

DON'T LET THEM CATCH YOU

No one knows what the kidnapper looks like, but everyone knows he is strong and fast. He waits at bus stops and in the woods. He has a car and there's a long rope coming out from it that you can't see because it's made of a special material that's invisible. And the rope has a loop on the end of it. When you step into the loop, he drags you in like a fish.

Then he drives away with you, and no one ever sees you again.

At piano, I play "Tarantella" worse than before. "Did you practice this week?" Mrs. Duncan asks.

I say yes, but I didn't because our keyboard broke. Last time it happened, Uncle Mike fixed it. Now he's in Afghanistan again, and I don't know who will fix it.

Mrs. Duncan asks how many times I practiced. I tell her one hour every day, and she shakes her head.

30 Outside, I stand on the front porch. Mrs. Duncan's house is bigger than ours. We don't have a front porch—only two steps that go up to the door, and when you open it, you're in the living room and Brandy's magazines and sweaters are all over the floor, and Mom will yell at her for leaving her crap everywhere.

Mrs. Duncan's front yard has a little black tree as tall as the top of the windows. It's November, so the ground is gray and brown.

Inside, Anne Fontaine is playing "Russian Dance." It sneaks through the windows and the keyhole in the door. It swirls around on the porch like a little tornado of leaves. Anne is one and a half years older than me. She has long, lemony hair with lots of clips and barrettes. Her mother takes her everywhere in her silver car.

I wait a long time.

Brandy doesn't come.

My sister is supposed to pick me up, but she never does what she's supposed to because she's fourteen. She doesn't care about anyone except her new boyfriend, who is three years older and wears gel in his hair like the Russians. He smells like cigarettes and Cheetos and squints when he looks at me. He doesn't ever say anything, except to Brandy. When he talks to her, he puts his hand on her neck and moves his lips close to her ear.

"Kaitlyn," Brandy told me the first time her boyfriend came over, "if you tell Mom that Chaz was here, I swear to God I will break every bone in your right hand."

She chose that one because I'm left-handed and she wouldn't want to have to help me do things like writing and eating. But that would make it so I couldn't play piano anymore. Brandy hates that I'm so good at piano. When Uncle Mike left for the army, he got Mrs. Duncan to start giving me lessons. He didn't get anything at all for her.

It was after he left that Brandy started dating Chaz. I don't tell Mom that he comes over because I'm good at keeping secrets. Even Brandy's secrets. Even though she doesn't do what she's supposed to, like coming to Mrs. Duncan's to walk me home from piano when there's a kidnapper driving around looking for girls who are all alone.

It's getting late. Anne Fontaine finishes playing "Russian Dance" and moves on to a song I don't know. Her mom will get here soon to pick her up. I don't want her to ask why I'm all alone. Anne will stand next to her in her watermelon raincoat, and her mom will shake her keys in her hands. Both of them will look at me like I'm a lost dog they have to help, but only because it's the right thing to do, not because they want to.

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I don't need their help. I need my sister to come get me. But she isn't here, and that means I have to start walking home by myself.

It happened like this: a girl got off the bus. Her friends waved good-bye to her from the windows. They would see her tomorrow; tomorrow was Thursday. She started walking and the bus drove off. Then she disappeared and no one saw her again.

Brandy told me the girl went to another school in our district. She told me the kidnapper took the girl away in his car.

"Did someone see it?" I asked.

Brandy looked at me in the mirror. Her eyes were gooped with mascara. It was after school and it was four o'clock and there wasn't anything good on TV. Just shows where people sat on couches and cried or stood in front of a judge and yelled about money. Brandy was getting ready for Chaz to come get her. She was sitting in front of the mirror in our bedroom and her make-up was spread out on the floor around her. Her stuff always takes up more space than mine. "Of course not, stupid." She went back to putting on lip gloss.

"Then how do you know?"

"Everyone knows. It's on the news."

Brandy doesn't watch the news. Whenever the news is on, she's always out with Chaz in his lizard-green car. She isn't supposed to leave me alone when Mom is gone. But she always does anyway.

"Maybe they'll find her," I said.

"No, they won't."

"They could."

Brandy shrugged. The phone rang and she gave me a dark look. "Go watch TV or something."

I went. Brandy doesn't care that it's my room, too.

It's nine blocks to our house and you have to cross Olive, which has four lanes and stoplights and a lot of cars. I don't like it because the people sit in their cars and watch when you run across in front of them. Sometimes they're alone and talking to themselves. Sometimes they're arguing with the person in the passenger seat, and when they turn to look at you, their eyes are squinted up so that only the black parts show.

