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—Roland Smith, author of *Peak*

THE TRAIL

Stay warm.

Stay dry.

Stay fed.

SURVIVE.

MEIKA HASHIMOTO

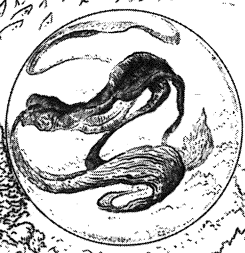
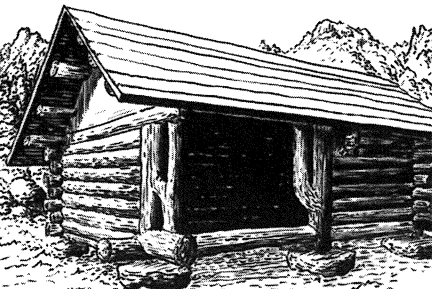


SCHOLASTIC

THE TRAIL

MEIKA HASHIMOTO

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Garfield Ridge Shelter

Kinsman Pond Shelter

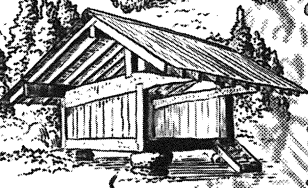


Lonesome Lake Hut

FRANCONIA RIDGE

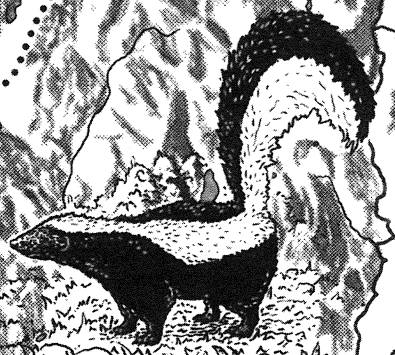
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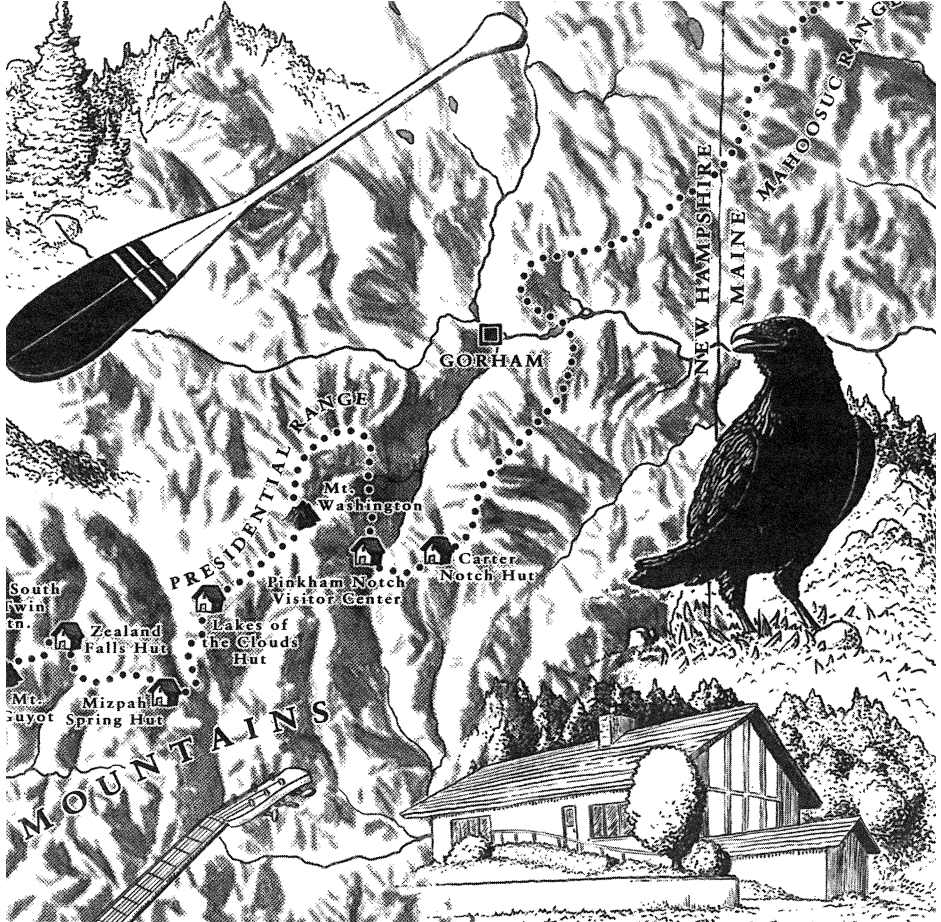


VERMONT
NEW HAMPSHIRE

Velvet Rocks Shelter



W. J. GARDNER
Illustrator



TOBY'S JOURNEY

ALONG THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL



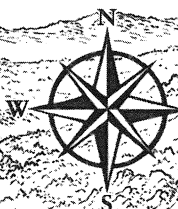
STRUCTURE



MOUNTAIN



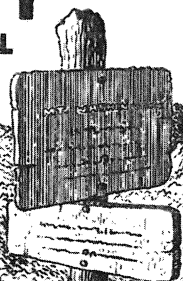
TOWN



SCALE IN MILES

0 2 4 6 8

Trail continues on next map



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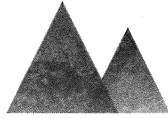
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*To my father, Toshio Hashimoto,
who taught me to love the mountains*



CHAPTER 1

OUT IN THE woods, all by myself, I've become aware of the little things. There are the good littles: cooling my face with a handful of water from a mountain stream. The way sunlight plays through wind-rippled leaves. The startled leap of a deer that only I see.

Then there are the bad littles: mosquitoes, mostly. Achy feet. Lying down on a sharp rock under the tent after a long day of hiking, being too tired to move, and waking up to a bruise the size of a baseball on my shoulder.

But really. These are little things.

Then there are the little things that can turn into big things. I call them my keeps list. When I'm out on the trail, every hour or two I tick them off: (1) Keep warm. (2) Keep hydrated. (3) Keep eating. (4) Keep an eye on the sun.

Ignoring a little keep could turn into a big problem later. So I'll pull on a jacket if I'm cold, or slug back some water if I'm thirsty, or scarf down a Snickers if my belly rumbles. And I always try to make camp before dark.

It's a simple system, but I've learned the hard way that if you neglect one of the keeps long enough, before you know it, your teeth are chattering as you tilt back an aspirin for your dehydration headache, trying to make dinner in the pitch-dark with a groan in your stomach loud enough to wake the zombies.

In the woods, after dark, it's easy to believe in zombies.

But I know better than to be afraid of that.

Sort of.

Right now, I've been doing pretty good with my keeps list. It's evening, and I've pitched the tent by a small stream. Even though it's late June, I've layered up with a wool hat and two jackets—a light fleece and a waterproof shell. I've taken a long drink of water and have unpacked my mess kit to make dinner. Bowl, cup, fork. A quart pot with a lid that doubles as a frying pan.

Next, I break out my stove. It's an MSR PocketRocket, a pretty cool piece of camping equipment that folds to the size of my fist. I screw it onto my fuel canister and open the three pot supports. A quick twist of my wrist turns on the gas; I flick a match and, a second later, a bright blue flame darts up. I pour the rest of my water bottle into the pot and settle it onto the stove.

By the time the water has boiled, I've dug through my pack and found my meal for the night—a package of spaghetti and some ready-to-eat tomato sauce in a plastic pouch. It doesn't compare to what I'd be eating back at Gran's house, but I'm so hungry I don't care. I dump the spaghetti into the



bubbling water. As the long, thick strands twist in the water, a burst of saliva floods my mouth.

I've been on the trail for just a few days but have enough food for only one more, two if I count my candy bars as full-on meals. I've been eating more than I expected. I'm going to need to find a gas station or grocery store on a real road soon to restock.

That's what I call them now: real roads. Gravel and tar with straight yellow lines that run true and smooth to their destinations. Sometimes when the bad little things are getting to me—I'm lying in the tent and a stray mosquito won't stop buzzing, or my pack strap presses right on my black-and-blue shoulder—I think about taking a real road. A real road would bring me home so fast. All I would need to do is follow one to a town and turn myself in to the police station. A few hours later, I would be home.

But taking a real road would mean giving up. And I can't do that. Not yet, not while there's something warped and unfinished inside me that can be drained away only by hiking, step-by-step, down this two-foot-wide path, into the wilderness for four hundred more miles, until I'm standing at the top of Mount Katahdin at the end of the Appalachian Trail.



Just when I am crouching over the boiling pot, calculating the last nuggets of food in my pack, I hear it. A growl in the shadows.



My heart slams into my throat.

Bear.

I've been so busy thinking about the little things that I lost sight of the big ones. A bear is a big thing. And not a good one.

I am alone, with only a Swiss Army knife for protection. And I'm pretty sure a two-inch blade covered in last night's cheese crumbs won't stop much of anything. But I slide the knife out of my back pocket anyway and point it out ahead of me, jabbing at the night.

The growl gets louder. It's coming from a choked tangle of bushes fifty feet from my campsite. In the thickening darkness I can't see when it might attack.

I think I read somewhere that if you see a black bear, you shouldn't run away or they'll think you're prey. You're supposed to look big and make loud noises. So I stand up slowly. I open my mouth to shout at it.

Nothing comes out.

I also read somewhere that animals can see and smell fear, which is really too bad because I'm trembling all over and I can feel myself breaking into a cold sweat. *Look big*, I tell myself again. *Be brave*. But then my mind empties and I'm just praying, *Please don't eat me, please don't eat me*.

Bristling fur. Sharp teeth. Snarling lips. I cry out as it comes hurtling from the bushes like a burst of crackling gunfire and—it's a dog. Shaggy-faced and flop-eared, eyes brave with desperation. Pitch-black except for a



hollowed-out chest that's so mud-spattered, I can't tell if it's brown or white. A tail bent at the tip, as though someone had tried to snap it in half. He's definitely a mutt. Mangy and starving and as ugly as sin. I can count his ribs.

The dog rushes at me, but I feel my heart start beating again. I leap back as he stalks over to my cook site. A swift kick with his hind leg upsets my dinner pot.

"Hey!" I shout, but it's too late. Spaghetti and foaming starchy water spill to the ground. The movement was practiced, smooth. This dog has done this before. He must have seen me—a skinny kid with unwashed dark hair and terrified brown eyes who weighed less than a hundred pounds even with pockets full of change—and figured I was an easy target. He grabs a mouthful of scorching noodles and beats it back to the bushes.

I have never seen a dog hold boiling food in its mouth. The rest of my fear melts away. He must be near-crazy with hunger. I wonder how long he has been out here, scavenging for scraps from frightened hikers.

I stare at the remaining spaghetti lying in the dirt. My dinner. My stomach growls angrily. I can try to salvage the remains, give the noodles a long rinse and hope the tomato sauce covers up any leftover grit.

I sigh. Instead, I dig a fork out of my mess kit and scoop the muddy spaghetti into my pot. I tiptoe over to the edge of the campsite and dump the contents on the ground. I can see the dog now. He's twenty feet away, behind the thickest part of the bushes. He watches me with uncertain eyes.



