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—Jessica Verday, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Hollow*

ANYA PARRISH

DAMAGE

just imagine.

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First e-book edition © 2011

E-book ISBN: 9780738730219

Cover design by Ellen Lawson

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Flux
Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.
2143 Wooddale Drive
Woodbury, MN 55125
www.fluxnow.com

Manufactured in the United States of America

One

Dani

The bus smells of diesel, old sandwiches, the ghosts of sweaty soccer players, and opportunity. Sweet, shiny opportunity.

I suck in a deep breath and almost smile, but don't. Even on a day like this one, with the winter sun shining through the smeary bus windows and an entire twelve hours of freedom and New York City exploration spreading out before me like brightly colored beads on a wire, there's no reason to let my guard down.

I don't smile when people are watching. I don't frown, either. I strive for neutrality and balance.

Every winter morning, I pull on khaki pants, a white collared shirt, and a navy sweater. Every day, I brush my long, reddish-brown hair into a low ponytail and sweep on mascara and a touch of lip gloss. I look tidy and pretty enough not to be teased, plain and unassuming enough not to be threatening.

Pleasant. Invisible. Just the way I like it.

"So did you give your stepmom the note?" Mina asks. I don't miss the predatory excitement in her voice.

Mina is rarely pleasant, and never invisible.

Today, she wears her blue-and-white-plaid uniform skirt rolled up at the waist to show off more of her strong, dancer's legs, paired with scarred, black motorcycle boots. Her chin-length black hair is flat-ironed into aggressive points and her eyeliner is thick and hostile.

If she weren't five inches shorter than my five eight, I would never have been brave enough to say "hello" to her on her first day of ballet class two years ago. Mina was even scarier then, before she brought up her grades enough to get into Madisonville Prep and was forced to remove her numerous piercings and adhere to the private school dress code.

"Was she crushed that you don't think of her as your BFF?" Mina asks, in a

perfect imitation of my stepmother's perky, upbeat tone. "Did she weep that the past four years of stepmotherly love and dedication haven't won your heart?" She clasps her hands to her chest and fakes a sob.

Mina thrives on the noxious air that lingers above an emotional battlefield. Sometimes I do, too. Last night, after two hours of *Nutcracker* rehearsal with Ivon the Destroyer of feet and souls—the guest director Madisonville City Ballet brought in for this year's production—I was ready to create some drama of my own. I tasted the metallic flavor of trouble on my tongue as Mina and I drafted the blackmail letter, and I enjoyed it.

I strive for neutrality and balance in most things, but where the mothers in my life are concerned, I mostly try not to give in to the urge to poison their non-dairy creamer.

Both my mom and stepmom, Penelope, are lactose intolerant. It's the only thing they have in common aside from marrying my dad. Both make my life difficult—Mom because she can't be bothered, Penny because she bothers too much.

"I didn't give it to her. I decided to wait," I tell Mina. "See how it goes."

"What!"

"It's almost Christmas break. I'll be stuck in the house alone with her for days while Dad's at work. If she's upset, she'll mope around acting pathetic and I'll feel awful."

"She's going to convince your dad you're too young to go, and you'll lose your spot if you wait much longer to pay the deposit." Mina ambles deeper into the bus, standing on tiptoe to hunt for two empty seats next to each other. But the senior boys in front of us are tall and wide and taking their sweet time. She turns back to me. "You've got to show her you're not going to let her ruin your life."

I sigh. Missing the eight-week resident dance camp at the New York City College of Arts next summer probably won't ruin my life, but it won't help my career either. Mina and I are still just sophomores, but dancers need to be ready to go to work straight out of high school, or sooner. There are sixteen-year-olds working in professional ballet companies across the country.

Not that I want to be a ballet dancer. I have different goals, goals I will never tell Mina. Our supposed mutual desire to bleed into our toe shoes for a living is

the glue that holds our friendship together.

My only friendship. I don't feel the need for more, but I don't want to lose Mina. Despite her flaws, she's a good friend. Loyal, but lacking that craving for extreme intimacy I've noticed in other best friend relationships. We tell each other many things, but not everything. I like that. It feels ... safe.

"You know she's the one calling the shots, not your dad, right? I mean, that's not cool. She's not even really related to you."

"I know," I say. "I'll think of something. I just ... I didn't feel right about it after I got home."

Bitching to Mina about Penny secretly slipping her loser brother hundreds of dollars every month is one thing. Threatening Penny with exposure is another. Penny is a pain, but she looks out for me in her control-freak kind of way. And she can't help lying to my dad. He doesn't believe in charity for family members. My stepmom is just trying to do what she feels she has to do for her brother while keeping her husband happy. No matter how much I resent her constantly sticking her nose into the business of "parenting" me—from her psychotic attention to my nutrition to the forced-fun family hiking trips—I still feel a certain amount of sympathy for her.

After all, haven't I told my share of lies in the name of keeping Dad happy?

"You're too good," Mina says. "It's a problem."

My lips thin, crooking at the edges. "I'll work on finding my inner evil."

"You do that." She gives the boys dawdling in the aisle in front of us another nasty look and flicks the ballet-shoe key chain hanging from my backpack zipper. "I hear Christmas spectaculars are great places to connect with inner evil."

"Probably. Santa's pretty scary when you think about it."

"Totally scary. Do we really have to go? Haven't you seen the Rockettes' crotches enough by now?"

