



CHAPTER 29

“KNOCK, KNOCK.”

Somebody is tapping at the tent door. The zipper peels down, and I see Abbey’s beautiful face hovering over me. “Hey there, kiddo,” she says. She is carrying a first aid kit and a small backpack.

I rub my eyes and sit up and run my hands through my hair, yanking through the knots that have gathered. I hope I look dashing. “Wello-there! I mean, hallo well— Well, hello there! What are you doing here?” I bare my teeth in a crazy grin.

Abbey peels the tent flap back even farther, and I see a crowd of people outside.

“I’ve brought the search-and-rescue team,” Abbey says. “Lakes radioed over to Mizpah. We have crew and guests from both huts who heard about your situation and wanted to help.”

There is a chorus of hellos and Sean comes into view. His rope-burned hands are swathed in bandages. “How’s Denver?” he asks.

Denver lets out a snore.

"I think he's going to be okay," I say. I poke Denver. "Time to get rescued."

Denver opens one eye. "Five more minutes," he mumbles. He closes the eye.

Abbey clears her throat, and Denver opens both eyes. "I mean, I'm ready," he says.

"Move over, Tony," says Abbey. She ducks into the tent and zips up the flap to seal in the heat. "Has he had any painkillers?" she asks me.

I shake my head. Abbey opens the first aid kit and takes out four ibuprofen. She pops them in Denver's mouth and hands him a bottle full of water. "Lie back down," she orders Denver as soon as he has swallowed the pills.

She opens Denver's sleeping bag until his feet are showing. She takes Denver's sock with the tips of her fingers. Very gently, she pulls his sock back, exposing his ankle. She does the same with the other sock.

Denver hisses and bites his lip. "How bad is it, Doc?"

I take a peek. Both Denver's ankles are purple. His right one is swollen to at least twice the size of his left.

"There's no bleeding, which is good." Abbey pinches Denver's big toe. "Can you feel this?"

Denver nods.

Abbey pinches the rest of Denver's toes. Each time he gives a nod when she asks if he can feel it. "How about wiggling your toes?" she asks.

Denver concentrates, and his toes give a little wave.



“Good,” says Abbey. “You haven’t lost circulation in your feet. Since both your ankles are injured, you’re not going to be walking out of here, but we won’t need to helicopter you out.

“Hey, Bill!” she calls.

“Yeah?” says a voice from outside the tent.

“Radio front desk. Tell them we’re taking the patient up to Washington. He’s got two sprained ankles but does not require immediate evacuation. We’ll radio when we’re at Lakes and give an ETA on our arrival. If the weather holds, it shouldn’t take us more than two or three hours to get from Lakes to the top of Washington.”

I know that Lakes is only one mile below the summit. A normal hiker would need less than an hour to reach the top of Washington from the hut. Carrying Denver out is going to be a slow task.

“Will do, Captain,” says Bill.

Abbey turns her attention back to Denver. “I’m going to make a U-splint for your ankles.” She opens her backpack and takes out a T-shirt. She rolls it into a long, tight tube. “Hold this,” she tells me.

My fingers brush hers as she gives me the T-shirt. I am the luckiest kid in the world.

Abbey puts her hands around Denver’s ankle and carefully turns his foot until it’s at a ninety-degree angle to his shin. “Wrap the center of the T-shirt around the sole of his foot. Then put both the ends of the shirt along the sides of his leg and hold them there,” she tells me.

I do as I'm instructed. It feels good to have someone who knows what she's doing. Abbey lets go of Denver's foot and reaches for a roll of tape in the med kit. She starts taping the ball of the foot, then wraps around the T-shirt and the rest of the foot, over the ankle, and up the side of the leg. When she is done, the T-shirt and the tape are holding Denver's ankle firmly in place.

Abbey adds two more layers of tape before she is satisfied with her work. Then she does the same thing with the second ankle. "Now you are going to scoot yourself to the tent entrance, and folks are going to pick you up and bring you into the sleeping bag on the litter outside. After that, we will be carrying you out."

Denver sits up and gives a little salute. "Aye, aye, Captain."

Abbey opens the tent, and Denver skooches himself to the entrance. A couple of hands reach down and lift him up, then swing him onto a bright orange sled with a puffy blue sleeping bag laid open on it.

Denver lies down, and Abbey zips up the bag. She jams a hat onto Denver's head. "Lie back and relax," she says. "You've got a ways to go."

Abbey counts off a dozen people, then instructs numbers one through six to gather around the litter. Number one is at the head, number four is at the rear, and two, three, five, and six are along the sides. On the count of three, they lift the litter and begin to carry Denver. The others follow behind, ready to switch off whenever the team gets tired.

