



CHAPTER 15

LATE-MORNING LIGHT is pouring into the shelter by the time I open my eyes. Everything aches. Even my hair hurts. I shuffle out of my sleeping bag and walk around, looking for Sean and Denver, but they aren't there. It's probably for the best. They're too fast for me, plus Sean kind of hates me. I shouldn't be following them, anyway.

But I feel a little sad at the thought of not seeing those two guys again. They saved me from the storm, maybe even saved my life. I realize I never really thanked them for doing that. Even though the chance of our paths crossing is pretty slim, I hope we get to meet one more time so I can tell them how much they helped me.

I return to the shelter and feed Moose a couple of Clif Bars that don't have chocolate in them, then chow down on two Snickers bars as I look over my map. I need to hike at least ten miles a day if I'm going to finish the trail before school starts. But I want to finish sooner. I'm starting to miss Gran. It's been a while since there's been a dog in her house, but she loves them. I can't wait for her to meet Moose.

I tap my finger on my goal for the day—Ethan Pond Shelter, a little over fifteen miles away. It's ambitious, especially considering the long night Moose and I had gone through, but I think we can do it. And if it starts getting dark, the terrain looks flat enough in the last couple of miles that I could pitch a tent anywhere along the trail.

After tucking away my map and stuffing my sleeping pad and bag into my backpack, I call to Moose. He comes trotting out of the bushes, ready to go.

First there's a steep hike that goes down past Galehead Hut. I avoid going into the hut and keep on trekking, passing a family of four slowly making their way up in the opposite direction, and letting a fast-paced group of college-age kids go by me. Beyond the hut, the trail goes straight up. Moose matches me step for step until we come to a smooth granite slab, steep-angled and slick with water. I think it's no problem until I'm halfway up it and my foot slips. My shin bangs into the rock, and I slide to the bottom of the slab. I try again, being more careful this time. Even using both my hands and feet, I can barely make it up. Moose noses to the right, then to the left of the trail, trying to find an alternate path, but short, thick spruce trees block his way. He whines uneasily.

I drop my pack and scramble down to the base of the slab. I call to Moose. He stiffens when I wrap my arms around his torso, and I wonder if he will let me pick him up. But he does not try to wriggle away. I lift him so he can reach a tiny ledge in the rock about four feet high.



My heart jumps as Moose scrabbles and slips on the nearly vertical rock, but finally his nails hitch on to the rock, and he hauls himself clear. I scramble next to him and pull on my pack, breathing a sigh of relief. We made it. Andy's lucky marble must be working.

We break above the tree line and summit South Twin and Guyot. Clouds and mist have engulfed the mountains, but as I reach the top of Guyot, the sun parts the clouds like a veil and clears the whole of the White Mountains and beyond. I turn in every direction—north, where I swear I can see Canada; south, toward the Adirondacks of New York; west, to the Franconia Ridge, from where I had come; and east, to Maine.

I'm already feeling stronger. Happier. Like I'm breaking free of my rotten luck back home. "Hey, Lucas," I whisper. "I wish you were here."

A gust of wind wraps around my words and blows them out across the mountains. Moose licks my hand, and in that moment, I am convinced that Lucas is here, grinning at the view with me.

Moose and I descend into the trees, and a few miles later we are hopping across small stream crossings. I know the next hut, Zealand Falls, is near when I hear a steady mechanical whirring and see a red-painted well pump handle moving up and down all by itself next to a large drum of a water tank.

The trail spills out next to the hut, which has a stunning view of the valley. There are two weathered front porches,

divided by the front of the hut's dining room, which sticks out in between them. Each porch has a door that leads to the dining room.

I plan on passing by, but as I walk along the trail past the front decks, I hear a loud shout.

I tell Moose to stay, and jog up the steps to one of the hut porches. As I approach the door, I hesitate. Angry words are bulleting out of the hut like rapid machine-gun fire.

My heart jitters into my throat. I don't want to walk into an argument or a fight. I'm about to turn around and hurry past the hut when six words come sailing out the kitchen, hitting me straight in both ears.

"What am I going to dooooo?"

It is a cry of despair. I need to at least know what is going on. I peer in through the small rectangles of glass on the door but can't see anything.

I lean over and peek through the front window of the hut. Past the empty dining hall I can see a guy standing in the kitchen, hopping up and down in the middle of a spreading puddle of hacked-up vegetables and soup water. A fallen cooking pot lies sideways under the sinks next to a broken wooden spoon.

As the soup water runs down the wooden floorboards into the dining room, he makes a beeline for a mop in the corner of the kitchen. He picks up the mop just as his foot slips. He goes sailing backward, and his head hits the floor with a thud. "Ow," he moans.

He needs help. I swallow my shyness and barge into the hut. I drop my pack on a dining room bench and run into the kitchen. It appears as though the cook has given up on the whole situation. He tries to sit up, winces, and decides to lie back on the floor. His Carhartts and red plaid shirt and dirty-blond hair drink up the soup water.

I walk over to his head and peer down. "Hi," I say.

"Mmf," he says.

"Do you need help?"

"Nah, I'm good. Just gonna hang out down here and look at the ceiling and count some spiderwebs." The guy darts his eyes to the corners of the room, but he doesn't move his head. "Do you see four? I see four."

I look up. "Yeah, I see four."

"Good." The guy rolls slowly onto his side and gingerly pulls himself up to sitting. "Means I don't have double vision."

I pick up the fallen mop. "Hey, why don't you stay there for a second. I'll take care of this." The guy doesn't protest, and I wipe up the soup water, wringing out the mop in a drainage tub underneath a line of dish sinks. The guy goes up a narrow flight of stairs behind the kitchen to change out of his wet clothes while I find a broom and dustpan and sweep up the celery and onions, dumping them in a compost bucket on top of the sink. By the time he comes back down, in a fresh blue T-shirt and jeans, there is barely any evidence that a disaster had taken place.

The guy sticks out his hand. "Hi. I'm Jake. Thanks for helping out."

"Tony." I shake Jake's hand. "How's your head?"

"Not so great, but I don't think I have a concussion. I need to get cracking, though. I'm already behind on my cook day."

"Would you like some help?" I know I should get going, but part of me wants to stay here a while longer. Hiking until midnight the night before is beginning to catch up with me. I can feel exhaustion tugging at my legs and eyelids. Right now, cooking for an hour sounds a lot better than getting back on the trail. Plus, there aren't any guests in the hut. I don't feel like I could get found out at any moment. I straighten up and try to look more chef-like. "I've been helping my grandma in the kitchen since I was nine."

Jake furrows his eyebrows. It looks like he's about to say no, but then he sighs and hands me a cutting board and a knife. "That would be awesome, actually. I would ask another crew member to help, but they all just left for some long day-hikes, and I don't think any of them are going to be back until dinner. Can you dice onions and celery and carrots?"



CHAPTER 16

I SET UP the cutting board on one of the kitchen counters and get to work while Jake hauls out frozen balls of ham to defrost, then sets a soup pot on one of the stove burners and pours a quart of olive oil into it from a two-gallon jug. He switches on the propane flame, and I dump chopped vegetables into the soup pot when my cutting board fills up. Soon the air is filled with the sounds and smells of hissing, cooking onions. Jake adds some frozen minced garlic, then fills the pot with water, pours in a few gallons of beans, and sets the stove flame low. Before he puts a lid on, he drops a handful of metal spoons into the pot.

“Keeps the soup from burning,” he tells me. “Now we let that simmer until dinner. Meanwhile, want to make some oatmeal honey bread?” Jake digs into the fridge and pulls out a three-pound bag of industrial yeast held closed with a bright green plastic clothespin. He asks me to measure out a half cup of yeast into a large bowl, and then adds a generous dose of honey, a handful of salt, and some carefully measured warm water.

I watch the yeast form little bubbles as it gobbles up the sugar in the honey. My mouth starts to water as the soup's delicate smells waft through the kitchen. All of a sudden a wave of homesickness hits me. I want to be back in Gran's kitchen, smelling soup on the stove.

"Hey. You okay?" Jake is looking at me curiously.

I nod. "Yeah. Sorry. I was just thinking about how my grandma would have loved this kitchen."

Jake smiles and pulls out two twenty-gallon rolling bins from underneath a stainless-steel island. One bin contains oatmeal; the other is full of flour. He measures out sixteen cups of flour while I measure out ten cups of oatmeal, and we dump them into the bowl. Jake kneads the dough just until it holds together, then flours the island and upturns the dough onto it. He splits the dough in two pieces and nudges one of them over to me. "And now comes my favorite part of baking," he announces. "Kneading."

Jake shows me how to work the dough, sliding his fingers under the bottom of it and lifting and folding it in half, then using the heels of his hands to push the dough back into itself. I can see why he likes it. There is something soothing to the rhythm of kneading, and how a sticky mess of unformed dough, with time and care and patience and work, transforms into a silky round ball.

Once the dough is smooth and elastic, we transfer it back to the bowl and let it rise while we make dessert. Jake decides on chocolate brownies with mint icing. He melts chocolate and butter while I beat together confectioners'

sugar and milk with a dash of peppermint extract. Before long, the brownies are in the oven and we have gone back to the oatmeal honey dough, dividing it into six pieces and tucking them into oiled bread pans.

We let the bread rise a second time while we pull the brownies out of the oven. Once they're cool, we drizzle the icing over them. After a round of dishes, the bread goes in the oven, the kitchen is shipshape, and Jake and I are ready for a sit-down. Before our break, I go outside to see how Moose is doing. He is fast asleep under the porch. He's earned a nap. I give him a gentle pat and tiptoe back inside.

Jake leaves out a little bell at the front desk for guests to ding if they need him, and we head upstairs to the crew quarters.

At the top of the steps we reach a dark, tiny landing and duck through a hobbit-sized doorway. Crew rooms are off-limits to guests, and I feel like a VIP as I enter a sunlit room filled with traces of the current crew and crews past. Handwritten notes, photos of people doing handstands on hut roofs at sunset, drawings of elephants on skates and clowns riding unicorns, a poster of Han Solo marked up with pink hearts that float around his face, plus a number of battered road signs only hint at countless stories that the crew have been part of and created over the years.