Anxiety tightens the skin at my neck, making me regret buttoning the top button of my shirt. "I like the Rockettes."

"Really?"

"Really."

No, not really. I don't like the Rockettes, I *love* the Rockettes. It's a shameful

secret I'll never tell anyone in my snobby dancer world, but I *love* them. Love them so much I want to be one. Forget toe shoes; give me tap shoes and high kicks.

Mina would die if she knew. So would my dad. Ballet as a career choice is bad enough, but at least it's "culturally relevant."

"Aren't we a little old for Radio City?"

I shrug. "Maybe, but we already signed up for the Christmas show. You know how Mrs. Martin is about changing things. She'll never let us switch."

"Fine." Mina rolls her eyes and my throat unclenches. "But next year we're going to the Met." She turns around and stomps one boot on the floor. The boy in front of her—a senior with super-wavy brown hair, but the kind of face that can pull off Shirley Temple curls—glances over his shoulder and grins.

Despite her scary factor, Mina is very, very pretty.

"What's the problem, Nate?" Mina asks, a perfect mix of flirtation and annoyance in her tone.

I'm not surprised that she knows the guy's name. Madisonville Prep is divided into a girls' campus and a boys' campus, but we all get together for field trips and dances and charity stuff. In the past two years, Mina has made it her business to know the names of every decent-looking guy at Madisonville and dated more than a handful of them.

She dragged me along only once. The double date ended less than an hour after it began. I was too nervous to say a word to the boy her date had brought along for me. He bailed after coffee, before we even made it to the all-ages '80s night at the Den.

I think his name was Shane, but I can't really remember. I've tried to block his name and face from my memory, the better to not blush bright red the next time I see him.

He isn't on the trip today, I know that much.

"Krista and her minions are taking forever." Nate nods toward the rear of the bus, where a clutch of senior girls are arranging pillows and blankets and tiny portable televisions all connected to one laptop via a web of cords. The drive into the city only takes two hours, but they look like they're settling in for a transatlantic flight.

“Fabulous. Wonder what we’re watching this time? *Twilight*, *New Moon*, or *Eclipse*?” Mina rolls her eyes again. Her eyeliner makes them look even more intensely blue. Really pretty. I can tell Nate notices, but doesn’t notice me noticing him. People usually don’t.

“I’m not watching anything.” He slides into the seat on his left. “I’m going to sleep. You can sit with me if you want.” He nods to the empty space beside him.

He’s trying to keep it casual, but I can tell he’s interested in Mina. I wonder if it’s just because she’s pretty or if he’s heard the stories. According to legend, Mina is “great in bed.” I don’t know if that’s true or not. Mina and I don’t talk about things like that.

I think she can tell that sex mystifies me and that I prefer to stay mystified. It doesn’t matter that I’ll be sixteen in June. Sex is an adult thing to me. Maybe it’s because I’m so thin and flat-chested that I still feel like a kid despite my height. Maybe it’s because imagining being naked, skin to skin, with another human being makes my flesh crawl.

As far as I can tell, touching, hugging—closeness in general—is overrated. I prefer to be inviolate, alone in my body, without anyone trying to bridge the gap between one person and another. Skin was created for a reason, to keep us from getting too close. I don’t see a reason to force something that seems unnatural.

I had enough forced closeness when I was little, when dozens of doctors and nurses with their cold tools and colder hands took for granted the fact that they could touch me however they liked.

“Oh really?” Mina leans a hip against the seat. Her skirt inches up, revealing even more of her thigh. “So I get to watch you sleep all the way to New York? Sounds fun.”

Oh no. She wouldn’t. Would she?

Nate smiles. “I’m cute when I sleep.”

“Who told you that?” Mina shifts closer. My teeth grind together. She wouldn’t. She wouldn’t leave me to sit by myself. She knows I don’t have anyone else.

“My mom.” Nate blinks big brown eyes, wondering if Mina will get the joke.

Low laughter, a purr of approval, slips from Mina’s lips and curls on the seat next to Nate. Mina follows it a second later. “Fine, but if you snore and drool

I'm recording it and posting it on YouTube."

Panic dumps into my bloodstream and goes swimming through my veins, tightening my throat, curling my fingers, making my bladder ache even though I used the bathroom just before getting on the bus. The few feet of emptiness in front of me, where Mina and Nate were standing a second ago, stretches on for miles.

The girl behind me shoves at my shoulders with her hot breath.

I have to go, find another seat, but I can't get my feet to move.

"You don't mind, do you, Dani?" Mina's blue eyes meet mine, wondering if I get the message. I do. I'm not nearly as oblivious as she thinks I am. She's angry that I didn't give Penny that letter, frustrated by the fact that I'm making her go see the Rockettes for the third year in a row.

This is my punishment.

I shake my head, tongue too thick to form words. Thankfully, my feet begin to move on their own, shuffling down the aisle. I reach the web of senior-girl wires and have to focus on stepping up and over, guiding my large feet safely down on the other side. The action calms me. Dance steps; it's just like choreographed dance steps, a series of organized movements that will take me where I need to go, to the prearranged place on stage. There is no uncertainty, no need to be afraid.