As the litter carry makes its way slowly over the rough ground, Sean stays with me while I pack the tent away. Once we've made sure we haven't forgotten anything, we catch up to the rescue operation just as they are getting back on the trail.

The rain comes again in a sudden fury. It doesn't turn to hail, but a vicious wind starts up. Everyone pauses and breaks out waterproof coats before continuing on. By the time the roof of Lakes of the Clouds comes into view, the temperature has dropped about twenty degrees and the rocks on the trail are starting to ice over.

When we clomp into the hut, icy raindrops scattering everywhere, Abbey has the rescue team set Denver down in the foyer next to the dining room. She checks Denver's ankles again. "Looks like you've still got circulation in your feet. The weather's too dangerous to go any farther tonight. How do you feel about spending the night here and heading to the top of Washington tomorrow morning? If the weather's all right and the auto road is opened, your parents can drive up and meet you there."

"I think the ibuprofen is working, and I'm feeling rather comfy. And I'd rather spend the next ten hours in a hut instead of getting pummeled by the weather," says Denver.

"Hey, Nate!" Abbey calls to one of the Lakes crew members. "Any free bunks tonight?"

Nate nods toward a long, narrow corridor with doors on either side. "We've got one left. I checked right before dinner. There's a free bottom bunk in the third bunkroom down that he can take."

Abbey directs the litter-carry to heave Denver up one more time. We walk past the tables packed with hut guests about to dig into their soup, down the hallway, and turn into a bunkroom. Abbey has the litter placed next to a bottom bunk bed with three neatly folded woolen blankets on it.

The search-and-rescue volunteers and the rest of the hut crew go back to the dining room to eat, leaving Sean, Abbey, and me with Denver.

Abbey hoists Denver out of the drenched search-and-rescue sleeping bag and onto the mattress. She checks his feet one last time. "With some RICE, you should be all set," she tells him.

"I was just thinking I was kind of hungry," said Denver.

Abbey cracks a smile. "RICE is an acronym. It stands for 'rest, ice, compression, elevation.' It's standard procedure for sprains and strains." She takes a few extra blankets that are on a bench near the door and tucks them under Denver's feet.

She digs into the med kit one more time and breaks out a couple of instant ice packs. She whacks them against the floor to activate them, then drapes them around Denver's ankles. "Rest," she says. "I'll be back soon with soup."

Denver lies back and closes his eyes. "Hey, guys," he says.

"Yeah?" says Sean.

"Thank you."

"Get some sleep, buddy." Sean nods toward the door. He and I tiptoe out as Denver begins to snore again.



CHAPTER 30

THE WEATHER'S SO horrible that Sean and I don't even think about heading out to set up our tents. We find the Lakes crew in the kitchen and the guy named Nate shows us an extra bunkroom called the Dungeon. The door is rusty, with badly peeling turquoise paint and a wooden sign that reads "REFUGE ROOM—EMERGENCY USE ONLY" in wind-battered red letters.

"This is our emergency shelter. It's designed to take an overflow of hikers in bad weather. We're full up now, but you guys can stay here for tonight," says Nate.

I'm glad I'm not sleeping inside the hut. Even though I thought there had been way too many people in Zealand two days ago, it's nothing compared to the hordes of people inside Lakes. I read somewhere that the hut can hold over a hundred people. Definitely a number I am not comfortable with. I put my hand on the Dungeon door and push it open.

Inside, half a dozen wooden bunk beds form an L-shape in the corner farthest from the door. It is a basic setup, chilly, but blocked from the rain and the wind.

Moose sniffs around our place for the night while Sean and I lay our sleeping pads and bags on the two bottom bunks. It's creepy down here. I begin to notice the constant low moan of the wind. The cold and the damp. The feeling of being on a mountain, far from civilization. I can see why it is called the Dungeon.

Once we've set up our bunks, Sean and I return to the hut for dinner. We eat quickly, I let Moose outside for a minute, and then we return to the Dungeon for the night. We don't get much sleep. Moose paces the cold stone floor of the Dungeon, his nails clicking restlessly.

The next morning Abbey and the two other crew members from Mizpah head back over the ridge to their hut. Abbey gives me a hug before she leaves. "Denver told me everything. They were lucky to have you there."

My cheeks turn to fire.

"Take care, Tony," Abbey says. She heads toward the door.

"It's Toby," I say.

But she's already gone.

Nate takes over the rescue operation. Denver's ankles have gotten a little better during the night, but he still can't walk. After breakfast, Nate gathers a dozen volunteers and loads Denver back up in the litter.

