

SPARTACUS

AND THE CIRCUS OF SHADOWS

PRAISE FOR SPARTACUS AND THE CIRCUS OF SHADOWS



“As an author, there’s a moment when noble emotions such as “admiration” and “respect” for a fellow scribe cross over into outright, green-eyed jealousy. And, about midway through reading Molly E. Johnson’s page-turning debut *Spartacus and the Circus of Shadows*, my appreciation for her quirky, breezy style quickly gave way to wanton prose-envy of the worst kind. The “E” surely stands for either “Effortless,” “Eclectic,” or perhaps “Eunice”... I can’t be sure. Only someone with the middle name of Eunice, like a creepy secret hidden at the nougaty center of their name, could create a charming outsider such as Spartacus Zander, AKA “Poop Lip.”

As exotic as his name is, Spartacus grounds the fantastical events of his story in a deeply affecting and relatable way. His insights and feelings at being a runaway in a difficult situation at a difficult age hold your metaphorical hand as Johnson leads you, circuitously, to the inevitable big showdown at the Big Top. But it’s the various roadside attractions and delightful deviations along the way that make her story sparkle like the creepy-shiny eyes of a carnie. Seriously: your mind will do advanced yoga moves at the story’s twisting twists and—at times—stomach-turning turns. But I’m a better person for every mile spent with Spartacus on his darkly comic road trip. And, if you’re from inner- or even outer-Portlandia, you will derive extra joy from the numerous inclusions of various beloved landmarks, twisted like a helium-filled balloon animal into Johnson’s wonderful story.”

— Dale E-for-Eunice Basye

[Author of the demonically delightful series *Heck: Where the Bad Kids Go*]

“I couldn’t put it down. Literally. Never pick up a book while eating honey glazed ribs. But, if you are going to be stuck with a book for a few days, I advise you to make it *Spartacus and the Circus of Shadows*.”

—Dr. Cuthbert Soup

[Author of the hilarious road trip tale, *A Whole Nother Story*, and (N)others]

SPARTACUS

AND THE CIRCUS OF SHADOWS

MOLLY E. JOHNSON

RAINTOWN  PRESS
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Spartacus and the Circus of Shadows

Text © 2011 by Molly E. Johnson (www.mollyejohnson.com)

Illustrations © 2011 by Robin E. Kaplan (www.thegorgonist.com)

For interactive games and other cool stuff: www.circusofshadows.com

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To Z:

FOR SENDING THE TORNADO,
THE TATTOO ARTIST,
NINETEEN-DOZEN PARENTHETICALS,
AND
TWENTY-EIGHT HYPERBOLES
TO THEIR
ALTERNATE DIMENSIONS.

I'LL ALWAYS TRUST YOU TO KILL MY DARLINGS.

YMEFL—LYBRYSSM.

PROLOGUE

A CLOWN CAN BE A scary thing. And a clown posing as a cop can be even scarier. And a mob of clown cops? Let me tell you—you haven't experienced real fear until you've been chased and cornered by a mob of pale, grinning clown cops.

From my spot on the catwalk (a ridiculous fifty feet in the air), I could see all the performers coming out onto the stage below me—the mime-faced muscle men, the wiry contortionists, those creepy, spindly-legged skeleton guys—like this was some big, end-of-the-show curtain call. The ringmaster looked up at me with a smug smile, like everything was going according to plan. Sharkman stood by his side, gnashing his knife-sharp teeth. The circus orchestra was sending insane music blating through my head, so loud I could barely think.

Right below me, twenty or so fake cops climbed both sides of the scaffolding, crazy smiles pasted on their faces. I only had a few seconds before they'd be up on the catwalk with me.

I had two choices, and they were both bad: I could dangle from the catwalk and jump down onto the diving board ten feet below... or I could stay right where I was and wait for Bartholomew's goons to reach me.

One more look at the advancing clowns and I knew I wasn't staying.

Ten feet isn't that far, is it?

I told myself not to look down.

Don't look down.

Looking down would be a very bad idea.

I lined myself up with the diving board before dropping to my stomach. Then I inched my way backward off the edge, letting my feet dangle below me. I'd never been so high off the ground before, and there I was, blindly lowering myself off a fifty-foot catwalk, about to do some sort of reverse pull-up. And I'd never been able to do a *normal* pull-up.

Don't look down.

I got to the point of no return, where I was more in the air than I was on the ledge, legs kicking. I knew I was right above the diving board—all I had to do was let go and I'd land right on it. It wouldn't be so bad.

I looked down.