32 I look up the street in the direction I have to go. There aren't any cars coming.

One block, two blocks. I watch my feet on the sidewalk.

A week ago, our teacher took us down to the gym for a school assembly. We sat on the floor and listened while the principal told us about Stranger Awareness. Strangers, she said, can be people we know. "Is the mailman a stranger?" she asked, and we all answered yes. "That's right," she said, and then she told us that while not all strangers are bad, we should never go anywhere alone with a stranger.

But if the kidnapper catches me, I won't have a choice. He'll put me in the back of the car, and we'll drive a long way to his house on top of a waterfall, somewhere in Italy or maybe Japan. He'll have gel in his hair, and he'll smoke cigarettes and tell me how I will never get away, not ever. He'll tell me that he chose me out of everyone because he knows I am the most talented piano player in the world and he wants someone to play music for him for the rest of his life.

But when I play, he'll become sad. He'll howl and beat his head with his fists and cry. It's too beautiful! he'll weep. You're too wonderful to keep alone in a house on top of a waterfall! And then he'll know that he has to set me free.

But maybe I won't go back home when he lets me go.

Somewhere behind me, a car door slams. I turn around. A bright red bird flies from one side of the street to the other and disappears inside a bush.

There are cars parked all along the side of the street. They have wet, dark-looking leaves pasted on their windows that look like big hands pressed against the glass from the inside.

Did the kidnapped girl sit in the backseat or the front?

At Olive, I have to wait for the walk sign. A dirty red car with three men in it pulls halfway into the crosswalk. Two of the men are fat, and one is skinny. There's loud music with screaming voices coming from the car. The driver is one of the fat ones. His tiny eyes are buried deep in his face. His two friends are talking, but he follows me with his eyes.

When I get to the other side, I start running, and I don't stop again until I reach home.

Locked.

The house is dark. Brandy isn't there.

We have a key hidden in a secret place because sometimes my sister forgets to bring hers. I can get it, but I don't want to go inside alone. Inside, it's hard to breathe because the air is heavy. Sometimes the basement door is open and I have to shut it, and when I walk past a mirror or a window, I get afraid that my reflection will start doing something different than me.

Brandy doesn't care about any of that. Once, she asked Mom why she didn't give me my own key. I was in the living room watching reruns on TV. They were in the kitchen yelling at each other.

"Because then you'd think it was okay to leave her alone. You do remember that your sister is eight years old."

"She's *seven*," Brandy said. "Jesus, Mom, you don't even know how old your own daughter is?"

I heard the refrigerator door slam and all the jars rattle around.

"I have my own life, you know," Brandy said in a loud voice.

"Jesus Christ!" Mom said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Why don't you get a fucking babysitter?" Brandy yelled. She stomped in from the kitchen and went to our room. Mom came in with a can of Coke in her hand. She looked at me and then at the TV. "Turn that thing off," she said and went back to the kitchen.

The next day, Brandy left me alone for the first time. She was gone for two hours. I spent the whole time sitting next to the front door, so I could open it and run out if I heard footsteps coming up from the basement. "See?" she said when she got back. "That wasn't so bad, right?" Chaz pulled away in his car, and Brandy watched him go. Then she pulled the front door closed behind her and took a king-sized Snickers bar out of her hoodie. "This is for you," she said, holding it out in front of her. "For being a decent sister and not ratting me out."

"I don't want it," I said. My stomach felt spiky from being nervous and scared.

Brandy frowned. "Don't be an asshole. Chaz spent money on this." When I didn't say anything, she set the candy bar down on the TV and went to our room. "Just don't whine to Mom," she said over her shoulder. "I'm warning you."

When I got hungry, I ate the whole candy bar and then felt sick.

Standing on the steps, I squint at the houses across the street. Their windows are filmy, like crocodile eyes. I can't tell if anyone is looking out.

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We keep the key hidden under a rock. But I can't let anyone see me get it. If a thief knew where it was, he could come in the middle of the night and tiptoe right up beside my bed. He would wave his hands over my face. I'd be fast asleep; I wouldn't even know he was there. Then he'd pick me up and squeeze me until I couldn't breathe or yell, and he'd jump out through the window and run away.

At the side of the house is a bush that comes up to my waist. I pick up the big rock behind it.

The key isn't there.

I push my fingers around in the dirt. It's crumbly and cold and smells like the inside of the fridge when there's food rotting inside. My fingers get dirty and I don't find anything.

It's getting dark. Nighttime is when the thieves come out, and prisoners who escaped from jail. Cars drive by with thumping music, and the people inside them laugh too loud. At night, there are crazy people who could run up to you from behind and push you down on the ground.