I back up slowly. The dog does not budge until I have retreated all the way to the tent. Then he shuffles forward and begins gulping down the rest of his dinner.

“Enjoy it,” I tell him. I’m still annoyed, but at least he seems to appreciate my cooking.

Digging into my pack, I pull out a flattened peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. It was going to be my lunch for tomorrow, but it will have to do for tonight. As the dog busies himself with my pasta, I put away the rest of my food and then crawl into the tent, where I spend the last minutes before true dark with the taste of cold sandwich in my mouth and the certainty that, tomorrow, I’m going to have to find more food.



CHAPTER 2

INSIDE THE TENT, the dark heavy all around me, I can't stop my thoughts from crowding back into my brain. It's easy to keep them out when I'm worrying about food or water, or putting one foot in front of the other. But here at night, I can't help thinking about the reason I'm here: my best friend. Lucas. It was Lucas's idea to hike the Appalachian Trail in the first place.

He had been my best friend ever since second grade, when I moved from my parents' house in the suburbs of Boston to my grandma's place up in Norwich, Vermont, to wait out their divorce. My parents and I had been driving up I-91 one rainy night when a moose jumped the guardrail. My dad rammed on the brakes, and the car had gone spinning.

From the backseat I had seen a whirl of dark fur and the tiny needles of the spruce trees that lined the highway. Fur, needles, fur, needles—we were out of control, and like a sped-up movie I watched the galloping animal come straight

at me, its heavy body smashing like the Hulk's fist through the back door.

There was the crack of a shattering window, and I remember thinking how I never realized that car glass broke in twinkling cubes instead of jagged triangles.

The next couple of hours were fuzzy—there were blue-blazing sirens and the static of police radios clicking on and off, but nothing really came into focus until I was in the hospital with tubes up my nose and my arm in a cast and Gran by my side, telling me that I was going to be okay.

My parents were unhurt in the crash. They stayed in Vermont only long enough to make sure I would be okay and left before my week in the hospital was even over. I guess nearly losing their only son wasn't enough to distract them from the grief of losing their marriage.

On the third evening, a boy my age walked in, joking with the nurses as he climbed into the bed next to mine. He had a cast on his arm, like me, but it extended all the way down to his hand and fingers as well. He didn't seem to mind. He saw me looking at his arm and lightly patted the hard plaster of his cast. "Fell out of a tree. Never trust a dead branch." He nodded at me. "How did you get yours?"

"Car accident."

The boy went still. Then he swung his legs past the side of the bed and trotted over to me. He was barefoot.

I shuddered when I saw his toes curl against the tiles—what kind of kid would cross a hospital floor without shoes? His feet must have been freezing. The boy's deep blue eyes were filled with amazement. "You're the kid."

"The kid?" I asked.

"The moose kid. Norwich is a small town. Your grandma and my parents are friends. I heard about you and your folks at dinner last night." He gripped the side rail of my hospital bed with his good hand.

I looked at this boy, with his broken arm and chipper freckles, and all I could manage was a strangled "Yeah," before burying my head in my pillow. I had just been in an accident. Everything hurt. My parents had abandoned me. I didn't want to talk.

After a while I heard him remove his hand from the rail and return to his bed. He didn't speak to me again; the next morning he was gone. I figured I'd missed my chance to make a friend but couldn't really bring myself to care.

The day before I left the hospital, Gran handed me a plain white envelope. "This is from the next-door neighbor's son, Lucas," she told me.

The envelope contained a note in messy handwriting on plain white loose-leaf. It read: *Hey Toby! I heard you're getting out of the hospital. I'll come by on Saturday at noon.*

That Saturday I met him on Gran's front porch. He had a stack of DC comics with him. We didn't talk much, but we



sat on the porch swing as cold spring rain soaked into the grass, and buried ourselves in the adventures of Batman and Superman and the Flash.

When I boarded the bus a week later for the first day of school, I was dreading the long walk past unfamiliar faces as I tried to find a seat. Then I saw someone standing in the back, waving wildly with his one good arm. Lucas, of course. We ended up riding the bus to Norwich Elementary School together every day, and by the end of the fall we were testing out our newly healed arms on bike rides and games of catch.

For three years, Lucas and I were inseparable. As I settled into Norwich and got to know other kids, sometimes I joined in on kickball games and freeze tag at recess. But most of the time it was just me and Lucas.

That first year, we spent endless afternoons exploring our backyards, but by fifth grade we were having adventures by local rivers and trees and mountains. We built forts with rocks and broken branches. We battled with sticks for swords. We watched the tadpoles shed their fishy tails to become full-throated bullfrogs.

Sometimes we'd swing bats in Norwich's perfectly measured ball fields, or go to a pool party in town, but our favorite thing to do was to go camping behind my house. Lucas's dad was a middle school teacher and a Boy Scouts leader, and he taught us all about survival in the woods, taking us for overnights during the summer when he was on vacation.

As I lie here thinking about it, I can almost pretend that that's where I am right now: a tent in the woods behind Gran's house. Lucas beside me. His dad in another tent just next to ours. I can almost feel their presence, and it helps me finally fall asleep.



CHAPTER 3

I WAKE TO light rain pattering down on the tent. It's snug and cozy in my mummy sleeping bag, and even though I know I should get up soon, I pull the hood over my head and burrow deeper inside.

Gran likes to say that the best temperature is bed. At this moment, I couldn't agree more. There is something miraculous about the fact that my own body turned yesterday's soggy peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich into enough energy and heat to keep me sleeping comfortably through the night.

Curled in the darkness, I inhale my warmth for a few minutes more, not minding the smells that happen to a hiker—sweat, dirt, and last night's trapped farts. They're not pretty smells. But they're my smells.

Eventually, though, I know it's time to get up when my belly reminds me of the third thing on my keeps list: *Keep eating, Toby!* I wriggle out of my bag and rub away my eye crusts. My boots are under the vestibule, a patch of tent awning that keeps my belongings dry and covered. I unzip

the door and poke my head out, scanning the campsite to see if that mangy dog is still hanging around.

He's not there. I reach out and pull my boots inside. My socks are draped over them, dirt-stiffened but not too damp. As I slide on a sock, a scraping jolt of pain hits my foot. I yelp. Blisters have formed on two of my toe knuckles, red-shiny and taut with fluid.

I dig through the top pocket of my pack and find my Swiss Army knife and Band-Aids from my first aid kit. I unfold one of the smaller blades from the knife. As I lean over to nick open my blisters, I hear a voice.

Toe, you're gonna have to sterilize that.

It's Lucas's voice. Inside my head again.

Suddenly the pain of my blisters is obliterated by a wave of guilt that hits me. I shake my head to clear my thoughts, but it is another minute before I can focus on moving my hands back to the first aid kit.

"Thanks, Lucas," I whisper as I rip open an alcohol prep pad.

I wipe the blade with alcohol to sterilize it, then swiftly draw it across my blisters. Clear pus oozes out. I squeeze the bulbs of liquid until the blisters have drained, then wrap them tightly with the Band-Aids.

My foot taken care of, it's time to get dressed. I pull a sweat-stained T-shirt over my head, then a thin long-sleeve shirt.

My raincoat goes on next. "Always dress in layers," Lucas's dad had told me when I had first started camping

with them. “Layers let you regulate your temperature. One of the most common things to deal with on the trail is hypothermia, and you can get it by both over- and underdressing. If you don’t wear enough, your body’s going to cool down. If you wear too much, you’re going to soak your clothes in sweat, and they’ll be useless if the wind picks up or the temperature drops.”

I pick up a pair of lightweight hiking pants and slide them on. They are another lesson from Lucas after the two of us had gotten caught in the rain during a camping trip. I had been wearing jeans and they had stuck to my legs like warmth-sucking leeches, making me completely miserable.

“Cotton kills,” Lucas had said, echoing his dad’s advice. He told me that when it gets wet, it gets heavy and loses its ability to keep you warm. After that trip, Lucas had given me a pair of his old nylon hiking pants. I never had to wait long for them to dry.

Everything I was doing that morning was reminding me of Lucas.





CHAPTER 4

LAST SUMMER, LUCAS and I made the List.

It was the weekend after school had let out, and the two of us were in the middle of our Saturday morning ritual of gobbling down breakfast in my kitchen. Gran had left a thick stack of pancakes for us to eat before heading into town to run errands.

“You know,” said Lucas, stuffing an entire pancake in his mouth, “weshldwridownsmthgs.”

“Huh?” I asked, slathering butter on five pancakes before pouring syrup over them.

Lucas took a big gulp of juice. “We should write down some things. A list of all the totally awesome things we want to do this summer.”

I sliced into my stack and forked a huge chunk of pancake into my mouth. “How about we put ‘Eat twenty pancakes in one sitting’ at the top?” I mumbled.

“We basically do that every Saturday,” Lucas said, waving away my idea. He got a pen and piece of paper from a

kitchen drawer. "We should do something new. What about fishing?"

"Sure!" I liked how the list was starting out already. Fishing was easy. And safe.

By the end of the breakfast we had written the following:

- #1: Go fishing
- #2: Eat a worm
- #3: Spend a whole day at the movie theater
- #4: Build a tree house
- #5: Go blueberry picking
- #6: Make a raft and float it
- #7: Explore the abandoned house on Chimney Hill
- #8: Learn how to pop wheelies on our bikes

I mopped my last bite of pancake over my syrup-sticky plate and got up to clear the table. I was nearly at the sink when Lucas asked the question.

"Why don't we put 'Jump off the rope swing at the quarry' on the list?"

The plate slipped from my fingers and shattered on the floor.

I hated that note of excitement in Lucas's voice. It always came out when he wanted to do something risky. He was the brave one, chasing adventure wherever it went. I would follow him, but half the time I would mess up somehow. Forget to bring something or do something. Then depend



on Lucas to figure out how to save us from my dumb mistakes. Ever since the car accident, I hadn't been able to shake the feeling that bad luck followed me wherever I went. I was the cursed kid whose own parents didn't even want him.

"I don't know." I pictured the rope swing, dangling at least twenty feet above the water. Every summer we watched the older kids doing it, shrieking as they leaped. I'd never thought about doing it myself.

"We're starting middle school this fall. Don't be so chicken. It'll be fun."

Suddenly the desire to be as brave as Lucas surged past my fear. "All right," I said.

Lucas wrote it down as I swept the pieces of my broken plate into a dustpan and into the trash.

#9: Jump off the rope swing at the quarry

"We need one more thing to make it an even ten. Let's make it something big, Toe."

Toe was the nickname Lucas had given me last summer when a Godzilla of a bee had buried its stinger into my big toe. It's one syllable short of my real name, Toby. Lucas only used Toe when he was talking about something really important.

I put the dustpan away and crossed the kitchen to Lucas, leaning over his shoulder to look at the list. An idea popped into my head. "You know how we like to hike?"

Lucas nodded, the pen still poised above the paper.
“Mm-hmm.”

“How about we hike the tallest mountain we can get to?”

A slow grin filled Lucas’s face. “I have a better idea. Why don’t we hike the whole Appalachian Trail?”