The wind is blowing steadily when we leave the hut, but the skies are clear. The morning forecast calls for sun for the next couple of hours. For the litter-carry, it is a warm, easy walk along the gentle boulder-strewn path. Moose

trots next to me, even when I'm taking a turn carrying Denver.

I see the buildings on top of Washington before the actual summit. Metal towers that resemble rocket launchers rise up in the air. The elevated trestle of the Cog Railway rises up underneath a single locomotive belching out coal-black smoke as it pulls a trainload of tourists up the mountain.

We crest a rocky hill, and suddenly we are standing at the edge of a round stone tower. It looks like something Rapunzel would have lived in. There is a humungous parking lot filled with opening and closing car doors. Swarms of people are walking up a set of wooden stairs toward the true summit. Some are wearing packs and using trekking poles, but many of them are in thin cotton shirts, with big cameras strapped around their necks, shuffling in loafers or clutching purses. If a sudden gale struck up, they would be Popsicles.

"Larry. Larry! Look at that, Larry!" A woman with bright pink lips and a thick Jersey accent elbows the hairy arm of a lumbering man with a waxed head that shines like a newly mopped kitchen floor.

"Quit your poking, Janice!" says Larry.

"There's a body in that sled. Ooh, take a picture for the kids!" Janice hustles over to us. Larry wobbles behind.

A dozen heads turn, and we are set upon by a mob of tourist photographers. There's a guy with a heavy-duty Nikon, crouching down to take low-angled pictures. Two ladies in matching pink miniskirts and bejeweled sandals, each of

them holding their iPhones sideways as they walk toward us. A girl with one of those old-school disposable cameras that still uses film. Larry hobbles to the front and starts taking pictures of the litter. Moose growls, and I put my hand on his head to calm him.

"Everyone, step back," shouts Nate. "This is a rescue operation, not a circus show."

"Ooh, how bad is it? Is he dead?" asks Janice. "Larry, take a picture of the dead guy!"

"Sir!" yells Nate. His voice drops an octave. "Step away from the litter!"

"Let me just get this shot." Larry leans over to take a picture of Denver's face.

I glance at Sean. His hands are clenched. He looks about ready to punch Larry in the face.

"Sir!" Nate barks again. "If you do not remove yourself immediately from the situation, I am going to call the Fish and Game warden and have you detained for obstructing a rescue operation."

"There's no such thing as that." Larry clicks away.

"You are violating park service code seven-twelve-oh-one-two, whereby any citizen who deliberately ignores a search-and-rescue leader is subject to a five-thousand-dollar fine. Do you want me to call and make that official?" Nate removes his walkie-talkie from his belt and holds it up to his ear.

"All right, all right," Larry grumbles. He moves to the side and lets the litter pass.

“Larry, check the pictures, make sure they’re good,” says Janice. “I want to show Mavis and Jerry that we saw a real dead guy.”

With a few more threats, Nate clears the crowd so the litter can move up a series of wooden steps to a huge bunker-like visitor center at the top.

I tell Moose to stay outside and take a final turn helping to carry Denver into the building. I look down and realize why Janice thought he was dead. Through the whole scene, Denver has been fast asleep.

Once we are settled in the visitor center, Nate calls Denver’s parents, who are driving up an auto road to the summit.

Nate hangs up the phone. “Your folks will be here in about half an hour,” he tells Denver.

“Hey, Nate,” I say.

“Yeah?”

“Could you really have gotten that guy arrested and fined?”

Nate laughs. “Nope.”

“But what about that code?”

“I’m hut crew. My job is to make up official-sounding stuff.”

Nate unzips Denver’s sleeping bag. “Time for one more ankle check before I send you on your way.”

As Nate starts his final inspection, the smell of fried food suddenly hits me. After weeks of being on the trail, the scent is enough to lure me away from Denver and Sean and

to the visitor center's cafeteria. It is bustling with hungry tourists, some in high heels, tottering around looking for hot chocolate or bowls of clam chowder, hot dogs wrinkled with overheating, burgers flipped in lard, and big, fat, wonderful french fries.

I buy a tray of fries and douse them in ketchup. As I munch on them, I take a better look around. Next to the cafeteria there is a souvenir shop that sells key chains, THIS CAR CLIMBED MOUNT WASHINGTON bumper stickers, chocolate-covered almonds posing as "Moose Poop," T-shirts and sweatshirts and hats and bandannas.

It is too much. As good as the fries taste, I'm ready to be back outside, away from civilization. I return to Denver and Sean. "Hey, guys, I think I'll get going."