I pretend I'm back in the theater, inhaling the scent of old plaster and aging wood, scuffing my toe shoes through the chalk near the curtain to keep from slipping on the slick, worn planks of the stage. I move smoothly with the other dancers of the corps de ballet in front of me, each of us dressed for practice in identical pink tights and black leotards, each one with hair slicked tight into a bun, virtually indistinguishable except for our varying heights.

When I'm a Rockette, even that will fade away. Rockettes all have to be between five six and five ten and a half and are arranged on stage in such a way that the audience barely notices the slight difference. They are costumed alike, makeupped alike, trained and creatively padded so that even their bodies seem identical.

And when they dance, they dance as one entity, in harmony, consuming the attention of every last person in their world while still remaining individually

invisible.

Invisible, but seen. Anonymous, but beloved.

Sometimes my dream seems the stupidest thing in the world. Sometimes it is a secret treasure in my pocket.

My hands tremble on the worn leather of the seats on either side of the aisle, my eyes stare at the back window and the red emergency handle underneath. I've reached the end of the line.

"You okay?"

I turn toward the voice. It belongs to a boy, one I recognize, but not one of Mina's conquests. Mina only pretends to be bad. In reality she has to be in by eleven, goes to mass every Sunday with her family, and babysits her two little half-brothers every Wednesday night so her mom and stepdad can have their "date night." She's never written a letter telling her stepdad she hates the way he says mean things about her biological father, she's never snuck out her ground-floor window, and she's never talked back to a teacher or turned in her homework a day late or worn her hair down to ballet class.

Her biggest act of defiance is perpetrated with an eyeliner pencil.

Not so with this boy. He is genuinely Bad. He was suspended twice last year, once for punching an assistant coach during lacrosse practice. At the time, everyone was certain he would be expelled for good. He's a scholarship student. They're expected to be on their best behavior, grateful for the gift they've been given. And even if his family was a top contributor to Madisonville Prep, there's a strict "no violence" policy. We aren't allowed to hit *each other*, let alone a teacher—even if he is just an assistant coach.

But come August, there he was, Jesse Vance in the flesh, hunched over the extracurricular activities registration table, signing up for the fall after-school sports programs. His short black hair stuck straight in the air the way it always had, his bright blue eyes were sharp and watchful, alien in a room full of people who had never considered whether they were predators or prey.

Well ... most hadn't considered it. If I let myself, I could remember. There's a reason I play the diabetes card to get out of anything resembling a competitive sport in gym class.

Not so with Jesse. He plays every sport known to man and is extraordinary at

every one. He's six feet tall and built like a grown man, strong and solid and terrifying. I've seen what his body can do to other boys on the wrestling team, watched the contained violence in the way he wields his lacrosse stick.

We all suspect that athletic promise is the reason he was allowed to stay, though he's probably dangerous and undoubtedly scary.

Jesse doesn't have a single friend at Madisonville Prep. He's the only boy I've ever seen who can play with a team, but not seem a part of it. He doesn't joke or smile with the other boys, he doesn't date any of the girls. He's an outsider in every sense of the word. I see him on the town commons at least once a week, but he's always alone. Not even the rougher, cooler, townie kids will come anywhere near him.

He might as well have yellow caution tape floating around his body.

"Are you okay?"

And he's asking if I'm okay.

"Dani?"

And he knows my name.

His eyes slide to the front of the bus then back to me. "Sit down." His hand closes around my wrist, completely encircling the bone. I have small bones, but his hands are huge. His fingers and thumb overlap, beginning a second journey around my arm. My diabetic bracelet slips down to brush against his skin, but he doesn't seem to notice.

Good. I don't like people to know if I can help it. My diabetes is mild compared to what it was when I was a kid, but still ... it's something I like to keep secret. To ignore. Even as I make a mental note to eat the muffin in my backpack before too much longer, before the insulin shot I gave myself a few minutes ago in the bathroom kicks in, I manage to largely ignore the mathematics associated with diabetes management.

There is no ignoring the fact that Jesse is touching me. He's looking up into my eyes, expecting an answer. Expecting action.

If someone had told me this was going happen, I would have been terrified. My panic attack after Mina's dismissal would have faded to a tiny tremor on my radar in comparison to the earthquake of this interaction. A boy is *touching* me, and not just any boy, but Jesse Vance.

But this crept up on me unaware, this moment of being tugged down into the empty seat next to Jesse. His hand is warm and firm, but strangely gentle. It's as if he knows how ridiculously hard the solo dance to the back of the bus was for me, as if he understands what it feels like to be breakable.

"It's the last empty seat." His tone is dismissive, but his fingers linger on my wrist before pulling away. He crosses his arms and turns toward the window, but his shoulders are so broad that his body still brushes against mine.

The place where we touch has a mini panic attack of its own. The skin beneath my sweater burns hot then cold, the nerve endings shredding and reforming themselves in the wake of this shocking new discovery.

The discovery that maybe separation isn't as desirable as I'd thought, that maybe, just maybe, the gaps between people are meant to be bridged.

Two

Jesse

For a second, I think about grabbing her and making a run for it. We could be out the back of the bus and into the woods behind the school before anyone notices we're gone. The alarm doesn't work. This is the same bus the lacrosse team uses for away games, and Coach disabled the alarm last spring so we could load our duffle bags and equipment from the back without listening to the thing scream. Dani and I could go. Run. Hide.

I could force her to come with me.

She's tall, but thin. Physically strong—I could feel it when I grabbed her wrist—but emotionally weak. She almost lost it when her friend ditched her. She won't fight or call for help. And when I tell her the truth, she might even believe me.

