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DEAD TO YOU

A close-up, high-angle photograph of a person's eye. The eye is partially closed, and the eyelashes are coated with a thick layer of white powder. The skin around the eye is also covered in the powder, which is slightly clumped. The lighting is soft and focused on the eye, creating a dramatic and somewhat unsettling atmosphere.

DEAD TO YOU

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SIMON PULSE

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CHAPTER 1

There are three of them. No, four.

They step off the Amtrak train into the snowy dusk, children first and adults after, and then they hesitate, clustered on the platform. Passengers behind them shove past, but the four—Blake, Gracie, Dad, Mama—just move a few more steps and stop again, look around. Their faces are an uneasy yellow in the overhead light from the station. Mama looks most anxious. She peers into the darkness under the awning where I stand, just twenty feet away, as if she knows instinctively that I am here, but no confirmation registers on her face. I am still invisible in the shadows.

Invisible, but cornered. Backed up against the station wall, next to a bench, the woman from Child Protective

Services who I met this afternoon standing beside me. It's too late to stop this now. Too late to go back, too late to run away. I press my back into the wall, feeling the tenderness of a recent bruise on my right shoulder blade. I wet my chapped lips and break into a cold sweat.

“Is that them?” the woman asks quietly.

“It's them,” I say. And I'm sure. I feel panic welling up in my gut.

If I move, they'll see me.

CHAPTER 2

I take a deep breath, hold it, and force myself to step out from under the awning into the yellow light. Walk toward them. Mama sees me, and her mittened hand clutches her coat where it opens at her neck. As I approach, I can see her eyes shining above deep gray semicircles, and I can tell she's not sure—I'm not seven anymore. Her lips part and I imagine she gasps a bit. Then Dad, Blake, and finally Gracie, the replacement child, stare with doubting eyes, taking me in.

I open my mouth to say something, but I don't know what to say. It's almost like the cold sweat in the small of my back, in my armpits, freezes me in place.

Mama takes Dad's arm and they stumble over to me while the two children hang back. And then they're

right in front of me, and I'm looking into Mama's eyes.

"Ethan?" she says within a visible exhaled breath that envelopes me, then dissipates. She touches my hair, my cheek. Her breath smells like spearmint, and her eyes fill up with tears. Her skin is darker, and she's rounder, shorter than I expected. A lot shorter than me. I stand almost even with my dad, which feels right. Like I belong with this group of people.

I'm surprised to find tears welling in my own eyes. I haven't cried in a while, but it feels good to be with them. All at once, I feel wanted.

"It's really you," she says, wonder in her voice. She throws herself at me, sobs into my neck, and I close my eyes and hold her and let out a breath.

"Mama," I whisper into her soft hair. I am at once sixteen, my actual age, and seven, the age they remember me. We are long-lost souls, a mother reuniting with her semi-prodigal son. It is the end of one story and the beginning of the next.

Being near her makes my teeth stop chattering.

CHAPTER 3

Dad comes in for a group hug, and we are suddenly stepping on each other's feet, not sure where to put our heads in the crowded space. I turn my face outward and see Blake watching. We hold each other's gaze for several seconds, until my eyes cross from staring, and I think, for a moment, that he looks a little bit like this yellow dog I used to see hanging around the group home. He really does. I close my eyes.

The woman from CPS gently interrupts, lays a hand on my coat sleeve. I pull away from my parents. "Ethan," she says, "I'm sorry to intrude. It seems obvious, but I need to ask a few questions." We nod, and she looks at me. "Are these your parents?"

I'm choked up, but I say in a weird voice, "Yes, ma'am."

She asks my parents for identification and they fumble in an attempt to show it as quickly as possible. Asks them officially, “Is this your son?”

Mama breaks down. “Yes,” she says, sobbing. “Finally. I can’t believe it. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Please don’t be offended by the next question—I’m required to ask. Would you like a DNA test?”

They look at each other and then at me. “Absolutely not,” Mama says. “I’m positive.”

“There’s no need for that,” Dad says.

There are a few more questions and papers for them to sign, so we step out of the snow, into the building. At a closed ticket window we spread things out on the ledge, and that’s all there is. I already talked to the cops this afternoon. There are no more formalities. It’s almost like I got lost in the fishing tackle aisle of Wal-Mart for ten minutes. *This your mom? This your kid? Good. Stay close now, keep a better eye out.*

The woman from CPS squeezes my arm, searches my eyes, and apparently sees what she wants in them—enough to satisfy her that I am okay with all of this. She puts her hand to her chest and says, “Congratulations to all of you.” Her voice fills out, like she’s choking up. “It’s really such an amazing, joyful event when one of the lost ones makes it home again.” She smiles brightly, but her eyes glisten. I figure it must feel good to her,

like they actually finished a job. To me, it just feels like nausea.

Then the woman turns businesslike. “Mr. and Mrs. De Wilde, we’ve arranged for our counselor, Dr. Cook, to talk with you all and explain what we know. The train station manager was kind enough to let us use the break room to do this. Ethan, would you like me to stay?” She ushers us to the room and opens the door.

I shake my head. “No, that’s okay.” It only gets worse the longer she stays. I can’t even remember her name, I’m so anxious. Dr. Cook is sitting inside at a round table. I talked to her this afternoon. She has six pencils stuck in the ball of hair at the back of her head—four yellows, two reds.

“All right.” The CPS woman steps in after us and introduces my family to Dr. Cook. “Good luck, Ethan,” she says. “I’ll be in touch in a day or two to see how it’s going.”

I nod.

Dr. Cook smiles at Blake. “Maybe you and your little sister can sit outside in the waiting area.”

