



A NOVEL BY
**MICHAEL
CURRINDER**

**running
full tilt**



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Charlesbridge

TEEN

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TO MY BROTHER, CHRIS, for inspiration.
It wasn't always easy, but it was worth
the ride.

I DID ONE FINAL STRIDE and positioned myself on the line. It was a staggered start that would break at the first turn. When the gun finally blasted, I got sucked into the flow. I had to protect myself, but I had to be aggressive, too.

Unlike sprinters, distance runners don't run in the solitude of their own lanes. They run in packs, with steel spikes sharp as steak knives attached to their feet. Inside a tight pack moving at close to four-minute-mile pace, the spikes like barracuda teeth slashing at calves and shins from front and back, elbows and fists box for position.

By the time we cut in at the first turn, it was clear nobody wanted to take the lead in this race. So it was a scramble of bodies as we broke from the bend, sixteen guys angling toward the inside rail, like bees making their way to the hive.

We completed the first lap in 61 seconds and change. I knew damn well that when the pack is crammed tight and you lose focus for even a split second—the amount of time it takes to blink—it's easy to get clipped. So when I went down, the first person I cursed was myself. Falling is a runner's worst nightmare, but I did the only thing I could do at that moment. I got back up.

I knew if I could catch the pack by the bell lap, I might have a chance. At that point in the race, every runner has crossed the pain barrier and is running on fumes. It all comes down to guts and will in the final sprint. I had three laps to go. If I could be there for the final hundred meters, I still had a chance.

That's the beauty of a distance event. If you make a mistake early on, you can still get back in the race.

Part One

1

“LEO?”

“Yes, Caleb?”

“Who put butter on Monica’s nose?”

“You did, Caleb.”

I flipped over onto my back, put my hands under my pillow, and watched the headlights from a passing car hit the speed bump and roll across our bedroom ceiling. It was our last night in the house, and I wished to God my older brother would stop talking nonsense and just close his eyes and go to sleep.

“Morris is frozen cat?”

“Yes, Morris is frozen cat,” I answered.

“THAT’S RIGHT!” Caleb exploded in laughter. “Leo, what car God drive?”

“What car God drive?” I asked.

“GOD DRIVE BROWN THUNDERBIRD FORD!” he said, laughing again.

My brother posed riddles, ones I never solved. I had no idea who Monica was, why our cat was frozen, or why God drove a brown Thunderbird. I just knew my brother refused to sleep, and since he never slept, neither did I.

Dad once explained to me that Caleb's birth was a difficult one and his issues extended way past just autism. Mom was in labor for twenty hours and an encephalogram later revealed a lesion in Caleb's brain that probably was caused by a lack of oxygen. All I understood was that Caleb's autism and cognitive delays meant that his brain made sense of the world in a different way than mine. When he saw, heard, touched, or experienced something, his brain was doing something totally different with that information than my brain. I didn't really get it at the time. I just knew there was something inside him that made him talk differently, walk differently, act differently, and obsess on weird things like train tracks, ceiling fans, and Greyhound buses.

Caleb loved to paint, so Dad used to buy him paint-by-number kits, and on nights when he was especially restless he painted in the den outside our bedroom by the light of the television.

Caleb didn't get the whole idea of painting by numbers. He grasped the part about finding all the squiggly shapes with the same number and filling them in with the same color, but he didn't understand that the codes were predetermined. So he produced this crazy art. One month he painted this series of seascapes where deep-blue water and white-tipped waves became bubbling orange lava flecked with flames. Green-faced-sailors with blazing-red eyes fought for their lives adrift bubbling molten rock.

Dad framed and crammed our bedroom walls with Caleb's art. My favorite was da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. It hung opposite my bed, making it the first and last image I saw each day.

Caleb's version included an orange-skinned Jesus with purple hair, and apostles in jet-black robes circling behind a brick-red table. It looked more like Hells Angels at a Sizzler steak house than Christ's final meal.

"Leo, what happen long time ago?"

"What happened, Caleb?" I asked him.

"Caleb put Morris cat in mailbox."

"Yes, you did, Caleb," I confirmed.

"Scare mailman. RIGHT!" Caleb's laughter filled our tiny bedroom.

"You scared the holy crap out of him," I assured him.

"NEVER, EVER DO THAT AGAIN!" Caleb shouted.
"CALEB GET IN BIG TROUBLE!"

"It's time to sleep." I turned and flipped my pillow. "Good night, Caleb."

"Good night, Leo. God love you."

My brother said this to me every night, and I always wondered what he meant.

Did God love me, or him?

2.

WHILE I WASN'T EXACTLY THRILLED about moving, I couldn't wait to get out of Manchester. We lived in one of those St. Louis subdivisions that looked like it had been designed with Legos; everything looked the same. Our house was located on one of those dead-end streets with a little loop so there's only one way in, one way out, and everybody knows everybody's business.

Last April, Caleb crawled out of bed late at night and wandered into the Larsens' house, a few doors down. He didn't bother ringing the doorbell or knocking. Caleb just barged into their living room and started zinging Mr. and Mrs. Larsen with his bizarre random questions. He did the same to the Pirellos a couple of months earlier, only a little earlier in the evening.

When some seventeen-year-old guy cruises into his neighbors' house late at night wearing nothing but his pajamas, it's going to cause a hot mess in the neighborhood. Breaking and entering lands some people in jail, but Mr. Larsen was pretty cool about the whole thing and didn't even call the cops. Mrs. Larsen was a different story, though. She went off the deep end because Caleb freaked out her twin daughters, Nina and Lori, who were in my grade. She got the whole neighborhood riled up. That was the final straw. After Caleb pulled that

little stunt, my parents decided to ditch Manchester for a new scene.

Mom and Dad weren't exactly sure how Caleb would deal with the move, but they did know that once they started packing up boxes, all hell would probably break loose. My brother liked things predictable. Major disruptions to his routines often triggered tantrums where he'd go ballistic. Caleb would bite his knuckles, smack his head, jump up and down, and scream nonsense. Sometimes he even hurt himself. One time a lightning storm forced Caleb's favorite pool to close down early, so he punched out a bedroom window and ended up getting fifteen stitches.

Mom's solution was to haul Caleb and me down to her parents' farm for the weekend while my parents moved house. I knew it was probably for the best, but it also meant I was in for a crappy weekend. The only difference between Grandma and Grandpa's farm and a prison labor camp was that some prisons actually paid their inmates. By the time Mom rescued us on Monday morning, I was ready to snap.

Our "new" house on Geyer Road turned out to be one of those old ranch homes that looked frail and tired. Its wood siding was scarred from peeling paint and crawling with ivy, the roof spotted with missing shingles, and the windows clouded and bleary with dust. The front yard, though, was enormous and teeming with life. Old oak and elm trees loomed above me; thick, snaky branches shaded the lawn, cooling and hiding me. The tangled chatter of birds and insects made me feel isolated, but it also chilled me out.

“So . . . what do you think?” Mom asked.

I could barely see the neighbors’ homes through the trees. That was another plus.

“It’s pretty secluded,” I said.

“It is,” she agreed. “That’s what I like about it.”

Mom led us up a mossy brick walkway to the porch, unlocked the front door, and gave Caleb and me the grand tour. The entryway opened into a living and dining room with a wall of windows that overlooked a large backyard bordered by a creek and forest. To the right was a long hallway that led to two bedrooms and a bathroom. To the left was the kitchen, which adjoined a large den with walls made of red brick and old wood planks that looked like they might have come from a barn.

The rooms were still cluttered with unpacked boxes and brown sheet paper, but for the most part things were already in place just as before: same tired green sofa, same old dining room table and matching cupboard, same rugs, same bookshelves and books, same kitchen table and refrigerator. Mom looked over the living room and sighed. “I was kind of wishing your father would have looked at this as an opportunity to upgrade.”

Her comment was a dig at Dad, but I didn’t take the bait. She and Dad had all this complicated history that I preferred to stay away from.

“Honest, Mom, the place looks great. And it seems to be working for him.” I nodded toward Caleb and smiled.

Caleb plucked two ice cubes from the freezer, tossed them into a glass, and filled the glass from the sink like it was any other day.

“Where will Caleb and I be stationed?”

“You two have an entire floor to yourselves.”

