth's arm behind his back.

A sharp pain wracked his elbow. The man shoved him toward the bushes.

Then, in a rush of muscle and power and furious barking, Whiskey attacked. The dog lunged and sank his teeth into the man's wrist. The brick reeled and let go of Seth.

Seth staggered, glasses crooked, through the trees toward Fulton Street. Behind him he heard crazy barking. The brick shouting. A horrible yelp from Whiskey.

Forty yards to Fulton. Whiskey's whimper fell to a moan of pain. Seth kept running. Twenty yards. He could hear his dad: *Don't swerve for an animal. If it's between you and a dog in the road, you need to be the one who lives.*

But this was happening because of his dad, and he had to get out of it or he and his mother were going to be in a whole huge world of pain and fear.

Fifteen yards. He could see the street, cars, the sidewalk, the cross street that led off Fulton. *His* street—his house was a block up the road. He squinted, trying to tell if his mom's car was parked there.

Somebody was standing on the driveway. A woman—he saw pale legs in a skirt. Long light-brown hair.

His strength flooded back in a vivid burst. "*Mom!*"

Whiskey wailed.

Seth faltered. Whiskey had rescued him—he couldn't abandon the dog. He spotted a rock, picked it up, and turned around.

Oscar Mayer was barreling straight at him. Before Seth could jump the man hunkered low, like a linebacker, and tackled him.

Seth hit the ground so hard his glasses flew, but he kept hold of the rock. He bashed it against the guy's head.

"Let me fucking go."

The man grabbed Seth's hand and pinned it to the ground. The brick ran up, jerking Whiskey by the collar.

"Really is his old man's kid, isn't he?" The brick turned his arm, looking at a bloody bite. "Bastard mutt."

Seth threw his head back. "Mom!"

Oscar Mayer grabbed his face and tried to force his mouth open and shove a handkerchief inside to gag him. The man had blood on his forehead where the rock had hit. Seth locked his jaw. Whiskey surged, trying to reach him. The man pinched his nose. Seth kicked, trying to get the guy's knees, but next to the human hot dog he was just a stick insect. He opened his mouth to gulp a breath and got the handkerchief jammed past his teeth.

The man grabbed Seth's hair, leaned down, and put his lips next to Seth's ear. "I'll hurt you." His voice, so close, made wet noises against Seth's skin. "But first I'll hurt your dog. With a screwdriver."

All Seth's strength turned to water. A dark weight pressed on his chest, and tears rose uncontrollably toward his eyes.

Oscar Mayer smiled behind his shades. His gums looked pink and glistening. He turned to the brick. "Call."

Without his glasses the twilight looked blurred and murky. Seth heard the brick on a cell phone.

"Come on."

Oscar Mayer wiped the back of his forearm over his brow. "You know what this is about?"

On the street, a black van screeched to a stop. A man hopped out and strutted toward the woods. He was a skinny white guy, but he looked like a gangbanger. Or like one he'd seen on MTV. Blue bandanna tied around his forehead, chain hanging from the pocket of his saggy jeans, shoulders rolling. He was like the *Mickey Mouse Club* version of a lowrider.

Oscar Mayer eyed him like he was dressed for a parade. Marking him down as a moron. A scary one.

Then he turned his hot dog head back to Seth. “You know where your dad is? What he’s doing?”

Seth clamped his mouth shut.

“You got a choice. You want to get hurt, or disappear?” He scanned Seth’s face and let his wet mouth smile again. “Didn’t think so.” He looked at the other men. “Get him up.”