Not even for any reason.

Just because you are alone.

I squat down behind the bush. Lucky for me, it's a magic bush that makes me invisible. Even though there aren't any leaves, when I go behind it no one can see me. I just disappear.

A long time goes by. I watch cars drive past. Some of them are neighbors who park and get out and go into their houses. A skinny, streaky cat comes out from behind the corner of a house. A man I don't know walks down the sidewalk real slow with a gym bag swinging at his side.

The way he walks with big, lazy steps makes me scared of him.

There are other people besides kidnappers you have to watch out for.

Finally, the green car comes down the street. It stops in front of our house. My sister stares out the window with a bored, angry look on her face. Chaz turns off the engine, and they sit there for a while without speaking. After a few minutes, Brandy looks at him and says something, and they both get out of the car.

That's when I stand up and become un-invisible.

"Holy fuck!" Brandy yells when I come out from behind the bush.

"I'm locked out," I say. "My legs hurt and I'm cold."

"Where's the key?"

"I don't know."

Brandy folds her arms. Her mouth gets flat, like whenever Mom yells at her for something. "You better not've lost it. Mom'll freak out."

"I *didn't* lose it. It's supposed to be there and it's not."

Chaz says to her, "You've got your key, right?"

"I'm not an idiot," she answers. She sticks her fingers into the front pocket of her jeans. Chaz runs his hands down her sides and says something into her ear. She shakes her head a little.

I want to tell Chaz to stop touching my sister.

"I'm hungry," I say.

Chaz looks at me. His hands are still frozen on Brandy. My sister opens the door, and I follow the two of them inside.

I get a bag of chips from the kitchen. It's an almost-full bag. I decide to be nice and share with Brandy and Chaz. But when I go in the living room, there's no one there. The TV is on with the volume up really loud, and the door to the bedroom is shut. I don't like that the TV is on with nobody watching it.

I stand at the back of the room, eating potato chips out of the bag. On the TV, a fat woman wearing a lot of eye make-up is standing in a bright kitchen stirring some sauce in a pot. "Mm," she says, dipping her head so the steam from the pot goes right up in her face. "That sure does smell good." She widens her eyes, which are already big and surprised-looking because of the make-up. I glance at the door to the bedroom, then back at the screen. "You'll just have to take my word for it," says the fat woman with a wink, and she's looking right at me.

"Brandy," I say, going up to the door. I rattle the knob, but it's locked. "Brandy, come out here."

"Not now," my sister says from somewhere on the other side of the door.

I turn to look over my shoulder. The remote control is sitting in the middle of the couch. I don't want to go over and get it alone. The fat woman's face isn't on the TV, but her voice is still talking. There's a picture of her hands picking up little bowls of spices and tilting them so the camera can see. "Just for a minute," I say.

I hear Chaz mumbling something. After a second, my sister says, "Not right now, K. Just watch TV."

I stand with my ear to the door, trying to hear them talking. I don't care what they're talking about. I just want them to come out of the room. The two of them can sit on the couch together and I'll sit on the chair and they don't even have to look at me at all. We can just watch *The Simpsons* and laugh at the funny parts, like Brandy and me used to do with Uncle Mike when he came by for dinner.

"Kaitlyn, I can see your feet under the door," Brandy says, and now she sounds annoyed. "Just go the fuck away for once."

I feel my face twisting up like a balled-up tissue. I'm thinking about the way Brandy didn't come get me from piano and how she left me locked out of the house in the cold. I'm thinking how unfair it is that she yells at me for no good reason. I'm thinking that I hate hate hate hate hate my sister. Looking at the door, I imagine I can see Brandy's stupid face pasted across it. I pull back my arm and hit it with the palm of my hand as hard as I can. "Fuck you, Brandy!" I yell, and then I cross the living room fast and run out the front door.

I am a swooping owl, a fast train. Nothing and no one can catch me.

I run down the sidewalk all the way to the end of the street, then turn the corner and keep on running. A street goes off to one side, and I run down that. As long as I keep moving, I don't care where I go.

A car passes by me and doesn't slow down. I know it's not the kidnapper. The kidnapper is already stopped and parked, waiting somewhere for me to show up.

And if I meet him, I'll just take my chances and get in his car.

Uncle Mike once told me a stranger might be an angel in disguise. When he e-mailed us from Afghanistan, he said, "Don't worry, I got an angel watching over me here."

It's almost all the way dark now. I've run a long way, and I'm starting to get tired. I slow down to a walk just to catch my breath.