Mom led us downstairs into a dimly lit room that felt like a bear den. I scoped out the place—the old brown couch, television, and bookshelves were now parked next to a brick fireplace. With a little work, the room might make a pretty decent man cave I thought. There was even a door that opened to a small patio. Our bedroom was on the far side of the room, partly underground, the windows high on the walls looking out into the massive backyard.

“Not bad?” Mom asked.

“Not bad,” I said, but thinking about sleeping below the surface of the earth kind of creeped me out.

I looked out the window and spotted an albino squirrel in a tree, pure white from nose to fluffy tail, scrambling from branch to branch as it chased a gray squirrel.

“That’s Al,” Mom said, laughing, and nodding toward the squirrel. “We saw him the other day. Your father named him.” She gave me a little hug. “I’m going to head upstairs and do some more unpacking. I’ll let you and your brother settle in.”

I turned and looked out the window again, but the white squirrel was gone.

I emptied a few boxes of clothes and my books, then took a break and decided to check out the backyard, but the door wouldn’t budge. I had to throw my shoulder into the jamb a couple of times before the hinges finally loosened and I could pull the door open. I stepped outside into a yard thick with trees. With a little oil on those hinges, Caleb and I would have our own private exit.

3.

FOR THE MOST PART, I spent my summer scraping, sanding, painting, cleaning gutters, sealing and paving the driveway—you name it. I rarely saw any neighbors, and the ones I did see were old people, the kind that walked hunched over and moved slowly.

I met up with Vincent and Ricky from my old neighborhood a couple of times that summer. Ricky and I had played CYO soccer together at St. Joe's since we were five, and Vincent was this weird kid that lived down the street who knew everything about birds. The three of us liked to hang out in the woods behind our subdivision, and Vincent would whistle, gurgle, and squawk birdcalls and make the trees come alive in song. I'd known them almost twelve years, but they didn't offer much of a reaction when I told them I was moving. When our car pulled out of our driveway for the last time, they flipped me the bird. I think it was their way of telling me they'd miss me.

By August I was nearly going out of my mind, hungry for the company of people my age. I always got a little nervous before the first day of school, but this year I was also the new kid, which meant I was walking into a new school, a different terrain, one with unforeseen hazards. I slipped on my most comfortable jeans, a new black T-shirt that wouldn't show pit stains, and my

Nike running shoes. I took a look at myself in the bathroom mirror and figured I looked okay enough to just blend in.

“You need to remember to smile a lot and introduce yourself to your teachers and classmates,” Mom cheerfully reminded me at breakfast. “You have a tendency to present yourself as a grouch.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, cringing at the way she said ‘classmates’ like I was heading off to first grade.

Dad reached into his pocket and handed me a crisp ten-dollar bill. “Knock yourself out, son. Think of this as an opportunity to reinvent yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked him.

Dad smeared a giant glob of jam across his toast with his spoon. “Relax, Leo.” He laughed. “Don’t take life so seriously.”

“I’ll try that, Dad.” I grabbed my lunch and thanked them for their crap advice.

It was the typical first day of school. Most teachers reviewed their grading policies and expectations, distributed books, and maybe launched partway into a lecture. I was bored senseless and famished by the time lunch rolled around.

My route to the cafeteria involved threading my way down unknown hallways past unfamiliar faces. Just outside the library, I had to skirt five thugs harassing some poor scrawny kid I assumed was a freshman. The ringleader, a burly guy wearing a football jersey with the name GLUSKER plastered over numbers, had his victim down on his knees, hands behind his back, pushing a tiny peanut across the tile floor with his nose. Glusker guided the kid by nudging his ass with the tip of

his Timberland boot along a parade route lined by laughing upperclassmen.

I made a quick U-turn and navigated my way safely through the student lounge and into the cafeteria, bought a couple of cartons of milk, and sought refuge at an empty section of table. Dad had made me an enormous ham-and-Swiss sandwich on rye that was goopy with honey-brown mustard, just the way I loved it. I opened my novel, and within five minutes I was in a different world.

My bubble was soon popped, though, by the clank and clatter of five plastic cafeteria trays piled high with cheeseburgers and fries slamming against the Formica tabletop. I glanced over the spine of my novel to find myself in the unfortunate company of Glusker and crew. Fearing I might be the next guy rolling a peanut across the floor, I spun my body the other way, started cramming my sandwich into my mouth, and hoped that the three seats separating me from them would provide a safe-enough buffer zone. For the next few minutes, I heard nothing but raucous laughter and lewd remarks about the cafeteria ladies before one of Glusker's minions snickered, "Hey, there's Itchy." And that stopped their conversation.

"Get over here, Itchy. Now!" Glusker barked. "You heard me! Get your sorry ass over here!"

I figured Itchy was probably just some dude from their football team with ringworm or a bad case of jock itch. If Itchy was going to take the seat closest to me, I was going to scam. But when I snuck another glance, I realized Itchy wasn't their buddy. He was a custodian.

Itchy was a scrawny guy with slicked-back dark hair and small, deep-set eyes rimmed by dark circles. He pushed his damp mop around in jerky crisscross patterns over the cafeteria floor. The guy walked with a gimp, pausing every few seconds to feverishly scratch at a bald spot behind his right ear. After a few seconds of scratching, he stopped, shook his head, slapped his hand, and mumbled something to himself before resuming mopping.

“Itchy,” one brute yelled. “Tell us about your summer.”

“What did you do with all that extra cash you pocketed last year?” another said, laughing. “Take your girlfriends to Vegas?”

“I missed you this summer, Itchy,” Glusker yelled. “It’s hard to find cheap entertainment when you’re not around.”

Itchy continued to push his mop, his lips twitching like he was attempting to smile, but the expression on his face made me think he was confused and becoming agitated. I had nearly finished my sandwich and was about to bolt when one of Glusker’s goons took a nickel from his pocket and tossed it on the floor near Itchy. The poor guy dropped the mop, got down on his knees, crawled on the floor, located the nickel, and put it in his pocket. Within seconds, another guy at the table started flicking pennies on the floor so that now Itchy was scrambling around searching for them.

Bullying was bad enough, but hounding some poor guy who didn’t even realize he was the victim of a cruel joke was as low as you could go in my book. There were kids in the old neighborhood who sometimes made Caleb do stupid stuff like that just for kicks.

Pennies, nickels, and dimes were flying off the table at Itchy like a Fourth of July bottle-rocket attack. Confronting Glusker and company would be suicidal, but I had to do something. So I took advantage of the fact that their undivided attention was directed toward Itchy. I pulled a nickel from my pocket and slid it inside Glusker's greasy hamburger bun as I slipped away. Near the garbage bins, I dumped my milk on the floor, then tapped Itchy on the shoulder and guided him to the puddle I'd created.

I threw my sandwich bag in the bin and was about to make a safe getaway when I felt a hand touch my shoulder. "I saw what you did," a calm, soft voice informed me. It was a girl. Thank God.

I turned to face her. "Saw what?" I mumbled defensively. She had slightly mussed-up long blond hair that fell to her shoulders, and these round, glassy green eyes that looked through me. She was wearing tight black jeans and a white button-down shirt with a tank top underneath. Amazing.

At a loss for words, I offered her an awkward dumb smile, but she crossed her arms and gave me a harsh stare. "I saw what you did," she repeated. "He could choke on that."

Part of me was totally unsettled by this girl's looks, and part of me was thrown off balance by her giving me crap for taking on those pricks. "Are you kidding?" I finally asked. "Did you see what those morons were doing to that guy?"

She glanced back and forth between me and Glusker. I seriously thought my time was up, but she suddenly smiled. "Nicely done," she said. "What those idiots were doing was wrong on so many levels."

At that moment a loud howl of pain sliced through the cafeteria. "Holy shit!" Glusker yelled. "There's a frickin' nickel inside my cheeseburger! I think my tooth is chipped!"

I turned and looked at the girl. "Well, at least he didn't choke," I offered.

Glusker was close to completely losing it by now, glaring wide-eyed at each member of his posse. "Which one of you guys did this?" he yelled.

"It might be a good time to make your escape." She laughed. "You've probably used up all your good karma for the day."

"I think that's a good idea," I agreed.

She turned, then glanced over her shoulder once more and flashed that sweet smile. "By the way, I'm Mary."