Jake picks up a Calvin and Hobbes comic book and settles down on the top of a bunk bed, one of five beds in the room. There is a hammock rigged up in the center of the room, and I sink into it.

Lucas would have loved this. He would have been asking a million questions, starting with the pink hearts around Han Solo. I start to ask Jake about the *Star Wars* poster when something else catches my eye.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing to a cup of spoons. It is perched below a window that opens up into the dining room and has a few coils of fishing line wrapped around the cup handle.

Jake looks up from his comic book. “Oh, that? It’s a booby trap. Have you ever heard of a night raid?”

I shake my head.

“Night-raiding is a time-honored tradition of sneaking into another hut in the dead of dark and stealing as many special objects as we can without getting caught. If you take a look at the hut dining rooms, you’ll see objects that the crews have collected over the years and hung up for decoration. Road signs, mostly. Some of the objects are more coveted than others and are often booby-trapped to make them more difficult to steal.”

“Like what?”

“Well, back in the 1950s and 1960s the prize item was a human skull that had been smuggled out of an abandoned logging camp. In 1969, a Cessna plane crashed on Mount Washington and its front propeller made it into the huts, though it disappeared a few years back.”

Jake scratches his chin. “There’s a stuffed pink boa constrictor named Vicky. A megaphone taken from Rutgers

University.” He nods at the cup. “Take a peek at where that fishing line goes and tell me what you see.”

I hop out of the hammock to inspect the cup. The fishing line is almost invisible, but I trace it out the window and down to the handle of a weathered rowing oar hanging on the dining room wall. “An oar?”

“Yep. That oar is one of the special items. It was used in the Olympic Games in the 1970s. Right now it’s the most valuable raid item in the huts. If someone tries to take it down, they’ll trigger the fishing line to tip over the cup, spilling the spoons and waking us up. There is also a row of spoons hidden behind the oar, so even if the fishing line is cut, there would still be a ruckus if the oar is moved.” Jake grins. “Every once in a while a guest gets hit with a falling spoon, but they’re generally good-natured about it when we explain its purpose.”

Jake returns to his comic book, and I go back to the hammock. I pull a blanket over myself and fall asleep to the smells of baking bread and cooling brownies.



CHAPTER 17

“POWER RAAAAAAIIIIID!!!”

I awaken to the sound of spoons clattering and voices shouting in the dining room. Jake is halfway out the door and pounding down the stairs before I tumble out of the hammock. The cup is no longer there. I rush to the window—it has been yanked down and lies broken amid the tossed spoons on the dining room floor.

A girl with brown hair pulled into a tight ponytail is holding the paddle of the oar while a guy with spiky blue hair and a tie-dyed T-shirt is using a Swiss Army knife to slice the fishing line off the handle. Another guy, with dreadlocks, has climbed on top of one of the benches and is busily removing a No Parking sign from the wall.

My heart jumps into my throat. I want to run down there and tackle the raiding crew, but the guys pulling down the oar look big. And determined. I feel helpless. I'd be easy for them to squash like a bug if I tried to fight them.

Jake comes into view, a howling tornado of protest. He grabs the middle of the oar and leaps onto a dining room

table, wrapping his body into a human knot around the wooden shaft. “You’re not getting the oar, Pete,” he yells.

“Hi, Jake!” the blue-haired guy says cheerfully. “I do believe I *am* getting the oar. Hannah, check and see if anyone’s upstairs. We need to make sure that Jake’s the only one around.”

The girl with the ponytail nods. Panicked, I duck down from the window and crawl under the bunk bed as I hear footsteps climb the stairs. I scrunch up and try to make myself as still and silent as possible.

Two neon-yellow sneakers appear in the doorway. I can see flecks of mud and dirt on the shoelaces as they wind up to make little bows below a pair of gray wool socks. The sneakers step into the room and approach the bunk bed. They are so close. I swear the girl can feel my heart thump-like a jackrabbit’s against the wooden floor.

“Pete, there’s no one up here!” Hannah calls down from the window.

The neon sneakers take one more turn around the room before they finally leave, and I remember to breathe again. I wriggle out from under the bed and take a quick look through the crew window.

“George, get the duct tape!” Pete barks to the dreadlocked guy, who is trying unsuccessfully to peel Jake off the oar. George grabs a roll of tape and tosses it to Hannah before joining Pete.

Together the two burly guys pry Jake off the oar—first his fingers, then his arms, then his legs and reluctant feet.



Hannah is waiting with duct tape. They hold him down while she winds the tape around his hands and his ankles until he is completely immobile. With a flourish, Pete rips off one last piece of tape and seals it across Jake's mouth.

Once Jake is taped up, Pete, Hannah, and George go to town on the dining room, unscrewing bolts and pulling out nails to free all the decorations until the walls are bare. They pile up the signs they have taken and tie them to wooden packboards they have brought with them before carrying them to the front porch.

Pete picks up the oar and lashes it to his packboard using a length of twine. He takes his time, looping and knotting the twine tightly to make it extra secure. He gives the oar a loud kiss and carries it reverentially to the porch. When he returns, he smacks his lips together. "Snack time, anyone?"

Pete and the other two raiding crew members disappear below me, into the kitchen. I hear them shuffling about, raiding more than just signs and the oar.

Jake has been placed on top of a dining room table. He looks up and sees me. His head tilts a little and his eyes fixate on the front porch for a moment, then jump back over to me.

I know what he wants me to do. It scares me. I can handle the woods. I don't know if I can handle people. Especially confident, ridiculously in-shape college kids who would kill me if they caught me.

C'mon, Toe. Don't be a chicken. It's Lucas. In my head again.



I take a deep breath and look around the crew room. On the table next to the radio, a pair of pink scissors is jammed into a widemouthed mason jar along with black permanent markers and pens. I pick up the scissors. My hands are shaking so hard that I nearly jab myself as I tuck them in my pocket.

There is a door in the crew room that leads to a metal catwalk over the backyard. I open it quietly and tiptoe across it. The kitchen windows are open and directly below me. I can hear Pete laughing as he crunches on something. I reach the end of the catwalk and make a wide counterclockwise circle to the front of the hut.

Ducking below the dining room windows, I drop to my hands and knees to crawl over to the packboards on one of the porches. Both porch doors have been propped wide open, and I can see Jake slumped on the front dining room table. He slides his eyes over to me, and I give him a quick nod.

As quietly as I can, I begin cutting the twine pinning the oar to Pete's packboard. My hands wobble like crazy. Pete tied some good knots, and it takes several tries before they give way to the multipurpose shears.

"Yo, Jake, want some crackers?" The voice sounds like it's right next to me.

I look up. George is standing in front of Jake holding a box of Triscuits. He only has to swing his head left to see me through the doorway, a twelve-year-old nothing of a kid, crouched above the most precious raid item in the entire huts system.

George rips off the duct tape keeping Jake silent. He pulls out a cracker and makes dive-bombing sounds as he swoops it toward Jake's mouth. The cracker starts curving left.

"Hey, man, can you stir the soup and take out the bread?" Jake asks.

"Yeah, no problem." The cracker flies back to center and is fed to Jake. George throws a handful of Triscuits down the hatch, then heads back to the kitchen, munching.

I slide my hands around the center of the oar and hoist it up. The paddle end is heavier than I realize, and it rises two inches before gravity takes over and it thunks gently onto the floorboards.

I wince. One of the raid crew must have heard me. I wait a few agonizing seconds, but no one comes out to inspect the noise. I breathe in quiet shallow gulps as I shift my grip and swing the oar sideways. Waddling under the weight, I move off the porch.

There is a short bark. Moose runs over to me, his tail wagging. He has woken from his nap at exactly the wrong moment.

"Shh." I bend down to quiet him, nearly ramming the oar into the ground. I swing it up at the last second and motion for Moose to follow me down the trail. When we get about twenty yards away from the hut I hear someone shouting. We've been found out.

I crash off the trail and into the woods. I nearly eat dirt when the oar dips down and rams into the ground. I sprawl

forward and just barely catch myself on Moose's skinny back. He whines and holds still while I get my feet back under me.

I yank the oar level again and keep going, trying to keep all eight feet of it from wobbling out of balance again. It seems to bang on every bush and tree that I pass, but it doesn't hit the ground again.

A hundred yards later, I stop, panting hard. I prop the oar against a maple tree and quiet my breath. I wait for the sounds of pursuit, but none come. I sit on a rock with Moose by my side and we wait.

After an hour, I am convinced that I've waited long enough. I carry the oar back until I can see the trail, then stash it behind an old rotting log.

When I get back to the hut, the signs on the front porch are gone. I tell Moose to stay outside and head in. Jake is in the kitchen, digging a spoon into a pint of Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream. When he sees me, he grins. "You got the oar?"

I nod.

Jake laughs. "The crew from Greenleaf are mighty mad. They couldn't figure out where it went. I think I've convinced them that Zealand has a ghost thief."

Ghost thief. I could get used to the name. Sounds wily.

Jake goes to the freezer and removes a second pint. It's Phish Food. Chocolate ice cream with chocolate fish swimming in marshmallows swirls. My favorite.

Jake hands me the pint and a spoon. "For you."

“Where’d you get it?”

“Whether or not a raid is successful, it is tradition for raiding crew members to offer tokens of consolation to the crew that gets raided. In this case, we are the lucky winners of two pints of Ben and Jerry’s.”

“So that was a power raid,” I say as Jake and I gobble and slurp down our pints.

“Yup,” Jake says, licking his spoon. “It’s more risky than a night raid. If any of my crew had stayed around, we could have shut them down.” He pats me on the back. “But they weren’t. And we still have the oar. I’m glad you were here, Tony.”

After we finish the ice cream, I show Jake where I hid the oar, and we spend the afternoon rigging it to the wall. When we are done, it is the only decoration in the dining room. But it is enough. As I stare at one of the silver spoons peeking out from the oar’s paddle, a flicker of pride shoots through me. I did it. I helped Jake out and didn’t screw everything up. I can protect things.

It feels like my bad luck is turning. I think of Andy’s marble, safely tucked away in my pack. Once again, it seems to be working.



CHAPTER 18

AS EVENING COMES, Jake invites me to grab a spare bunk and spend the night. I look around the hut. It is nearly six o'clock, and most of the guests spending the night have already arrived. There are at least two dozen people milling around the dining room. It's too dangerous. Too many people.