Denver sits up and reaches into his pocket. He takes a piece of paper and a pen. "Well?" he says. He looks at me expectantly. "Am I going to get your grandma's number or not?"

That's right. I hesitate, but I know that Denver wouldn't betray my trust. He will get Gran a message without having her try to stop what I need to do. I tell him the number.

Denver writes down the digits and tucks the paper in his pocket.

"Hey," says Sean. He crosses over to me. Before I know what's happening, I'm wrapped up in a fierce hug. I stand there, paralyzed. My mind can't believe that gruff-and-tough Sean would actually do something like this. Then, without thinking, I hug him back.

Sean lets go of me and uses the back of his hand to rub away something in his eye. "I know I was rotten to you when we met, but I'm really glad we found you."

"I'm glad we found one another." I mean it. By some stroke of incredible luck, we helped to save one another from the past. Denver from his brother, me from Lucas. A wave of sadness hits me. I realize that I probably won't ever see these guys again. I open my mouth. I want to tell them how awesome they are, and that I'm going to miss them, and that now that they have Gran's number maybe they could call sometime and we could catch up.

But then out of the corner of my eye I see a man with Denver's blue eyes and a woman with his dark-brown hair rushing toward us, and I know I have to get going before they start asking me questions. "I gotta go," I mumble, and lunge for my backpack.

"Bye, kid," says Sean.

"Safe travels, Toby," says Denver.

"Thanks. You get home safe, too."

I hitch up my pack and head out, just missing Denver's parents as they barrel toward their son. I call to Moose, and within a few seconds, we are on our way. It is a relief to hurry off the top of Washington and make for Mount Jefferson, the next peak over. The crowds fade into straggles of people once I start climbing across the ridge, away from the parking lot and train stop.

The top of Jefferson is a small outcropping of rocks. I clamber up it, and as I stare at the metal geological marker

marking the top, it occurs to me that I didn't actually touch the true summit of Washington. It would have been the highest point for me on the entire trail.

A moment later, it also occurs to me that it doesn't matter. I doesn't matter that I got within a hundred feet of the summit and forgot to actually touch it. I saved a guy from jumping off a cliff. I've got a lucky marble in my pack. I fed a dog, who saved me from a moose. I'm doing all right.

After a snack of tortillas and cheese for Moose and me, it is time to move on. We tackle Mount Adams next, then descend down.

The top of Madison is less than half a mile up. When I reach it, it's getting to be late afternoon. Three miles later, we are at Osgood tentsite—our stopping point for the night. We've hiked over four peaks and gone ten miles today, one of them being Denver's three-hour carryout. Not too bad.

I take out my stove and coax a round blue flame to life. I fill my pot halfway with water and set it on the stove. As the water forms tight bubbles around the edge of the pot, I peel the cardboard tab back on the rice-and-beans box and pull open the plastic sack inside.

I pour the rice and beans in the boiling water and turn the flame down to low, letting it simmer while I cut pieces of sausage and drop them into the pot. Just before the soupy mixture is done, I push a slab of cheese into the center and let it melt into a core of gooey goodness.

I twist the fuel knob until the flame dies and lift the pot off the stove. I let it sit for a few minutes with the cover on,

then settle it and myself on a large flat rock to eat my dinner. I hear clicking toenails, and Moose jumps up on the rock beside me. I ruffle his head and pour some of my food out for him to lap up.

After dinner, I pitch my tent and then sit outside to watch the sunset.

Golden streaks lace the sky before the midnight blue of dark creeps down. The sun drops below the horizon, and already a half-moon is dimly visible. There is something calming about this sunset. It doesn't mean a night of uncertainty and cold, or aloneness.

Moose pads up beside me and flops down. His head rests on my knee, and together we watch the stars come out.



CHAPTER 31

THE NEXT MORNING, Moose and I set off for Carter Notch Hut eleven miles away. I don't intend on spending the night there, but I do have to return Andy's lucky marble to the crew. I figure that it has gotten me this far—I can do the rest of the trail alone. Plus, I can ask the crew if they know any stealth sites where I can camp. The next shelter past Carter is another seven miles, and even though I'm feeling pretty good, eighteen miles is still way too much for me to attempt to hike in a day.

Moose and I tread carefully down a steep section of trail, but once we reach the bottom of the valley there is nothing but smooth, flat going for miles.

My stride feels longer; my heart feels stronger. There is a toughness that is beginning to take root in my body. I can feel it in the way I move, how my steps are firmer, the swing of my trekking poles rhythmic and sure.