I opened my mouth to respond, but my tongue got all swelled up and nothing came out. Maybe I was focused on making a quick exit? Or maybe I was just chickenshit? I had to face the fact that I'd had enough guts to take on those dudes but couldn't find the nerve to tell this girl my name.

4.

BY LAST PERIOD, ALGEBRA 2, the novelty of the first day at a new school had worn off. I was restless and just about crawling out of my skin. My elementary school teachers had told my parents I was hyperactive, but my parents had scoffed. Compared with Caleb, I was a sloth.

After I finally located my gym locker and got dressed, I headed outside and made my way to the track. The football players were already on the inside field in full combat attire, doing drills to the beat of claps and shrill whistles. Even for late August, it was still blazing hot. Blanketed in pads and helmets, they barked the number of each and every jumping jack and push-up. Coaches stalked the chalked lines and got in the grille of anyone slacking. That sport wasn't for me.

I'd decided I was going out for cross-country this year.

Looking across the football field I spotted a group of scraggly, undernourished-looking guys in shorts and worn T-shirts clustered in a section of bleachers lining the sidelines and track. Behind the railing, they looked like those POWs you see in old World War II movies. I figured they must be the cross-country team, so I threaded my way across the field, climbed the

bleachers, and tried to drift in without being noticed. Some guys were doing some light stretching, but most were just sprawled out across the empty benches.

“You new here?” The voice came from behind me.

I turned and faced a tall guy with long blond hair pulled back with a headband stretching his hamstrings on the top guardrail. Compared with the others gathered around, this guy actually resembled an athlete, like he could be a wide receiver on the football team. He looked like a runner—lean but strong, with these thick veins in his arms and legs that swelled under his skin.

“I’m Leo.”

“Curtis,” he said, extending his hand. “What’s your story, Leo?”

“Just moved from Parkway Central. I’m a junior.”

He scratched his chin thoughtfully as he looked me up and down. “And what makes you think you have the talent to join this elite group of athletes?”

“Uh . . .,” I stammered, unable to read the guy. I wasn’t quite sure if he was some smart dude who actually spoke this way, or if he was just messing with me.

He nodded toward a scrawny guy curled up in the fetal position in the shade below the first row. “Lighten up, Leo. I’m just giving you crap. I’m captain of this pathetic outfit,” he told me. “Ever run before?”

“Not cross-country. Played soccer until now. I just started running this summer.”

“How much?” He grabbed his ankle and contorted his leg behind him.

“Every day. Not sure how far, but every day.”

He glanced at the other guys. “Well, you’re way ahead of these buffoons,” he said with a sweep of his hand. “Some of these athletes,” he shouted, pointing toward two, “like Rosenthal and Rasmussen, could be respectable runners if they possessed even a shred of discipline.” He then nodded toward the others. “The rest of this sorry lot,” he said, shaking his head, “also have potential. Maybe if they’d put in their summer miles like they were supposed to, this team wouldn’t be such an embarrassment.”

“We prefer to come into the season well rested,” Rosenthal replied calmly. Rosenthal was a tall, ridiculously thin guy with a mop of black hair. He was wearing long black basketball shorts and an oversize tank top that left every bone in his rib cage visible. Rasmussen was shorter, with slightly more muscle on his bones. He had buzzed blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Both appeared unfazed by Curtis’s insults.

“You gotta be a glutton for punishment if you want to excel at this sport!” Curtis shot back.

“That sounds unhealthy if you ask me, Kaufman,” Rosenthal said.

“I think *warped* and *twisted* are better words for it,” Rasmussen added. “Burpee, Stuper, and I prefer to follow Rosenthal’s summer training regimen,” Rasmussen continued. “Twelve hours of sound sleep, two daily servings of Imo’s pizza washed down with Coke, and a minimum of four hours of video games. Call of Duty, Madden, Grand Theft Auto, Resident Evil—we encourage variety.”

Burpee and Stuper, I assumed, were the two guys seated next to Rasmussen who were slowly nodding their heads, perhaps too wiped out by their day to engage. Like Rosenthal, they were tall and gaunt and looked like they hadn't seen sunlight in months.

"Pitiful!" Curtis muttered in disgust. "You must embrace the monotony!" he screamed before pointing across the field. "Gentlemen, at attention! Our fearless leader has arrived."

A gray-haired hulk of a guy was marching toward us, carrying nothing but a clipboard. He was over six feet tall, with a thick neck, a barrel chest, and calves the size of bowling balls.

"Leo," Curtis said, "allow me to be the first to introduce you to Coach Archibald Gorsky."

The guys rolled up from their lounging positions and sat up straight.

Gorsky came to a halt at the foot of the bleacher stairs and scanned the group. "Gentlemen," he bellowed, before looking each of us in the eye. "I hope you've all had a restful summer and you're now prepared to get back to work."

He proceeded up the stairs, the bleachers shaking and rattling with each step.

"Gorsky's a good guy," Curtis whispered. "He actually has a degree in engineering, but he chose to apply his science to athletics. He'll give us a five-minute speech, send us out for our workout, then head over there and toss his shot and disc," Curtis said, nodding opposite us toward a large fenced-in field beyond the track. "If he's not there, you'll find him in the weight room pumping iron."

Gorsky covered all the typical first-day-of-practice details—attendance policies, deadlines for physicals, practice times, reminders about diet—and then gave a lengthy lecture about hydration and monitoring our urine for color and clarity. His clipboard circulated and we wrote down the usual crap.

Finally, Gorsky announced the day's workout: "Today we'll begin with our standard distance run."

A few guys groaned.

"That's correct, gentlemen. We'll start with the superbblock." He laughed. "For those of you new to the team, I advise you to pair up with a veteran so you don't get lost. When you're done, meet me over there," he said, pointing to the shot put and discus rings. "I'll see where you're at and tell you what's next on the menu."

Guys stood up slowly, shook their legs, and made their way down the bleachers, past Gorsky. "Get a good drink of water before you head out," he yelled.

I followed Curtis down the steps. Gorsky placed his hand on Curtis's shoulder and stopped him. "Are you healthy, Kaufman?"

"Better than ever," Curtis told him.

"Didn't overdo it this summer?"

"Relax, old man," Curtis said, laughing. "I stuck to the plan."

Gorsky released his grip on Curtis's shoulder and gave him a pat on the back. "That's my boy," he said.

I followed Curtis along the track circling the football field. "Superblock?" I asked.

He broke into a slow jog. "The superbblock is a running route you will soon learn to love and appreciate if you decide to pursue this fine sport," Curtis explained.

I looked back and saw the rest of the guys lingering at the water fountain, pretending to stretch. “Do you mind if I run with you?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, young grasshopper, that depends if you can keep up.”

By the time we left the parking lot, Curtis had already picked up the pace. “To tell you the truth, most of the time I go solo. The rest of the guys don’t train during the summer,” he informed me. “I live for this, Leo.”

His pace was quick, but I kept up.

“Run with me as long as you can,” Curtis said. “If you get tired, you can wait for those guys to come along, and they’ll show you the way back.”

We ran another two hundred meters before I looked over my shoulder and saw nobody in sight. Soon enough Curtis and I ascended the first hill and coasted the descent. I loved my solitary runs, but it was kind of cool running beside another person and talking.

Curtis told me about some of the guys on the team, what the season would be like, and Gorsky’s typical workout regimen. “He’s pretty old-school,” Curtis explained, “but his stuff works.” Curtis signaled with his hand to turn at an intersection. He also increased the pace.

We approached another hill, one of several he had promised. “Tempo okay for you?” he asked.

I was pushing, but it felt manageable. “I feel all right.”

He looked over his shoulder at me and smiled. “Do you mind if we pick it up a notch?”

“I can try.”

Curtis increased the pace even more, and I felt myself start sucking desperately for air, but I hung with him. He asked why I came out for cross-country, and I made up this load of bull about how I was tired of playing on lousy soccer teams.

“Wise man,” he said. “It’s not like we’ve got a great cross-country team here, but aspects of this fine sport can still allow one to thrive as an individual.”

Though I had put in some miles this summer, Curtis was on a different level. The hills and pace began taking their toll on me, making my legs burn and become heavy. By the time we made the turn onto Price Road, my lungs were screaming for more air.

“What’s your last name, Leo?” he asked me.

“Coughlin,” I gasped.