Then again, my goal for the day, Ethan Pond Shelter, is still five miles away. I don't want to be stuck making camp after dark again. I've already learned that lesson. "Do you know any place nearby where I could camp?" I ask Jake.

Jake nods. "There's a stealth site just down the trail. Once you come to an intersection and take a right, start looking on your right. You'll see it in a few hundred feet."

"Thanks. I think I'll set up there for the night," I tell him. "Too many people snore in the bunk rooms." I don't want to tell him the real reason I've been avoiding the huts at night.

Before I leave, Jake gives me an extra loaf of bread for the road. "Be careful," he warns me. "It's gonna be a scorcher of a day tomorrow."

Moose is waiting for me on the steps outside of the hut. I tear off a few hunks of bread and toss them to him. "C'mon, boy," I say. "Let's get going."

We head down a short, steep rocky section that ends abruptly in smooth, flat ground. I take a right at the intersection and start hunting for the stealth site like Jake told me to. Even though he told me it was easy to find, it takes a few back-and-forths before I spot the narrow bushwhack trail leading down to it.

I set down my pack and fire up my stove, cooking up two boxes of Annie's mac and cheese. As I spoon out half on the ground for Moose to eat, it occurs to me that I should be getting him some proper dog food. And a dog bowl. And maybe a leash for when we have to cross real roads. To keep him safe.

It'll add a couple of pounds to my pack. And it'll cost more than I budgeted for. I think about the shrinking roll of bills in my backpack. I would have to be very careful to have enough to buy food for me plus Moose.

I look over at Moose, where he is lapping up his dinner in fast, hungry gulps. He looks up with his scruffy face and gives me a huge doggy smile, and I know he's worth it.

As soon as he has gobbled up every bite of his dinner, Moose trots over to where I'm sitting with my pot of macaroni. He noses his way in between my legs. I lift up my pot and look down at him. He woofs and wags his tail. I shake my head. "No, you can't have my dinner," I scold him.

Moose raises his eyebrows and gives me the most pathetic sad little puppy eyes look. It completely destroys me. "Oh, you are good," I grumble. I reach into my pack and pull out the rest of the bread. I decide to eat fast, so by the time Moose is done with his dinner, my plate is empty and I'm not tempted to give him more macaroni.

As I gobble down the rest of my dinner, I pull out my map. It's thirteen miles to Mizpah Spring Hut, the next hut down the trail. There's a tentsite nearby, where I figure I can stay for my next night.

Thirteen miles. I smile to myself. When I first started out, I was barely making ten miles a day. I thought it would be a miracle if I could hold the pace. Now, after nearly a week on the trail, and especially after the mileage I pulled yesterday, I know I can make it.

I lick the last bit of mac and cheese off my spoon and stand up. There is a small stream nearby, and I walk down to it to clean my cookware. As I'm finishing up, I hear barking from the campsite.

Moose. He's in danger.

I grab my stuff and run back to the site in time to see Moose circling a great big bearded man wearing a dirty rust-colored backpack.

I'm about to scream at the man, to tell him to get away from my dog, when the man stoops down to Moose and holds his hand out.

"Here, boy," he says. His voice is deep and calm.

My stomach flips back right side up as I see him reach over and gently scratch behind Moose's ears. "Hi," I say hesitantly.

The man looks up. "This your puppy?"

I nod. "Moose, settle."

Moose trots over to me. I reach down and scratch his belly. "Be good."

The man straightens. "Mind if I camp here with you tonight? I'm thru-hiking and didn't want to stay at the hut, so they told me to come this way."

"Not at all." A jolt of excitement jumps through me. I've never met a bona fide thru-hiker before. "I'm Toby." My real name slips out before I can catch it.

The man nods. "Name's Wingin' It."

"Wingin' It?"

"It's my trail name. When I'm in town I like to order buckets of chicken wings and chow down." He shrugs. "I also don't plan much." He sets down his pack. "Hate to be rude, but I gotta get something to eat before my gut digests itself."

Wingin' It gets to work on his dinner while I pitch my tent, driving the stakes into the rocky ground. After I set down my sleeping pad and fluff up my bag, I jam all my food into my bear bag and go to find a place to sling it up. As I walk by Wingin' It, he is just settling into his dinner, a massive helping of ramen noodles. I spot four empty noodle packages curled up in a plastic trash bag.



Wingin' It is on the ground leaning back against a fallen log. "Sit down and have a chat," he tells me.

If I had been Lucas, I would have already been bugging Wingin' It with a million questions. What's the whole trail like? What was your favorite part? Did you ever almost give up, and if so, where and why?

But I'm not Lucas. I'm me. The kid standing behind the kid asking the questions.

I hesitate. I'm about to tell Wingin' It that I'm just going to hang up my bear bag and go to bed, but then Moose trots over to the thru-hiker and casually plops down next to him. He gives Wingin' It his devastating puppy eyes look.

Wingin' It picks out one long string of ramen and dangles it in front of Moose. Moose catches it on his nose and licks it up.

I sigh. If Moose is going to be social, then so am I. I settle against the fallen log and stare as Wingin' It wolfs down the steaming noodles. He eats faster than Moose. When he's finished with the ramen, he slurps down the soup and belches. "That was good." He sighs. "When you're hiking miles upon miles every day, there's just no way that you can keep up with feeding yourself. You're ravenous all the time."

"What's the hungriest you have felt?" I ask.

Wingin' It gives me a long, contemplative stare. "Now that's a story," he says slowly. "I'll tell you for some dessert."



I dig through my bear bag and pull out two Snickers bars. Wingin' It solemnly accepts them. He peels open the wrapper on one of them, bites down, and chews appreciatively. When he has licked the chocolate off his fingers, he is ready to begin.



CHAPTER 19

“SOME WEEKS AGO I was on this one stretch down in Vermont. It’s a piece of trail where you’ll cross a couple of country roads, but you won’t see a single gas station or convenience store the whole way. It’s about three days of travel before you can even think about a resupply.

“I was traveling with another thru-hiker, named Arsenic. I had met him in Connecticut, shortly after passing the New York state line. We hiked at the same pace, so we more or less found ourselves camping together for about two weeks before we got to those three days in Vermont.

“I didn’t particularly like Arsenic—he was always bumming cigarettes and food off other hikers, even though he had more than enough of his own supplies. And he wasn’t exactly a bluebird in springtime when it came to personality. He was rough. He had been in the army. It had . . . done things to his head. Served three tours in Afghanistan, came home angry and broken and decided to hike the trail.

“While I hiked with Arsenic, I had to listen to hour-long rants about the messed-up things that humans can do to one

another. At first, the stories that Arsenic told made me more than a little afraid of him—this was a guy whose job description included shooting people, after all. But as the days went by, I realized that Arsenic didn't enjoy watching or participating in the dark side of human nature. He was mad that he had to be part of it.

"That first day in Vermont, Arsenic and I had booked it pretty hard and got twenty-three miles from the last town before we set up camp for the night. We were stopped at a shelter, just the two of us. It was pretty late for trail time, about seven o'clock, with the sun hurrying down toward the horizon.

"We left our dinners inside the shelter—three packets of ramen noodles each—and went out to hang the rest of our food.

"We were rigging our bear bag and had been able to throw our rope over a high branch of a beech tree. We had tied the sack with all our food to the rope and I was just starting to haul it up when we saw this shape coming out from the shadows. It was covered with shaggy black fur, and it was very, very big."

"A bear," I breathe. Not a funny one, like the one Moose and I had run into last night.

Wingin' It nods. "Not just a bear. A hungry bear." Wingin' It reaches for a water bottle and takes a deep swig. "Coming face-to-face with something with claws and teeth—something that will eat meat, and realizing that in the end, you are potentially just another meal for a wild animal—is a frightening thing.

“And here we are, with all our food on an open sack on the ground and a massive black bear lumbering our way. Arsenic goes running, and I am left holding the rope. In that moment I have to make a decision. Run for it, and lose whatever food the bear decides to eat, or try and scare it away.”

“What did you do?” I ask. I know what I would have done. Run like heck.

Wingin’ It blinks slowly, remembering. “I let go of the rope and hoofed it back to the shelter. Arsenic was there, too. We watched in dead silence as that bear tore into the dry sack and had himself a fine old dinner at our expense. He ate every last bit of our food, snuffling around to pick up the crumbs he might have left behind. When he was done, he gave this satisfied grunt and waddled back into the shadows of the woods.

“And when Arsenic and I finally turned away from the scene of carnage to our ramen noodles behind us, we discovered that some manner of chipmunks or mice had gotten to it. They had chewed through the plastic ramen packages, leaving only sad curls of broken noodles scattered across the wooden floor.”

“That night Arsenic and I swept the fragments of noodles into one cooking pot and had ourselves a miserable dinner that tasted like half food, half boot dirt. We had to decide if we were going to backtrack for a resupply, adding almost twenty-five extra miles to our journey, or if we were going to press on and hope that we would find people with extra food that they could give us.



Even though I've had dinner, my stomach growls at the thought of hiking for so long with so little food. "What did you do?" I asked again.

"Arsenic and I made different decisions. Arsenic was convinced that even if we ran into people, they wouldn't spare us any food. He decided to backtrack. In all honesty, his pessimism was practical. But I had faith that I would be able to get by."

Wingin' It takes another sip of water. "The next morning we said good-bye to each other and parted ways. By mid-afternoon I was starting to think that Arsenic had been right, and by nightfall I was convinced of it. I had crossed a road and waited four hours for a hitch to a town. A couple of cars passed, but no one picked me up, so I kept going. I didn't see a single human soul over the nineteen miles I traveled that day. The only food I had had was a few chocolate smears that had been left inside a Hershey's bar wrapper that I found at around mile twelve.

"That night there was a cold snap, and I found myself shivering like a wet dog inside my sleeping bag. I didn't have enough calories to keep warm. When dawn came, I was shaking so hard from hunger that I could barely stand up.

"I made it about twelve more miles, and then I was done. I staggered and fell, and no amount of willpower was going to get me back up again. And so I dragged myself to a tree by the side of the trail and sat. And waited.