And lost my grip and fell.

For the brief moment I was in the air, the music paused and I heard the audience's combined gasp over my own.

I landed on the diving board to wild applause, the cymbals crashing in triumph. I clung to the board vibrating beneath me.

"Go, Spartacus, go!" someone in the audience shouted.

Morons. They were all morons.

Shaking, I clambered to my feet and looked up at the catwalk where I'd been hanging a few seconds before. The clown cops were already there, shaking their oversized, foam billy clubs at me. I hoped the guns strapped to their uniforms were equally fake. They wouldn't hurt me in front of the audience, would they? I didn't think so, but maybe they could cover it all up as being part of the show.

Bartholomew was crafty like that.

"Please! I'm not part of the circus! This is real!" I shouted to the audience, waving my arms, feeling pathetic. But the music and the crowd drowned me out.

I looked down at the water tank so far below me and, as if the situation wasn't bad enough, Sharkman ran across the stage and took a flying leap into the tank. He then started swimming around in darting circles so all I could see was his dorsal fin above the water. You had to hand it to him; he really did look just like a shark.

Down below, the clowns started climbing the ladder to the diving board. I only had a few seconds before I would be cornered again—and this time, there was only one way down.

“They’ve got me surrounded,” I whispered. That was something I’d always wanted to say out loud, but until that moment, I hadn’t realized that that’s one thing you *never* want to say.

So I cried out again, a pathetic “Help! This is real! I’m not with them!” It all felt like a dream—no, a nightmare. It had finally reached the point of weirdness where you know you’ve got to be waking up any moment. You’ve just got to.

Everyone was on their feet, wildly cheering. It was like Bartholomew had seen this coming and planned the whole commotion. And then someone from the audience shouted it.

“Jump!”

And then again, from more voices: “Jump, kid!”

Were they insane?

I looked down at the tank. It might as well have been a glass of water at this height. I frantically shook my head. Jumping would be crazy. I wasn't my mom. I wasn't a performer.

The clowns on the ladder were almost up to the diving board. When they got there, they were going to take me backstage to do who knows what. Erase me. Bump me off. Rub me out.

“Jump!” shouted someone else. Soon the whole audience was chanting it: “Jump! Jump! Jump!” The noise was deafening.

This wasn’t a dream and I wasn’t about to wake up and find myself at home in bed. This was really happening.

I gulped the thick summer air as I considered everything that had led me to this moment. To what was looking more and more like the end of the line.

The fat lady singing.

The grand finale of Spartacus Ryan Zander.

CHAPTER 1



I'M GOING TO START RIGHT at the beginning, the day mom left home to become The Amazing Athena, World-Famous Human Cannonball.

Sure, first there were the epic fights, the Month of Silence, and the time Dad set Mom's hula-hoops on fire. But going into all of that would just make you think Mom ran out on Dad. But trust me—none of that stuff is important.

Dad and Will (my older brother) took her departure pretty well. And by "pretty well," I mean they seemed to

think we were better off without her. Will was convinced she'd left Dad for another guy—maybe a circus performer. Her absence was a touchy subject with Dad. Sometimes when I tried to bring it up, he wouldn't talk to me for days.

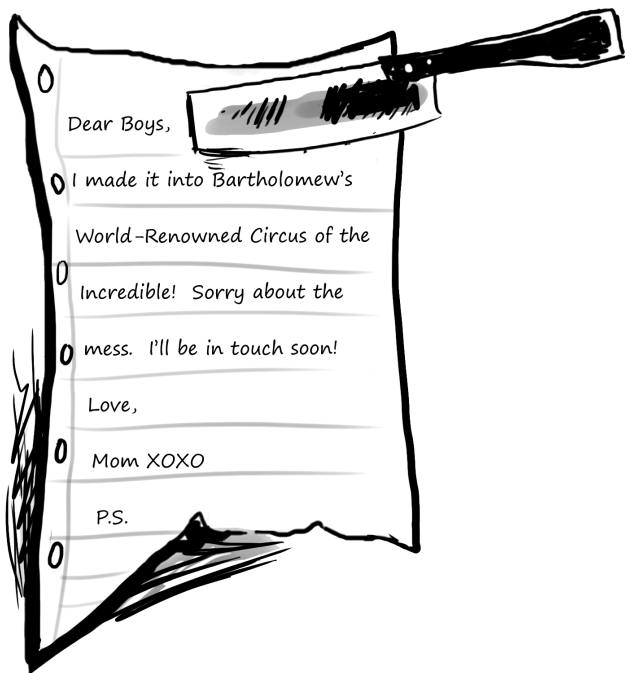
She went missing the same day I started the seventh grade. I came home that afternoon to find the house looking *a little odd*. (Those were Dad's exact words to Grandma: "The place looked a little odd." Personally, I think a better way to put it would be "the place was *destroyed*.") When Will opened the front door, water started pouring out onto the porch. The front hall's bathroom sink was overflowing, flooding the entryway.