“Okay, Coughlin,” he said casually. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

He started hammering. The next hill nearly finished me for good, but I had a slight downhill to recover. “That hill’s a beast,” he confirmed. “I’m impressed.”

When we made the turn onto Clayton, I spotted a gas station up ahead. “I think I need to stop for water,” I panted.

“No water,” he told me. “You’re going to feel this same way toward the end of a race. Ten more minutes and you’re done. Now’s the time you need to embrace the pain.”

“I think I embraced it a couple of miles ago,” I gasped.

The next ten minutes were the longest of my life. “This is it,” he assured me as we ascended another huge hill. “Once we get over this baby, it’s over.”

It hurt, and when we got to the bottom of the hill, it sure as hell wasn't over. We turned right onto Warson Road and still had another half mile he'd forgotten to mention. It was flat, but it was an eternity. That's where he left me in his dust.

I staggered back to school a minute behind him, bent over in pain.

"Stand up and put your hands above your head," he encouraged me. "It will get more air into your lungs." He helped me stand and patted me on my back, and I started to feel a little better.

"Mind if I get some water now?" I asked.

We stopped at the drinking fountain outside the gymnasium, and I gulped until my insides cooled.

"What do you think, Leo?" Curtis asked.

I lifted my head from the fountain. "I'm wrecked," I huffed, then continued guzzling water.

Gorsky was retrieving his discuses and shots when we returned to the track. He looked at us and flashed a smile. "What have we here, Kaufman?" he called out. "Someone who can finally keep up with you?"

"This is Leo," he told Gorsky. "The guy can run. At least, he could today."

"Leo," Gorsky repeated, studying me a moment. He turned and walked back to the shot ring, glancing over his shoulder this time at Curtis. "Kaufman, I don't suppose the rest of your teammates ran this summer?"

Curtis shook his head.

Gorsky nuzzled the shot against his bulging neck. "How

many times have I told them: cross-country is a summer sport. Unless you train in the summer, the season's pointless," he said to us as he positioned his massive body to throw.

We watched the small cannonball explode from his body and land with a thud in the grass. He chucked it pretty far for an old guy. "I tell them, but they never listen." He sighed.

Gorsky launched two more shots while we stretched against the fence, and then he trudged out to retrieve them. With his back to us, he issued final instructions. "Run eight strides at three-quarters sprint speed," he ordered. "Then call it a day."

"We'll see you tomorrow," Curtis yelled.

"Lift those damn knees on the strides, Kaufman," he ordered. "And remember to drink plenty of liquids."

After we'd finished I was walking like a zombie toward my bike, wondering how I'd ever make it home, when Curtis pulled up beside me in his car. "You're telling me that you never ran before this summer?" he asked me.

"Not really," I told him.

"I call bullshit, Coughlin," he said, smiling. "We hammered today, and I can sense you've definitely run."

When I finally got on my bike, my legs could barely crank the pedals. That workout had nearly killed me, but I loved the intensity and could feel myself craving more. If that was a typical workout, I could hardly imagine an actual race.

5.

I DIDN'T EXACTLY LIE TO CURTIS—I actually *had* started running that summer—but I didn't tell him the whole truth, either.

As it turned out, Caleb wasn't crazy about our new house at first. Shortly after the move his temper tantrums escalated to a whole new level. And he began directing them at me. His violent outbursts had me running out the back door on almost a daily basis.

In hindsight, Caleb had sent out plenty of signals even before the move—twirling the stick he always carried with more intensity, curling his fingers into a fist, biting his knuckles. I guess I should have known he was tightly wound and it was only a matter of time before he exploded. I really just didn't know what to do about it. Mom and Dad didn't seem to have a clue either, or maybe they were completely in denial.

"I need for you to keep a lid on things around here for a while," Dad told me at the beginning of the summer.

"What exactly does that mean?" I asked him. It was one of Dad's signature phrases that could refer to any number of things.

"Just keep an eye on your brother. We're new in the neighborhood and we don't need any incidents."

“I’m on it,” I assured him.

While Caleb was certainly capable of taking care of his basic needs, particularly managing his enormous appetite, Mom and Dad were still a little apprehensive about Caleb’s transition. Basically they wanted an extra set of eyes scoped on him over the summer in case he did anything especially inappropriate to freak out our new neighbors.

Dad had recently started paying Caleb for doing different jobs—sweeping the garage, pulling out the dandelions and crabgrass, or clipping the high grass around the trees and shrubs. When Caleb finished his assignments, he created his own jobs and negotiated a fee that Dad paid him in one-dollar bills. Caleb kept the cash neatly stacked in the top drawer of his dresser next to his socks, and he spent a portion of it on maintaining a stash of candy he kept hidden in a paper bag in the cabinet beneath our bathroom sink.

Lately Caleb had been using the rake to comb and thatch the front yard, a new obsession. One morning when I headed upstairs for breakfast—Mom was working early shifts at the hospital, and Dad liked to be the first one to the office, and I usually got up after they’d left for work—I saw that he’d already created twenty small piles of dead grass, twigs, and dirt clods. He would rake a small patch of grass for a minute or two, pause, and talk to himself, then plop on the ground and arrange the dead blades into neat little mounds. He would leave those piles in the yard until Dad got home, as concrete evidence of his labor. Based upon the number of piles I counted, I figured he’d already been hard at it for a couple of hours that morning.

I was reading the sports section when I glanced up and noticed Caleb really getting riled up—jumping around, his rake and garden fork discarded on the ground. He'd abandoned his piles and was now skipping around the yard, pounding one fist through the air and biting the knuckles on the other. It wasn't exactly the way I wanted to start my day, but I figured I'd better step outside and try to calm him down.

I approached him cautiously; he was thumping himself hard on the forehead. "Caleb, that can't feel too good," I told him. "Why don't you come inside and take a little break? You're going to hurt yourself, buddy."

He sat down, whacked the ground a few times with his fist, and eventually resumed picking through his grass piles. God knew what was making him angry this time, but he seemed steady for the moment, so I went back inside. I scanned the list of jobs Mom had left for me on the fridge. Vacuuming was easiest, so I started in the den.

That's when Caleb blasted into the room. "HOW MUCH MONEY LEO GET VACUUMING?" he yelled.

"I get an allowance, Caleb," I told him. "Flat rate. I do whatever I'm told and get my salary on Fridays."

"HOW MUCH LEO GET?" he shouted. He was talking faster now, and I realized he was really agitated.

"I told you already," I said calmly.

I had my back to him and was removing the plug from the socket when he smashed into me from behind. I smacked my head against an end table and collided with the wall. The lamp fell over and the bulb shattered. Before I knew it, he'd flipped

me on my back and pinned my shoulders with his knees. He slapped my head with one open hand and started pounding the other side of my face with his fist. Then he grasped my throat with his right hand and started trying to jab his left thumb into my eye. I kicked and punched, but Caleb was built like a linebacker. I fought to grab a handful of his hair with one hand and his ear with my other, and I pinched and pulled with everything I had before he finally screamed and released me.

I rolled out from under him, tore through the kitchen, and tipped a chair in his path. I dashed downstairs toward the door to the patio, with Caleb in pursuit. If it wasn't open, I was screwed. Luck was on my side, though, and I was across the grass and into the next-door neighbor's backyard before I looked over my shoulder to catch my breath. Caleb was no longer chasing me. He had stopped in our driveway and was jumping and skipping around, hitting himself.

I decided it was best to keep moving. I watched my sneakers disappear under me, and after a while my body found a rhythm, my breathing evened out, and I relaxed a bit. I wondered what I'd done to set Caleb off. Caleb occasionally lost control of himself, but this was new territory as far as I knew. It was the first time he'd actually gone after a person instead of a window or a wall, and that person happened to be me. As mixed up as I was when running that morning, I wondered if it was better me than some other person.

I ran for a long time, making a loop along the major roads before heading back to the house. When I finally got home, Caleb was sitting calmly in the front yard, picking through the

dead grass. He smiled and laughed as he talked about God and the Thunderbird Ford. I approached him tentatively.

“Hi, Leo,” he said when he saw me.

“Hi, Caleb.”

“Where Leo go?” he asked me.

“I had to take a little break,” I explained, keeping my distance.

“Caleb good worker. Right!” Whenever my brother followed with “Right!” I understood that the preceding statement was actually a question—one he meant for me to affirm.