"I was there for six hours. Just waiting, too tired to swat the mosquitoes slurping away at my blood and the flies

buzzing about my ears. And as evening crept on and the sun began to set, I heard someone coming down the trail. I cleared my throat and begin to call out for help. And who should answer but a familiar, irritated voice. It was Arsenic.

“He had backtracked, filled his pack with food, and then hitchhiked to a spot on the highway, bushwhacked to the shelter where we had met the bear, and had started hiking to find me. When he did, he cursed and muttered and called me all sorts of things that amounted to the fact that I was an idiot, all the while putting pieces of chocolate into my mouth as if I were a baby sparrow.

“An hour later, I was able to get up and help pitch a tent, and a week later, it was me who Arsenic leaned on for over six miles, as he hopped out of the wilderness on a broken ankle.”

A quiet descends. Wingin’ It tips back his water bottle and finishes the last of his water. He turns to me. “Thanks for the dessert,” he says.

“Thanks for the story,” I tell him. I get to my feet. It’s full dark now, and tomorrow both of us have big days ahead of us. I say good night to Wingin’ It and find a tree to hang my bear bag.

That night I dream that a pack of hungry bears are chasing me with their open claws and mouths. When I wake the next morning, Wingin’ It has already packed up and left, and it’s just me and Moose again.



CHAPTER 20

JAKE WAS RIGHT. Unlike the numbingly cold rainstorm that nearly ended my hike a few days ago, today the air wraps around me like a hot, slobbery tongue. Heat rises from the ground, rippling the summer leaves. There is no wind. As I slog forward, my eyes begin to droop and my feet get sluggish.

Moose starts off racing ahead of me, but soon the heat gets to him, too, and he's matching my snail's pace. By midday we have covered seven hilly miles of trail and crossed over Route 302 to tackle the other side of the valley. Here the trail goes up sharply. I battle gravity and the heat. My world shrinks to my feet and the dirt in front of them. Step. Step. Step. Plod. Plod. Plod.

My palms are greasy with sweat. I am hot. Hotter than baked pizza. Hotter than a cactus in the sun. Hotter than Mount Vesuvius. When it's erupting.

The heat does not quit. I mop my forehead and stare out at the trail ahead me. I swear it is shimmering with heat.

I see a boulder up ahead. All of me wants to lie down on it and go to sleep.

Keep on going. We're nearly there, Toe. It's Lucas's voice inside my head. Telling me what to do again.

I check my map. I still have five miles to go before the tentsite near Mizpah Hut. Despite the heat, I shiver. Lucas is wrong.

Just like the last time he said that.



It was when we were doing number five on the List.

We had already done #2: *Eat a worm*. That was the hardest one of all, I'd thought at the time. The day after our fishing trip, I got up early, when the grass was still wet with dew, to dig up the worms from Lucas's backyard. My stomach was a pile of knots. I couldn't promise myself that I wouldn't upchuck the worm as soon as it touched my tongue.

When I arrived, Lucas was wearing a chef's apron that seemed to swallow his whole body and a white poufy hat. "We are going to have the most delicious worms in the history of worm eating!" he told me. He showed me a bucket and a spade. "You go dig up the worms. Leave the rest to me."

I went outside and dug the spade into the soft ground. When I pulled it out, there were at least six or seven worms

writhing in the clod of dirt. I hurriedly dropped it into the bucket and ran back into the kitchen, my stomach churning.

Lucas took the bucket. He made a big show of washing the worms, then drying them carefully with a square of paper towel. Next, he melted a stick of butter in a cast-iron pan and tossed the wiggling worms inside, frying them up. He looked over at me, grinning maniacally as I tried to ignore the smell of cooking worms and the sizzle of the hot butter.

I had almost backed out when I saw the limp gray squiggles in the pan, but Lucas knew exactly how to get me to eat them. He had toasted two buns until they were golden brown, drenched them in more butter, and laid a worm in each bun. Finally, he had pulled out bottles of Heinz and French's and squirted ketchup and bright yellow mustard until I could barely see the worms. We had sat on his front steps and had eaten them like extra-skinny, extra-chewy hot dogs.

They weren't bad.

The next to go was #3: *Spend a whole day at the movie theater*. We paid for a 10:00 a.m. showing and stumbled out ten hours later, our bellies lurching with popcorn, having watched five movies on one ticket each.

For number four, Lucas's dad helped us nail together a tree house using scrap wood from an old barn that had been torn down. We spent entire afternoons in that rickety

thing, playing cards and reading comics, ready to dash down the rope ladder if a creaky board gave way.

Then came number five—blueberry picking. Two weeks after building our tree house, we took two gallon metal buckets and went up a local mountain in search of blueberries.

Lucas, as always, was in the lead. His dad had shown him a supersecret blueberry picking spot the year before, and he wanted to show it to me by himself.

We climbed and climbed for hours, finally getting to the bald summit at noon. Blueberry bushes were everywhere, but a lot of them had been picked over. The mountain was known as the blueberry spot for miles around. People had even seen commercial blueberry pickers combing through the bushes with rakes.

Lucas wasn't worried, though. "C'mon, Toby. The spot I'm thinking about isn't on the path. We'll be sure to find gallons of blueberries there."

"Is it close?" I peeked up at the sky. The noonday sun was blazing overhead, and I was nearly out of water.

"So close," he told me.

He led us off the main path, bushwhacking through thigh-high bushes that scraped against my legs and made me itch. After an hour, I was ready to stop. My arms were lobster red from sunburn. I had forgotten to wear a hat. I didn't even want to think about what my face looked like. "How much longer?" I asked.



“Just a little bit farther.” But now Lucas didn’t sound so sure.

“Well, you’d better be right.”

“Keep on going. We’re nearly there.”

But we weren’t. We wandered until our water was gone and our skin started to peel and blister. When crows began to circle above, I swear they were waiting for us to drop so they could eat us.

Finally Lucas called it off. “We’ll find it next time,” he said.

“Next time? Next time?” I laughed. “Some supersecret spot you found.”

“Well, you haven’t been much help,” Lucas snapped tiredly. “Why don’t you try taking charge for once?”

“How am I supposed to lead when I don’t even know where we’re going?”

“Is it my fault that I’m always the one who has to know where we’re going? And that you never even bother to try to help out?”

“Well, is it my fault that you never let me be first?” I shouted.

“You never want to!” Lucas shouted back.

“Sure I do.” I said the words, knowing that they were a lie.

“Yeah, right.” Lucas rolled his eyes. “You’re just like a little lost puppy, Toby. Following me wherever I go.”

Anger rose in my throat. “Well, guess what. You need me following you around to feel important. To feel like you’re in

charge.” I was so mad I could spit. Only, I was so dehydrated I didn’t have enough saliva to even do that. “Except now you’ve screwed up, and you don’t want to admit it.”

“Let’s just find the trail and get back down,” Lucas said stiffly.

“Fine.” I was too tired and hot to argue more. I had trusted Lucas to lead. To know where to go and what to do. Instead, he had failed. For the first time, he had failed me.

We backtracked until we hit the main path, then hiked down in complete silence. When we got to my house, I turned my back to him and went up the front steps without saying good-bye.

Later that night, when I was getting ready for bed, Gran came into my room. She handed me a little glass jar. “I found this on the porch. I think it’s for you.”

Inside the jar was a single blueberry. A Post-it note was stuck to the lid. Lucas’s handwriting, of course.

~~#5. Go blueberry picking~~
Sorry about losing the way.



CHAPTER 21

NUMBER FIVE. NUMBER five was when things between me and Lucas started to go wrong. I began seeing ways that Lucas was not perfect. How he could mess up, just like me. He had been my good-luck charm, and he had failed me.

I hear a low growl of excitement. I look up and instantly forget about Lucas. “Moose. Moose, no.”

Moose has torn into the woods, barking furiously as he scrambles past a thicket of young spruce. His prey is small and furry and slow. It ambles unhurriedly through the brush, snuffling through the dirt for grubs. It is way too easy to catch.

“Moooooose!” My pack is on the trail, and I go crashing through the brush. “Come back, boy!”

Moose does not listen. By the time I get to him, the skunk is already hissing and stamping, its tail puffed out so wildly it looks like it has been stuffed into an electric socket.

“Hey there, boy.” I try to keep my voice even. “Moose, you leave him alone.”

Moose perks up his ears. He hears me, but his eyes are fixed on the skunk. Slowly he lowers his head. A woof escapes his throat. He begins to circle the black-and-white ball of fur.

The skunk hisses again, and Moose rushes it. The skunk backs away and turns its tail toward Moose.

"Moose, stop!" I cry, but Moose is in full-on attack mode. With a snarl, he darts forward, his mouth gaping open as he goes in for the kill.

The skunk blasts him with a putrid yellow spray that lands squarely on Moose's nose. He sneezes and snuffs, and lets out a piteous moan, as if hot coals have been thrown on his snout. His hind legs collapse on him as he paws at his face. Satisfied, the skunk hurries on its unharmed way.

"Oh, Moose." I want to hug him, but the stink is overwhelming. Moose drops to the ground and rolls around, trying to escape the horrible smell covering his body, but only succeeds in dirtying up his already-mangy coat.

As I watch Moose, all I can think is that I've gone and done it. My bad luck has rubbed off on him. Of course the first thing I tried to take care of would get hit in the face with skunk spray.

"C'mon, boy. We'll get you cleaned up." I hope it's the truth.

It seems like ages before we reach Mizpah. It is late afternoon, and both of us are tired and stinky. Moose drops his head and lays down on a flat rock while I go inside.

Afternoon light pours through the high windows of the dining room. Leaning back on a chair behind the front desk is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. She is wearing a denim dress cinched at the waist with a simple brown belt. Her long brown hair falls over her shoulders like waves on a beach. Her green eyes are fixed on the guitar she is strumming. Half-formed thoughts and murmurs spill from her lips. She is lost in the song that she is making.

I want to freeze that moment forever. A girl, her voice, sunlight falling on her hair.

She finishes and looks up. "Hi there."

"Um. Hi. Hello. Um." I am having trouble making words. "Yes. Well. You sing. That was really nice. Oh! Yes. Skunk."

I think I am babbling.

"Oh no." The angel puts down her guitar. "Pepper." She sighs. "He's been hanging around the hut for the past month. At some point he was bound to spray."

"I tried to stop him, but he got to Moose."