Will slogged through the water to turn off the sink while I checked out the living room. The couch's smoldering, smoking cushions smelled like burnt lemon custard, like they had been lit on fire and then doused with a pitcher of lemonade. Our old box television had been knocked to the floor, and there were footprints high up on the wall.

Then there was the kitchen. The blender was running and the dining table was on its side with only three legs attached. (We never did find the fourth one.) Six steak knives stuck out of the pantry door in a perfect vertical line. The bottom knife pinned a note at eye level, scrawled in handwriting that didn't quite look like my mom's.

The bottom half of the note was torn off in a jagged line, like someone had tried to erase the rest of her message. I wanted to tear the note down and crumple it up, but instead I just slid to the floor and sat there staring up at it and trying to blink away the pressure building behind my eyes.

"What are you doing?" Will hadn't noticed the note yet and he was peering down at me. "Poop Lip—wait, are you crying?"



I scowled at his smirking face. Poop Lip. One unfortunately-placed freckle—not a mole, a *freckle*—one concentrated cluster of melanin, one overly-pigmented spot just above my lip and, thanks to Will, nearly every kid at Brenville Middle-Senior High School called me Poop Lip. The town we live in is small and Will's reach was long—even the old man at the gas station once called me Poop Lip. I just stared at him. I couldn't think of anything to say.

I guess I was lucky that at least my dad, my teachers, and Eli Carson, my best friend (and next-door neighbor), called me Ryan, which is my middle name. I go by Ryan because my first name isn't exactly normal, but I'll get to that tragedy later.

When dealing with Will, you need to follow two simple rules: rule number one is you never question him. Not unless you want to walk away bruised and possibly wedged. And

rule number two? Never show weakness. Not even if your mom destroys the house and then abandons the family.

I wiped my nose before standing up. I realized I was shivering—maybe I was cold from the windows being left wide open. I pulled the note from the pantry door and handed it to Will.

“Mom left,” I told him. “With the circus. She’s gone.”

Will skimmed Mom’s note. He looked even angrier than usual. “Of course she’s gone,” he said, kicking a can of green beans so it skittered across the floor. “How long has she been trying to get out of here?”

Will had a point. Even though I was the only one who knew Mom was serious about becoming a circus performer, anyone could see she wasn’t happy. Brenville wasn’t big enough for someone with her talents. But even though I knew she wanted to lead a more exciting life, I always thought that, if she left, she’d take us with her.

I never thought she’d leave me behind.

Dad got home a few minutes later and the three of us just stared at the mess and the note and then—get this—no one said anything. Every time I started to speak, to ask what we were going to do, Dad glared and Will elbowed me in the armpit. Can you imagine? No, you can’t, because it’s not normal. But then again, no one in my family is normal.

So, instead of talking, Dad went upstairs to shower, Will called in a pizza, and then we sat and ate dinner in front of the broken TV, as if Mom trashing the house and leaving with the circus was the most normal thing in the world.



IT'S COMMON SENSE THAT IF someone goes missing and your house looks like a tornado went through it, you call the police. Dad didn't. He made a few late night phone calls that I couldn't quite hear through the heating ducts, but he must have decided to take the note at face value and leave it at that.

Maybe he was just relieved to be rid of her. Whenever he found her doing something "weird" or "crazy," they fought like stray cats. Like when he came home to find her teaching me how to throw knives. Or when she dyed her hair orange and red so that it looked like flames. Or when he got a call from the neighbors complaining that she was leaping from fence post to fence post in front of their house. Or the time, on a family picnic, she somehow got on the back of a wild elk and rode it for a whole twenty yards. (And that was just the stuff Dad *knew* about.)

Brenville is a small town. If you stand out at all, you may as well start your own reality TV show because everyone is going to know everything about you anyway. So the neighbors talked. And Dad? Dad just wanted to be invisible.

The day after my mom disappeared, Eli told me the Story of the Black Van. Eli had been home sick on the first day of school (which he's been getting away with every year since the third grade) and happened to look out his window to see a black van pulling up in our driveway. An unmarked van—it definitely did *not* have *Bartholomew's World-Renowned Circus of the Incredible* scrawled across the side like you'd think it would if it was there doing anything normal. No, it was a plain black van with tinted windows. It didn't even have license plates.