My hands fell onto the back of Lucas’s chair. I was glad I wasn’t holding anything that could break. “The entire thing? Isn’t it two thousand miles long or something?”

“Let me look it up.” Lucas took out his phone and began tapping away. “Two thousand one hundred ninety miles, to be exact,” he announced, his face falling. “That’s at least a thousand miles too much for me.” He bent over the phone, his thumbs swirling rapidly. “Hang on, I’ve got another idea.” He held up his phone and waved it around. “Look at this.”

I looked at the phone. There were names of places, with little mile indicators next to them.

“I found a website that shows the distances between shelters on the trail. You know that one that’s just a mile from your backyard?”

I nodded. Velvet Rocks Shelter was an easy walk from my yard. Gran and I sometimes had picnics there.

“Well, it’s four-hundred forty miles from Velvet Rocks Shelter to Mount Katahdin at the end of the trail in Maine. If we hike ten miles a day, we could finish the whole trail in a month and a half, easy. We could do it before school starts!” Lucas was nodding to himself, excited. “I’ll ask my dad if he can come with us. He’s been talking about doing a

long hiking trip for a while." He picked up the pen and added:

#10: Hike the Appalachian Trail from Velvet Rocks
to Katahdin

And that was the List.



CHAPTER 5

I TUCK MY memories into the back of my mind and unzip the tent flap to face the day.

“Aaaaahhh,” I sigh. Taking a whiz in the morning is one of the chiefest pleasures of being out on the trail. You tend to hold it during the night—you don’t want to leave the huddled warmth of your sleeping bag, you don’t want to let in bugs, or zombies, and so usually by daybreak the urge to go is overwhelming.

When I first started camping with Lucas and his dad, one of the first things I discovered was that relieving myself against a tree in the early dawn light is just about the best feeling in the world.

I finish my business and check the sky. The rain clouds are quickly turning leaden gray. I have to get packed and moving—and eat—if I am going to stay warm during the heavier rain.

I make my way to a tall maple tree to get my food. A lumpy sack dangles from a branch fifteen feet up. Hanging your food keeps it out of reach of *all* general wildlife, but

the sack you use is generally called a bear bag. I guess “squirrel bag” or “mouse bag” doesn’t sound all that protective.

The bear bag is attached to a line of rope that I’ve coiled around the trunk of the maple. I undo the rope, and the bag falls to the ground with a light thump. I loosen the nylon cord around the bag’s mouth and pull out the contents. I knew there wasn’t much food left, but it still makes me nervous to see it: three Snickers bars, a bagel, a quarter block of cheddar cheese, and a small Ziploc full of M&M’S.

I pick out my third-to-last Snickers bar and peel back the wrapper. Gran wouldn’t approve, and I’m sure there will be some unhappy dentist visits later, but for now, chocolate and peanuts and caramel are the perfect breakfast.

After wolfing down the Snickers, I jam my belongings into my pack and begin breaking down the tent, shaking drops of water off the rain fly before folding it in half and placing the aluminum tent poles at one end. I roll the tent up to the other end, then stuff it all into the tent bag. I clip the tent to my pack using the two thin outer straps at the pack bottom, then heft everything onto my shoulders.

The last thing I have to do is orient myself in the right direction. I unzip my hip pocket and pull out a Ziploc stuffed with maps. I open the one that shows where I am and where I have to go today. The next shelter is eight miles away.

I shake off the urge to look at the part of the map that shows Velvet Rocks Shelter. Or the unmarked spot a mile west, where Gran lives.



Gran and Velvet Rocks are behind me. I have to focus on what's ahead.

I fold the map back up and shove it into the Ziploc, then cram everything back into my hip pocket. As I pull at the zipper, it gets caught on the Ziploc. I tug harder, sealing the plastic into the teeth. I'll worry about it later. Right now I want to get going.

I hop on the trail and start walking. I'm only a few steps in when my pack straps begin to chafe. It feels like two lines of fire are raging down my chest. The pack had seemed so comfortable when I tried it on at home. But that was before I had filled it with thirty pounds of equipment and supplies. Now, even though calluses have started to form, every time my pack shifts, it still hurts.

I bite my lip and try to take my mind off the pain. I concentrate on the two-by-six-inch white blazes that mark the path. They are like tiny North Stars, leading me up to Maine. As I get into the rhythm of hiking, I start to forget the little pains and lose myself in the woods. Plus, it's comforting to know that with every white splash of paint I spot in the woods, I'm getting closer to fulfilling my promise to Lucas.

I'm feeling pretty good until I come to a river crossing that looks way too familiar. The trail is a lot of trees and more trees, but rivers are more memorable. I frown. I could swear that I've been here before.

I stand at the river's edge and yank at the hip pocket zipper. Oh yeah, still stuck. Frustrated, I yank harder and

slowly force the pocket open. As I take out the Ziploc, I groan. The zipper has chewed a gaping hole on the corner. So much for my waterproof map bag.

I dig up the map that I need. It confirms my fears. I wasn't supposed to come to a river crossing for miles. I've been following the trail, but in the completely wrong direction. Like a total moron, I literally exited my campsite and started walking back in the direction I'd come from.

Of course I messed up. I always do. I shove the map back into the ruined bag and try to zip the pocket shut. But no matter how hard I pull, it's stuck for real this time. Great.

I snatch the Ziploc out of the broken hip pocket and shrug off my pack. I kneel down and open the hood, but it's too full to fit the maps. I take out my water filter and set it down so I can push the maps inside. As I put the maps into the hood pocket, the filter rolls into the water.

"No!" I drop everything and grab at the filter. I miss. I chase it down the river and nearly swipe it half a dozen times, but then a burst of wind pushes the filter into fast, deep water, and it is lost.

I grit my teeth and return to my pack just in time to see another gust of wind pick up my map bag and toss it into the current. Before I can blink, the ragged Ziploc sails into the water and tumbles away.

Typical. It's just my rotten luck. My stupid, rotten luck. Now I'm going to have to really make sure that I'm going in the right direction.

It takes me a long time to get back to where I had camped the night before. I trudge past it, kicking a clod of dirt and rock toward my old tentsite. I hate making mistakes. But they seem to find me wherever I go.

I continue on, plodding up to a flat, bald peak as fat drops of rain begin to fall. My backpack slumps against my shoulders. I can feel my bruise throbbing under the shoulder strap. It hurts. When I reach the top of the mountain, there is no view. Just cold mist and clouds and a trail sign in all caps: "THIS TRAIL IS EXTREMELY TOUGH. IF YOU LACK EXPERIENCE PLEASE USE ANOTHER TRAIL. TAKE SPECIAL CARE AT THE CASCADES TO AVOID TRAGIC RESULTS."

"That's me," I mutter. "Just a tragic result waiting to happen."

But I keep going anyway.

The trail descends for a long stretch, and as the rain starts to fall harder I realize that I'm starting to get chilly. The first keep on my list needs attention.

I stop for a round of jumping jacks. Hands up, hands down. Legs out, legs in. Repeat. After a minute I feel it—the bumping of my heart against my rib cage. When I shove my hands back into my raincoat, they are warmer.

I continue down from the peak into a forest of thick, gnarled trees. Moss hangs like beards off their branches. Roots twist up, octopus-like, catching my feet as I go by.

It is quiet here. No birds are chirping, and despite the lush growth of ferns and lichens and the steady dripping of rainwater on the green summer leaves, it's too still. It feels like an abandoned jungle, as if all the animals have fled from some awful presence.

A gust of wind blasts through the trees, and the rain changes its tune. Before, it was a drumbeat. Now it is a hammer, beating down with relentless fury.

This is no longer a morning drizzle—this is a storm. I pick up the pace. There are lean-tos, sturdy three-sided log shelters, every couple of miles along the trail. I need to get to the next one to wait out the rain.

The wind begins to howl. Branches crack, and frantic leaves spin through the air. The clouds are black with rain. Thunder growls over my head, and even though I don't see it, I hear the explosion of lightning hitting somewhere above the tree line.

Up until now, I've been so focused on taking care of my keeps list that I haven't paused to think about the bigger picture. But suddenly I'm aware of how alone I am. With the rough terrain and nasty weather, every stumble on a slick rock could turn into a fall. Every step could be a sprained ankle or a broken leg.

And I've violated the number one rule of hiking. I have told no one where I am. Not even Gran. If I get hurt or lost, no one will come looking for me.

I could die out here in these woods.



Cold creeps through my veins. And it's not just the weather seeping into my bones. I am scared. What am I doing out here, without Lucas? It was stupid of me to think that I could survive the trail without him.

Lucas was the leader of our two-kid pack, the one who always knew what to do. I was the happy-to-follow sheep. Now I'm alone, in the middle of a violent storm, rain pelting down, shivering and almost out of food.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

My heart is racing with fear, and without thinking, I begin to run. My boots splash through puddles, soaking my calves with muddy water. I clench and unclench the straps of my backpack, trying to keep my numb hands from freezing. Chunks of wet hair glue themselves to my forehead.

The trail stretches on, seemingly endless as I stumble forward, pausing just once to put on all my clothes and gulp down the bagel and the rest of my M&M'S. Despite these precautions, I am cold and growing colder. Shivers spasm through my body, becoming more and more uncontrollable.

My keeps list has gone out the window—I can't keep warm; I can't keep fed; I can't keep an eye on the nonexistent sun. And in the cold, damp wetness, I realize I have forgotten to keep hydrated.

I lose track of time. My teeth are knocking together so hard I can feel my brain bouncing around in my head. The rain is still coming down and now the wind has picked up, blowing deep, numbing cold through my jacket. Everything is wet. I have given up on trying to feel my fingers or my toes.



A twisted oak root rises up across the trail, and before I can react, I have caught my foot on it and gone sprawling. I hit the ground hard, breaking the fall with my arms, but my face is inches from a rock.

My backpack presses down on me, and my cheek falls onto the cold stone.

I am tired. I've barely begun, and I already want to give up. I let myself sink into the wet ground. "I'm sorry, Lucas," I whisper. I close my eyes, trying to block out my grief. I've failed my best friend.

And then there is a hand on my shoulder. I turn my head and, in the drizzling rain, a face comes into focus.

"Hey. Hey, kid! You okay?"

I'm too tired to shake my head. The next thing I know, I'm being picked up, backpack and all, and carried. Right before I pass out I see it. Ahead, on the trail. A stack of logs covered by an old tin roof.

Shelter.



CHAPTER 6

IT HAS STOPPED raining by the time I wake. Late-afternoon light shuffles through the patchy clouds and into the shelter where I am lying. I hear the sound of murmuring voices. Two teenage guys are sitting in the shelter, huddled around the flickering blue flames of their stove. A pot sits on top, simmering with water.

One guy has a mess of curly black hair poking out from underneath a dark-blue bandanna. A two-inch scar cuts across his cheek, stopping just shy of his left nostril. His mouth tightens into a thin line as he lifts the pot to pour hot water into a tall metal thermos.

The other wears a bright-blue ball cap that matches his eyes. The cap has a stick figure paddling a canoe and “Life is Good” embroidered across the front in script. He turns off the stove and reaches into his jacket, pulling out several packets of Swiss Miss.

