

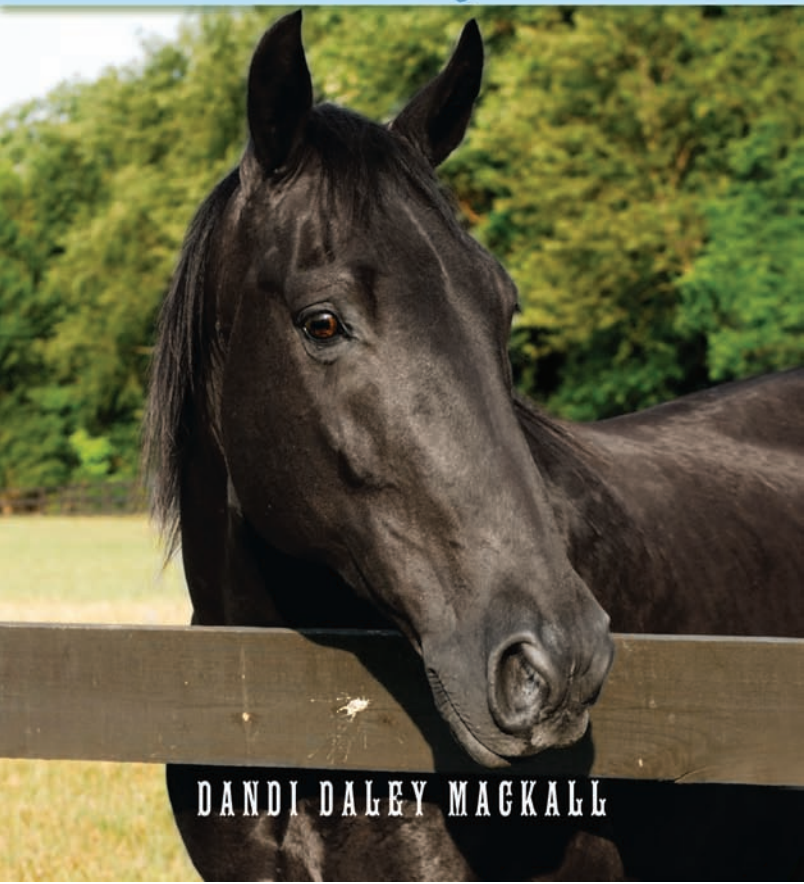
S * T * A * R * L * I * G * H * T



Animal Rescue



Runaway



DANDI DALEY MACKALL

Runaway



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. • Carol Stream, Illinois

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Runaway

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Designed by Jacqueline L. Nuñez

Edited by Stephanie Voiland

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ONE

WHEREVER WE'RE GOING, I won't be staying. That much I can promise. I've run away seven times—never once *to* anything, just *away from*. Maybe that's why they call me a “runaway” and not a “run-to.”

The way I figure it, these “ideal placements” by Chicago's social services never add up to much. And anyway, so far, my life has been subtraction. Two parents and a brother and me. Take away one brother, and that leaves two parents and me. Take away one parent, and that leaves one parent and me. Take away another parent, and that leaves me,

Dakota Brown, age almost 16, trying not to wonder what it will be like when I'm the one taken away.

Bouncing in the backseat of the social worker's car—the front seat has too many papers and folders *about* me to fit the real me in it—I decide it's time for a list. I love lists. You can take a mess like Ms. Social Worker has going for her in the front seat and, in a few minutes, turn it into a list that fits on a single sheet of paper. Lists bring things under control. *My* control.

I take my list-book out of my backpack and turn to a clean page. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I catch the frown of concentration on the social worker's face. She's too busy trying to get us out of Chicago traffic to worry about what I'm doing in the backseat.

I know her name is Ms. Bean, but in my head I keep thinking of her as “the social worker” because things are easier that way. She's not a bad person, and I'm not trying to get her into trouble or anything. But because I'm so good at what I do—running away—I'm bound to make her look pretty lousy at what she does. She thinks she's driving me to my

new foster family, where I'll live happily ever after and forever be a pleasant anecdote for her to share with friends and family and future fosters everywhere.

Poor Ms. Social Worker. She is doomed to fail. The State of Illinois has not invented a foster family from which I, Dakota Brown, cannot escape.

In my list-book, I form an action plan.

THE PLAN:

- A. Pay attention to the route leading to my new location. It is also my route out.
- B. Control reaction to new setting. It's important that the social worker believes I like my new digs.
- C. Headache. This will be my medical weapon of choice, the only complaint I'll voice, my one excuse to get out of whatever needs getting out of.
- D. Observe. Knowledge is power.
- E. Never cry. At least, never let them see you cry.
- F. Never get angry. (Yeah, right.) Don't let them see the anger.

G. Never “confide,” as the social worker likes to call it.

H. Be friendly, but do not make friends.

“Dakota, what are you writing?” Ms. Bean asks.

“Sorry.” I close my list-book and flash a smile to the rearview mirror.