“Caleb is a good worker,” I confirmed, wondering if maybe I was really the crazy one.

I studied my eighteen-year-old brother, sitting in the yard in the midst of another obsessive monologue, assembling more piles of dead grass and twigs. Caleb was a good worker all right, but when he lost control it was time to bolt.

“Are we cool?” I finally asked.

“TAKE CALEB SWIMMING!”

Crap. That, of course, was also on my list of duties for that day, and Caleb knew it. There wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell I was going to get out of taking him to the pool.

“Have you calmed down?” I asked him.

“YES! Take Caleb pool!”

I took a moment to consider the possible consequences if I didn’t. “All right,” I decided. “Be ready in fifteen.”

I was still a bit rattled when we got in the car, so I kept silent. I spent the twenty-minute drive listening to Caleb laugh and chatter away about God and rocky road ice cream.

The Mid-County Y was Caleb's home away from home. It had both an indoor and an outdoor pool, which kept Caleb happy all year long. I really didn't feel too much like swimming; I did a few laps, then sprawled out on a deck chair. Usually I sunk myself into a good book while Caleb swam, but today I couldn't focus. Instead I watched Caleb in the deep end as he jumped off the high dive, like he did every time we came to the pool. Again and again, he'd bound off the diving board high into the sky, laughing maniacally and screaming nonsense, then midair he'd do this crazy corkscrew spin. He'd hit the water with a tremendous splash and disappear until he finally needed a breath. Some kids laughed, others stared. Caleb's pool antics mortified me when I was younger, but I no longer gave a rip. It really made him happy.

Usually we'd hang out for only a couple of hours at the pool before I told him we needed to get going, but after the day we'd had I let him swim until he came out on his own terms. I wanted to make good and sure he had calmed down.

I told Mom and Dad about what had happened that morning, but Dad pretty much blew it off. "My big brother and I used to fight all the time," Dad said, and laughed, casually scooping from the salad bowl. "He used to beat the living daylight out of me sometimes."

Mom at least casted me a worried glance, but she didn't say anything. She also seemed kind of checked out.

The next day, Caleb went for a repeat performance. This

time I was folding laundry. He took me by surprise when he jumped me, but I managed to pull his hair, knee him in the groin, and take off running. This time I ran even farther. It took me longer to find a running rhythm, to settle down.

It happened again the next day when I was washing the windows.

And the day after that I decided to lay off the chores altogether, since that seemed to be his trigger, but he still came at me. At least this time I saw him coming and had a head start.

Before I knew it these attacks were a regular pattern and I was running every day, sometimes more than once. When Caleb lost control, I had to get away. I really didn't have much choice but to run, and I had to run far, because I had to give both of us enough time to cool off. When I got home I usually took him to the pool, where he'd unleash his energy and we'd both return to some semblance of normal.

I used to think that all that stuff I heard about a runner's high was legend, but it's actually true. I found if I ran far enough and hard enough, I actually got an amazing buzz like I was floating outside myself, looking down on my body running on earth, like a red-tailed hawk soaring high above. When that feeling kicked in, the pain and fear disappeared. Sometimes I felt like I could run forever.

One morning Mom posted a letter from the new high school with information about the upcoming year. She'd circled the information about fall sports: football, soccer, golf, cross-country.

Running seemed to be calling me, so I signed up for the cross-country team.

That's the part I didn't mention to Curtis after our first practice. I figured he didn't need to know that I'd started running because my brother scared the hell out of me.

6.

“GEEZ, MOM. CALEB’S STARTING TO make our front yard look like some kind of ancient burial ground,” I commented as I dove into my third bowl of Cheerios. Those couple of weeks after I joined cross-country, Mom told me I was devouring food like an elephant with a tapeworm.

I was watching Caleb crawl around the front yard on his hands and knees, having an intense discussion with himself. He was obsessed. Bit by bit, he was scalping our lawn, making one mound of debris after another. Caleb labored before and after school, plucking each and every blade of dead grass, little twig, and dirt clod by hand.

“It makes him happy,” she said. “Those little mounds he builds are kind of like your Cheerios.”

“Not quite the same,” I corrected her, before slurping the last soggy bits from the bowl.

As I headed out the door for school, Mom stopped me. “Why don’t you invite one of the guys from the team over for dinner?” she asked.

“Really, Mom? Don’t you think that might be kind of weird with the sacrificial graveyard out front? I’ll think about it. Are we having cheese pizza or fish sticks?”

“Your choice.”

Our family abandoned the church a couple of years ago, but Mom still harbored some residual Catholic guilt and clung to a few traditions like no meat on Fridays.

“You know I’ve never been a big fan of fish sticks. That’s Caleb’s thing.”

“So I’ll doctor up some cheese pizzas and plan on a guest?”

I gazed out at Caleb hacking up the yard and told Mom again that I’d think about it.

Curtis believed in a daily dose of intense focus and effort. He called that portion of the workout “red miles.” I called it pain. The first ten minutes of our run were conversational. He would give me the rundown on what I needed to know about life at Ladue: the best-looking girls, a few thugs to avoid at all costs, and a couple of locations on campus where various sordid events had transpired. But after those first ten minutes, he jacked up the pace and things got serious.

By the time we crested the first hill that Friday, I was suffering. I told Curtis to go ahead, and I staggered along until the pack of Rasmussen, Stuper, Rosenthal, and Burpee pulled up beside me.

“So Rasmussen is our winner!” Burpee announced, raising Rasmussen’s arm in victory.

“Winner of what?” I asked.

“We placed a bet the other day on how long it would take before you crashed and burned trying to hang with Kaufman,” Stuper explained.

“The guy hammers,” I gasped.

"No kidding," Rasmussen laughed.

"Kaufman's been running twice a day since ninth grade," Rosenthal offered up.

"He's a freak," Burpee said, as if it were widely accepted fact.

"Not to mention he took five APs last year," Stuper added.

"Kaufman is one intense freak," Burpee repeated.

"How does he do it?" I asked, suddenly feeling like a fool.

"There is rumor of steroid use," Rasmussen said with a raised eyebrow. "Or perhaps he's bionic."

"Come to think of it, the bionic theory might explain the way he speaks," Burpee suggested.

"Why *does* he talk that way?" I asked.

"Kaufman is a man of mystery," Rosenthal said to me.

The rest of the run was grueling, but when we finally finished, Curtis was waiting in front of the school, stretching under the shade of a tree.

"Look what we found during our run today, Kaufman!" Stuper yelled as he and Rasmussen grabbed my arms and pretended to haul me.

"Another one of your roadkill victims," Rosenthal said, laughing. "Someday you're going to be charged with manslaughter."

I looked at Curtis and shook my head. "I feel like total dog meat."

He laughed. "You're doing fine, Coughlin. Third week is the worst. Hang in one more and it'll get easier."

We headed onto the track, where Gorsky dictated the final portion of the workout: twelve strides a hundred meters in length.

We began each one slowly and increased the speed in increments, until we were going flat out the last thirty meters. My legs burned, but I could still hang with Curtis, given the short distance. The recovery was short, a ten-meter walk to and from the fence. By the time I'd completed my fourth, I was getting ready to blow chunks.

"Leo!" Gorsky bellowed. He waved me over and pulled a roll of white athletic tape from his equipment bag. "Give me your hands," he ordered.

I held out my arms, too exhausted, nauseous, and confused to question him.

"Now make fists and place your thumbs outward over your index fingers," he instructed.

I did like he said, so my thumbs were now pointing outward like some wayward hitchhikers. He taped my thumbs tightly around my fists so I couldn't move my fingers.

"Your arms flop back and forth like a rag doll when you run," he explained. "Go on back there and do a few more strides at full strength, but this time pump those arms of yours. Then come back and tell me what you notice."

I jogged back to the pack, my hands hanging outward, away from my hips. The guys were waiting for me, looking at my hands curiously.

"That's going to make going to the bathroom very problematic," Stuper decided.

"What's up with the bandages?" Rosenthal asked. "You look like a land-mine victim."

But as we accelerated into our next stride, it did feel different.

My arms pumped, drove forward, and provided power. By mid-way through that stride, I'd moved comfortably ahead of Curtis by five meters.

"What the hell?" he yelled from behind.

"Kaufman is finally getting his butt kicked," Burpee howled.