Dani isn't like the others. I can tell she knows what it's like to be afraid. She knows how many things there are to be afraid of.

"Thanks." Her voice is deeper than I thought it would be, but pretty. It sounds like she'd be a good singer. "I'm Dani ... guess you know that."

Of course I know. She's pale and a little too skinny and never wears a skirt or makeup, but she's one of the prettiest girls at Madisonville Prep. Not hot, but beautiful in a simple kind of way. Her big brown eyes see everything and her hair is shiny like those girls in the shampoo commercials. I've always wondered if it's as soft as it looks. It would have to be pretty soft to compete with her skin. Her skin was like tissue paper. I could feel the flutter of her pulse underneath it. I can still smell the soap and mint and flowers mixing in her perfume.

Or maybe it's just shampoo. She doesn't seem like the type who wears perfume. She doesn't try that hard. It's part of what makes her interesting.

Most people at Mad Prep don't notice Dani, but I knew her name and basic details a few days after I enrolled. I know she has a pretty, blond stepmom who

picks her up after school and a big deal doctor dad who is a Major Donor. I know that she's some kind of dancer and that she would be one of the first people signed up for this stupid field trip.

I knew all that even before the man with her picture slipped me five hundred dollars to make sure she got on this bus.

I wasn't planning to go to New York before that. It's the last day of school before break; who wants to make it any longer than it has to be? Especially to go to a museum or some musical with one hundred dancing Santa Clauses or whatever the hell that Radio City thing is about.

Madisonville Prep dismisses at three forty-five; the bus from New York City won't be back until after eight at night. It's a no-brainer. It's better to stay at school and watch a bunch of dumb movies or sleep in classes where the teachers couldn't care less what you do now that finals are over, and be free four hours earlier.

But then, last Tuesday, the man gave me the money. Five hundred dollars. More money than I've ever held at once.

I go to an expensive school on scholarship and I live with people who've never earned more than twenty grand a year and don't like spending much of it on me. Even the money the government gives them for allowing me to live there. I pay for a lot of my own food, and buy my own clothes and uniforms with money I earn working construction during the summer. I break my back for three months so I can spend the school year breaking the rest of the bones in my body. Playing three sports doesn't leave much time for an after-school job.

My counselors at school say it will all be worth it in the end. I have decent grades, but I have star potential as an athlete. I'll get a scholarship, change my life, and finally become something more than a foster kid or an "abuse survivor." I'm a big deal. Scouts are already noticing, even though I'm just a junior.

At first, I thought the man was a college scout.

He was wearing a green warm-up suit, glasses, and a ball hat. He hung around for our entire soccer game against Ithaca High School, even when it started to rain halfway through. Most of the parents had gone to sit in their cars by the end, but the guy stayed. And gave me money to go on a field trip. And to make sure Danielle Connor went on it, too.

“You’re Jesse, right?” She picks at the skin around her cuticle. I can see her fingers out of the corner of my eye. I’m making her nervous.

Still, I don’t say anything. I don’t know what to say.

Run. We have to get off this bus.

She’ll think I’m crazy. Maybe I am. Maybe nothing is going to happen.

Right. Some old man in dark glasses gives you money to make sure a pretty girl gets on a school bus going to a big city. Nothing’s going to happen, there’s no way he’s going to grab her and lock her in some basement room and do things to her.

Things even worse than they did to you.

The bus rumbles and lurches forward. I smell fuel and my stomach clenches. My fingers dig into my own arms. It’s too late now.

It’s always too late.

Sweat gathers between my shoulder blades. I drop my forehead to the cold window and suck in a breath, watching trees become houses and houses become fast food restaurants and fast food restaurants fade into trees again as we merge onto the highway heading south. The sun is shining so bright the frost in the fields on the side of the road makes my eyes hurt. It’s a perfect day and everything is going to be fine.

Everything really is going to be fine. I signed up for the stupid Radio City show. I’ll follow Dani and her friend and sit a few rows behind. If she gets up to go to the bathroom, I’ll go with her. If she and her friend go shopping, I’ll go too. I’ll be their shadow, ready to kick that man’s ass if he shows up and tries to grab Dani. I’m bigger than he is. Unless he has a gun, there’s no way he’ll be able to take me.

I pocketed the money before I thought better of it, but I’ve thought better of it now.

Anyway, I did what he asked me to do. I made sure Dani’s name was on the sign-up list and I added mine in the last space. We’re both on the bus heading for New York City. I never told the freak I’d let him abduct her or touch her or even look at her up close.

Close. We’re close. Our shoulders brush just the slightest bit. She doesn’t pull away the way I think she will, but I know she can’t be comfortable. I’ve never

seen her touch anyone except that goth girl she's friends with, and she doesn't have a boyfriend. At lacrosse practice last year, Gareth said he thought she was a lesbian. He wasn't being mean about it, just making an observation, but I've remembered it ever since.

I'd bet my leg that Danielle doesn't like girls like that. But she doesn't like guys, either. She doesn't like people, at least not when they get too close. She needs her space. She's like me. I felt it from the second I first saw her, and every careful step she took to get to the back of the bus was a spy confirming my suspicions.

I suddenly want to know what happened to her to make her like me. But then just as quickly decide I don't. I have enough bad memories of my own; I don't need to collect someone else's.