The girl's lovely eyebrows arch delicately. I see the question on her face.

"I mean, he got my dog. Well, he's not my dog. But he's been following me. I named him Moose. The skunk didn't get a real moose. That would be funny. Ha-ha." My efforts to sound intelligent are not improving.

The girl comes out from behind the counter. "Let's take a look and see what we can do."



CHAPTER 22

MOOSE HAS COMPANY by the flat rock. I spot a familiar ball cap and bandanna standing a respectful distance from him.

“Sean! Denver!”

“Hey there, Tony.” Denver waves. “How long have you been here?”

“Just a couple of minutes.”

“Are you planning to stay the night?”

“Yeah. At Nauman tentsite, next door.”

Denver nods. “Us, too. Glad to see you caught up to us. Sean and I were heading to the hut to refill our water bottles when we ran into your dog.”

“It doesn’t seem as though he’s having a very good day,” says Sean.

Moose thumps his tail sadly.

The girl from heaven turns to the pile of stench curled in a miserable ball. “This guy is going to need a good scrubbing.”

“Do you need help?” Denver asks eagerly.

“The more the better,” says the girl. She smiles at Denver.
“I’m Abbey.”

“Denver.”

In that moment, I wish I were five years older and handsome and rugged and not a blubbery mess whenever I talk to a pretty girl. Denver has spoken five words, and already he’s gotten the girl’s name and her smile. Jealously flickers in me.

On the other hand, Sean does not seem impressed with Abbey’s green eyes and long, dark, silky hair. “I’m refilling my water,” he says gruffly, and heads inside the hut.

“I hear tomato juice is great at getting the stench out,” Denver says to Abbey.

“No, that’s a myth,” I interrupt. Denver has been nice to me, but I’m eager to prove to Abbey that I know a thing or two about skunks. “It just covers the smell—it doesn’t get rid of it. A few years ago, me and a friend of mine were volunteering at a rescue shelter. A dog came in after being skunked, and the way we got rid of it was with hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, and dish detergent.”

Abbey pulls out her phone and double-checks my facts. “Looks like Tony is right,” she says.

I silently cheer.

“We’ve got that stuff in the hut. We can de-skunk Moose out back. Follow me,” Abbey says.

I call to Moose, and he hops off his rock. He follows me and Denver as Abbey leads us down a rugged path that cuts through grass and rocks to a hidden corner of the hut. It’s

like a little hideaway, surrounded by trees and protected from view of foot traffic.

It's a surprise to find a secret place so close to the hut. It's even more of a surprise to find a turquoise kiddie pool dotted with pink dolphins, full of water, with a guy in a Speedo and a forest of curly hair on his chest lounging in it, reading a copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. He looks up as we approach, then goes back to his book.

As we get closer, the guy's nostrils flare. He gives two short sniffs, and then he is out of the pool and hopping about, holding his nose, as water dances off his tight swimsuit. Miraculously, Harry Potter has stayed dry.

"Pool time's over, Dan." Abbey gives Moose a tentative pat. "Pepper skunked this little guy. We've got to get him soaped up."

Dan wraps a towel around his waist. "I'll heat some water," he says, and disappears through a side door into the hut.

"Wait here." Abbey follows Dan and reappears shortly with a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, a box of baking soda, liquid soap, a sand pail, and an old threadbare towel. She mixes the de-skunking ingredients in the pail and fills it with water so it bubbles up. "Here, Moose," she calls.

Moose skitters back, whining.

"Here, let me try. I'm good with dogs." Denver rolls up his pant legs and steps into the kiddie pool. "C'mon, boy," he coaxes, clapping his hands softly.

Moose hesitates, and Denver crouches down. "Here, boy. We're going to get you cleaned up." Denver reaches for Moose and hoists him into the pool.

Moose holds still as Denver lifts him up, but as soon as his paws touch the water, he explodes. His legs pummel the air, and his body twists like a seal. He head-butts Denver, and the two of them pitch backward, sending a massive wave across the pool.

Sputtering, Denver emerges from the water still holding Moose, who is yipping in terror.

"Moose. Moose. Hey." A moment later I am in the water with them, my arms hugging Moose's stinky body. Denver has let go and is busy wiping his eyes clear of water.

I ignore the horrible reek of skunked dog hair and put my chin on Moose's head. I scratch behind his ears and whisper, "It's okay, buddy. Shhh. It's okay."

Moose trembles and quiets down. I stroke his matted fur, feeling the skin drawn tight over his still-showing ribs. Even though he has feasted on bread and pasta for the past couple of days, a lifetime of starvation has kept him horribly skinny.

Keeping one hand on his head, I dip the other in the water and slowly wet Moose down. Abbey hands me the pail, and I pour the mixture over Moose's back. I work my hand through his fur, gently scrubbing one side. I pick out twigs and untangle knots and work out clumps of dirt-encrusted hair.

Moose has closed his eyes and sits perfectly still. Where before he was frightened of the bath, I think he's enjoying

it now. When I have scrubbed away all the layers of dirt, I use the empty sand pail to rinse him off.

Dan arrives with a large pot of warm water, and I pour it over Moose. When I am done, he jumps out of the pool and shakes himself off. He is clean for the first time since I met him, and now I can see that the splotch of fur on his chest is pure white. I pick up the old towel that Abbey has brought and rub him down. He still has a whiff of skunk on him, but only a whiff.

As I dry his head, Moose gives my face a single lick. It's like he's telling me that it's okay. That it wasn't my bad luck that got him, but just something bad that happened. And I figured out a way to make it better.

It is then when I feel like Moose is really and truly my dog.



CHAPTER 23

ABBEY INVITES SEAN, Denver, and me to join the crew after the guests have been served dinner. After the leftovers are scraped into mustard-colored plastic salad bowls, we feast on ham and rice, slices of challah dipped in minestrone, and boiled broccoli. The guests have gone through all the homemade dessert, so Abbey breaks out Oreos and pours us glasses of milk.

I break an Oreo in two pieces. I casually flip one half into the air and pray that it lands in my mouth and impresses the socks off Abbey.

I succeed, but a little too well. The Oreo chunk bull's-eyes my throat, and a second later I am choking and swigging down milk, coughing with little explosions that send the milk spurting out of my nose. "I'm fine," I whisper hoarsely when Dan offers to give me the Heimlich.

Denver breaks an Oreo into quarters. He takes a swig of milk and tilts his head back. A piece of Oreo flies behind his back and over his shoulder, landing with a plop in his open mouth.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" asks Abbey.

Envy wriggles through my veins again. I dab milk off my nostrils.

Denver flips another quarter of Oreo into his mouth. "My older brother, Harry. He had the sharpest eye and best aim of anyone in the neighborhood. When we were in middle school, he could pitch a dime into a water glass from fifty feet away." A third quarter of Oreo lands neatly onto his tongue. "Almost made it to the big leagues last year."

Dan lifts his eyebrows. "Why almost?"

The last piece of Oreo clicks off Denver's front tooth. He tries to grab it, but his hand goes wide and the cookie tumbles to the floor. Instead of picking it up, he just stares at it blankly.

"Did something happen to him?" I ask.

"Yes." Denver's voice is short.

A thick silence fills the air.

I shouldn't press. It would be mean, and I know it. But I'm so jealous of Denver's neat little Oreo trick that's making Abbey's eyes shine that I lose my head. I press. "Was there an accident?"

No answer. Denver's shoulders hunch. He stares mutely at the fallen cookie with dimming eyes, lost in the memory of what happened.

I know that look. Of grief and numbness and disbelief at the unfairness of life.

I've gone too far. Suddenly I feel horrible. "Hey. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

As if shaking off a nightmare, Denver's eyes come back into focus. He looks at me and sighs. "No, it's all right." He takes a deep breath. "My brother was the star of the baseball team all throughout high school. His senior year of high school, they were 18–0. Three of those games had been no-hitters. Harry threw a mean curveball, but it was his fastball that pegged him for the major leagues. He had it up to ninety-one miles per hour by the time his team got to the state championships.

"A big talent scout was going to be there. Harry was certain he was going to be drafted into the major leagues. He just had to pitch one perfect game.

"Then the night before the big game, Harry and I got into a fight. It was over something stupid—what Netflix show to watch; I don't even remember." Denver bends down and picks the piece of Oreó off the floor. He turns it in his hands, as if it is a Magic 8 Ball with all the answers. "Funny how little things can change your life.

"We ended up wrestling for the remote. At one point I grabbed it and yanked. Harry tripped over the couch. His right eye landed on the corner of the coffee table. And that was the end of his baseball career."

Without dusting off any dirt, Denver puts the Oreó in his mouth and chews. "A few weeks later he ran away from home. My parents went crazy trying to find him. But he was eighteen. Legally he could disappear if he wanted to. And he did. We haven't seen or heard from him in over a year."

Except for the soft ticking of a wall clock above the sink, it is quiet in the kitchen.

Sean puts a hand on Denver's back. "C'mon, man. Let's go to bed." He keeps his hand on Denver and guides him out the front door. As they head out, the glow of the hut light silhouettes them against the wooden floors—two shadows melting together to keep each other standing.



Later, I head over to the tentsite and set up next to Sean and Denver's tent. As I crawl in and zip up the mosquito netting, Moose hops up on the platform. He turns a couple of times before settling down in front of the tent.

As I fall asleep, I think about how surprising life is. I started on this trail because I wanted to get away from the bad luck and hurt in my life. I had run into plenty of trouble at the beginning of the trail, but right now Andy's marble seems to be protecting me. But it hasn't stopped me from running into the bad luck and hurt of others.

Yet somehow, through sharing stories of the ways life can knock you down, there's friendship. Understanding. Strength.

I think about Denver. How he's such a good guy. And how that goodness became twisted into guilt over something that wasn't his fault. He'll probably feel responsible for his brother's accident for the rest of his life. Even though it was just bad luck.

I can hear Sean and Denver shifting on their sleeping pads in the tent next to mine. I'm glad they have each other. I think about the story Denver told me about how he and Sean became friends. How they protect each other. Then I think about the story Wingin' It told me, how people are thrown into bad situations that are none of their fault, and how they figure their way through it.

Maybe life isn't about luck, good or bad. Maybe it's a lot about leaning on others when things get rough. And being leaned on in return.