Both of them are decked out in high-tech gear—Arc'teryx hardshells, Patagonia pants, Outdoor Research gloves and gaiters. Gleaming Black Diamond trekking

poles rest against brand-new Osprey packs bulging with supplies. The only difference is, Bandanna Dude wears nothing but black, while Ball Cap Guy is dressed in blue.

These guys are not much older than me, but their confidence and expensive-looking gear make them seem way more experienced. They look like the kind of kids Lucas and I would watch jumping into the quarry.

I am still wet but, miraculously, not frozen. My soaked rain jacket lies next to my head. I look down and see a flash of silver. I have been wrapped like a burrito in an emergency blanket. It's made of thin, foil-like Mylar that's supposed to reflect 90 percent of the heat you generate back onto you. On top of that, an unfamiliar sleeping bag is piled over my body. The blanket crinkles like Christmas wrapping paper as I sit up.

"He's awake." The guy with the ball cap picks up a cup and pours hot water into it. He comes over to me and kneels down. He tears open a packet of Swiss Miss. I get dizzy from the smell of powdered chocolate.

Ball Cap pours the Swiss Miss into the cup and stirs it with a blue plastic spork. "Here you go," he says.

I cradle the cup and let the hot steam warm my face. I'm afraid my first sip will scorch my tongue, but the boiling pot water has been mixed with some cold water, and the temperature is just right. Tiny marshmallows float on top like heavenly little clouds. It is the best hot chocolate I have ever had.

I try to make it last, but it takes only thirty seconds before I drain everything. "Thanks," I say to Ball Cap. His blue eyes

twinkle as I lick the ring of melted white fluff below the cup's edge. "The marshmallows made that just right."

"No problem." The guy takes back the cup. "I'll get you a refill. By the way, the name is Denver." He nods over to Bandanna Dude, who has not budged an inch from the stove. "And that's Sean."

"I'm To—Tony."

Sean snorts. "Totony?"

"I mean, Tony." If these two boys recognize my name, it might be the end of the trail for me. I told Gran not to worry, but I wouldn't put it past her to have plastered all of New Hampshire with missing posters of me by now.

Denver gives me a second cup of chocolate. This time, I'm able to stretch it out to a full minute.

"Do you want any food? We've got plenty." Denver unzips the top pocket of his backpack and digs out a ham-and-cheese sandwich. I accept it gratefully.

Sean stares at me from across the shelter. "You were a mess out there. And why are you hiking alone? You clearly can't take care of yourself."

I can feel him sizing me up. A dripping-wet kid in the rain who barely made it to shelter before collapsing of hypothermia. Alone and unprepared, probably needing help with each step until he finally gets off the trail. Sean's eyes flicker. I can feel his annoyance. Already I have become a burden to him.

I make up an answer fast. "I'm getting my advanced Wilderness Survival badge for Boy Scouts. I have to spend a

week in the woods on my own.” I pray that Sean and Denver have never done Boy Scouts. A week in the woods was definitely not a requirement for the badge.

“Well, you’re doing a lousy job at earning that badge.” Sean shrugs and sips from his thermos.

I reluctantly push the sleeping bag and emergency blanket off me. Curls of body steam escape from my damp clothes. I shiver. “Thanks for the chocolate and the sandwich,” I tell Denver.

“You heading out now?” Denver takes the sleeping bag and begins stuffing it in his compression sack.

“Yeah. I think I’ll try to get to the next shelter.” My voice sticks a little, rusty. “It’ll be good to have a roof over my head for the night.”

Denver nods. “Kinsman Pond? We’re going there, too. According to the map, it’s four miles away.”

“We were aiming for Lonesome Lake Hut, which is only two miles farther on,” says Sean. “But you slowed us down.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Denver says, glancing at Sean. “We’re in no rush.”

“Well, I won’t hold you guys up any longer.” I reach for my rain jacket and gingerly slide into it. Even soaked, it will protect me from the wind.

“If you want to wait, Sean and I will be packing up soon. You could hike with us.” Denver ignores the scowl that Sean gives him.

I want to follow with these guys. I want to feel safe behind their conversation and their well-stocked backpacks.

But from the way Sean is glaring at me, I know he doesn't want to be bothered.

I decide to compromise. "You guys are probably a lot faster than I am. How about I start off now, and I'll see you on the trail whenever you catch up."

Denver nods. "Sounds good."

"Whatever," says Sean.

I put on my backpack and head out, making sure to go the right way this time. The trail turns into a gentle logging trail, then hitches left past tumbling cascades swollen with new rain and inky-black pools. Moss and roots drape themselves over hip-high boulders, forming little dark caverns. It is lush and spooky. A haunting place for angry ghosts.

I'm glad that Denver and Sean are behind me.

As I follow the trail beside the brook, I see a brief rush of dirty matted fur. A fox, I think. And then I see a familiar rib cage. It is the dinner-stealer from last night.

The dog lopes through the brush at least ten yards from the trail. He is keeping his distance. There is no hot pot of spaghetti for him to kick right now. But he knows that I have been generous in the past.

I think about the food I have left. Two Snickers. A quarter block of cheese.

I have to be careful with this decision. If I feed the dog now, he's only going to expect more. He might get aggressive. Plus, I was running low on food when I met him, but now I'm really almost out.

And then I remember Sean saying that Lonesome Lake Hut was two miles from Kinsman Pond Shelter. Doing the math, that's a little over five miles from where I am.

A hut is different from a shelter. They are luxuries in the woods, with bunks and blankets and food during the summer. Eight of them are spaced out across the toughest sections of the White Mountains, with college-age kids running the show. Lucas and I often talked about working in them when we were old enough.

At Lonesome Lake Hut, I would be able to buy food. I have two hundred and forty-three dollars rolled up in a Ziploc and tucked in a hidden pocket on the inside of my hood. It's all the money I've earned from years of mowing lawns and raking yards and odd jobs around town. I'm hoping it's enough to last me to Mount Katahdin.

The Snickers can keep me going for five more miles, I decide. I break out my block of cheese. The dog trots forward. He is hesitant, unsure of what I will do. But this time, he is not going to rush me.

I toss the cheese, and the dog catches and swallows it in one fast gulp. "Sorry, dog, but that's all I've got," I tell him. He seems to understand. As I continue down the trail, he follows me, but he doesn't beg.

"Tony!" I turn back and see Sean and Denver coming up the trail. Sean is in the lead. He spots the bag of bones following me. "Is that your dog?"

"No, but I've been feeding him a little."

“Why?”

I bite back the urge to tell Sean off. “He’s pretty hungry.”

“But so are you. Back at the shelter, you ate Denver’s sandwich in three bites. You can’t afford to feed something else if you don’t have enough food for yourself.”

Sean is right. I don’t like it, but he is right. I’m doing what I’ve always done. Messing up. Making the wrong decision. Giving a dog food when I needed it more. And now he’s looking to me for more food and I can’t give him anything. He was wrong to trust me.

“C’mon, Sean. Give the kid a break.” Denver unzips the hip pocket of his pack and pulls out a granola bar. He unwraps it and tosses it. A snap and a bite, and the granola bar is gone.

The dog scuttles back off the trail. His eyes are on us, wary but hopeful. I can’t spare him any more food, but I have a feeling that we’re going to have some company over the next few miles.

Sean hitches up his backpack. It is clear that he is impatient. “C’mon, we need to get going.”

I fall in line between Sean and Denver, and breathe a sigh of relief. I’m back at my old place—following. Having people take care of me. I know I need to be able to make it on my own, but for now the company feels great.



CHAPTER 7

SEAN FORGES ALONG with a smooth, practiced gait. I fall into the rhythm of his pace, trying to hide my wheezy breathing so he doesn't realize how much effort it's taking me to keep up.

The trail brings us to the edge of a small muddy pond with long grassy weeds growing up from the bottom. "How are you doing on water?" asks Denver.

I pull out my two water bottles and shake them. They rattle with a few stray drops. "I'm nearly empty."

"You need to fill up here—we won't be hitting another water source until the shelter," says Sean.

I kneel down by the pond and open my bottles. I'm about to dip them into the pond when Sean asks, "Hey, how are you going to purify your water? Don't you have a filter or iodine?"

I shake my head. "I lost my filter at a river crossing this morning. I'll just drink straight from the rivers and streams until I can find another one."

“Purifying your water is no joke.” Sean folds his arms disapprovingly. “Haven’t you heard of giardia?”

He doesn’t wait for my response. “It’s like this: You come to a little pond. You drink a tiny mouthful of unpurified water. You don’t think it can hurt you. But in that water there could be some animal crap. Moose crap. Deer crap. Beaver crap and squirrel crap and owl crap. And in that crap there could be these little balled-up giardia cysts just waiting to hatch.”

Sean’s voice pitches up a little higher. “And you drink those cysts because you think, ‘Just this one time, I’ll be okay.’ But then the acid in your stomach gets them to hatch into wriggling parasites that attach to the walls of your intestine.

“Then the parasites feed off you, growing and multiplying until there are billions of them, eating you from the inside out. Then they roll up into cysts again and you crap them out in the weeks of diarrhea that you get, along with being so tired you can’t get out of bed for weeks and cramps so bad it makes the worst stomachache you’ve had feel like a fairy tale.”

“Sean, we don’t have to know every detail.” Denver’s voice has a note of warning in it.

“No, it’s okay. I know giardia’s serious.” I try to keep my voice steady, but it still comes out shaky. I’m not used to being yelled at, and it makes me a little scared of Sean.

Sean thumps his pack on the ground and pulls out a three-liter CamelBak water bladder.

Bladders sound gross, but they're actually a lot better than bottles, as long as they don't leak. Every time I want to take a drink I have to stop and unload my bottles from my pack. Meanwhile, a bladder has a water hose that snakes up through a hiker's pack and attaches to the front of a shoulder strap. Any time a hiker gets thirsty, all he has to do is chomp on the hose's bite valve without breaking stride.

Sean removes a small black bag with a nylon drawstring from a side pocket on his pack. Opening the bag, he empties out what looks like a tiny fire extinguisher with a pumping handle at the top and two tubes emerging out of one side. He lowers one of the tubes into the pond and places the second tube into the water bladder. "D, keep the tubes steady while I pump."

Denver comes over and holds the tubes in place as Sean suctions dirty pond water into the filter. Clear, clean water flows through the second tube and into the bladder. When it is full, Denver moves the tube over to his own water bladder. Then he fills my water bottles as well.

After filling up, Sean packs away the filter. "Let's get going," he says shortly.

Before we leave, Denver digs into his pack and hold up a bottle of iodine pills. "You know how to use these?"

I shake my head. When I went camping with Lucas, we always used a water filter.

Denver hands me the pills. "Put two in each bottle. Screw the bottle caps back on, but don't close them all the way. In five minutes, wispy brown threads will

form under the caps. Shake them loose, then tighten your bottles.”

“I don’t need all of these.” I’m about to open the bottle and take just a few pills, but Denver shakes his head. “Keep it all, Tony. It’s our backup. You need it more than us.”