Still, I never imagined we'd end up sitting next to each other. It never entered my mind. I wonder if it's a sign that my gut is right and I need to watch out for her. If so, it would be a good idea to quit acting like an asshole. Otherwise, she'll be as scared of me as some stalker old enough to be her dad.

*Just ask her what she's doing over break, or tell her you like the smell of her—
No, don't tell her that. You don't talk to a girl like Dani about the way she smells. Tell her you've seen her around school. Ask her what grade she's in. Tell her you—*

Say "hi," idiot. Say "what's up?" Something! Or just turn and look at her. Quit staring at the window like a loser or it's going to be too late.

Too late. I see the headlights coming, but my brain doesn't register what they are until after. They're too high, too intense. Even in the early morning sunlight, they're bright enough to blind me. I squint and turn to Dani, planning to ask her if she knows what they are.

I've barely turned away from the window when the semi hits.

The middle of the bus explodes, glass shattering, metal groaning as people near the point of impact are thrown from their seats. Dani and I are forced the other direction as the two ends of the bus fold back around the truck.

Dani crashes into me, her light body slamming against mine. My arms close around her on instinct just before the back of my head hits the window. I can hear the pop of bone striking glass over the cries of the girls in front of us and

the wail of iron as the bus screeches across the road. My brain feels soft and squishy and the day grows darker, like somebody turned down the sun.

Dani's hands clutch mine as she curls into a ball. She's smarter than I am; some part of her must have known we wouldn't be smashed against the glass for long.

Our sideways movement ends in a moment of horrible stillness. One second we're skidding, then, with a groan and a crack, we're falling. Faster, faster, off the side of the bridge, shooting through empty air.

The world whirls and people fly like clothes in a dryer, flipping over each other, feet and hands and jackets and backpacks and portable televisions colliding and coming apart broken. I curl around Dani, clenching my stomach and tucking my head, trying to protect as much of her as possible. I've already got a busted skull; might as well put my broken body to use.

We start to fall toward the opposite window, but by the time we get to the other side, the window is the roof of the bus. My spine hits—hard. I make a noise, but I can't hear it over the rushing of the blood in my head. Maybe it's because of the injury; maybe it's a side effect of fear.

I've never been so afraid. The world is sharp with it; everything stands out like a scene from a pop-out book. I swear I can see pupils dilate, pieces of dirt rise up from the floor as gravity reverses its pressure, concrete rush by smashed windows with teeth made of broken glass.

Then it's over, ending with a bang way bigger than the one it started with.

The bus lands on the same side it was hit, the force of our fall knocking the bus flat again, ironing out the wrinkle made by the initial impact. As metal and rubber and glass collide with cold earth, a collective groan fills the air, a sound of such pure pain it makes my teeth hurt.

Or maybe they hurt because Dani's skull slams into my jaw as we land. She groans and goes limp just before we slide down the side of the roof to puddle with the rest of the bodies on the new floor.

I smell gasoline and sewer. I feel the cold winter day seeping into the air, cooling the blood that spills from torn skin.

God, everything hurts. My ribs, my head, my arms, my jaw. Glass slices into my side and stabs through my sweater and undershirt, but I can't move. There's

a terrible pressure in my chest and a something ...

Something ... crooked ... rattles inside my brain.

More gasoline stink, so strong I can almost taste it. Visions of big-budget movie crashes and cars going up in a burst of flames shoot behind my eyes. My foster dad says that's a bunch of Hollywood bullshit. Real cars hardly ever burn. He ought to know, he drives a tow truck part-time. Only part-time, so he can spend the rest of his time on the couch watching those bad movies.

When I was younger, before Mad Prep and the endless soccer and wrestling and lacrosse practices, I used to watch them with him. I never realized I missed those long, lazy nights until this very second. I'll have to tell Trent that he isn't a complete loser. I didn't always consider every day under his roof another day in prison.

In fact, in those early days, watching movies with him probably saved my life. The later I stayed up, the less time I had to spend in my bed waiting for the monster that kept trying to kill me. Green and black, with slick scales covering snakelike muscles—the monster was every bad dream I'd ever had rolled into one terrifying package.

I never got a good look at the creature, but I felt its death grip around my neck dozens of times. I smelled its devil breath and watched its red eyes glow in the darkness. It would hover over me while I slept, but never strike until it knew I was awake. It wanted me to be conscious when I died, wanted to lick up my fear with its rough tongue, soak up my death like bread swiped through spaghetti sauce.

In my mind, I called it the Thing, but I never named it aloud. I never said a word, never made a sound, never cried out for help. I knew by then that crying out for help only worked if there was someone around who gave a damn. I stopped calling out and learned how to fight. And I fought and I fought, every single night, until finally the monster went away. Around my tenth birthday.

It's been seven years since I've seen the Thing. It's been almost that long since I've thought about it. Even when I push myself to the breaking point in the weight room, getting bigger, stronger, meaner than anyone else, I don't let myself wonder why I need to be so strong. Even when I go to sleep with the lights and the television on, I don't let myself remember why I'm afraid of the

dark.

I don't admit to anyone—even myself—that I'm afraid of anything.

But I am. I'm afraid of dying in this bus. I'm afraid of Dani dying in my arms. I'm afraid of the Thing that came in the night, the Thing I almost swear I can see curled around the broken steering wheel at the front of the bus, staring down the long row of broken, moaning, twisted bodies.