Outside the tent, Moose lets out a long, slow fart.

I smile. I started alone, but we're going to finish this trail together. Me and Moose and the other half of my shadow—Lucas.

"I promise," I whisper. "I will see us through all the way to Katahdin."



CHAPTER 24

THE NEXT MORNING I wake to thick fog. A cold wind presses against the tent, and I close the vestibule to get an extra bit of warmth while I dress. Unlike the hot, sticky mugginess of the day before, this day promises to be wet and chilly.

A black nose appears in the tent the second I unzip it. I have to push Moose back so he doesn't invade my sleeping bag. He's clean, but he still smells like damp dog.

Sean is on the platform stirring oatmeal into a pot of boiling water. "There's a storm coming," he says as I clamber out of my tent.

"How can you tell?" I break out two Clif Bars and a hunk of cheddar cheese. I toss one of the bars to Moose.

"I checked the weather forecast at the hut this morning. Gusts on Washington are going to be over sixty miles an hour, and the wind chill is expected to get to about twenty degrees."

"But it was so hot yesterday!" I can't believe there could be such a huge difference in temperature in less than twenty-four hours.

Sean shrugs. "Welcome to the Whites." He takes out a jar of peanut butter and adds a couple of spoonfuls to the oatmeal mixture. We eat our breakfast in silence.

"Where's Denver?" I ask as I finish off the last of my cheese and crumple empty wrappers into my food bag.

"He left early this morning. He told me to meet him on top of Washington. Wanted to do the last bit of hiking by himself."

"That's right—you two are finishing your trip today." I feel a twinge of sadness. Denver and Sean had saved me on that rain-drenched day when I had nearly given up. Without them, I would probably have quit the trail. But now they are leaving and I will really be on my own.

I lick my bowl and spoon clean, then tuck them back in my pack. After breaking down my tent, I stop by the hut quickly to say good-bye to Abbey. I call to Moose, and as we turn back down the trail, I see Sean. He has a scowl on his face.

"Hurry up," he says.

When I tell him that he doesn't have to wait for me, his scowl deepens. "Normally I'd agree. I hate waiting for you. But you're not hiking in this weather by yourself," he says curtly. He turns his back to me and starts hiking.

I grin and follow him, with Moose not far behind.

A mile later, the rain begins. We pause for a moment to shrug into our raincoats, and I ask Sean a question that I had been wondering about since that morning. "Did you know about Denver's older brother?"

“Yeah. Denver worshipped him.” Sean turns his head to the side and puts a finger over a nostril. He exhales hard, and a snot rocket flies out to the side of the trail. “When Harry disappeared, Denver nearly went crazy with guilt.”

“How long ago was that?”

Sean clears the second nostril. “Come to think of it, it was exactly a year to this day that Harry ran away.” He goes utterly still for a moment. “I have a bad feeling about this. Maybe I shouldn’t have let Denver hike by himself this morning.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I say. Nevertheless, Sean hitches up his backpack and shoots down the trail as though a swarm of bees were after us. Before long we are above the tree line. The rain has increased to a pelting clatter, and we can barely see the trail ten feet in front of us. I pull my rain hood over my head and cinch it tight. Moose whimpers. “Sorry, buddy,” I tell him. There will be no shelter, no trees to break the wind, until we reach the next hut over, Lakes of the Clouds.

The higher we climb, the more the temperature drops. Without the trees to protect us, the wind rises to a sideways howl. I lean against it and hope that it keeps up. With a steady wind I can adjust my body to constantly battle the pressure. If the wind stops, I’d go tumbling.

The trail becomes all rocks and boulders, slippery with lichen and rain. It is only 4.8 miles between Mizpah and Lakes of the Clouds, but it seems like an impossible distance as our pace slows to a crawl.

A jagged arc of lightning cuts through the rain and fog. It flashes across the sky like a glowing warning finger. Moose lets out a high, frightened bark.

Nobody should be above the tree line in a lightning storm. Odds are, you're the tallest object sticking out from the mountain. The weather has just turned from bad to dangerous.

If I had been here with Lucas and his dad, there would have been no question about it. We would have turned around and gone back into the trees as fast as possible.

"I think we should go back!" I shout.

Sean doesn't answer but quickens his pace. "I need to find Denver," he says. His voice is low. Urgent. His strides lengthen. His legs are long. Too long. Behind me, Moose stumbles on a slippery boulder.

"I can't keep up!" I yell. Sean is a couple of yards ahead of me and adding more distance between us fast. He doesn't stop. I can't tell if he hasn't heard me. Or if he doesn't care.

The rain turns to hail. I tuck my head and scurry along as fast as I can, making sure that Moose is still with me. The chattering hail becomes a roar of clicking ice. I feel like I've stepped under a falling frozen waterfall. I concentrate on my boots and putting one of them in front of the other. When I finally look up, Sean is gone.



CHAPTER 25

ABANDONMENT HITS ME harder than any slap of weather. I didn't want to admit it, but I was counting on Sean and Denver to keep me safe. For their knowledge and food and gear and companionship to protect me, at least for a little bit. Now both of them have disappeared.

The wind and hail are relentless. All the energy drains out of me. Once again, I am alone in a storm.

Grief comes, hard and fast as a bullet. I sit down on a rock and put my head in my hands. I miss my best friend. "I'm sorry, Lucas," I whisper. "I can't do this. Not without help. Not without you."

I think about what had happened after the blueberry-picking disaster. We had patched things up and kept going with the List. But something felt broken between us. We had built a raft and floated down the Connecticut River, only to have it tumble apart as we were trying to land it. The night on Chimney Hill hadn't been spooky at all, but I forgot to zip up the tent door and we ended up covered in hundreds of tick and mosquito bites.

But it was when we were popping wheelies in the school parking lot that it really all fell apart. Lucas had mastered the one-wheeled trick almost immediately, but hours passed and all I had to show for it were dozens of scrapes and bruises on my elbows and knees.

"Maybe we should try again tomorrow," Lucas had said.

I hopped on my bike for one last go. I pedaled as hard as I could, then jerked my handlebars up. The bike flew over my head and I went sprawling, cracking the back of my helmet against the pavement.

Lucas rushed over and bent down to pull me up.

"Don't help me," I snapped. "I'm tired of you protecting me. You never let me get up by myself. Or stand on my own two feet."

Lucas drew back as if I had punched him in the face. "Toe, that's not true."

"Sure it is." I struggled to my feet. Blood ran down my calf. "Why do you even hang out with me? I've been nothing but bad luck since the day you met me."

Lucas shook his head. "I hang out with you because we have fun together. So what if bad stuff happens to us sometimes?"

"Or maybe you like being the hero." I could feel my tailbone throbbing. "Maybe you need me to mess up so you can fix everything. Maybe that's why you keep me around. So you can feel good about yourself."

Lucas's shoulders straightened. He walked past me

and picked up his bike. "You know what? Maybe you *are* bad luck. Maybe it's time I started making new friends."

And then Lucas had ridden away from me. He had not looked back.



A chunk of hail smashes into my shoulder and brings me back to the rock where I'm sitting. I put my hands on my cheeks. Despite the wind and ice, they are warm. I realize I am crying. And then something snaps inside of me. Big, horrible sobs wrack my chest and my lungs. I tighten my hands into fists around my hair. Alone. I am alone.

I wait for Lucas's voice to come. To comfort me and tell me what to do. But instead, there is only silence.

His voice is gone.

"Toby. Toby, get up," I tell myself. I'm speaking out loud, in the rain. "You can do this without Lucas."

No. No, *you can't*, says the part of me that is small and cold and scared. *You can't. You can't. You can't.* I'm drowning in my doubt. I can't even get up to save myself.

A furry snout burrows between my chin and my heart, and a long, stinky tongue licks my cheek.

"Hey, Moose." I put out a hand blindly and pat his rain-drenched side. I close my eyes. "I can do this," I tell myself.

It should have been you instead of Lucas, last summer. The awful voice of doubt is relentless. *He was the stronger one. The better one.*

I fold my arms and tuck my hands under my armpits, rocking back and forth.

Screwup, the voice whispers.

I stare into the hail as it gathers around me. Something twists inside me. I'm not going to accept my bad luck anymore. "Screwing up and giving up are two different things. Life is messy. Like Denver and his brother's eye. Or Arsenic in the war, or my parents and their stupid divorce. But all those people keep on going. And I'm going to, too."

You're worthless, the voice hisses. *So what if you kept going. You lost your map. You ran out of food. You couldn't keep Moose from getting skunked.*

I shake my head. "But I found my way again. I'm pointed in the right direction to Katahdin. I found food. I'm keeping Moose alive and clean and fed. I'm finally learning to trust myself." I rear back and scream with all of my might. "So screw you!"

I wait for a reply, but there is none.

A chunk of hail slips past my hood and trickles down my neck. It is ice-cold. Numbness creeps into my fingers and toes.

Moose whines and nudges my face. He is shivering.

I'm not sure I can save myself. But I am going to save this scrawny mutt of a dog if it's the last thing I do. I stand up and shake pockets of hail off my backpack and my coat. It's time to start hiking.



CHAPTER 26

MY KEEPS LIST—to keep warm, hydrated, fed, and mindful of the sun—is almost completely shot. But unlike a few days ago when Sean and Denver had to rescue me, I don't panic. I start off at a half jog to warm up. Moose trots doggedly beside me. After a few minutes, I can feel some sensation coming back into my fingers and toes. I jog until I spot a cluster of boulders that make up a little overhanging cave. Shelter from the lightning and the hail.

I urge Moose inside and skooch in beside him. The two of us barely fit, but we are both covered. I open my pack and dig out all my layers, pulling them on as fast as I can. The only things I don't put on are two T-shirts. I use one to dry off Moose. The other I wrap around his neck like a little scarf. He could use the extra warmth.

Then I take out my water bottle, gulping down liquid while tearing into a Snickers bar. Moose gets two Clif Bars. We sit and munch and huddle, keeping each other warm while I keep my eye on the weather.

The hailstorm finally lets up, giving way to a swathe of thick fog. It's still not great weather, but it'll have to do. I pack up my stuff, make sure the T-shirt around Moose is tight, and together we clamber out of the little cave and back onto the trail. As we hike, I begin to see pieces of sky through the fog. It is a moody gray, but at least it doesn't feel as though the weather is out to get us anymore.