“And find a way to get another filter.” Sean has already started walking down the trail. “You’ll end up in the hospital if you don’t.”

We leave the pond and wind our way along the green, wet, muddy trail. We’ve crossed a small real road, beginning a steep climb, when Denver asks, “So, Tony, how long are you out here for?”

I try to sound casual. “Oh, just a couple of days.”

“Do you have enough to eat now?” Denver sounds worried.

“I’ve got two Snickers bars. And some cheese. Wait, no, no cheese. Just the Snickers.”

Sean snorts. “What? I knew you were low, but that is borderline stupid. And you fed that dog? Such a newb.”

I decide at that moment that I don’t like Sean.

Denver pulls up beside me. “Tony, that’s not enough. You’re going to need more food than that.”

“I know. But it’s all I’ve got.” I want to let Denver know that I’m not completely dumb, that I do have plans to keep myself from starving. “And once I get to Lonesome Lake, I’ll be able to stock up.”

Denver opens a hip pocket strap and pulls out a Ziploc bag full of homemade gorp. That stands for “good old

raisins and peanuts.” Denver’s mix has colorful flashes of M&M’S added as well.

Denver seems to be a decent guy, and I feel a momentary pang of unease. I made a decision to hike this trail alone, and I don’t want to feel like I owe anyone anything. I don’t want to get too involved with these guys.

But he stuffs it into my hand, like it isn’t even a question.

I open the Ziploc and pop a handful of peanuts, raisins, and M&M’S in my mouth. I can feel fat and sugar breaking down as I chew. My stomach howls with happy anticipation.

“Hungry, huh?” Denver has a smile on his face. I’m almost angry at him, for thinking friendship could be so easy, for acting like I’m some little kid—but I know he means well.

“Yeah,” I mumble, trying not to demolish the entire bag.

“Eat it all—we’ve got plenty of food for our trip.”

I swallow another handful of sweet, free food and gulp down my anger. “How far are you guys going?”

“After Kinsman Pond we’re heading up to Franconia Ridge—Liberty, Lafayette, Little Haystack—then over the Presidential Range to Mount Washington. We go down to Pinkham Notch from there. We’ve got Sean’s car parked at the visitor center. We’re planning for it to take four days, but we’ve got enough supplies for five or six.”

The names ring bells in my head. Mount Washington for sure. It’s the tallest peak in the Northeast, and is said to have some of the worst weather on earth. The Appalachian Trail runs right over it.

“And what about you—how far are you planning to go for your week in the woods?” Denver asks.

I am confused until I remember the lie I’ve told them. About earning my Boy Scouts merit badge. “I don’t know yet,” I say cautiously. I don’t want to let on that I’m planning to hike all the way to Katahdin. “Probably past Washington a little ways—I’ll have to see.”

Denver doesn’t press, and we go along in a comfortable silence. I’ve just begun to notice the soft rustle of wind through the maples when Denver asks, “So, Tony. How did you get into hiking?”

I don’t respond right away. I keep in step with these two guys who clearly are far more prepared than I am, and try not to think about the answer to that question.

It comes to me anyway.



CHAPTER 8

WE HAD DONE almost all the things on the List. Almost every single one. While we were checking things off our list, we were also planning for our big hike. We read up on hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and through the 100 Mile Wilderness in Maine. We made a list of things we would need: sleeping bags, sleeping pads, tent, boots, socks . . . all the way down to cups and first aid kits and maps.

We found water bottles and the MSR cooking stove at one garage sale, Swiss Army knives and a water filter and headlamps from another. There were well-used backpacks in the gear room where Lucas's dad kept all his camping supplies. Lucas had our shelter—an army-green Stansport tent he had gotten from his dad when he was eight.

We planned simple meals. Pasta and sauce, rice and beans, peanut butter and tortillas, ramen noodles. We got maps of the trail and studied them by flashlight in our creaky tree house as lightning bugs darted by, their golden pulses as brief and bright as hope.

The time when I knew that we were going to actually go, though, was when Lucas knocked on my door one Friday night in early July and told me to be ready for a surprise the next morning. “We’re going to Boston and we’ve got to get there early,” he announced.

“Is this for the trail?” I asked.

“You’ll see.” Lucas smiled mysteriously. “Set your alarm for three a.m. and bring as much cash as you can. I promise you, it’ll be worth it.”

I set my alarm, but it didn’t matter. I was up all night, fidgety and excited. By 2:00 a.m. I was out of bed, and by 2:47 a.m. I was tapping at the front door of Lucas’s house with three twenties shoved into the back pocket of my jeans.

We got into Lucas’s mom’s Subaru Legacy and she drove us through town, with its nickel-and-dime storefronts, past Dan & Whit’s general store, which advertises in plain-printed type in their front window, “If we don’t have it, you don’t need it!” We passed by the redbrick town hall and by the tiny post office where Mr. Dinkins had worked for thirty-six years.

We stayed on Route 5 for a mile before taking the sharp-curved ramp to I-91 south. On the highway, I finally fell asleep to the quiet hum of the car and the lull of the road. I was still dreaming when the digital clock on the Legacy’s dash turned to 5:27 a.m. and we pulled into the Landmark Center parking lot.

Lucas nudged me and hopped out of the car. He pointed at a big box store with a line of sleepy customers waiting

next to the glass double doors. “Today’s the REI’s scratch-and-dent sale.”

I was suddenly very awake. REI scratch-and-dent sales are like Christmas for anyone who loves the outdoors. They are exactly as advertised—any slightly damaged returned items go on sale a couple of times a year at huge discounts. Sometimes a customer returns something because it’s the wrong size, or the wrong color, and that’s when you can get a perfect piece of gear at half off or more.

Lucas and I dashed to the end of the line. His mom came more slowly, bringing muffins and a thermos of hot chocolate for us to drink as we waited. When the doors opened at eight, we scampered like rabbits to the camping section. I found a moisture-wicking base layer and some lightweight Darn Tough hiking socks and was looking at a basic first aid kit when Lucas tapped my arm. “Toe, check these out!”

And there they were. Asolo hiking boots, chestnut brown, coated with waterproof Gore-Tex. Two-inch rubber soles. High-quality leather and precise stitching all crafted into one perfect set of boots dangling by their laces from Lucas’s hands.

I sat down in the middle of the store and pulled them on. They were stiff, but when I stood up and walked around the store to test them out, I could feel them molding to my feet, as though they were mine already.

Then I looked down at the price tag, and my heart crumbled. Even at the steep discount, there was no way I could shell out that amount of money.

I took them off and handed them back to Lucas. “Man, these are great, but I don’t think I can afford them. Thanks for spotting them, though.” I picked up the items I had tossed in a heap in my eagerness to try on the boots. “I’ll get these. Meet you in the car.”

A day later I returned home from a walk with Gran to find a lumpy brown paper package scotched-taped together sitting on the front porch. I ripped open the paper, and the Asolo boots fell out. A note had been stuffed inside one of them. When I unfolded it, there was only one line, written in Lucas’s scrawl.

Shut up and don't thank me.

I never did.



CHAPTER 9

LUCAS. I GOT into hiking and I'm on the trail in my muddy Asolo boots because of Lucas and the List.

"Tony? Earth to Tony . . ."

I shake myself out of my memories. It has been a few minutes since Denver asked me why I was on the trail. The silence must have felt strange. It was a straightforward question, after all.

"I got into hiking because I'm trying to grow up." It's the best half truth I can give.

"'Grow up?'" Ahead of me, Sean shakes his head. "What does that even mean?"

"I've . . . always needed people. I've always been a follower. Out here on the trail, I want to learn how to grow up. Depend on myself. Learn how to be alone." The last answer slips past me before I can catch it.

A bird flutters out of the brush. A quail, I think. Its light-brown body lifts off, and it disappears into the trees.

Sean does not respond, and we spend the next hour in silence, lost in our own thoughts. We pass through muddy

trails slick with new rain, up a steep mile to the top of South Kinsman, down a rocky scramble, up again to the peak of North Kinsman, and make it to Kinsman Pond Shelter an hour after all our stomachs have started to growl.

No one else is there, and we take over the shelter, flopping our backpacks into the corner. I think about hiking the extra couple of miles to Lonesome Lake so I can get more food, but I quickly decide against it. After my hypothermia scare earlier today, I don't trust myself to not mess up. Plus, it's getting dark and I don't want to leave the protection of my rescuers.

Sean and Denver break out their cooking equipment and make their dinner, a soupy mess of jasmine rice and plump red kidney beans floating among thick slices of summer sausage, all simmering in a heap of Cajun seasonings. As the stew cooks, the smell is unbearably good.

But when Denver offers to share with me, I say no. Instead, I eat my second-to-last Snickers, forcing myself to chew slowly. I count to twenty for every bite, making each mouthful last as long as possible. I want to prove to Sean that I am taking responsibility for feeding the dog. That I'm not going to depend on luck and the generosity of others to make it on the trail.

It's not enough. The hunger in my belly takes over, and I snatch my final Snickers and rip open the wrapper. It is half-way gone before I can force myself to stop. I clamp my mouth shut and tuck the last half in the top pocket of my backpack. I'm not out of food. I'm not desperate. Yet.

There is no flat place to pitch a tent, and the ground is soggy from the day's rain, so after dinner we all decide to stay in the shelter. We roll out our sleeping pads on the dry wooden floor and fluff up our sleeping bags on top of them. Night comes, and each of us shuffles into our patch of warmth for the night.

It is when we are all inside our bags, breathing the cool summer-night air, and I'm wondering if either Sean or Denver snore, that Sean puts his hands behind his head and studies the roof beams above our heads.

"Hey, Tony," he says. "I've been thinking about what you said. You want to learn how to be alone?" He scratches his neck. "Just give up on everybody."

I am confused. "What do you mean?"

Sean unclasps one of his hands and runs his thumb across his cheek. The moonlight glows against the dark line of his scar. "When you can say *screw you* to everyone, when you can feel them not caring, and not care about them, then you've made it. You're alone. You trust no one but yourself. You look out for no one but yourself. And you survive."

"But what about your family?" I think about Gran. The way she had hugged me so hard after what happened with Lucas, I thought my bones would crack. "Don't you trust them? Don't they look out for you?"

"No," Sean says.

It's only one word, but there is so much venom behind it that I know it's true. "What about your brothers or sisters?"

"Only child."



"Me, too," I say.

"So what? That doesn't make us friends." Sean shifts so his dark eyes reflect back at mine. "And anyway, having siblings doesn't mean you're less alone. Take Denver. His brother, Harry, is a real piece of work."

"Sean, let's not talk about it." For the first time I hear anger in Denver's voice. And something else. Sadness. Fear.

"Fine. I'm going to sleep," Sean says. He turns his back to me.

"But—"

"Shut up, Tony," he growls.

It is quiet. I stare at the moonlit cobwebs as Sean's breathing grows deep and even. I guess I can see what he means. About not trusting anyone.

But I don't want that kind of alone. I want to be able to trust myself and rely on myself, but I want to be able to trust others, too. Being alone is not the same as being lonely.

Just as I'm about to drift off, Denver's sleeping bag rustles. "Hey, Tony. You still awake?"