Eli watched what happened because he thought the van was weird—and because he didn't have anything better to

do. He said it was there for exactly forty-two minutes and that there might have been some crashing and banging coming from inside the house. He never saw Mom, but he did see two creepy men heave a big black bag into the back of the van right before it left, tires squealing down the street.

“One of the guys was all pale and really tall,” Eli explained. “He was like a vampire version of Conan O’Brien. The other guy was like a Mr. America, weight-lifter type. Built like a brick house. Man, I can’t believe they kidnapped your mom!”

Yeah, he said it just like that. No build up, no saying it in a *Do-you-think-this-is-possible?* kind of way. Just *bam!* Dropped the bomb without even thinking. Of course, he argues over who actually said it first, but this is *my* story and I can say with utter certainty that I am pretty sure it was Eli.

Will was dribbling his soccer ball around the lawn like nothing had happened when I ran to tell him about the Black Van. He snorted but didn’t look up.

“So what you’re saying,” he said, dancing around the ball and breathing hard, “is that you and The Eel think she was kidnapped?”

Pow!

I jumped as Will kicked the ball hard against the fence. It always hit the same spot. He’d put one toe on it, fake left, fake right, then:

Pow!

“Maybe,” I said, trying to sound more casual than I was. Will made me nervous. But then, Will made everyone nervous. I think he even made our parents nervous.

“Why would a circus kidnap somebody?” Will asked.

“Maybe so they don’t have to pay them?” I ventured.

“That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard.”

Pow!

I flinched again. He was kicking the ball really hard. Harder than usual. But I wasn’t going to let it drop.

“What about the bag, though?” I asked. “It was big enough for a person.”

“Maybe it was her makeup,” he said. I worked up enough confidence to glare at him. “What? Seriously! They wear a lot of makeup in the circus,” he said, before firing the ball again.

Pow!

The look on Will’s face made it clear that, unless I wanted him to get *really* angry, the conversation was over. So I kept quiet for a while, but it never really left my mind.

It wasn’t just the house being destroyed and the Black Van and the large-enough-for-a-person bag. There was more. Much more.

A few weeks later I started getting postcards from my mom. Postcards with secret messages, saying things like “Help me” and “I’m in trouble.”

No matter how ridiculous it seemed, it was true—my mom really had been kidnapped by the circus.



EVEN BEFORE THE POSTCARDS BEGAN arriving, Eli and I had started researching Bartholomew’s Circus. What we found wasn’t very reassuring.

Sure, the main website for Bartholomew’s World-Renowned Circus of the Incredible was kind of underwhelming. They only had a few pictures and a schedule that listed just a handful of shows. Eli and I knew from other

websites that the circus performed a lot more often than that. Plus, the postcards from Mom came from all over the country. So that was weird.

But Wikipedia had more information on Bartholomew. There had been an incident where three trapeze artists had died (getting weirder). We couldn't find many details about that, but according to Wikipedia, it was an accident. Then there was a tiger mauling where another guy almost died. There had been some accusations of animal cruelty, but they were dismissed as coming from angry ex-performers.

That wasn't even close to the weirdest (and worst) stuff, though. We found a site, IHateBartholomewsCircus.com, where everybody and their brother seemed to have a story about how evil the circus was—they claimed that Bartholomew had sold his soul to the devil, that he used dark magic to entertain his audience, and that he'd even helped fix the 2005 Tour de France.

Obviously I wasn't the only person who had come to the conclusion that something was strange about Bartholomew's Circus. It all sounded too crazy to believe, but if even some of it was true, it didn't bode well for my mom.

I wasn't really surprised that Dad didn't take my kidnapping theory seriously. Adults seem to lose their ability to think about anything strange or out of the ordinary. But Will, who knew evil inside and out, should have sensed that something was off.

Over the next ten months, I showed him the twenty-five postcards Mom sent me, including the ones with the secret codes. Those were the strangest. Every new one I got, I brought immediately to Will. I've never seen anyone laugh so hard.

"How could it be more obvious?" I fumed, shoving the postcard from Last Chance, Colorado in his face. "Read it."

“Come *on*,” he said. “Circuses don’t kidnap people. Don’t be a moron.”

“Just read it,” I repeated. “Read it and tell me she isn’t asking for help.”

And so he read it out loud:

Hello Spartacus!