An hour later the fog clears off, and I see two familiar Osprey packs in the distance. One is hurrying toward the other. Now that the fog is gone, the trail is easy to spot. Rock cairns as big as barrels line the way, making it fairly impossible to get lost.

But the two backpacks are not on the trail. They have veered onto a lone, sharp cliff that plummets into the valley below.

Something is wrong. I begin to run. Moose follows behind, his nails clattering against the slippery rocks.

By the time I get to them, Denver has slung off his pack and is standing at the edge of the cliff. He is so close to falling that the front of his boots are hanging over nothing but air.

"Denver, don't do this. It's not your fault," Sean is pleading.

"Yes, it is," cries Denver. "Harry is gone. Everything that he was dreaming of for his life died the second his head hit that coffee table. And I did that to him."

Sean shakes his head. "It was an accident. You were just horsing around."

Denver's right boot jerks forward another inch. "I try to



tell myself that. Over and over I relive that moment in my mind. And all I think of is that maybe . . . maybe I meant to do it. Maybe I meant to hurt him. He was Mr. Perfect. Always doing the right thing." Denver stares into the valley, his shoulders braced against the rising wind. "Do you have any idea what it's like to live in the shadow of your brother? To live with the guilt that you hurt someone you loved, and may have meant it?"

I do, I think.

I step forward, closer to Sean.

Then I say it. "Denver, I know what that's like. Listen. I killed my best friend." It's the first time I've spoken those words. They cut through me like a newly sharpened blade.

"I didn't mean to, but I . . ." I can't bring myself to describe the scene. What happened. But I force myself to keep talking. "Because of me, he got into an accident and died. He may not have been my brother," I tell Denver, "but he was my best friend." Then the three words that had been battering the inside of my brain for months explode out of my mouth, over and over. "I killed him. I killed him. I killed him."



It was the second-to-last thing on the List.

Despite our fight, we had come so close. Lucas's dad had told us that he would go with us on the trail. Gran gave her consent. We had all the gear, all the maps, everything. We set our start date—August 3. We were prepared.

And then, on a scorching July afternoon exactly a week before we were to hit the trail, we set out to tick off #9: *Jump off the rope swing at the quarry.*

The air was sticky hot as we climbed up to the quarry's edge, humidity clinging to our faces like glue. It had been a brutal summer, the hottest on record. When we reached the rope swing, the muddy water below was the lowest I'd ever seen. It made the rope swing seem even that much higher.

It made me that much more afraid.

But Lucas was never afraid of anything. He peered over the side of the quarry and laughed. "Piece of cake. We'll be swimming around in that nice cool water in no time."

And then Lucas said it. Seven words that have haunted me every single day. "Toe, do you want to go first?"

He had listened to me when I had yelled at him. About always being the follower. He wanted to give me the chance to change that. To prove that I could be a leader, too.

In that moment I wanted more than anything to take charge. To be the one who finished number nine on the List first. But then I took another look down at the water so far below, and I couldn't do it.

"No," I told Lucas. "You go first."

And so Lucas climbed up the tall red oak with the rope swing slung around its thickest branch and soared off with the grace of an angel, swan-diving straight into a block of granite hidden a foot beneath the water's surface.

I slid down the steep quarry walls, screaming his name as I pulled him out of the water. But by the time I got to him,



he was unconscious. He had broken his neck. He died an hour later, in the hospital where we had first met.



Sharp explosions of noises snap me out of my memory. Moose is by my side, giving short, sharp warning barks. His yipping pulls me back into the present, reminding me that I can't lose myself to the past when a friend needs help now.

As my eyes refocus, Denver has turned around. He is looking at me. I wait for him to judge me.

Instead, he gives me a look of confusion. Of not knowing what to think.

The whole truth comes spilling out before I can stop it. "I wish it had been me who had died. It should have been me. But it wasn't, and I'm still here." I realize only as I'm saying it that it's true. No matter how guilty and broken I've felt, I haven't given up on Lucas or on myself. No matter how unlucky or dumb I am, I've kept going.

"I made a promise to Lucas that I would hike to Katahdin with him, and I'm going to keep my promise." I am shaking, but standing taller than I've ever stood before.

"You made a mistake, too. But as much as you think your brother must hate you, he wouldn't have wanted you to jump off a cliff. And he's still out there." I swallow a lump in my throat. "You could still work things out with him."

"That's not true," Denver says quietly. "When he lost his eye, when he found out he would never be able to see if a

baseball was an inch or a mile from his head for the rest of his life, he told me he wished I were dead. And then he disappeared.”

“Screw Harry,” Sean says. “Screw his career and his eye and the guilt he put on you.”

“I know what it’s like to live with so much guilt that . . . that you can barely go on,” I say. For a quick second, the past year flashes through my mind, dim and hazy and gray. Taking an ax and destroying the tree house we had built while screaming bloody murder. Not being able to eat a blueberry or see a worm without breaking down into sobs. Lying in Lucas’s backyard for hours, numb with memories and grief.

“But here’s the thing.” I take a step closer to Denver. “We live through it. We survive. And we learn to forgive ourselves.”

It is quiet now, off the trail. There is only the gray sky, the rocks and the cliffs, and us.

My words echo through my head, and for the first time, I wonder if I really can fully forgive myself someday.

Denver stands completely still for a moment. His hands are shaking. He takes a step away from the ledge.

And that’s when a gust of wind hits him like a wrecking ball square in the chest.



CHAPTER 27

MOOSE HOWLS AS Denver stumbles backward. His arms go wheeling over his head as Sean lunges to grab him. Their hands just miss.

Denver teeters, his arms flailing, his eyes wide with surprise and fear.

And then he falls.

There is the sound of a body scraping against dirt and rock, and then an awful thud. Moose barks frantically as Sean and I scramble to the edge of the cliff.

Denver is twisted up in a heap on a ledge about twenty feet down. He is motionless and his eyes are closed. His face and front are smeared with mud.

Sean yells Denver's name. Nothing.

Sean yells again.

Denver cracks an eye open.

"Ow," he says.

The breath I had been holding comes whooshing out. I know it's wrong, but I start laughing. Big, whooping gasps of relief come snorting out of me. Denver is alive. He is alive.

Denver peers down at himself and untangles his body until he is sitting up, his legs dangling off the narrow shelf that he has miraculously fallen on.

"You okay, man?" asks Sean.

Denver starts moving different parts of his body one by one. After his arms, he does a little chest shake and prods his legs. When he tries to move his foot, he winces. "I did something to my ankle," he says. He touches it and yelps. "I think it might be sprained."

"Anything else hurt?" asks Sean.

Denver completes his self-inspection. "It's just my ankle, I think."

"Don't worry. We'll get you back." Sean goes to his pack and takes out his bear bag rope.

He wraps one end of the rope around a boulder at the top of the cliff. Then he loops the rope around itself every sixteen inches, making little handhold knots.

When he's done, he tosses the rope over the side. It whips down and slaps loose a couple of pebbles next to Denver's shoulder. Sean grabs the rope near the boulder and yanks it, hard. The rope tightens but doesn't snap. Sean walks back over to the cliff's edge. "Denver, can you climb up?"

Denver grabs onto the rope. Using the handhold knots, he pulls himself up three feet, then four and a half feet, then six feet. But when he gets to seven and a half feet he stops. His feet dangle helplessly in the air. With a groan, Denver lowers himself back down to the ledge. His face is white as

he looks up at us. "I don't think I can pull myself up to you guys. I can't use my feet to brace myself."

Sean studies the cliff. He is silent for a long moment. "If I went down there, do you think you could piggyback on me while I bring you up?" he finally asks Denver.

"Yeah, I think I could hold on. But I'm no featherweight, Sean."

"You be quiet."

Holding the rope, Sean walks to the edge of the cliff. He turns around and leans back. The rope holds. "Here goes," he says. He takes a step down, bracing his foot against the side of the cliff. Then he takes another. Hand over hand, he starts shimmying down. Right before his head lowers out of sight, I see him stare down with a look of utter terror on his face.

In that moment I realize that Sean has no idea what he's doing. That the way he took control of the situation and told Denver he would rescue him was just a front. He's still a kid, just like me.

The rope sways back and forth as Sean continues his descent. I get on my hands and knees and crawl to the edge of the cliff. When I peer over, Sean is halfway to Denver. His knuckles have turned white from gripping the rope.

"You've got this, buddy," says Denver.

Sean takes another step. His foot slips on a smooth patch of rock. His other foot slides free, and he smashes into the cliff. When he pulls away, a line of blood trickles down from a gash on his cheek.

He doesn't bother trying to put his feet back on the cliff. Instead, he dangles and lowers himself in a panic using just his arms and his hands. His chest slides across a couple of rocks that tumble free. They seem to bounce forever on their way down.

With a gasp, Sean crumples next to Denver. He wraps his hand around the rope and leans forward, his forehead just touching the rock. His shoulders are trembling.

When he moves again, it is to look up at the cliff he is going to have to climb with his best friend on his back. It looks terrifying. But I don't want him to feel my fear, so I give him a thumbs-up.

"All right," Sean says to Denver. "Up you go."

Sean slowly turns to the side and crouches next to Denver. Denver wraps his arms around Sean's neck, balancing on his good foot and wrapping one leg around Sean's waist. With a little hop, he is on Sean's back.

Sean's knees wobble for a moment, but then they hold steady. He looks up. I see his eyes and know he's going to make it. Time stretches out forever as I watch him put one hand above the other, pulling more than three hundred pounds of weight off the ledge. Every time he pulls himself up and brings his arms down to his chest, he wraps the rope around one leg and traps the rope between both his boots, taking the weight off his arms. I understand now why it would have been useless for Denver to try to climb the rope. With a busted ankle, there's no way he could have used Sean's technique to get off the cliff.

Sean starts fast, grunting every once in a while as he powers through, but otherwise there's no sign that he's under any sort of pressure.

But then, two-thirds of the way up, Sean begins to slow down. Even though it's chilly, beads of sweat gather at his temples and roll down his face. He pauses, and suddenly he's breathing fast and short. He is hyperventilating.