"Yeah."

"I know Sean can come off as a little harsh. But he's a good guy."

I think about how different Sean and Denver are. I wonder why they're together—Sean's coldness and Denver's friendliness are like night and day. "How'd you become friends?" I ask.

Denver is silent, and I don't think he's going to answer. Then, when I'm just about to close my eyes, he clears his

throat. “When I was twelve, my dad caught this scrawny, scraggly kid stealing the garden gnomes off our front porch. But instead of calling the cops, my dad took him into the house and told my mom to make extra for dinner.

“That night I came home to see Sean in the kitchen, scarfing down a huge plate of food. The first thought I had of him was ‘Man, that kid is skinny.’ You could see his ribs through his shirt. Later, Sean told me that until that night, he hadn’t had a real meal in a week.

“Anyway, after dinner my dad told Sean he could stop by anytime for a meal. He soon became a regular at our house.

“I wasn’t sure what to think about Sean at first. He was really quiet. Wouldn’t touch anything. I think he was scared that he would somehow mess up. That he would prove that a kid from the bad side of town could only be bad.

“When he started inviting Sean over, my dad sat me and my brother, Harry, down. He told us that even though Sean had stolen from us, we had to trust him. ‘Trust builds trust,’ he said.

“I listened to my father for the most part, but I still wasn’t sure about wanting Sean as a friend. Then, one day, I saw him riding down the street on the way to my house. He was on this old, beat-up skateboard. The paint had been worn to nothing, and the wheels were rubbed down almost to their axles. But Sean was double-flipping and high-jumping on that board as if it were a stroll in the park. I asked him to teach me. We ended up meeting at the local skate park almost

every day after school. As we spent more time together, I never worried about trusting him again.

“But Harry was a different story. He never liked Sean. When my parents were away and Sean was over, Harry would always tease him about his Walmart jeans and his ragged homemade haircuts. He constantly accused Sean of wanting to steal our Xbox or PlayStation or whatever new toy we got for Christmas or our birthdays.

“And he wouldn’t let up about Sean’s shirts. Sean was always wearing long-sleeved shirts, even in summer. They were the really cheap kind, the ones you get in three-packs at the dollar store. Harry would ask Sean why he didn’t have T-shirts like a normal person, but Sean just wouldn’t answer.

“I couldn’t figure it out, until this one really hot day in August. It was about a year after I met Sean. Harry and I were horsing around in the pool in our backyard. Sean was with us but refused to go swimming. Said he was afraid of the water.

“Harry and I got into a wrestling match. Harry has always been stronger than me and liked to prove it, especially if there was an audience. He would hold me under and then lift my head up only enough to get a half breath in before jerking me down back into the water. Each time he dunked me, he held me under for longer. Then he finally got to the point where he wouldn’t let me up.

“Later, Sean told me that he had seen my eyes bulge and my mouth open and take in water, and he had screamed to Harry to let go. Instead of pulling me up, Harry had



taunted him. Had told him that he was a wuss for not trying to save me. I couldn't hear. I was too busy drowning.

"Sean jumped in. He still had his sneakers on. He really didn't know how to swim. But he could kick and bite, and that's what he did. Harry has a scar from where Sean left teeth marks on his arm.

"Harry let go of me. I got to the surface and pulled myself from the water, choking out half the pool. Harry and Sean were thrashing around in the shallow end. Harry was screaming at Sean that he was fighting dirty, and Sean was screaming back that Harry was a bully and a coward.

"Harry dragged himself out of the pool. He called us horrible names and went inside to take care of his bleeding arm.

"After a while, Sean and I went inside, too. I took Sean to my room and gave him some dry clothes. I went into the bathroom to change, and it occurred to me that Sean didn't have a towel to dry off. I got one from the bathroom shelf and opened my bedroom door.

"Sean was in the middle of dressing. His shirt was off and he was facing away from me. His back and arms were covered in bruises and welts. And not the kind you get from falling off a skateboard.

"Sean had heard the door open. He knew I was behind him.

"‘Don't tell,’ he had said.

"‘I won't,’ I said. ‘But you have to.’

"I handed him the towel and Sean covered himself. He began to shake. We sat on the floor and he told me about his father. About the alcohol, the drugs, and the violence

that happened in his home. About the threats of what would happen if he told anyone.

“I didn’t know what to do. But I knew someone who would. That night, after supper, I got my dad and Sean in the living room. I got Sean to talk. My dad called Child Protective Services that night, and a week later, Sean was living with us. And a few months later, I was teaching him how to swim.”

A loon calls out in the night. It is a lonely, mournful sound. After a while, Denver begins to snore.

I tuck my head down and close my eyes. I still don’t like Sean much. But I don’t mind his meanness anymore.





CHAPTER 10

HUNGER WAKES ME. My stomach feels like it has shrunk to the size of a robin's egg; it's searching for any last bits of food so it can expand again.

In the gray dawn light, I unscrew my water bottle and take a gulp, then another, hoping to quiet my growling stomach. I unpeel the last bit of wrapper on the last half of my last Snickers bar. This time, I hold each bite and count to fifty.

"Morning, Tony." Denver is pouring hot water into a bowl at the other end of the shelter. The smell of oatmeal hits my nose, thick and rich with brown sugar and cinnamon.

I have to leave immediately, or I'm going to pounce on Denver's breakfast. "Morning." I crumple my Snickers wrapper into my empty bear bag and shove it into my pack, along with everything else. "I'm going to hit the trail early."

"Sounds good." Denver holds a spoonful of oatmeal to his mouth and blows. I can barely look at him. "But when

you get to Lonesome, wait up for us. The next stretch of trail is going to be pretty tough, and you shouldn't be doing it alone."

Sean looks up from stuffing his mouth with a peanut-butter-covered bagel. "Denver! We're not dragging this kid with us for our entire trip!"

"Sean. Chill out." Denver glares at his friend.

"Fine. If he can keep up, he can stay with us. But if not, we're ditching him." Sean takes another bite of his bagel and turns his back to me.

I try not to let Sean get to me. "See you guys," I say as casually as I can, and head out.

Lonesome Lake. Lonesome Lake. Lonesome Lake. I match the name of the place with food to the beat of my hunger pangs. I have given up looking at the forest around me. All I want to do is eat.

I start thinking of the delicious things Gran would make for me. Homemade waffles, hot from the waffle iron, covered in strawberries and whipped cream and drizzled with Hershey's chocolate syrup. Lasagna, with its layers of wide noodles and soft ricotta and beefy tomato sauce, covered in melty, bubbling mozzarella. A whole roast chicken, with brown-crisped skin, sliced into long tender pieces and eaten with smooth heaps of buttery mashed potatoes. Apple pie, still warm, served with a wedge of cheddar cheese and a tall glass of milk.

Gran. A pang of guilt shoots through me. I think about the letter I wrote her the night before leaving for the trail,

hunching over a piece of loose leaf, biting my pen so hard between every couple of words that the plastic shell broke before I was done.

Gran,

You have always been there for me. When Mom and Dad left me at the hospital, you stayed and held my hand and kept me safe. After what happened with me and Lucas, when I just wanted to hide from the world forever, you made sure I got out of bed every morning. You made me brush my teeth and eat my breakfast and face the day. You are awesome and I love you.

But I have to go away. I know you probably know where I'm heading, but please don't come searching for me. I need to be by myself for a while.

Don't worry—I'll be back before school starts. I promise.

But I need to do something first.

Love,

Toby

I had placed the note on the kitchen table the next morning when she was out on her weekly errand run, knowing that she wouldn't be back for hours. Then I had put on my pack and headed for the trail.

Now I am staring at my feet, pushing one foot in front of the other, thinking about food and Gran and trying so

hard not to collapse that I barely notice anything until the silver glimmer of Lonesome Lake comes flashing through the trees.

Then I look up, and I see a dash of movement out of the corner of my eye. Four legs, a familiar scruff. Ratty fur as gnarled as a bird's nest.

It's the dog. He is uncertain, skittering forward two steps, then hopping back one.

I stop and unsling my pack to look half as intimidating. Slowly I bend my knees until I am level with him. A soft, clumsy whistle comes through my mouth. My hand stretches out, open palmed. "Here, boy," I say.

The dog's nose quivers. He is suspicious. If the only kindness he has received is food, then an empty hand must mean something bad.

I keep my hand still. "Hey. I'm not going to hurt you. But I don't have any food left."

I am talking to a dog. It feels natural and good. I push my hand out a tiny bit more.

Long seconds pass. My thighs are burning and my knees start to jiggle back and forth. But I keep my hand steady.

The dog comes. His wet nose brushes my fingers and he licks the palm of my hand. He must have found a smudge of food because he keeps on licking. But he does not bite.

My heart jumps with a fierce kind of joy. For the first time in my life, I feel needed. This dog has eaten my spaghetti supper and my block of cheese, and now he's looking to me for help. I reach down to pet his head.

Instantly the dog is crouched backward with his lips arched, a low growl in his throat. I can see his yellow-stained teeth, the dark pink of his inner cheeks. He's telling me with every bristling hair that he doesn't want to be touched.

I feel a pang of hurt. He doesn't trust me yet.

And then I stand and turn around and the dog is still growling and now I see why.

Fifty feet away, its hooves sinking in the soft mud of the trail, is a moose.

I have only a moment to take in the size of the animal—its chest bigger than a raging full-grown bull—before its massive shoulders tighten. It lowers its head and paws the ground.

I turn to run, and a calf with gangly legs stumbles out from the bushes onto the trail. I had been concentrating so hard on making the dog my friend that I hadn't noticed that I had gotten in between a mama moose and her baby.

If I run toward the calf, the mama will think I'm attacking it. If I run toward the mama, I will be heading straight into a beast with horrible eyesight and a blind desire to trample whatever may be harming her baby.

The mama moose snorts. Her long, narrow ears flatten backward and she lowers her head. She doesn't have antlers but doesn't need any for me to be squashed like a grape.

A charging moose. It's a big thing. And a bad one.

The mama moose starts galloping toward me. I scream at myself to get out of the way, but suddenly I am back in the car that hurtled me toward Lucas, with the rise of the

other moose's body rocketing toward the window by my head. I hear the sounds of glass shattering and sirens wailing, and then I see me and Lucas in the hospital and the bright white of our new casts. I know I have to move, but my boots are pinned to the dirt.

There is a blur of dirty fur, and the dog hurtles out from behind me. He plants himself directly in front of my scared, shaking body and barks three times, loud and low.

The moose thunders toward us. As she nears, the dog leaps up, nipping at her broad chest. She swerves to avoid him and crashes into the underbrush off the trail. She does not slow down as she heads toward her baby, and as she passes, I take in the short coarse hairs on her side, the dark scabs around her knees, the sloping hump of her neck, her powerful jaw muscles bulging, her wild smell of swamp and mountains.

And then she is past me and with her calf, and they both go running down the trail toward the lake.

The dog trots back to me. This time, when I put my hand out, he nuzzles his head under it.