We reach the Pinkham Notch visitor center in the early afternoon. Inside is a dining room and a store that sells gloves, hats, maps, water-filtration systems, hand and toe warmers.

There is a topographic model of the mountains and valleys in the area, with trails marked in little dotted red lines.

I follow signs for the bathrooms down a flight of steps and discover that there are coin-operated showers available. I go to the front desk and get a handful of quarters as well as a clean towel for two dollars. I pay with a twenty and as I'm waiting for change, I double-check my money Ziploc. I've got one hundred and eighty two dollars left.

I return to the showers and go into a stall. After peeling off my clothes, I slide a quarter into the coin slot on the wall and twist a knob. As soon as the hot water hits my skin, I know I've made the right decision. I groan with happiness and am very glad that there is no one in the bathroom to hear me. I get to work scrubbing, getting in between each finger- and toenail, the spaces behind my ears, every corner of my armpits, every inch of my scalp. Each quarter buys me three minutes of time, and I go through three full dollars before I reluctantly let the water shut off.

I dry myself and rub the towel hard against my wet hair until it sticks up in half-dried knots. Even though I'm getting back into dirty clothes, when I leave the bathroom I feel like a million bucks.

After refilling my water bottles and returning the towel, I stop by the dining room for a sandwich and some lemonade. By the time I start back on the trail, I'm nearly running with new energy.

After miles of downhill or flat, the trail turns abruptly to loose, steep rock. Moose finds his own way through the

dense brush, popping out every once in a while to make sure I am still there.

Up, up, up. Sweat rolls down my temples. My shirt is drenched and rubs against my skin where my backpack straps are pressed. My hip belt begins to feel like a sticky octopus tentacle, clinging to my waist as the weight of my pack digs into the small of my back.

But despite all this, I'm not uncomfortable. My lungs are working hard, and my pulse is high, but steady and even. Each rock scramble is a little puzzle, solvable with a couple of pulled tree roots and well-placed boot steps.

The small, stony Carter Notch Hut comes into view by early evening. I figure I'll go inside when it's darker and drop off Andy's marble, then find a place to camp a little farther away.

I continue down the trail. I come to a couple of small lakes and walk halfway around one before setting myself down for a little snack before dinner. I open my pack and dig out a granola bar. I break off a chunk and give it to Moose, then sit and munch as I watch ripples roll calmly over the lake. I've hiked eleven miles today, in some of the most rugged sections of the entire Appalachian Trail. I feel good and fine and happy.

"Lucas, buddy, I wish you were with me." The words appear out of nowhere.

I wait for the guilt to come on, as it always does. But then something miraculous happens. It takes me a moment to realize what it is.



I feel happy.

Somehow, through the mess of it all, I feel like Lucas is here with me. Telling me that he is proud of me for standing on my own two feet. For being able to go on without him.

Maybe I'm not a screwup after all. Maybe my bad luck is finally going away.

There is a rustling behind me, and Moose barks a warning. I turn to see an enormous black raven jabbing its head into my pack.

"Shoo!" I cry as I leap to my feet.

The raven jerks back, and my heart drops. In its beak is Andy's lucky marble.

"No!" I shout. I lunge toward the thief. But it is too late. The raven takes off into the thick woods beyond the lake, with Moose right behind.

I race after them—straight into a thicket of dense bramble bushes studded with thorns. By the time I pull myself free, my arms are covered in scratches and both Moose and the bird thief have disappeared.

When Moose finally circles back to me, he looks disappointed. There is no raven in his mouth. There is no marble, either.

I don't know what to do. I sink to my knees and close my eyes. I totally jinxed myself. It was foolish for me to believe that bad luck wouldn't follow me wherever I went.

I stay kneeling until Moose starts nudging me with his nose. I can't just stay here. I get up and return to the lake.



It's getting on dinnertime, but I'm not hungry. I don't want to go inside the hut and face the crew.

I could pretend that I was never given the marble. It's cowardly, and wrong. But I could do it. Go on my way. Stay on the trail and keep my promise to Lucas. I never asked to be in charge of something that important, anyway.

I take a deep breath. I accept that I'm a coward. I'd rather run away in the dark instead of face the crew at Carter and tell them that I lost Andy's great-grandfather's marble. The one that kept him alive during WWII.

Moose whines uncertainly as I sling my pack on my back. "Let's go, Moose," I say shortly. By the time we get to the next shelter, it will be night. I will have broken my promise to not get caught in the dark. But I tell myself that I don't care.

All the energy from earlier in the day seems to have left my body. My boots feel leaden. It's as if I gain a pound with every step.

I am slowing down, and in my mind I know that I can't do this.