At one of the houses, a man in a too-big T-shirt is standing on the top step smoking. He watches me walk by. He doesn't wave or nod, but his eyes squint up like he's trying to figure out why I'm there. I don't like how he stares without saying anything. I start to walk faster. When I look back, his body is turned a little. He's still watching me, but now he's talking to someone inside the house.

In a second, he's going to stamp out his cigarette.

He's going to come down the steps to the sidewalk.

He's going to start chasing me, and I don't know where to go.

I stop moving. My heart's beating so fast I think I'm going to be sick. I want to run, but my legs feel like they're filling up with ice.

Down the street, a car turns the corner and starts driving toward me. It's so dark I don't see what color it is until it goes under a light. The next second, it stops and the window comes down.

Chaz leans across the seat. "What're you doing all the way over here?"

"I got lost."

"You want to get in?" Chaz asks.

I look back, and the man has gone into his house. But he might come out again. He might just be waiting until I'm alone. "Okay," I say, because suddenly I'm tired and I don't want to have to run from anyone else.

Chaz reaches over to open the door, and I climb into the front seat.

We don't go on the streets that take us back to the house. Instead, we get on the highway. "You like Burger King?" Chaz asks, and I say yes. "I'm hungry. You hungry?"

Everything he says is a yes-or-no question.

At the drive-through, Chaz orders two Whoppers for himself and gets me a Kids Meal. "You want the burger?" he asks.

"Chicken fingers," I say.

"Yeah, with ranch sauce, right? That's what Brandy always gets."

I get mad thinking about Brandy. I don't want him to talk about her. "Barbecue sauce," I tell him.

We eat in the car while he drives. I don't know where we're going, but I don't ask. I'm just glad to be somewhere warm, and I have French fries and chicken fingers to eat, and I don't have to worry about strangers because I'm already with one. He holds the burger with one hand and drives with the other. It reminds me of how Uncle Mike drives, sitting way back in the seat. Chaz flips through the stations on the radio, using the hand that holds the burger. I eat my Kids Meal and get barbecue sauce all over my fingers.

When I'm done eating, I stuff all the trash in the white paper bag. I stare out the window at the telephone poles flashing by and then my eyes close. It's like falling off the top of a tall building. I'm asleep way before I get close to the ground.

When I wake up, everything is slow and heavy. It feels like all around me, instead of air, there's a big sponge. Like I shouldn't open my eyes yet because I'm still supposed to be asleep.

It's quiet. The car isn't moving. Chaz's hand is on my leg.

It's barely resting there. More like it's floating just above it. I turn my head, but he isn't looking at me. He's watching his fingers crawling up my leg like he doesn't know yet what they're going to do.

"It's okay," Chaz says. Now his other hand is in his lap, moving. "It's okay."

I don't think he's talking to me.

When we get back to the house, Chaz reaches across me to open the door.

I get out of the car. My whole body feels itchy and light. I don't want to go into the house with Chaz and see my sister, but I don't want him to drive away, either. "Aren't you going to come in?" I ask.

He shakes his head and looks through the windshield. "Don't worry," he says, "I'm not going to tell Brandy what you did."

As I'm walking up to the house, I hear the car drive away.

Inside, Brandy is sitting on the couch. It's completely dark in the living room, except for the light from the TV. My sister doesn't look at me. She keeps watching the TV, where there are some trees and a lot of police cars, and a man's voice is talking as a photo flashes on the screen. It's one I've seen a few times while flipping through the channels. It's of a girl with brown hair wearing a Cardinals T-shirt, smiling so big her eyes are almost closed. Her teeth are short and wide, like they don't fit her mouth. "They found that kidnapped girl," Brandy says, and she looks over at me. Her eyes are wide and empty, like she doesn't know who I am, or doesn't care. "She's dead," she says and turns back to the TV.

I don't want to watch anymore. I don't want to look at the picture of the girl. She was alive before, and now she's not, and nothing can change what happened.

There's nothing else to do, so I go over and sit at the keyboard. I try turning it on even though I know it's broken. No sound comes out when I press the keys. No one is going to fix it until Uncle Mike comes back, and I don't know when that will be. I duck to look at the tangle of cords at the back of the keyboard, and that's when I see the spare key lying against the wall, almost hidden in the carpet. I remember a few weeks ago when Brandy couldn't find her own key at the bottom of her backpack. "Here, go put this back," she'd said when we got in the house, throwing me the spare key as she ran to the bathroom. But I hadn't put it back right away, and then I'd forgotten.

I pick up the key. I run the teeth along the palm of my hand. All I can think is that I have to bury it again, so no one knows it's my fault it got lost.