"Good dog," I say. The words don't feel like they're enough. It feels strange, not to have a name for an animal that saved your life. I scratch behind his ears and look him full on in the face. "You know what? Your name is Moose from now on. I promise to take care of you. And when we get to Lonesome Lake Hut, you're going to have a feast like you never had before."



CHAPTER II

A FEW MINUTES later, Lonesome Lake Hut comes into view. Weathered shingles cover the sides and a hodgepodge of tin chimneys and solar panels stick out from the green metal roofing. There's a wraparound wooden deck that overlooks a patch of trees and the lake below. An unbearably wonderful smell of pancakes hovers in the air.

I scratch Moose under the chin and tell him to stay outside before climbing the hut steps and pushing open the door. I want to be quick. If Gran did report me as missing, I don't want anyone to see my face long enough to make the connection.

I've been on the trail for less than a week, but it still comes as a shock to be back indoors. Going inside of Lonesome Lake Hut is like being hugged by civilization. The temperature is warm and cozy. Tall windows let the sunlight in but keep the wind out.

The first things to greet me are long wooden tables with benches tucked neatly underneath them. A chalkboard announces the name of the crew working in the hut as well

as the dinner menu for the night—anadama bread, split-pea soup, beef tips, couscous, steamed veggies, and a surprise dessert.

A wooden counter with a stainless-steel top and three sinks divides half the eating area from the kitchen; a sales counter divides the other half. The sales counter is full of stuff to buy—extra socks, headlamps, AA batteries displayed in a glass case at knee level. Appalachian Mountain Club T-shirts for sale hang from a clothesline above.

A fully stocked kitchen lies behind the counters. The wooden shelves are lined with plastic spice containers, full of cumin, cinnamon, curry powder, bay leaves, rosemary, thyme, sage, parsley, basil, and onion and garlic powder. Gallon jugs of molasses, oil, and barbecue sauce rest on the windowpanes. White plastic rolling bins have been wheeled under a stainless-steel table. Traces of flour and oats dust their lids. Five-gallon pots hang from metal hooks dangling from the ceiling.

A guy with wiry brown hair and a scruffy beard stands in front of a six-burner stove, unloading a heap of chopped onions into a soup pot so big, a baby could swim around in it. He's got on a light-green T-shirt with the white blocky outline of a spruce tree across the front. His Carhartt workpants are stained with paint and dirt, and his feet are covered with bright orange Crocs over a pair of thick wool socks.

If Lucas and his dad were here, they'd already be chatting with this guy, asking him what's for dinner, how he likes working in the huts, what his favorite color is. I'd be in

the background, waiting until they were done talking so I could have Lucas to myself.

But they aren't here, and I have to talk to this guy if I'm going to get supplies from the hut. I'm about to ask where to get something to eat when I spot them. Lying like open treasure chests on top of the sales counter. Boxes of energy bars with their cardboard lids peeled back. Clif Bars, Luna bars, PowerBars, KIND bars. Flavors that sound like angels have been in the kitchen: chocolate chip peanut crunch, chocolate almond fudge, chocolate-dipped coconut, dark chocolate cherry cashew, peanut butter chunk chocolate.

And there are Snickers bars. Oh, there they are. Lovely Snickers bars.

I feel like a half-starved bear stumbling out of hibernation as I approach the counter, wobbly kneed and achy stomached. I set my pack down slowly. I'm so close to food that I'm trembling, and I'm worried that if I'm not careful I'll lose it and start cramming energy bars in my mouth, wrappers and all. I unzip the top of my pack and find the Ziploc with the rolled-up twenties.

The guy in the kitchen sees me unpeeling a twenty and comes over. "Hi there. What can I get you?"

I hand him the bill and reach for the closest box. I take out a chocolate almond fudge Clif Bar. My hands shake as I make a diagonal tear down the wrapper. The inside foil glints in the sunlight as I raise the bar to my lips and take a bite.

Sugar and chocolate flood my mouth. Before I can stop myself, I am ripping off huge chunks of the bar and swallowing them so fast I stop breathing. The whole thing is gone in about ten seconds. I am dizzy with happiness.

The guy has my twenty, but he seems to have forgotten that he's holding it. "When was the last time you ate?" he asks.

"I had half a Snickers bar this morning," I mumble. I don't want to tell him that I've completely run out of food.

The guy leaves the twenty on the counter. He walks over to the sinks and pulls a rack of dishes out from under them. He takes out a plate, removes a fork and a knife from a silverware holder, and hands them to me. "Sounds like you'll be needing breakfast, then." He points to a shallow pan with a lid over it on one of the long dining room tables. "Pancakes are over there. Have as many as you want."

I wanted to get supplies and get out, but the promise of more food is too powerful. I go over to the pan and slide off the lid. There are at least two dozen fluffy pancakes nestled inside, each as big as my hand. "Thank you, s-s-sir," I stutter.

The guy laughs. "You can call me Andy."

I pull the bench back and set myself down next to the pan, spear half a dozen of the pancakes on my plate, and begin to stuff them whole inside my mouth. I don't need the knife.

Andy comes over with a bottle of maple syrup. It's not the fake kind that they normally serve in the huts because

people use so much of it—it's Maine-made honest-to-goodness real maple syrup that he must have gotten from the crew's personal stash. He also brings a full stick of butter.

"Here you go," he says as he sets them on the table. "I'm making you some eggs, too." He goes back to the kitchen and takes a cast-iron skillet down from a hanging hook. A few moments later I hear the hiss and sizzle of frying eggs. "Do you eat meat?" he calls.

"Mm-hmm," I answer.

I've gone through about a dozen pancakes when Andy sets down a second plate in front of me. There are three fried eggs and six sausage links on it, plus a toasted sesame bagel piled high with cream cheese and slices of avocado. "This here's what we like to call hiker's delight," he tells me.

"Thank—"

"Just eat," he says.

I have gobbled down the eggs and half the avocado bagel before I remember. I take my plate and go outside. One by one, I toss the sausage links to Moose, ignoring the urge to save one for myself. I give him my other bagel half, too. Moose snaps everything up in a few gulps.

We are fed. We are full. We are doing all right.





CHAPTER 12

WHEN I GO back inside, Andy is in the kitchen pouring a can of tomato puree into the soup pot. He comes up to the counter when he sees me. I pass him my dirty plate. I figure my breakfast will cost a fortune, but it was worth it. “How much do I owe you?”

“Two bucks for the Clif Bar. Nothing for everything else.” Andy hands me eighteen dollars, change for my twenty.

“No.” I am determined not to owe him. I give him a ten back. He waves it away, so I shove it into a tip jar on the counter.

Andy sighs and leans his head toward the front windows. “Looks like your friend enjoyed the sausages.”

Andy seems like the kind of person who wouldn’t gossip about stray kids in huts. I decide to open up to him a little. “I’ve been giving him what I can. He doesn’t have an owner and has been following me since the Kinsmans.”

“You can feed him what’s left of the pancakes. And I have some dog treats that a hiker left here last week. Take them, too.”

Andy takes a box of Milk-Bone biscuits off one of the shelves and hands it to me. This act of kindness almost breaks me. After nearly giving up on the trail yesterday in the miserable pelting rain, too many things are going right. I haven't had this much stuff work out for me. Ever.

I can feel tears welling up. I jerk around and scrub my eyes, hoping that Andy hasn't seen. When I turn back around, Andy is staring at me. He has a curious look on his face. "How far are you planning to hike, kid?" he asks.

I decide to tell him the truth and hope that Sean and Denver don't compare stories with him. "I plan to go straight through the White Mountains and on to Katahdin."

"That's a far ways. You traveling with anybody?"

I nearly tell him that it's just me. Then I think about how weird that would sound. A young kid hiking hundreds of miles by himself. "I'm hiking with my dad, but he's real slow. I don't think he'll be here for another hour at least." I swallow hard. The lie is a lump in my throat. My face is turning hot. I hope Andy doesn't notice.

"Think you and your dad are going to make it?" he asks.

"I've—We've got to."

"And why is that?"

I think about the List. About the way Lucas would cup his hands over a newly lit fire to keep the small flames burning. About promises I have made. I look the guy square in the eye. "I've just got to." My voice is steel.

The hut goes still for a moment.

I expect Andy to poke further, to ask more questions that

I have to make more lies for. Instead, he folds his arms. "Wait here," he says. He disappears down a corridor past a sign that reads "Croo Only." When he comes back, he is holding a glass marble between his thumb and forefinger. It is perfectly clear except for a ribbon of blue swirled through the center.

"This belonged to my great-grandfather." Andy tosses the marble in the air. It winks in the sunlight before disappearing back into his hand. "He was a fighter pilot during World War II. Before he went to war, his five-year-old son gave him this marble. Told him it would keep him safe.

"Not a lot of pilots survived Nazi artillery, but my great-grandfather did. He kept the marble tucked in a special pocket he sewed onto his uniform. At the end of the war, he gave the lucky marble back to his son, who gave it to his daughter, who gave it to her eldest son." Andy taps the marble against his chest. "Me." He holds the marble out to me. "This is for you. You've got a long way ahead of you, and a little luck wouldn't hurt."

"No." The word tumbles out of my throat. I don't deserve this generosity. This faith and trust in me, when I barely have faith in myself.

Andy folds his arms. "I'm not telling you that you can keep it. When you reach Carter Notch Hut, give the marble to the crew. They'll get it back to me. But you look like you could use some help. At least take it through the huts."

I think about it. All my life I've done nothing but screw up. It wouldn't hurt to have something lucky to balance out all the bad luck that weighs my every step.

I hold out my hand. Andy drops the marble into my palm. It is small but surprisingly heavy. Then he goes to the front counter and begins taking Clif Bars and PowerBars out of their boxes. "Open your pack. You've got a ways to go, and you'll be needing supplies."

Half an hour later, my pack is ten pounds heavier and I have one hundred and ninety one dollars remaining in my money Ziploc. Andy has stuffed in boxes of Annie's macaroni and cheese, a dozen instant oatmeal packets, Gatorade mix, a two-pound block of cheese, a jar of peanut butter, three plump summer sausages, and about twenty energy bars. It should be more than enough to get me and Moose through the next couple of days.

I'm tempted to buy a water filter, but the one in the display case is almost a hundred bucks. It's way more than I can afford, so I figure I'll fill up on water in the huts. Plus, Denver's iodine pills should last me a good chunk of the trail into Maine.

And most important, tucked in my hood pocket is a Ziploc sandwich bag with a square of glossy paper detailing all the trails and contour lines of the White Mountains folded inside. I've got a map again.



CHAPTER 13

I AM OUTSIDE, feeding handfuls of dog biscuits to Moose, when Sean and Denver come down the trail. I say hello, and they go inside to have lunch. Moose and I head to the lake, where I avoid families of hikers and find a deserted patch of shore. I skip stones over the calm water while Moose snuffles around the reeds.

When I run out of smooth, flat stones, I sit on the rocky shore and think about the last time I had felt this peaceful by the water. It was the day when Lucas and I had officially gone about tackling the List.