Everything is going really good!

Lots of fun people to meet and

Places to see.

My cannonball thing is going really grate.

Everyone thinks I’m the best they have ever seen!

Love,

Mom

“First of all, do you think Mom is that bad a writer?” I asked him. “She’s trying to get my attention. I mean, look how she spelled *meet*.”

Will scowled, squinting at the card and then back at me.

“You really think there are hidden messages in these things, *Smarticus*?”

I wanted to think that maybe he was hiding his fear to protect me. That maybe, deep down, he saw how weird and scary the whole situation was.

But when I pointed out that the first letter of each line, going from top to bottom, spelled “HELP ME,” he laughed so hard, he farted.

“Why would she write that in there, huh?” I asked.

“It’s a coincidence!” he exclaimed, after containing himself and wiping a tear from his eye. “Look, you know how a hundred monkeys pounding on a hundred typewriters for a hundred years—”

“Yeah, yeah. They’d write a play,” I said, rolling my eyes. I hated his guts right then.

“Yeah. Everyone knows that. It’s a scientific fact,” Will explained. “But it doesn’t mean anything. Besides, what about the other postcards? She sends you some without all the... what did you call them?”

“Clues,” I huffed, pulling the card out of his hand and tucking it back in an envelope with the others.

“Whatever. Some don’t say anything secret, though, right? Why would she do that?”

I thought about it for a minute, and then shuffled through the envelope until I found one I liked, the one with the skull of a triceratops on it. It was from the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.

There weren’t any clues on it—at least none that I could find. Why was that?

“Maybe to throw Bartholomew off her track?” I suggested as Will snatched it out of my hand and began to read,

“*Dear Spartacus,*” he began, speaking in that high lady-voice he used when he imitated Mom—or any girl, for that matter. “*You don’t know how much I miss you and your lovely brother Will. Will is the best brother you could—*”

“Give me that! It doesn’t say that!” I lunged for it but he hopped up onto the sofa he’d been sitting on and, holding a hand over my face, jumped up and down while continuing to “read.”

“*The best brother you could ask for. In fact—oof! Watch it, Poop Lip!—In fact, I’ve told your father to give your allowance to sweet William for the next four years and—Ooh, Poopy, now you’ve done it!*”

The scuffle we had doesn’t need to be recounted blow for blow, so let’s just cut to me, back upstairs in the safety

of my room, tending my bruises and taping the postcard back together. (Will had turned it into confetti and stuffed it down my pants.)

As I taped the last piece into place, I had to admit Will had a point. Why would only some of the cards have clues and not the others? And why would the ones without clues make it sound like she was having a great time? I had to sit there and think about it for a minute before it made sense: the ones *without* clues were the ones she wrote and sent to make it appear like everything was normal, just in case they were being read. And even though she was sending the cards *with* clues secretly, she still put them in code.



BEFORE WE GET ANY FURTHER, I suppose I should address the whole “Spartacus” issue. Mom was pretty smart, but she seemed to have forgotten that when it came to naming me. I don’t think it crossed her mind that a child growing up in a town the size of Brenville might not do very well with a name like Spartacus Ryan Zander. Then again, her name was Athena, which is just as ridiculous, so maybe I should blame *her* parents—but then again, we never saw her parents. Mom never explained why. It’d just always been that way.

When I asked her why Will got a normal name and I got Spartacus, she just kissed me on the head and said in that airy way of hers, “In time, Spartacus. In time.”

The name didn’t bother me for the most part, except when we had a substitute teacher, or when it was report card time, everyone was reminded that I wasn’t only Ryan, or Poop Lip, but also Spartacus. So then I’d get teased for another few weeks about that. It was ridiculous.

Mom was the only one who called me Spartacus. At least in a serious, not-making-fun-of-me way. And I never minded. It never sounded weird when she said it.

Dad thought the name was just as stupid as I did. He started calling me Ryan as soon as I was born, hoping I'd "turn out normal." Even when Mom told him that Ryan wasn't my name, he'd say "Ryan" right over the top of her "Spartacus" until they were both yelling my names back and forth over my crib. As I got older, it continued...

"Spartacus, please pass the peas."

"Ryan, pass your mother the peas."

"Spartacus *heard* me, Phil."

"Ryan. The peas. *Now.*"



I TRIED TO TALK TO Dad about the postcards, but he refused to even read where they were from, let alone help me decode the secret messages. When I tried to show him the maps that tracked her erratic movements across the country or the connections to other kidnappings I saw on the news, his response was—well, you know those people who can crack their knuckles without even touching them? Yeah, Dad's one of them. Two or three cracks from his fingers and I'd clam up for a day or two. But I kept trying. I mean, this was my *mom*.