Looking straight at me.

Three

Jesse

Red eyes sent from hell glare above the dragon's mouth and blood drips from its fangs. It leaps from the steering wheel, claws crunching in the broken glass. Green-and-black scales ripple over muscles way bigger than mine, thick masses of tissue that assure me that I'm as small and helpless as when I first went into the hospital.

It's the Thing, no doubt about it. I've never seen it in the daylight before, but I've felt that reptilian body crouched on top of me, tense and ready to strike.

"Mina ... Mina." Dani shifts in my arms, eyelids fluttering. Her head turns and her blood smears onto my sweater.

The skin above her right cheek is split open, and red trickles down her face. I can almost feel how much the Thing would enjoy licking that trail away, getting a taste before coming in for the kill.

Kill. The Thing is back. It's here. It's *real*. And it could kill everyone on this bus.

Or at least everyone who isn't dead already.

The bus is mostly still now. Only a few pained moans and sobs break the silence. A couple of people at the front are moving—flailing arms and legs, struggling to sit up with no help from broken bones and bruised bodies—but the middle is silent. Dead silent.

The place where Dani's friend sat down is the hardest hit, just ahead of the point of impact where the seats are twisted beyond recognition. The chances that Mina is seriously hurt are good and getting better as the Thing slinks into the center of the bus, crawling over debris, pausing to survey the limp bodies with satisfaction. Its eyes slit and it pulls its bloodied lips back another inch, baring more of those impossibly large teeth.

"Mina ... we have to ..." Dani's eyes open, but almost immediately wince

closed again. She shudders against me like it hurts to breathe. “I have to ...”

We have to get out, that’s what we have to do. We have to get the hell out of this bus and away from that dragon before we’re as dead as half the student body of Madisonville Prep.

“Hold onto me.” I scoop Dani into my arms, ignoring the sting in my side and the rush of warmth that seeps through my sweater, and fight my way to my feet.

What’s left of the bus window shatters beneath our combined weight and my left leg plunges through the hole to sink into the muddy ground. I tug it free, gritting my teeth as one of the glass shards stabs into my calf and lodges there. I stumble back toward the emergency exit, feeling my way as I climb over the other seats, too scared to turn my back on the Thing.

“But what about—”

“The bus could explode,” I say, realizing a part of me worries my words are true. The sharp smell of gasoline bites at my nose, making my already aching head spin. “We have to get out. We’ll call for help when we’re safe.”

You’ll never be safe. Never again. Never, never, never. It came for you in the daylight. It won’t be leaving without your blood in its mouth.

I move faster, tripping over dead weight. *Dead weight.* People are dead, people I’ve seen every day, who I’ve envied for their easy smiles and simple problems. And now they’re dead, and Dani and I could be next.

“My backpack ...” Dani reaches a hand toward where we were sitting, but it falls back to her side a second later. Her head lolls against my shoulder. I glance down in time to see her eyes roll back and her lids flutter closed. She’s losing consciousness again, maybe even dying.

“Dani, wake up, don’t go to sleep. Stay awake!” The panic in my voice draws the attention of the monster.

Twenty feet away, the Thing hisses and crouches lower, wiggling its haunches, getting ready to pounce. Dani didn’t see it and none of the people at the front of the bus seem to have noticed a nightmare the size of a small horse slinking through the wreckage, but that doesn’t stop my heart from kicking into adrenaline-fueled overdrive. I don’t care if anyone else can see it. *I can see it.*

And I know if it gets close enough, I’ll *feel* it.

Memories of fighting for my life—small hands clenching around that neck,

straining to keep its teeth away from my face, wrestling for hours in hot, sticky sheets and waking up in the morning with bruises on my ribs—convince me it's time to risk turning my back on danger in the name of getting the hell out of here. Now.

I spin and lunge for the now-horizontal emergency door. Amazingly, it is still whole and clinging to its rusted hinges. All I have to do is get my hands on the handle and push. Two more steps and we're there. I lift my foot, aiming for the center of the door. My boot is only seconds away from impact when I see it.

I jerk my knee to my chest and scream, a raw, terrified sound that stirs up echoes from the front of the bus. But the people up there are only responding to my fear. They have no idea what they're screaming about. There's no way they could. They can't see the Thing from up there. It isn't in the bus with us anymore. It's outside, clawing at the glass that separates its fangs from my foot. I'd nearly let it back in and delivered Dani right into its jaws.

My heart slams in my chest as I back away.

How did it get outside so fast? And how am I ever going to outrun it, even if I do find another way out?

Hours of sprints up and down the soccer field haven't prepared me for this. I was an idiot to think I could ever be big enough or strong enough that I wouldn't have to be afraid. I will always be afraid. Until the day I die. Until the day this monster kills me.

The Thing lunges. Its face smashes into the glass, sending a crack shivering up the center. A few more hits like that and it'll be on top of us.

"Shit!" Blood rushes to my head. Fear and the smell of gasoline—so much thicker here in the very back of the bus—is making me dizzy. I stumble and Dani cries out, but it takes me a second to realize I'm the reason she's in pain. I'm holding her too tight.