"Keep on moving!" I yell to him. Sean's hand slips, and he and Denver drop a foot. Denver reaches out and grabs the rope to try to take some of his weight off Sean. His injured foot brushes against a jutting rock, and he gives a short, sharp yelp.

I reach down, but my hand is still far from where Sean and Denver are. I try to pick up the rope and pull on it, but it doesn't budge. I am no match for the combined weight of two bodies. "Hang on," I yell to them. My palms begin to sweat as I look around desperately for anything that will help.

Sean's trekking poles are lying next to his pack. I grab one of them and run back to the cliff edge. I get on my stomach and lower the pole down. It's just within reach of Sean and Denver. "Denver, grab on!" I say.

Denver shakes his head. "You're half my size. I'd pull you over." He grips the rope and swings himself on the other side of Sean. He starts hauling himself up, using his good foot to push up from the cliff wall.

Sean has stopped climbing. His hands slide an inch. "I don't how much longer I can hang on."

“Don’t you give up.” I drop the trekking pole and race to my pack. I pull out my bear bag rope, the one that Lucas and I got at a yard sale for three dollars. It’s flimsy, but it’ll have to do. I fling one end around the boulder next to Sean’s rope and tie a square knot to keep it in place. I run back to the cliff edge and tie a bowline around myself.

I wrap the rope around my right leg a few times and get back on the ground. Denver is only a foot from the edge, gasping with effort. I reach down. “I’ve roped myself to a rock up here,” I tell him. “You’re not going anywhere.” I hope it’s true.

Denver reaches up, and I grab his arm. I pull hard while he lets go of the rope and uses his other arm to push-up himself over the cliff edge. His chest flops onto the ground. I shift my grip to both his armpits and drag him until the rest of his body has made it safely over the edge.

Denver is already swiveling on his belly when I let go of him. “Sean!” he yells.

We scramble to the edge.

Sean has slid all the way back down to the ledge. “I don’t know if I can make it,” he says. He holds up both of his hands. Thick slashes of angry red skin cut across both his palms. “My hands are really messed-up.”

“Can you hold on to the rope?” asks Denver.

Sean winces as he tries. “It hurts, but yeah.”

“Then hang on.” Denver crawls to the boulder where the rope is wrapped. He scuffs out a hole in the dirt with his good foot and braces himself against it. He grabs the rope and begins to pull.

I crouch in front of Denver and begin to pull with him. Coils of rope gather at our feet as we lift Sean up the side of the cliff.

Even with the two of us, it's heavy work. I can't see Denver behind me, but I can hear him grunt under the strain every few seconds. My limbs feel like they are on fire. But we keep pulling, and before long Sean's head crests over the cliff.

Denver's bad ankle thwacks into the dirt and his legs buckle involuntarily. His good foot gives out from under him, smashing into the boulder and twisting at a weird angle.

All of a sudden all of Sean's weight is on me. I clutch the rope desperately, but without Denver's weight, I go sprawling.

My face hits the cliff edge right over Sean, who has slid back three feet.

"Tony, I'm slipping!" Denver says. He is sitting down now, holding on to the boulder with one hand and the rope with the other. Both his feet are useless now.

I see the trekking pole that I had abandoned a few minutes ago. I let go of the rope and grip the pole below the handle and thrust it down. The pointed tip is eye level with Sean. "Grab it!" I scream.

He flings out his arm and grabs the pole. With Sean's weight between the rope and the pole, Denver and I claw him back up to the top of the cliff and onto solid ground.

As we lie there gasping, I stare up at the sky and watch as the gray storm clouds break. Moose trots over to me and

begins to lick my face as a slice of blue sky appears, and sunlight glimmers down on us.

I turn on my side. Denver has both eyes closed in pain, but Sean's eyes are bright and open, staring at me. "Thank you," he says. And like a miracle unfolding, he smiles at me.



CHAPTER 28

“SO,” SAYS DENVER.

“So,” I say.

Denver is tucked in his sleeping bag. He looks like a kid waiting for a bedtime story. After we were all safe, Sean and I had pitched a tent and put him inside. Adrenaline had kept him standing while pulling Sean up the cliff, but once his friend was out of danger, Denver found he couldn't put any weight on either ankle without collapsing in pain.

Sean and I formed a game plan. We had no way of contacting anyone from where we were—I didn't have a phone, and Sean and Denver had left theirs in the glove compartment of Sean's car. Sean would run to Lakes of the Clouds Hut to get a rescue party. I would stay with Denver and make sure he was taken care of until they arrived.

Sean has been gone for half an hour, and now it's my turn to make hot chocolate. Denver instructs me on how to assemble his Jetboil stove. I twist a cylindrical white gas

canister into the fuel line, then screw a pot of water onto the top of the stove. There's a little plastic starter that lights the stove with one firm press. With a lid on, the whole pot of water bubbles in about three minutes.

"I gave you my marshmallows," I say when I enter the tent with two steaming mugs. Moose paces outside, before settling down next to the vestibule.

"Thanks." Denver takes the mug brimming with sticky white foam and blows on it gently. "So tell me more about yourself, Tony," he says.

I think for a moment. "Well, first of all, my real name is Toby."

Denver's eyes widen. I can see him adding up in his mind all the lies I've told him. I half expect him to be disgusted by my fibs.

Instead he asks, "Do you really think you can make it all the way to Katahdin?"

I answer honestly. "I don't know. But I have to try."

Denver gives me a long, hard look. "Did you tell your parents you were going?"

I shake my head. "My parents don't care. They're divorced. I live with my grandma." I swallow a mouthful of chocolate. The hot liquid runs down my throat, warming me to my toes. "My mom and dad married really young. They didn't really know what they were doing when I was born. They argued a lot.

"Every couple of months they'd take me to see Gran. She would always greet me on her front porch with a new book



and a fun-sized bag of peanut M&M'S. And when she tucked me in at night, she would make the most fantastic bedtime stories, with brave dragons and nasty princes and all sorts of magic spells.

"When my parents finally divorced, neither of them could afford to keep me. Gran took me in. She turned her sewing room into my bedroom and painted it my favorite color, forest green. She made me blueberry pancakes every Saturday."

I smile, remembering. "Last spring, we even tapped the sugar trees in the backyard and made a gallon of maple syrup. Still haven't run out of it yet." My smile falters. "At least, I don't think we've run out."

Denver sets down his mug. "Do you love your grandma?"

"Yes," I say softly.

"Does she know that you're on the trail?"

"I . . . don't know."

"Does she care about you?"

I stare into my mug. All of a sudden the chocolate tastes too sweet. "Yes."

"Don't you think she's worried sick?" Denver asks.

"No," I say. But as the word leaves my mouth, it already feels like a lie. "I left a note."

"And what did you say?"

"That I had to go away for a while. That I would be okay. And not to worry."

"Toby. She's probably scared to pieces right now. How long have you been gone?"

I count in my head. "Eight days."

Denver half sits, resting against his elbows as he drinks his hot chocolate. "You know, when Harry was about your age, he ran away from home. He was gone for only a day, but it was enough to watch my parents go nearly crazy. They called the cops after he had been gone for twelve hours, and were told that Harry would have to be missing for twenty-four hours before they could file a missing-persons report.

"So we went home. And waited. My dad couldn't stop pacing up and down the living room floor. My mom couldn't stop crying. When Harry finally came strolling in eighteen hours and twenty-seven minutes after he had left, he didn't care that he had caused such terror."

Denver leans back in his sleeping bag and closes his eyes. "It's something I had a hard time forgiving him for—for not caring." He looks at me. "It's a terrible thing, to make someone you love worry."

I drop my head. "I'd like to let Gran know that I'm okay, but I don't want to stop hiking. If she finds out where I am, I'll be yanked off the trail faster than you can say *hot popcorn*."

"What if someone were to give her a message saying that you were all right? I could do that."

"You could?"

"Sure. When I get down off the mountain, I'll give her a call. I won't let her know who I am or where I saw you. All I'll say is that you're safe." Denver grins. "You saved my life. It's the least I can do for you."

Denver's cup is empty. I try to take it out of his hands, but he doesn't let go for a moment. "I want to know more about Lucas," he says.

I tug, and the cup comes free. "What about him?" My guard goes up. I'm not sure I want to tell the whole story, even now.

"What's your favorite memory of him?"

That makes me pause. It has been so long since I've thought of Lucas without grief. I think about Denver's question. About Lucas. I can't stop the guilt that floods through me. But for the first time, I wade through it. I rewind past the rope swing, our fights, the morning we made the List, all the way to a day that I had nearly forgotten.

"When I turned nine, Lucas got me a brand-new baseball mitt and bat for my birthday. We went out to my backyard and played for hours. He made up this game where we pretended to be famous Red Sox players—Babe Ruth, Ted Williams, David Ortiz—and spent the afternoon hitting home runs, stealing bases, yelling at our imaginary ump—an old pine tree, chewing gum, and scuffing our feet in front of our home plate, a cut-up placemat from Lucas's kitchen.

"We played until sunset and then went inside, where Gran had made a gigantic chocolate birthday cake with buttercream frosting—my favorite."

I can't help smiling, talking about it. "After that, we always called the tree Ump, and we'd even nail a jersey to him during baseball season every year."

Denver laughs.

"That was the best day of my life," I say. "But then Lucas died." Something catches in my throat. "Ever since I can remember, I've been bad luck to anyone I meet."

Denver shakes his head. "I would say you're just the opposite, Toby. For me, at least."

Now my hot chocolate is gone, too. I take both dirty cups and go outside, rinsing them out before tucking them back into Denver's pack. I put away the stove and feed Moose a couple of cheese blocks and a handful of dog biscuits.

When I get back into the tent, Denver has fallen asleep. Before I curl up in my sleeping bag and let the wind lull me to sleep, I dig out a Ziploc bag from the hidden pocket of my pack's hood. I unzip the top and take out a wrinkled piece of paper. I smooth over the creased lines. Even though I've carried it with me all this way, it's the first time I've been able to bring myself to read it since starting the trail.

~~#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~~

~~#9 Sleep off the rope swing at the quarry~~

#10 Hike the Appalachian Trail from Velvet Rocks
to Katahdin

Screw bad luck. I'm going to do it. I'm going to finish the
List. For Lucas. And for me.