“Don’t be sorry,” she says, smiling back at the mirror. This action makes her come up too fast on the little sports car in front of us.

“Ms. Bean!” I shout.

She slams on the brakes, forcing the car behind us to do the same. Horns honk. “I hate traffic,” she admits.

I wonder how she ended up in Chicago when she hates traffic so much. But I don’t ask. My mind reaffixes the *Ms. Social Worker* label, and I stare out the window.

Ms. Bean is not the clichéd social worker. She’s a stylish, 24-year-old college graduate with light red hair, funky earrings, and clothes I wouldn’t mind wearing myself. I know she’s engaged. But other than the fact that she’s a lousy driver, I don’t know much else about her. That’s the way I like it.

I lean back and close my eyes, hoping she'll drop the subject of my writing notebook, her driving, and everything else. After a minute, I open my eyes and stare out the window again. Cars whiz by all around us. Every car window is closed. Heat rises from the pavement between the lanes. Even with the air-conditioning blasting, I can smell Chicago, a mixture of tar, exhaust fumes, and metal.

The social worker slams on her brakes again, but I can't see any reason for it this time.

"Sorry about that," she mutters. Maybe to me. Maybe to the guy behind her, who rolls down his window enough to scream at her.

"Don't stop writing on my account, Dakota," she says. "Unless it makes you carsick. It always makes me carsick."

I'm thinking that if I get carsick, it will have more to do with her driving style than it does with my writing style. But Rule #11 on my "How to Handle Social Workers" list is "Don't criticize. It puts them on the defensive."

I say, "You're right, Ms. Bean. I really shouldn't write while I'm in the car."

"My sister is a journalist," Ms. Bean tells me.

It's more information than I care to know. I don't want to picture her as a person, with a newspaper-writing sister.

"Charlotte has a mini recorder she carries with her everywhere," the social worker continues. "Instead of writing notes, she talks into that recorder, even when she's driving. My dad keeps telling her not to record and drive, but she won't listen."

She hits her horn when someone changes lanes right in front of her without signaling.

"How far out of Chicago is this place?" I ask.

"Nice?"

I know this is the name of the town they're dragging me to, but it takes a second to register. "Yeah. Nice," I say. "Only are you sure they don't pronounce it 'Niece,' like that city in France?" Both cities are spelled the same, but I'm guessing the similarities end there.

"That would make sense," she admits. "But no. You'll be living in Nice, Illinois." She giggles. "And going to Nice High. And I'm sure you'll be a nice resident of Nice."

I manage to smile, although I can only imagine how old this play on names must get.

I'm already feeling not so nice about it. "So, are we getting close?"

"It's still a good ways," Ms. Bean answers. "The board thought a rural home might be a nice change for you." She smiles, then lets the "nice" thing fade without comment.

Neither of us says anything, so her last words bang around in my head. The board thought a rural home would be a nice change? The board doesn't know me well enough to know how ridiculous it is to think a rural home would be just the ticket for Dakota Brown. The "ticket" for me is a one-way ticket out of there.

"Are you writing a book?" Ms. Bean asks.

"No," I answer, hoping she'll leave it alone.

"No? A letter, maybe?"

Those files scattered all over the front seat have enough information on me that she should know there's nobody in the world I'd write a letter to. "It's just lists," I say to get her off my case.

"Like a shopping list?"

"Just a list," I answer, trying not to let her see that this conversation is getting to me.

“Like what, for example?” Ms. Bean can turn into a little kid sometimes. She reminds me of this girl, Melody, who was in a foster home in Cicero with me for two months. Melody would grab on to a question and not let it go until she shook an answer out of you.

“Read me one, will you, Dakota?” she begs.

I’m pretty sure Ms. Bean will keep asking me about lists until I either read her one or get so angry I won’t be able to keep up my cheerful act. That, I don’t want.

I open my list-book and flip through dozens of lists until I come to a social worker-friendly list. “Okay . . . here’s a list of five cities I want to visit one day.” This is a real list I’ve made, but I have a hundred cities on it. Not five.

“That’s awesome!” she exclaims. “Which cities, Dakota?”

“Paris, Vienna, Rome, Moscow, and Fargo.” I stop and close the notebook before she can peek in the rearview mirror at the next list, because it looks like this:

TOP 8 CITIES I NEVER WANT TO SEE AGAIN

1. Elgin, IL
2. Evanston, IL

3. Aurora, IL
4. Glen Ellyn, IL
5. Kankakee, IL
6. Cicero, IL
7. Chicago, IL
- 8.

Ms. Bean was my social worker in only the last two cities, but she's got files on me from the other five. So she'd pick up on this list right away and make a big deal of it if she saw it.

I wait until she's totally confused and trying to study her map while avoiding crashing into trucks. Then I open my list-book and fill in that blank by #8 of the cities I never want to see again.

When I'm sure she's not looking, I write in big letters:

Nice, IL