We did another, and I exaggerated my new arm swing and went even faster. "It's just a measly hundred meters, Coughlin. Anything farther, and I've got your ass!" Curtis shouted.

We ran the next two together, and I focused on my new arm swing. Gorsky had stopped throwing and was now leaning against the fence, studying us. We did four more before we jogged over to him.

"What did you notice, Coughlin?"

"I feel stronger," I told him. "Like my arms aren't just dangling from my shoulders."

"You run with more than just your legs, Leo. You need your arms, too," he explained. "When they're all moving in the same direction, and every part of your body is working together in concert, you run faster. It's that simple. We'll put that tape on your hands when you run for the next week and see if we can fix this little problem."

He picked up his shot and rolled it around in his palm. "Focus on your form and believe that what you are attempting to do is good for you, that it will make you a better runner. Learn the patterns, until it's innate."

"How come you don't tape *our* hands?" Rosenthal asked, offering his hands to Gorsky.

"The only place I'd put tape on your body is over that mouth

of yours,” Gorsky answered. He headed back to his shot put ring, but not before scolding Curtis. “You’re pushing it too hard, Kaufman. I can tell by the length of your stride. You’re your own worst enemy. If you don’t back off, you’re going to end up sick again.” He blasted the shot once more. “That means rest, Kaufman,” he said as the shot crashed upon the gravel.

“Relax, old man,” Curtis told him. “I’ve got everything under control.”

“I worry about you, son.”

“No need to fret, Gorsky. I’ve learned my lesson.”

At the bike rack Curtis helped me take off the tape. “What was that all about?” I asked.

“Ran myself into the ground last summer and fall and ended up with mono in October. I was running out of my mind, and then I imploded. Not fun.” He pulled the tape off my hands, wadded it into a ball, and tossed it into the trash. “Hell, maybe I should tape my hands up to help me go faster, or just chop them off,” he said with a chuckle.

I climbed aboard my old bike. “Believe me, you have plenty of speed.”

“It’s got to suck riding that bike home after running,” he said to me. “You want a lift?”

“I thought you’d never ask. Give me a ride home and my mother will feed you dinner.”

“What’s the Friday-night special at the Coughlin house?” he asked.

“Pizza.”

He took a moment to weigh the offer. “I’m in.”

When I threw my bike in the hatch and climbed in, I suddenly realized I couldn't remember the last time I'd brought a friend home.

Curtis pulled into the driveway and immediately surveyed the yard. "What's up with all the little mounds?"

"It's a long story. I haven't told you about my brother yet." I gave Curtis a quick crash course on Caleb while we headed into the house. Before opening the door, I warned him that he was about to be interrogated.

Caleb met us in the front hall with his arms crossed.

"Good evening, Caleb," Curtis said, extending his hand to him. "I'm Curtis."

Caleb squeezed his hand briefly, crossed his arms again, and studied Curtis a moment. "CURTIS GRANDMOTHER DEAD!"

Curtis turned to me casually and whispered, "Was that a question or a statement?"

"That was a question," I whispered back.

Curtis turned back to Caleb. "Well, as a matter of fact, Caleb, both of my grandmothers have passed away."

"Caleb!" my mother shouted from the kitchen.

"GRANDFATHER STILL LIVING!" Caleb continued.

"One died about five years ago," Curtis explained. "However, my mother's father is still alive and kicking. Next question?"

"Caleb!" my mother yelled again.

Caleb scrutinized Curtis once more for a moment, uncrossed his arms, and marched toward the kitchen.

Curtis turned to me. “Have I been granted permission to enter the Coughlin premises?”

“I hope you don’t think he’s finished,” I told him as we entered the kitchen.

“I’m up for the challenge,” he said.

Mom was at the counter, making salad. When I introduced Curtis she was pleasant enough, but I could tell her mind was focused somewhere else. Mom asked Curtis twice within a five-minute interval what year he was in at school and how he liked Ladue. She invited Curtis to take a seat at the table with Caleb, then grabbed my arm and yanked me toward the sink. “Your father promised he’d be home an hour ago. I *know* he’s playing golf with his buddies,” she hissed. “But don’t you worry. He’ll be wearing his suit and pretend that he was just working late at the office—some ‘unscheduled meeting’ or something.”

I nodded. “Sorry, Mom. Curtis and I can clear out if you want us to.”

“Nonsense. We’ll give your dad ten more minutes. If he’s not home by then, we’ll just sit down and enjoy this meal without him.”

Enjoy? I thought. Not likely.

A moment later I heard the unmistakable thump of Dad’s silver Chrysler tires rolling over the curb and into the driveway. I wasn’t sure whether I should sigh with relief or prepare for the ensuing battle. It wasn’t like I was worried about Mom and Dad having some big ol’ knockdown, drag-out fight in front of Curtis or something. My parents didn’t fight that way. It was going to be something less certain, and that might be way worse. My par-

ents were skillful at getting underneath each other's skin. Mom took advantage of Dad's screwups in a passive-aggressive way. She cataloged his mistakes and exploded on him at the most inopportune moment and in the most unpredictable way.

Mom opened up the oven and pulled the pizza pans out with a thin dish towel, cursing under her breath when the second pan singed her fingers. Dad appeared just as Mom predicted—he was wearing his suit, but the knot of his tie was loose around his collar. He had a sheepish grin on his face like he'd already had a few.

Mom stood rigid at the cutting board with her back to Dad, slashing onions, her knife pecking against the cutting board. Dad placed his briefcase on the counter, then strolled over to Mom and kissed her on the cheek. "Hi, honey."

She turned the other cheek and nodded toward us. "*Your* dinner is ready," she announced.

I decided it was time for me to try and squelch the rising tension in the room. "Dad, this is Curtis," I said a bit too brightly. Curtis stood up from the table and they shook hands.

"Nice to meet you, Curtis," Dad said in a friendly voice. "Glad you can join us for dinner," he said, but Dad was also distracted by Mom's cool reception. He knew she was onto the golf game. "I bet after all that running, you boys are famished."

Dad removed his coat and tie, loosened his collar, and grabbed two glasses from the cabinet. He snatched some ice cubes from the freezer and poured some vodka. When he set a glass next to Mom, the chopping paused as she considered the drink. Then she nudged it away with the tip of her knife.

It's on, I thought with a slight heart skip.

Dad let out a loud sigh and owned up. "So I played a *little golf*, Elise," he confessed. "That's part of doing business. I'll slice the damn pizza."

Curtis raised an eyebrow. I winced.

Dad opened the counter drawer and pulled out a long knife. He chopped the two pizzas into quarters—a deliberate move to irritate Mom—placed the pizza trays before us, and took his seat at the head of the table.

When Mom put the salad on the table, she took one look at the pans and rolled her eyes. She snatched the knife and began sawing the pizzas up. Melted cheese, onions, peppers, and sausage bits clumped to the knife blade as Mom mangled the pizzas.

That set Dad off. He took a long, slow sip of his drink and considered his next move. I sat beside Caleb, and Curtis sat opposite us at the table, alone.

Caleb was the one who finally broke the silence. "CURTIS LIKE HONEY NUT CHEERIOS!" he announced.

Curtis looked up at me. I followed his eyes as they traveled from my father, to my mother cutting the pizzas, to Caleb, then back to me. He smiled. "As a matter of fact, Caleb, I do like a good bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios."

Mom finally finished hacking the pizzas, placed the knife on the counter, and sat down.

Caleb then resumed his interrogation. "CURTIS LIKE KELLOGG'S FROSTED FLAKES!"

Dad stood up and retrieved the knife.

“Okay, Dad,” I interjected. “Curtis and I are big boys. We know how to use a knife and fork.”

“Oh no, Leo. This is my pleasure. I’m just trying to help out your mother,” he said mockingly. He leaned over one of the pizzas and, using the tip of the knife and a firm wrist, chopped at the crust to make the slices into sixteenths.

Beneath the tension, Curtis continued to answer Caleb’s questions politely. “To tell you the truth, Caleb, I can’t remember the last time I had Frosted Flakes.” Curtis glanced at me, his eyebrows slightly raised. I rolled my shoulders slowly upward, shrugging an apology.

Dad placed the knife back on the counter and sat down again.

Now it was Mom’s turn. She grabbed the knife and began cutting the pizza again.