It was only a week after that fateful pancake breakfast. Lucas's dad had strapped the family canoe to the top of the Subaru and had driven us to Lake Winnepesaukee. We'd caught four wriggling trout, and Lucas's dad had scaled and gutted the fish on the picnic table at our campsite. After throwing the scraps to the birds, Lucas and I had rolled the fish in bread crumbs and his dad had panfried them to a crisp golden hue over a roaring campfire.

That night, we had feasted on fresh-caught fish, and as we sat by the lake digesting our meal and watching the stars glitter across the clear night sky, Lucas had pulled out the List and made one long slash across #1: *Go fishing*. “One down, nine to go,” he had said. We had whooped and high-fived our greasy hands.

“Gah!” A sharp prick on the side of my neck brings me out of my daze. I slap at my skin. When I take my hand away, there is a squashed mosquito on my palm, as well as a smear of my blood. My neck is already starting to itch.

I look down and see an army of flies crawling over my pants. Another mosquito lands on my knee and stabs down into my quick-dry pants.

Biting insects are the worst of the bad littles. I bat at my pants, and the flies whirl into my face. I accidentally snort up a bug, but before I can snort it back out, it bullets through my nose and down into my throat. I try not think of how many eyes it has. I decide that I am done with the lake.

I stand up. Moose is waiting for me, his long tail thumping against the rocks. I lean over and scratch him behind the ears. “Hey, buddy.”

Moose wiggles his head into my fingers. A stinky pink tongue licks my wrist, and his mouth curls into what I swear is a smile.

I give Moose a final scratch, then head back to the hut. Inside, Sean and Denver are refilling their water bladders in a small silver sink. Andy is nowhere in sight.



“Hey, Tony!” Denver greets me. “You heading out now?”

I nod. “Just got to fill my water bottles and I’ll be set.” I nervously check the hallway leading to the crew room. If Andy sees me talking with Sean and Denver, he may become suspicious of my story about hiking with my dad.

I hurriedly fill my water bottles and shove them in the side pockets. I sling my pack over my shoulders and nearly fall down. It’s a lot heavier than this morning. “Let’s go.” I am impatient to get out of the hut before Andy reappears.

Sean immediately heads out the door, but Denver waits in the hut until I have clipped my chest and hip straps closed. I stagger out of the hut behind him. We meet up with Sean and get back on our way.

As Denver and Sean stride down the trail, I quickly realize that the only reason that I could keep up with them before was because my pack had weighed half as much as it does now.

As the trail descends, I stumble behind Denver and Sean. My pack straps bite into my shoulders, rubbing them even rawer than before. Every time I lift my foot it’s as if I’m sloughing through deep water. I am silently grateful that we are going down instead of up. But even with gravity on my side, the distance between us grows longer and longer. Every once in a while Denver glances behind and waits a few seconds, but Sean does not stop or turn around once. He seems determined to lose me.



After a few miles, the trail comes to a whizzing highway. Up ahead, Denver shouts something to Sean, and he finally stops. He turns and glares at me until I have caught up.

"You're slowing us down," he says sharply. "We've got over nine miles to go before the Garfield Ridge Shelter, and it's already noon. We want to be able to set up camp before dark, but we won't with you hanging on to us like some sort of parasitic tick."

"Easy, Sean," says Denver.

Moose growls. I put my hand on his head to calm him. Sean's words hurt, but he is right. It has been too easy for me to follow them. But I'm not on the trail to be a follower. "You guys go ahead. I'll see you at the shelter."

"Are you sure?" Denver asks.

"Yes, he's sure," Sean says. "C'mon, D. Let's go." He turns his back to me and begins walking. Fast.

Denver looks at me. I nod. "Go. I'm going to stop and feed Moose, anyway."

Denver sighs and hurries after his friend.

I set down my pack. Moose whines as I dig through my supplies and snaps up the handful of dog treats I feed him. I polish off a Clif Bar as he scarfs down his food, and we are off again.

The trail climbs steeply past the highway. I plod along slowly, but I don't stop. Step. Breath. Step. Breath. I chant this in my head as I climb past the tree line and into a boulder field.

I realize that even at my snail pace, I'm making better progress on my own than if I had tried to keep up with Sean and Denver. I probably would have pooped out within an hour and needed to rest for another hour. And then I would have felt bad. Now I am making my own pace. It doesn't feel speedy, but it feels right.

The wind picks up. I pull on my Windbreaker and cinch up the hood. The sky is sharp and blue, and I can see the mountains all around me—the summer green of the maple leaves, the dark spruce and pine dotting the upper elevations, valleys on either side of me, and a wave of mountains in the distance, stretching all the way to Canada.

I look at these mountains and feel the wind pressing into my cheeks and close my eyes. A little piece of me opens up to being outside, with a dog at my feet and food in my belly.

Moose and I fall into a rhythm. He bounds ahead for thirty feet, then circles back to make sure I'm still there. When he reaches me he wags his tail, gives me a drooly smile, then turns around and leaps forward again. Even though he has far more energy and strength than me, he never goes out of my sight. It's like he's afraid of losing me. It's probably just because he knows I'll give him food. But I don't mind.

Like bumps along a camel's back, we hike steadily over peak after peak. Franconia Ridge is made up of a bunch of L-named mountains—Liberty and Little Haystack, Lincoln, and finally, the beast of the range, Lafayette, which stands nearly a mile tall.

On top of Liberty, Moose and I happily wolf down a few energy bars. We pass a bunch of folks on the ridge, but I don't talk to them. I'm still trying to keep myself as forgettable as possible so no one gets suspicious and raises the alarm.

By the time we get to Little Haystack, I'm starting to slow down. Moose is running only twenty feet ahead of me instead of thirty. On Lincoln he has stopped running ahead completely. After we have another snack, Moose stays by my side, tiredly panting as we slog forward.

As the afternoon turns into evening, the steady stream of hikers trickles to one or two an hour, then none. By the time we reach the top of Lafayette, the sun has set. I pull my map out in the fading twilight and trace the trail to the Garfield Ridge Shelter. My heart sinks. I still have four miles to go.

It's cold on the rocky peak. A wind whips up, and Moose shivers. I look down at him. His head is drooping and his tongue is hanging out. He's tired, too.

I have to make a decision. Greenleaf Hut is only a mile away. I could go down to it instead of continuing on the trail. It's warm and safe.

But I said I would see Denver and Sean at the shelter, and that's what I'm going to do. I tell Moose to follow me, and we set off in the growing darkness.





CHAPTER 14

IT GETS COLDER and colder. Earlier, the wind had been cool and pleasant in the midday sun. Now it feels crueler, carving away at my body's heat minute by minute, making me squint so my eyes don't dry out. Without the sun, the mountains feel like they're turning against me.

This is the first time that I've been caught without shelter after sunset. Even snug in bed, I hate the dark. But now, with no protection, anything on the mountain can attack me.

After a half hour, even the dim twilight is gone. Night creeps up around me. All I have is the light of the stars—the moon hasn't risen yet. I can barely see the trail, and I constantly trip over rocks jutting up from the path that would have been easy to see in daylight.

Coyotes howl in the distance. It sounds like there are dozens of them. I start to panic, thinking about how easy it would be for them to surround me, rip open my pack and eat all my food, then gnaw on my arms for dessert. My breath becomes noisy shallow gulps. Every whoosh of wind, every falling rock that clatters down the mountain makes

my heart jump. I swear I can see zombies moving down below.

But then Moose whines, and I know that I can't freak out. I put a hand on his trembling head. "I'm right here, buddy," I tell him. I will my voice to be steady. Both of us can't be scared. One of us has to be brave.

"Zombies can't climb this high," I whisper to myself as I descend below the tree line. The trees block out the wind, but they also make it impossible to see more than a couple of feet ahead. The thick dark presses on me from all sides as I trudge along.

I start telling Moose stories to keep my mind from going crazy with fear. "Once upon a time there was a zombie. He saw a nice juicy boy and his dog walking along a mountain and climbed up to eat them. But then a pack of coyotes surrounded the zombie and ate it instead. And the boy and the dog were safe."

Moose whimpers. I keep on talking, trying to keep both of us from being paralyzed with fright. When I run out of stories, I make up songs. "The dark is stupid; the dark is stuuuuupid," I warble. My voice sounds small and tinny.

Moose starts to howl. "My singing isn't that bad," I tell him, but he doesn't stop. I peer into the darkness. I can't see a thing now. It's too dangerous to keep going.

I'm doomed.

Toe, your headlamp. It's Lucas's voice. In my head, saving my butt once again. Duh. I had forgotten that one of my most important pieces of equipment is sitting in the top

pocket of my pack, just waiting to be used. Fear has turned my mind to mush.

Moose is still howling as I dig out my headlamp and pull the strap around my head. Even if I'm bone-tired, as long as I can see my way forward I can make it to the Garfield Ridge Shelter.

Moose is barking now. "Stop making so much noise!" I snap. "I'll get you more treats when we get to the shelter." I switch on my light and in the glare of the sudden beam I catch two dark wide-set eyes coming straight at me.

"AAAAAAHHHH!!!" It hits me all at once—the sharp, musty smell; the coarse-haired, lumbering body; the flash of wet teeth; claws scraping the dirt. I scream again as the bear rises onto its hind legs. It towers over me and Moose, and for a second I think we are both goners.

And then the bear tips onto its back and paws at its eyes. It snorts and shakes its head, then rolls back onto its feet and crashes into the bushes, sniffing and snuffing the entire way.

I've scared a bear. My terror drains away, and I start laughing as waves of relief wash over me.

"I'm sorry," I tell Moose. "I swear I will pay more attention to you next time." In the light of my headlamp, I feed him half the Milk-Bone treats right then and there on the trail.

It is close to midnight by the time we reach the shelter. No one is inside—Sean and Denver must have set up their tent elsewhere. I'm too tired to pitch my own tent, so I lay

my sleeping pad onto the wooden floor and curl up in my sleeping bag.

Moose pads wearily into the shelter. He circles a few times before collapsing next to me. He lays his head gently on my chest. I reach out and put my arm across his skinny side. He smells like rotten eggs, but I don't care.

As I drift off, I make a promise to myself to never again get caught on the trail after dark. If that bear had decided to attack me and Moose, we would have been toast. I would have never finished the trail and kept my vow to Lucas.

And even if it had just been Moose that had gotten hurt, I wouldn't have known what to do. I don't know the first thing about treating big injuries on myself, much less a dog. I probably wouldn't have been able to save him.

I can't be that irresponsible. I have to protect Moose, and that means being smarter than I was today. I should have swallowed my pride and stayed at the hut instead of charging ahead into the dark. But I wanted to prove to Sean that I could keep up with him, and it had almost ended in disaster.

Moose begins to snore. I smile and give his stinky head one last rub. "Good night, buddy," I whisper.



That night I have a dream about Lucas. We are standing at the bottom of a waterfall, but there's no water coming down.

Suddenly rivers of clear marbles ribboned with blue cascade off the top of the falls, twinkling bright globes that crack into tiny pieces as they hit the rocks next to us. I feel a wave of grief hit me at all these broken pieces, but when I look at Lucas, he is laughing.

As the shattered marbles pile up, they turn into a river of glittering light, and I realize that even broken things can turn into something beautiful.

When I wake up, for the first time in a long while, I am smiling.