I get a mile out before my feet come to a complete stop. I think about what I told Sean when he asked me why I was on the trail.

"So this is what it feels like to grow up," I whisper in the thickening dark. I take out my headlamp and turn around. I head back toward the hut to accept the consequences.

As I near Carter, something glints at the edge of the trail. I hurry closer.

When I look down, Andy's lucky marble is at my feet.



CHAPTER 32

IN CARTER NOTCH Hut, I give the cook Andy's lucky marble. I feel a twinge of nervousness as the marble drops from my hand into the cook's open palm. From now on, I'm going to have to create all my good luck myself.

The cook invites me to spend the night in one of the bunkhouses, but I tell him that I'm fine. He directs me to a stealth site half a mile farther down the trail, where I set up camp. That night, I let Moose into the tent. I keep my arm around him until he falls asleep.

The next morning I pack up early and head out. It's another 275 miles to the top of Katahdin. I have been on the trail for eleven days. I have forty days left before school starts. Before I've told Gran I would be back.

Plenty of time to make it.

Getting on late afternoon, I meet a southbound thru-hiker named Washboard. He's got a gnarly heap of dreadlocks piled around his head, and his shirt is nowhere to be seen. His stomach ripples every time he moves. It's easy to see how he got his name.

Washboard looks me over. "You got some rough stuff ahead of you, man. You ever hear of the killer mile?"

"The killer mile?" I scoff. I'm about to tell Washboard that I've already gone a hundred miles, over the wind and hail of Washington, and I can handle myself, thank you very much, but then I catch a closer look at Washboard's bare skin. It is covered in scrapes and scratches. It looks like a panther tore up his right side. I shiver. Washboard looks like a hard-core hiker. It must have taken some nasty trail for him to get so beat-up.

"They call it the hardest mile on the whole AT. Took me an hour and a half to get through it." Washboard shakes his head. "Man, I'm glad I'm done with that piece."

"How far up ahead is it for me?" I ask.

"Oh, I would say about thirty miles. When you see a peeling birch tree with two banged-in trail signs, one that says something about Goose and another that's got Speck on it, that's when you'll know that the trail is about to get real hairy."

Washboard points to the scratches on his belly. "I got these scrambling over boulders." He turns and shows me a long line of scrapes down the right side of his back. "And I got these scrambling under boulders. And these," he says, turning back around and pointing downward, "are from tripping over all the roots on the ground." It looks like a few baseball bats went swinging at his knees. They are covered in dark, angry purple bruises.

I thank Washboard for the warning and continue on my way. The weather is hot and fine, and my legs carry me

over thirteen miles and seven peaks before I make camp at the Rattle River Shelter for the night. As the sun sinks I boil up some pasta and fork the noodles down as I spread open a trail map of northern New Hampshire and Maine.

If I keep going at my pace, we'll be in Maine in a day or two and at the top of Katahdin in three weeks.

"You and me, we're gonna make it," I tell Moose.

Moose woofs. That night, my aloneness feels different from the first few days when I went on the trail. I have a dog outside protecting me. I am no longer a starving, clueless kid.

"Hey, Lucas," I whisper into the quiet of the tent and the stars above my head. I can feel him smiling down at me. "I'm doing it, buddy." I fall asleep to the sound of crickets chirping and the rustle of the wind through the trees.



The next morning I wake up to quiet. I make a bowl of oatmeal and swirl a couple of spoonfuls of peanut butter into it. Moose wags his tail expectantly, and I plop out some of the nutty oatmeal for him. Moose laps up the oatmeal and is still looking at me with hungry eyes, so I dig into my pack and feed him the last of the dog biscuits I had gotten at Lonesome Lake. He wolfs them down, finishing off the last crumb.

Once Moose is fed, it is time to go. After cleaning my cookware in the nearby river, I refill my water bottles, wipe them dry on my shirt, poke my sleeping bag back in its stuff sack, deflate my sleeping pad, and push them into my pack. I break down the tent and lash it to the outside of my pack. I call to Moose, and we are off.

In less than an hour we reach a road. I pull out my map. It's Route 2. About two miles west is the town of Gorham. I know from the lightness of my pack that I need to resupply.

Moose and I walk along the real road into Gorham. I tell him to stay outside as I enter a Cumberland Farms gas station. Inside, I grab energy bars, pasta, and boxes of rice and beans, as well as a three-pound bag of M&M'S. I find the pet aisle and stock up on a ten-pound bag of Purina for Moose. I also get trail maps for Maine. The map Andy had given me only covered New Hampshire.