As it turned out, Dad's limit for putting up with conspiracy theories was two and a half months.

He was doing bills at the new dining room table when he saw me standing in the doorway with the map and postcards. I was trying to get up the nerve to sit down next to him, hoping he'd finally show some interest.

His groan was so loud, dust flew off the light fixture.

“No more of this,” he growled before I’d even said a word. “You hear me, Ryan? No more postcards, no more random connections, *nada*. If I see another map with even a pushpin in it, I will tear it up and make you eat it like cereal. Got it?”

I heard Will snicker from the family room, but I ignored him. I was just starting to *think* about saying something when Dad shut his eyes and sucked air in through his teeth. Then, with his eyes still closed, he pounded both his fists on the table.

“Not (*bang*) another (*bang*) word (*bang*)!”

I ducked out of the kitchen before he could open his eyes and light me on fire with them.

After he shut me down, I tried calling the local police station a few times... and then a detective called our house and told Dad I had to stop calling them. I was grounded for a full week. That gave me free time to do some more research and draft a few letters to the FBI. But all I got back was an FBI baseball cap and a letter written from the point of view of a cartoon dog. A lot of help they were.

Nobody listens to kids. I was officially on my own.



I SPENT ALL WINTER COBBLING together a rescue plan. But before I can explain my plan, I need to tell you about one of Mom’s weird talents.

One weekend, when Dad was gone on a business trip, I heard Mom’s voice calling for help. It took me a few minutes to trace it to Dad’s study, but even then I couldn’t find her because there was nowhere in the room she could be.

Then I realized her voice seemed to be coming from inside Dad's filing cabinet. I opened up the top few drawers first, but still nothing.

I thought I was going crazy, until I heard my mom's voice say, "Lower."

She was in the very bottom drawer. A single drawer. It was amazing to see her unfold herself out of a little pretzel to become my mom again. I mean, I wouldn't have thought it was possible if I hadn't seen it myself.

"Don't tell anyone about this," she'd said, putting the papers back inside. Like anyone would believe me. But I knew what she really meant: "Don't tell Dad."

So I came up with the idea of using a suitcase the size of a small dog carrier—with wheels. I knew she could fit into that; it was bigger than the filing cabinet drawer. My brilliant, if simple, plan was to get to the circus, call the cops ahead of time (using myself, the Missing Kid, as bait, since the kidnapping of mothers obviously isn't something they care about), get backstage, and get Mom into the suitcase. Then I'd just wheel her out, lost in the crowd of kids and families. I'd take her straight to the cops waiting outside. Mom would tell them everything—and we'd bring Bartholomew down.

The rescue mission was planned for June, right after school let out. I figured there was no point in getting in extra trouble for missing school. I knew leaving was going to get Dad riled up, but I figured if I came home with Mom, there was no way he could ground me.

The one thing Eli and I had to go on was Bartholomew's website. Even though the schedule was incomplete, it listed two shows coming up in June. One was in California. As far as we knew, this was the closest they'd ever be to us in

Brenville, Oregon. Even though we knew they'd probably be performing in other places, this was the only one we could actually plan for in advance.

Eli's cousin was going to drive me to Bend, which was a bigger city about two hours away, where I'd "resurface," as Eli put it.

"You can't just get a bus from Brenville," he explained. "You have to go dark for a bit of time and pop up somewhere you don't belong. They'll never track you that way." Did I mention Eli watches a lot of spy movies? But it made sense. So, once I was in Bend, I'd catch a ride to California. Eli would set it all up using this ride-share website we'd found.

While Eli helped me prepare, Mom's postcards got more and more desperate. The one from Imalone, Wisconsin (where she'd underlined a bunch of random letters in the message that, when put together, spelled out "bring help") made me realize that she didn't mean for me to come alone. Eli was out though. He wasn't known for being brave—in fifth grade he'd peed his pants crossing a four-lane highway. I mulled it over and over (and over) until finally deciding Will was my only hope. After all, he was tough, she was his mom, and we were brothers. That had to count for something, right?

Look, I know what you're thinking—Will would have refused to go with me. But I was certain that if I could just get him to really look at all the evidence (and see that I was going with or without him), he'd have to say yes. It was just the matter of finding the right time to ask. But when your house is a war-zone, there really isn't a "right time." And so the right time still hadn't come when Will pulled the Worst Prank Ever on me.