How much could one pizza take?

Caleb began to warm to Curtis and his voice calmed. “Curtis like Cocoa Puffs?”

“Come to think of it, Cocoa Puffs are nice every now and then,” Curtis answered.

“Raisin Bran?”

“Sorry, Caleb,” he said, shaking his head. “Not a big fan of Raisin Bran.”

Caleb quizzed Curtis about a few more cereal brands while Mom sliced the pizza. When she finished, there were thirty-two razor-thin slices of pizza before us. Mom put the knife down on the counter, sat in her chair, and glared at Dad.

Caleb was the one who finally stopped the nonsense. He

took the delay in action as a cue that it was finally time to eat. He held both hands up in the air and shouted, "SAY PRAYER!"

"Amen!" I whispered to myself. I glanced at Curtis, who mouthed "Jesus!" to me and hid a smile.

I grabbed Caleb's hand and reached for Mom's.

My father turned to Curtis. "Caleb insists that we pray before dinner," he explained. "It's a routine we've kind of fallen into."

Curtis took my father's hand. "No problem. Let's give thanks." He looked over at my mother and extended his hand to her, too.

Caleb began his unique version of the prayer aloud in a single note. "Blessed our Lord, for these our gifts, about to receive, from my bounty, through Christ our Lord. AMEN!" he shouted. "HOW MANY SLICES PIZZA HAVE?" Caleb asked my father in the same breath.

We dropped hands. "As many as you want." My father sighed. "There's certainly plenty here!"

After his second drink, Dad started to calm down and managed to ask Curtis a few polite questions, mostly the same ones Mom had already asked. Caleb ended the breakfast-cereal survey and then moved on to cataloging the makes, models, and years of cars Curtis's family had owned over the years. Curtis was patient with Caleb; his responses were upbeat and conveyed genuine interest. I even managed to coax a few words from Mom about her day.

As soon as we stepped out of the house, Curtis burst out howling. "So is that a typical dinner?" he asked.

I considered his question a moment. "I wouldn't say it's typical, but it's within the bell curve."

"That was priceless," he said. "Our family dinners are nothing in comparison with that."

"I hope not."

"What do you mean?" he said as he climbed into his car, still laughing. "That was good, wholesome family entertainment!"

"Let's say you experienced a slice of life in the Coughlin household," I said in defense.

"If that was just a slice," he answered with a sly grin, "I'm going to bet it was a very small slice."

7.

AFTER CURTIS LEFT I WATCHED some old *Seinfeld* episodes, then crashed, falling asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. As luck would have it, that was the first time Caleb came after me during the night. He had trouble pinning me with his knees in the darkness, but he managed to slap my head a couple of times before going for my eyes. I got a knee into his crotch, pulled his hair, slipped from under him, ran across the room, and flipped on the lights. He was sitting on my bed rocking back and forth wildly and biting his fist.

I scrambled into my shorts, grabbed a T-shirt from the floor of the closet, snatched my running shoes, and made a run for it out the basement back door. I laced up my shoes by the side of the house, listening for Caleb's footsteps.

I took off through backyards and down side streets. It must have been the middle of the night. House lights were out and the streets were empty. I ran a few miles, until I relaxed and felt ready to deal. When I finally returned, Caleb was focused on a van Gogh *Starry Night* paint-by-number beside the television set. His painting made the sky look like it was raining fire.

He didn't even look up when I came in through the back door. "Sorry, Leo," he said to me. He had calmed down.

“It’s all right, Caleb,” I told him. It was no use mixing things up now.

“God not punish you?” he asked me.

I was thinking God should be on my side, but I paused and thought about his question a moment. “No, Caleb. God not punish you.”

“Jesus love you?”

Where did he get this?

“Yes, Jesus loves you,” I told him, and headed back to bed.

8.

I WAS SAVORING AN ENORMOUS BITE of my salami and cream cheese on an onion bagel when I saw the girl with blond hair standing at the salad bar. Mary.

Not that I have a photographic memory, but there was not a doubt in my mind that she was wearing the same black jeans as the last time I saw her, and I was fine with that. However, the white button-down shirt had been replaced with one of those long, button-down shirts that come down over girls' waists and turn into a skirt. The shirt's swirling pattern of green and black complemented her hair. Normally, I inhaled my sandwich in three or four bites. Today I involuntarily paused and gawked as she picked through a dodgy assortment of raw veggies with metal tongs.

Curtis followed my gaze from our lunch table to my target. "Her name is Mary Seisen. A junior like you," he informed me between bites of sandwich. "She's a little out of the box. I've known her since grade school." He took a sip of his Gatorade and nodded. "Interesting taste, Leo. Personally, I prefer brunettes."

Mary circled the salad bar, examining each item she placed on her plate.

"And if I'm not mistaken, she's single at the moment. I might be able to provide you with some assistance for a nominal charge."

“No, thanks.”

“Whatever,” he mumbled. He pointed at my face. “By the way,” he said, “what’s up with the scratch under your eye?”

“It’s nothing,” I mumbled. I kept my eyes glued on Mary and thought up a lie. “I took a shortcut biking home yesterday and got smacked by a tree branch.”

“And who was holding the tree branch?” he joked. He continued looking at me with this expression on his face like something didn’t quite add up.

“I was gassed after practice yesterday,” I finally told him. “I totally spaced out on the ride home.”

“You gotta be more careful, man.”

I directed my attention back to Mary. She paid for her salad and took a few steps into the chaos of the school cafeteria, searching for possible refuge. That’s when Curtis began frantically waving his arms like a lunatic. Mary acknowledged him with a nod and made her way toward us.

I tried to make a run for it, grabbing what was left of my sandwich and paper bag. “I have to get going,” I told him.

“Sit your butt down and relax, Coughlin,” he commanded. “Your lunch isn’t over.”

I did as told. I ran my hand through my hair nervously and wondered what I looked like.

Curtis stood up, wiped down the table surface with his napkin, and pulled out a chair for her as she approached the table. “Greetings, Miss Mary,” he addressed her. “How are you on this fine afternoon?”

“Always the gentleman, Curtis,” she said drily.

“Indeed,” he said as he removed the paper napkin from her tray and placed it on her lap. “Would you like to see a wine list?”

“No, thank you. Instead I would like for you to stop speaking like a pompous, overeducated freak.”

“My apologies, Mary. Growing up as the only child of two university professors who’ve made me attend frequent dinner parties listening to their peers endlessly pontificate has inevitably influenced my elocution. But I digress,” he said, nodding toward me.

“It’s annoying, Curtis,” she said.

“Duly noted,” he said insincerely. “Miss Mary Seisen, please allow me to cordially introduce you to my new friend, Leo Coughlin,” he said.

She glanced at me and smiled. “We’ve met,” she informed him.

I froze. Again.

“Mary and I have known each other since the fourth grade,” he informed me. Curtis sat down with a huge, stupid smile on his face and resumed eating. I was cheap entertainment. He was enjoying that Mary clearly unhinged me. “So how was your summer, Miss Mary?” Curtis asked.

She nibbled on a carrot and pondered. “I was in Chicago for way too long with my father and his new wife. You’d think I’d have something in common with her. She’s closer to my age than my dad’s.”

“Not the case?” Curtis asked.

Mary shook her head. “Let’s just say she’s something else altogether. But my dad gets this huge, dopey grin on his face

whenever she walks in the room, so I suppose I'm happy for him." She looked at me again, giving me a thorough going-over with her eyes.

"Leo is a new arrival here," Curtis explained. "A transfer from Parkway Central, and more important, a new member of Ladue's elite cross-country program. He's quite a runner."

Mary looked directly into my eyes. "Why did your family move here?" Then she nodded at Curtis. "And how did he convince you to go out for that insane sport?"

I thought for a moment, hoping some words would come out that made sense. "The move mostly has to do with my brother, and that's actually a longer story. The cross-country part was my choice."

"What's up with your brother?" she asked, brushing aside a mushy chunk of tomato with her fork.

"Well, for one, he's autistic," I explained.

"Like Bill Gates autistic?" she replied casually. "Or like *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* autistic?"

"Bill Gates's autism is pure conjecture," Curtis interrupted.

"Once again you're missing the point," she said, rolling her eyes at him before looking back at me.

"The autism is just one layer," I told her. "He's got a few other disabilities he's dealing with."