At the register, I unroll three twenties. As the cashier hands me my change of sixty-seven cents, I study a plastic March of Dimes donation box on the counter. With so much food weight, I'm trying to figure out if the coin weight is worth it.

I realize that I'm thinking about weight this way. A small curl of pride courses through me. I'm thinking like Wingin' It. I'm thinking like a thru-hiker.

I drop the coins in the donation box and head outside. With my pack full and heavy, I pick up Moose and we return

to the trail. Despite the weight, I hike another thirteen miles before setting up camp at a shelter. I'm doing great.



The next day, the trail climbs through thick spruce forests, and I pass the sign that Washboard told me about. Soon the trail is choked with boulders. Some of the rocks are as big as houses. We're descending into Mahoosuc Notch. The killer mile.

The temperature drops about twenty degrees. Even in July, there are patches of ice tucked in corners underneath freezing rocks. Broken rocks scatter at my feet, as if giants had been hurling them like snowballs. Fallen trees lie with their mud-encrusted roots fanning out to form humps of writhing earthworms and rotting bark.

It is creepy here. Even the birds seem to have abandoned the place, choosing the warmer temperatures above the notch.

The trail narrows until it is just a waterfall of fallen boulders. When a thick brown arrow marking the path points under a stack of looming rocks, I think about Washboard and his scrapes and bruises.

Mist descends on us, thick and cloudy as milk. Granite cliffs rise above. I feel like I'm gradually being squeezed between a rock giant's hands.

I squirm between two boulders the size of cars. My pack scrapes along the sides, and a water bottle clunks onto the

ground, dislodged by the rocks. I pick it up and stuff it deep into the side pocket. After it does it a second time, I stop to mash both bottles inside my pack.

The trail sprouts jagged blades of rock that become more and more difficult to navigate. Moose keeps trotting forward, then dancing back, running into me over and over again. Sometimes I have to pick him up and carry him over slick, steep boulders. I'm not very good at it, and more than once I almost drop him. Even though I've built up a lot of strength on the trail, Moose has been getting heavier. I'm sure I've been feeding him far more than his previous owner. Plus, all the gas station food and all my gear have made my pack bulky. It scrapes against the rocks at every turn.

It takes me and Moose three hours to get through the one mile of the notch. After the ups and downs, the trail turns into marshes and bogs, with nowhere dry to set down a tent. The last glimmers of sunset are fading by the time I reach a shelter.



The next day, the trail spills into an empty parking lot. I pour out some Purina for Moose, and he wolfs it down. As I devour a Snickers and reach for a water bottle, I realize that I have only two mouthfuls of liquid left.

There is a river next to the road. I fill up on water and root around my hood pocket for my iodine pills.

I can't find them.



I pull everything out, checking and rechecking and triple-checking. They are not there.

That nagging voice of doubt that I thought I had conquered on top of Washington is suddenly back. *Did you really think you would be rid of your rotten luck?* it whispers to me. *Of course you would lose them.*

I try to ignore the voice. At least I'm by a road, where I can hitchhike into a town and get another bottle of iodine pills. I pull out my map and check. I shove everything back into my pack and stick my thumb out.





CHAPTER 33

FOUR HOURS LATER, I realize how dumb I was to believe it would be easy to hitch. According to my map, the stretch of road where I'm trying to thumb a lift is ten miles from the nearest town. Only three cars have passed, and none have stopped for a scruffy-looking twelve-year-old standing next to a huge battered backpack and a scrawny dog.

Another hour passes.

It's nearly evening, and I'm just about ready to give up when a car roars up. It is black and shiny and expensive-looking. The windows are tinted.

The window on the driver's side rolls down. A middle-aged man with greased-back gray hair turns his head toward me in the dimming light. He is wearing reflective sunglasses. I can't see his eyes. "Hey, kid," he says. "You want a ride?"

There is something funny about the way he is saying his words. They are thick and sloppy, like an oil slick. Moose barks once. Then again, loudly. This time, I can hear the warning in his voice.

"Come here, kid," says the driver. He pulls his sunglasses away. His eyes look strange and very bloodshot.

I don't know what to do. I could accept a ride with this stranger. I may not like the way he looks, but I need the iodine pills.

The man crooks his finger at me. "Kid. Come. Here." His voice is commanding. Hypnotic.

I walk to the car. Up close, I can see the sweat stains under his button-up shirt. His teeth are yellow. There is a smell coming from him, old tobacco smoke and something else. No one else is in the car with him.

"I want you to get into the car. Right now." The man glares at me. His hand reaches for the door handle.

It hits me. Booze. The man smells like booze.