Blake glances at Mama and scowls. Mama says, “Yes, good idea.”

They go. We sit. And Dr. Cook debriefs.

It’s a relief, it really is, to have her talk to my parents instead of me. She tells them everything I told her.

Which, when you think of it, really isn't much at all.

I have three seasons of my life that I want to forget now that I'm here: Ellen (I told them her name was Eleanor—I don't know why), group home, and homeless. My mind wanders and my eyes roam the break room, land on the countertop. Spilled sugar. Coffee stains. A mug with a unicorn on it. For a minute I stare at it, thinking it moved, but it didn't—I'm just tired.

The coffeepot with the orange lid means decaf. I know that from the breakfast place Ellen worked at once in a while, whenever she needed the money. The little bit of coffee left in the pot is starting to burn and I can't look at it. The smell is sharp in my nose. The doctor says, "About two years ago, Eleanor abandoned him in Omaha at a group home." She tells them how I ran away from there and lived at the park and around the zoo. I blow breath out of my nose to get the burned smell out. Finally I just get up and turn off the burner. Dad gives me a curious look, but I don't care. I just don't think having this place burn down right now would make things easier.

Dr. Cook gives Mama the business card of a psychologist who lives near us. Says we should go individually and as a family. All these details are making me twitchy.

When Dr. Cook leaves, we walk out of the break room and find Gracie hopping around the waiting area, babbling

about kindergarten, and Blake sitting on the floor against the wall, staring at the ceiling.

“Well, it’s official,” Mama says with a huge smile, and hugs me again. When she finally lets go, Dad is next. Slaps me hard on the back, right near where my shoulder hurts. I hide a wince and take it like a man.

Blake stands up but doesn’t hug me. He stays back, shuffles his feet, embarrassed by absolutely everything. And the girl, the replacement child, she just stares at me.

It’s both jubilant and awkward, the five of us all wondering and staring and trying not to get caught looking. Mama apologizes for not bringing balloons. There wasn’t time to do anything, she says, and I believe her, since I just called CPS once I made it into Minnesota this morning. They really high-tailed it down here, actually. Must have. And I’m glad for that. I’m grateful. I look around the station, noticing other people for the first time, all of them busy trying to get home, I bet.

We have celebratory hot chocolate from an ancient, faded machine, waiting for the train that will take us home together, a complete family. Dad excuses himself after a minute and I watch him at the ticket counter, buying one more ticket home. My ticket. And I wonder, have they done this before? They didn’t want to waste the money in case I wasn’t me?

Everyone tries a little too hard. The small talk is strained. Gracie, who's six according to the family website, judges me from a safe distance behind Mama, who is talking excitedly on the phone. Talking about me. I take a sip of my hot chocolate too soon, and now my tongue feels like burlap.

Blake stares at my feet. He was there when it happened—the only witness. Just two brothers drawing with chalk on the sidewalk in front of the house, innocent as can be. I wonder if he remembers it. He doesn't say much. He just glances at me once in a while when he thinks I'm not looking.

"I can't believe it," Mama says over and over to me between calls. "You're all grown up. Such a little boy, and now you're all grown up."

Dad's quiet. He wipes his face with a white handkerchief that he keeps balled up in his hand.

A few times I try to ask a question, but I always change my mind right before I say anything. The words don't sound right. What am I supposed to say? *So, is it always this cold in Minnesota? Or, Hey, what have you guys been doing for the past nine years? I see you got busy replacing me.*

On the train it's even harder. We sit in two rows that face each other. I'm by the window, next to Blake. Mama and Dad sit across from us, with Gracie between them. I hold

my beat-up old bag on my lap to keep it safe from the slush on the floor. It's so difficult for me to look them in the eyes, like if I do I'm committing to something, even though I'm dying to take in their faces. To get a better picture. They are all looking at me, paying attention to me, asking me simple questions, and actually, I like that. I do. It makes me feel like something.

When there's a lull, I rack my brains for something to say, and I remember the photos on the website. "Still the same old house?" I feel myself starting to sweat again.

Dad clears his throat. "Still the same, yep. Thirty-fifth and Maple." He pauses. "Do you remember it?" His voice is gentle, careful.

"Some of it," I say, careful too. I know it only from the pictures on the website, but I don't want to hurt his feelings. "The front steps and the sidewalk and the white cement driveway, with the grass growing in the cracks. The Christmas tree in the big picture window, and a little black dog—what was his name?" I screw up my eyes, pretending to try to remember, but I already know that I don't know the dog's name. I see the photo of him in my head, but there are so many questions.

"Rags," Mama says with a smile. "Rags died a couple years after . . . about six years ago. Right around when Gracie was born."

"I'm sorry," I say. "He was a nice dog."

Dad laughs. “You hated that dog. He always chewed on your shoes.”

“Really?” I laugh too, a little too hard. “I don’t remember that.”

A few weeks ago, at the library, I found the page—my face staring back at me. My page, with my real name—Ethan Manuel De Wilde—on the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children’s website. I Googled my name and saw all the hits. People had been looking for me. Unreal. And then I found my family’s website. Even Grandpa and Grandma De Wilde and all the cousins and aunts and uncles post things there. Tons of pictures. Discussions about them . . . and about me. How they’ve been searching, and how they remember. Memories shared.

Things flash by the window and in my head: sleeping in doorways, the group home in Nebraska, and how I got there . . . and Ellen. . . . My throat hurts. I stare outside into the darkness, watching glowing snow and bare black trees whiz by.

“Um, so, what else do you remember, Ethan?” Blake asks after a while, still not quite looking at me. His voice is nonchalant, but I know what he’s really asking. He’s asking, *Do you remember me?*