I force my hands to relax and my feet to move. I pick my way back over the last seat and across the still forms of Bart Stevens and Na Ngyuen, the only two people socially awkward enough to end up closer to the back than Dani and me. The rest of the bus looms in front of me, an obstacle course filled with bleeding people and crushed seats and a jumble of backpacks and sack lunches and iPods, all useless now that there will be no one alive to use them. Hopelessness catches

in my throat, making it hard to swallow. It's too far. We'll never make it before the bus goes up in flames.

I can smell it now, above the gasoline and the wet earth of the riverbed. Sour ash and burning rubber. Smoke. Somewhere outside, the bus is on fire. Even if that B movie explosion I've been imagining since we crashed doesn't happen, this bus is going to burn and we'll all burn right along with our unnecessary possessions if we don't get out.

"Get out of the bus!" I yell, voice pinging off the crushed metal walls. "Get out! Get as far away as you can! The bus is on fire."

"Fire!" Someone sobs the word, stirring up another round of fear-echoes, but I don't wait around to see if the few conscious people take my advice. I turn back to the emergency exit and the dragon that waits for me with its red eyes and bloody teeth, and I run.

I slam into the handle with my side and jump, legs churning through the air, hoping to get some distance between me and the bus. I hit the ground hard, muscles clenching around the shard still stuck in my calf. Agony jolts up my leg and I cry out, but I don't stop. I don't dare look back to see if the monster I've cleared is already coming after me. I just run. I run as fast as I can, faster than I would have thought possible with glass in my leg, a sliced-up side, and carrying another person. Dani can't weigh more than a hundred and twenty pounds—a hundred thirty at most. Still, it's a lot more weight than I'm used to.

But you wouldn't know it by the way my feet eat up the sandy ground between the bus and the concrete pillars of the bridge. I'm Vince Young in the 2006 Rosebowl, I'm Superman on speed, so fast the wind stings my eyes and makes tears run down my cheeks. If the college scouts were watching, I'd score a fat scholarship on the spot.

Instead, I make an even bigger score. I keep Dani and me alive for a few more minutes.

The explosion rips through the air, filling the world, booming through the narrow riverbed. It crashes into my ears, rattling the loose piece in my brain. The heat comes a second later, burning against my back, so hot I start to sweat even though the front of my body is freezing cold.

The bus exploded. It really did, just like I was afraid it would.

Wouldn't Trent have loved to see that?

It's my last thought before something hits the back of my head and more warm blood spills down my neck. The gray light filtering into the riverbed flares white, then yellow, and then blackness sweeps in. I fall, the arms holding Dani clenching one last time before my vision snuffs out.

Dani

So tired, so cold. But still, I'm sweating. My forehead and upper lip are freckled with little beads, just like when we have ballet rehearsal in the theater during the summer.

The owner insists a theater in upstate New York doesn't need air conditioning. Maybe that's true at night—when the temperatures drop and the patrons come inside wearing sweaters and jackets they can take off if they get too warm—but for the dancers practicing in the eighty-degree heat of midday, it's stifling. My leotard is always drenched and sticky by the first break.

But I'm not wearing a leotard now. I'm in my school uniform. It's the crisp cotton of my white button-up that's glued to my clammy skin, not the soft fabric of my ancient dancewear. And I'm not inside ... I'm outside. Cold, winter air stirs the hair on my neck, trying to freeze the drops sliding into my collar into sweat-cicles.

What am I doing outside? And why does my body hurt all over?

With way more effort than something so simple should require, I open my eyes. I catch a glimpse of rocks and dirt before my lids slam closed, shutters made of lead.

Where am I? What happened? And why can't I keep my eyes open?

Images tease at the edges of my brain—glass shattering, wide, frightened mouths, strong arms that hold me tight as the world spins—but I can't seem to hold on to the pictures long enough to make sense of their message. I am so tired. So, so very tired. Too tired to think, too tired to talk, too tired to stay awake.

Stay awake. Jesse. He told me to stay awake. He was holding me, carrying me out of the wrecked bus, trying to save my life. But now I'm sprawled on cold sand.

Dread jolts my heart like an electric shock and my eyes flicker open. The bus. The accident. What if Jesse didn't make it out, what if—

“Dani?” His face appears above mine, blue eyes as bright as the clear winter sky behind him, triggering a grateful squeeze in my chest.

He's alive! It feels like I've been given some priceless gift. Crazy, since I hardly know him, but maybe not *that* crazy. He saved my life. I was dead weight, but he picked me up and carried me with him when he could have jumped out of the bus and saved himself. “Are you okay? I just woke up. I don't know how long we've been out. Can you hear me?”

“Mm ... hrrss ... ” In my head the words are clear, but they come out muffled and strange. I try again to tell him I'm okay, but my lips won't cooperate. “Nee ... mmmm.”

“Don't try to talk.” He winces as he slides one arm beneath my shoulder and helps me sit. Before I can get accustomed to the feel of his arms around me, of my elbow crooked around his neck, the world spins. I catch a dizzy glimpse of smoke and fire as Jesse's other arm slips beneath my knees, and then he's lifting me off the ground. Over his shoulder, ribbons of red and orange snake through the frigid air.

The bus. It's on fire. It really *did* explode. Mina and Nate and all the other kids and Mrs. Martin and the bus driver—the same old man who drove the bus for every field trip for as long as I can remember—are burning. Maybe while they're still alive, trapped and unable to escape.

The realization sends another jolt through my body, chasing some of the lethargy away.