Curtis couldn't help himself. "Leo has quite an interesting family," he told Mary. "Maybe we can all go over there some night for pizza."

Thankfully, Mary ignored him as she poked at her salad. "So why did you have to move here on account of your brother?"

“Go on,” Curtis said, motioning with his hand for me to continue. “You haven’t told me this part yet.”

I glared at Curtis. Honestly, I wasn’t sure if he was laughing with me or laughing at me. So I just looked down at the table and tried to formulate a concise explanation.

“Let’s just say that some of the stuff he pulled didn’t always go over too well in the neighborhood where we were living,” I told her. “Our house is a lot closer to his school now, and we don’t have as many neighbors.” I was now squirming in my own skin.

The bell rang and lunch was over. Curtis nodded and shrugged. “Personally, I’m glad you moved here, Leo,” he said with an expression that sounded actually genuine. He stood and gave me a little slap on the back before departing. “Besides, your brother isn’t the only one who’s not exactly normal. I think your parents take the cake on that.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, and got up to go to Spanish.

Mary tapped my shoulder as I turned to leave. “Nice to finally meet you, Leo.” She smiled. “Again.” Her green eyes drilled right through me.

This time I remembered Mom’s advice and smiled back. “Nice to meet you, too,” I said. I was too rattled at that moment to say much else.

9.

I COULDN'T GET MARY SEISEN out of my head. I was spacing out thinking about her during dinner when I saw Dad's headlights in the driveway. Caleb was too busy drawing train tracks in his mashed potatoes to notice Dad's arrival, and Mom was checked out again, not talking. She was pissed, maybe thinking Dad was coming home late again from work on account of golf or some other distraction at the office.

I figured I'd give her fair warning, since she had her back to the window. "Dad's home."

His voice drifted through the door behind me as he entered the kitchen. "Hi, guys." Dad sounded tired.

Mom looked up to greet him but didn't say a word. Her eyes grew huge, like she'd seen a ghost. She cast a quick glance at me and motioned with her head: *Don't look.*

I kept my shoulders and head square and focused on my salad, wondering what was going on this time. Two clinks signaled ice cubes hitting glass. More noise: the freezer door closing, the cap unscrewing from the bottle, liquid pouring. I cast a sideways glance again at my mother, who was still staring wide-eyed at Dad in disbelief.

I listened to the sounds of Dad's footsteps approaching the table, followed by the kiss on Mom's forehead. I peeked up at

my mother once more as Dad sat down and began serving himself. She definitely wasn't checked out anymore.

"So," Dad said as he grabbed salad with the tongs, "who is going to tell us about their day?"

It was a loaded question, but I looked up.

I couldn't believe it. Dad had a toupee.

For my entire life, my father had had a deep receding hairline, one he attempted to mask by parting his long, thin gray hair on the left side. Tonight, his scalp was covered with thick silvery hair. Dad stared into my eyes, daring me to say so.

"Leo, you start. Tell us about your day." Dad served himself some green beans and cut into a baked chicken breast like it was a typical meal.

I looked at him. His face was the same, but the hair unsettled me. Dad sat with his knife and fork, cutting his chicken, a blank expression on his face, like this new hairpiece had been slipped onto his head without his knowledge.

Incredible.

My day? I thought. The day my father came home with a new head of hair? Having lunch with Mary Seisen? All I wanted at this point was to disappear, but instead I focused and tried to make eye contact.

"Well," I began. I looked up at him and felt my eyes darting back and forth between his eyes and his new hairline. "Today we began to learn about the impact of the Treaty of Versailles on Germany after World War I in Mr. Ohlendorf's class, but this kid kept whistling to distract Ohlendorf because the guy lectures and makes eye contact with the ceiling in the corner of

the classroom.” I looked back at my plate and pretended to cut meat from an already clean bone.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Dad said. “How about your day, Caleb?”

“DAD GOT HAIRCUT! RIGHT!”

I nearly lost it and spit out my food right when Caleb said it.

“It’s not a haircut, Caleb,” Dad stated matter-of-factly. “Did you behave in school today?” he asked in an attempt to shift topics.

“YES! LEAVE SCOTT BREWSTER ALONE!”

“I sure hope so,” Dad said calmly. “I certainly don’t want any more phone calls from Mr. Baims.”

“STAY OUT OF TROUBLE!” Caleb assured him.

Mom looked up from her plate, but she wasn’t going to say a word tonight. When Caleb burst into laughter, I figured that was a good time to excuse myself and make an exit. I washed my dish quickly and made a beeline to my room.

I fell asleep wondering about Dad. I thought about all those late-night Hair Club for Men infomercials with those guys and their before-and-after photos. There was always some guy doing a cheesy testimonial about his newly restored confidence and feelings about being a new man. One commercial even showed this guy who started bawling about how his hair restoration gave him his life back. I wondered how Dad felt about his new head of hair. I wondered what Mom thought about it too. Then I wondered if my hair was going to fall out. Mostly I wondered how I was part of this family where things just happened and nobody said a word about them.

When I headed up to the breakfast table the next morning, Dad had already left for work.

Mom said good morning, friendly enough.

“So what’s up with Dad’s hair?” I blurted.

“God knows.” She buried her head in the morning paper, but I thought I detected a slight hint of a grin.

Like most things in our house, we’d never talk about it.

10.

IT WAS A LITTLE UNSETTLING not knowing when your older brother was going to try to take you down in the middle of the night. I didn't know what made it scarier: that he had a three-inch height and thirty-pound weight advantage, or that he wasn't working with a full deck.

My solution was to keep my old Little League bat nearby. At night I kept it wedged between the mattress and bed frame. When Caleb came at me in the pitch black, I gripped it high up the barrel like a club. If I smacked him on his back a couple of times, he usually rolled off me, and if that didn't work, I pinched and pulled his ears and hair. Usually that was enough to make him retreat. Sometimes he jumped around the room for a few minutes before settling back into his bed. Other times we were both so wound up that I had to head out for another night run. One way or another we always went through the same remorse ritual.

"Sorry, Leo," he'd say.

It was only at these times that his voice lost its robotic quality. He actually sounded like he was truly sorry, maybe even scared. Though it was dark in the room, I could see him lying on his bed on top of the covers, still heated with rage. When he spoke, he held his hands up toward the ceiling, and

his thumbs and fingers clicked like marionettes in unison with his voice.

I was usually too angry to respond the first time he'd apologize.

"Sorry, Leo," he'd repeat.

I always caved eventually. "It's all right, Caleb."

"God not punish you, Leo?" he'd ask.

"You" was him, and for some reason he seemed to have a fear of God—even after we stopped attending church. How did someone like Caleb, who often struggled to understand the world around him, become so concerned about God—some abstract, invisible force that we barely mentioned in this house?

"God not punish you, Caleb," I'd assure him.

"God not punish you," he'd repeat each time, but now as a statement.

"Never hit Leo again. Right?"

"That would be great, Caleb."

"Don't poke Leo in eye," he'd say.

"Let's get some sleep, Caleb," I'd say.

"Good night, Leo."

"Good night, Caleb."

A few nights later, it would happen all over again.

I began to anticipate when Caleb was off-kilter. I would catch him with his back to me, shaking his hand in front of his face, or I'd notice the sudden skip to his step when he was walking across the room—some gesture that showed he was unsettled about something, that the fuse had been lit and time was ticking.

It could take place anytime: daytime, evening, or the middle of the night. So I began to keep my clothes on and my running shoes by the back door when I went to sleep. If I woke to find Caleb shaking both his hands frantically in front of his face, I was ready. If he bit his wrist or began to jump up and down, I knew it was time to slip out and run far.

I ran until the tension seeped out of my chest and shoulders. I ran until I felt my face relax and I no longer clenched my teeth. I ran until my fists unwound and my fingers felt loose. I ran until my anger was gone. I ran until I was alone with just the steady rhythm of my feet tapping the pavement, my breath a soft, steady flow of energy in and out of my lungs, and my sweat releasing the heat from my body.

I was alone, away from him, away from home. It was at times like this I'd feel the runner's high again.

By the time I returned, Caleb would be calm, like nothing had ever happened. I'd wipe down with a wet towel and crawl back into my bed, and I'd forgive him. I knew deep down that he couldn't control himself. It wasn't his fault.