“We have to ... get help.” I twist in Jesse's arms as he turns and stumbles away from the wreckage.

“I told them to get out. We can't do anything else. We have to keep running. I don't know when it's going to come back.” His voice is strong and sure, even though what he's saying verges on nonsense. “I don't know why it didn't get me while I was passed out, but it'll be back. I know it will. It's not going to stop this time.”

Paranoid nonsense.

He's probably in shock, a fact that would consume more of my attention if my

arm didn't choose that moment to snap into my chest and stay there, twitching, for several seconds. Even my muddled brain knows what this means. Involuntary muscles spasms, the cold sweat, the light feeling in my head, the lethargy, the inability to think straight—I've felt all of these things before. When I was younger and my diabetes was totally out of control, I suffered insulin reactions all the time.

But back then, I always had a doctor or a nurse or at least a grown-up close by who knew about my condition. And I kept a roll of lifesavers in my pocket, prepared to give my sugar a boost when I needed it. I still keep a roll in my backpack, along with my shots and blood sugar monitor.

But my backpack's not here. It's burning on that bus, right along with my best friend.

"Mina! We have to go back. We have to help—"

"We can't help. Anyone who was alive after the crash is dead now. We have to go!"

His words make my throat burn. I taste the orange juice I had first thing this morning. Orange juice. I'll think about orange juice instead of Mina, instead of all the other scary things I need to think about. For once, concentrating on the math of carbs-versus-insulin is a blessing.

I close my eyes, visualizing the cool glass of juice. I only had a few sips. That's all. Then the shot in the bathroom before Mina and I got in line for the field trip. The bus crashed before I had the chance to unwrap the muffin I'd intended to eat. Now, I'll get progressively sicker unless I get something in my system. It's actually amazing I'm not worse than I am already. But I definitely can't let Jesse drag me out into the middle of nowhere. I have to stay by the bus and hope an ambulance and trained medical professionals get to me in time.

"Wait ... I'm diabetic. I have to stay by the bus." I manage to get the words out with only a slight slur. I know Jesse has to have heard me, but he doesn't stop walking away. In fact, he breaks into a hobbled run, a jog-hop that jolts my aching head with every step. "Please, I need sugar. You have to stop. Please, I —"

"I can't stop. I'm sorry. I just can't." He shakes his head and casts an anxious look over his shoulder. "And I can't leave you there. It could hurt you. It could

be real.”

The words prick at something inside of me, that part that knows what it’s like to be afraid for no reason, to be out of your mind believing in things that aren’t there, *people* who aren’t there.

I haven’t thought about Rachel in years. Dreamt about her, woken up screaming with her ruined face burned onto my mental screen—yes. But I haven’t consciously thought about her. I’ve done my best to erase those memories, to wall them up inside my mind and let them suffocate from lack of oxygen.

But now the wreck, the fear, the smell of smoke, and the horrible ache in my head ...

The walls are crumbling. I can almost sense Rachel slipping out, stealing out of her prison with a *tap tap tap* of her best dress-up shoes.

No. She’s not real. You’re just going into shock. You need food.

I shiver; the sweat on my neck feels like someone is holding an ice cube to my bare skin. “I need sugar,” I say. “I have to eat or I’ll get really sick. I’m diabetic.” I hold my bracelet in front of his face and watch as understanding creeps across his features.

His incredibly handsome features. Even now, even afraid and delirious, the strange temptation of his skin remains. I want to trace the strong line of his jaw, feel if his lips are as soft as they look. When my hand drops, it doesn’t fall back into my lap. It moves to his chest, feathering over where his muscles clench tight beneath his sweater. It’s all the confirmation I need that I’m not in my right mind. If I were, I would never dare to press against him, to explore the place where his chest bone becomes muscle with my fingers.

“Okay ... okay,” he mutters beneath his breath, not seeming to notice my touch though he pulls me closer. “So you need to eat? You don’t need ... a shot or something?”

“I took my insulin before I got on the bus. I just need some candy or juice, some kind of sugar or I’ll get sick.”

But even as I speak, saying things I know are true, I can’t help but notice how much easier it is to form words than it was a second before. Except for the odd rattled feeling in my head, I’m starting to feel better, not worse ... which doesn’t

make sense.

Jesse slows, but doesn't turn around. "Okay. I know a place we can go. It's not too far, and I think they have food. They should, anyway. At least a Coke or something."

"Jesse, please. Just let me go back to the bus. I'm sure the police—"

"The police can't help. They might not even be able to ... "

I watch him, watch his throat work as he swallows, and wonder what has made this big, bad boy so afraid. "Might not be able to what?" I ask.

"Nothing. You'll ... think I'm crazy." His eyes are icy blue, but burning from the inside out. My arm that's still around his neck flexes, responding to the need to hold him without my conscious permission. "You probably think I'm crazy already."

I should, but I don't. He isn't crazy, he's just ... scared. Scared half to death, the way I've been scared for most of my life. There's something about being afraid of a monster no one else believes in, that no one else can even *see*, that pushes fear into the realm of mind-blowing terror. That kind of terror destroys things inside you, things necessary to leading a normal life.

But how can you ever be normal when you know that the terrors under the bed are real, that they want your blood on their "imaginary" hands?

The thought has barely whispered through my mind when I see the flash of shining brown hair and sparkling blue eyes in the bare tree limbs above my head.

Rachel. She's back.

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