Moose barks crazily as I step back. The man opens the door as I turn around and run. I reach my pack and for one moment my hand goes down to scoop it up. It is my lifeline in the woods.

But then the man is behind me and closing in fast. Moose jumps in front of him, growling, his teeth bared. The man curses. And then he kicks Moose in the side. Hard.

Moose yelps and stumbles back to me.

I abandon my pack and pick up Moose. Holding my dog to my chest, I run full tilt into the darkening woods.

"Kid! Kid!" screams the man.

I ignore him and scramble into a thicket of scratchy briars. They dig into my pants, but I pull free and keep running.

I am not on the trail. I am trying to get lost somewhere in the forest.

The man's voice fades, then goes away completely. I slow down, panting, listening for him. Nothing. Moose is trembling in my arms.

I see a felled tree trunk lying across the way. It is a huge beech tree with its branches spreading out like angel wings. I gently place Moose under the tree and wriggle beside him.

"Don't bark, Moose," I whisper to him. "Don't make a noise. It's gonna be okay, boy."

We lie there, frozen, until the last of sunset fades through the trees and nighttime blankets the woods in a protective dark. Only then do I dare to move.

There is no sign of the man. No hint of flashlight, no footsteps, nothing. I am safe.

I pick up Moose again and try to retrace my steps. But as the night grows deeper, I realize that I have no idea where I am.

A twig breaks behind me, and my heart explodes with fear. I begin to run blindly, tripping over unseen rocks and roots. It isn't until I smash into a tree and Moose whimpers that I realize I cannot panic.

I stop. In the utter dark, I realize something. Moose depends on me. And right now, in this moment, I need to depend on myself. For us. I can't huddle into my sleeping bag and feel sorry for myself. I have to get us out of this.

“Think, Toby. Think,” I say to myself. “What do you need to do to stay alive?”

I have no food. I have no water. I have no tent. There is no wooden shelter to protect me. It is full-on dark. I’ve completely failed my keeps list.

But there is that tree. And a rising moon that is softly illuminating the forest.

I can keep warm.

In the pale ghostly light, I make my way back to the dead beech. I scrape together a pile of leaves and push them against the trunk, then put Moose inside and shuffle in next to him. I curl into a tight ball around my dog.

The leaves rustle and shift, covering me. Me and Moose aren’t exactly comfortable, and I don’t get a lot of sleep. But when the pale streaks of dawn come, we are still very much alive.



CHAPTER 34

BY MORNING, MOOSE'S side is swollen and tender, but he is able to walk. Dawn gives way to a leaden sky as we make our way back toward the road, toward my pack and the supplies in it. In daylight it is a little bit easier to see my tracks. I can see where I had fled off the trail and through the thick brush. But when I finally get back to the real road, what I see makes me so angry, I could spit.

My pack has been ripped open and emptied, its contents scattered across the road. My sleeping bag is half out of its stuff sack. When I pick it up, it is heavy. It has been zipped up and filled with dirt and stones. My pad is next to it, an ugly gash slashed into its side.

Lucas's Stansport tent lies like a wounded bird, flapping sadly, wrapped around a tree trunk. I run my hands over it, searching for holes and rips, but the nylon and zippers have withstood the fury of their attack. The tent poles, however, are bent at crazy angles or broken. I wrap the poles in the tent like a shroud. Even though it is most likely beyond repair, I'm not letting go of it.

I find my cookware and headlamp flung wide but unharmed. My first aid kit has been unzipped, the Band-Aids ripped in half, gauze and tape and scissors and bandages missing.

My maps have been torn to pieces. I only know because I find bits of them fluttering in the low branches of a few young maple trees next to the road. The backpack itself has tire marks on it, as though it has been backed up on and run over. It is damaged and dirty, but there are no gaping holes that would make it useless.

Every single bit of brand-new food that I just bought has been opened and dumped and stamped into the dirt. Birds are pecking away at grains of rice on the tar. I see a squirrel make off with a bit of Snickers.

And then I see it. My iodine bottle. I must have not searched for it hard enough. Only now the bottle is in a thousand pieces, smashed against a rock. There are no pills among the shattered glass. The man must have emptied the bottle before destroying it.

I don't cry. Instead, I collect the bits of food that are salvageable—a few energy bars, mangled, but still edible. A handful of M&M'S. I carve away the smears of dirt on a block of cheese and eat the rest of it for breakfast, along with a nearly intact bagel that had been thrown into the brush.

I empty my sleeping bag and brush it out as best I can. I gather up my ripped and scattered belongings and put everything I can find neatly and quickly back into my pack. I check the hidden pocket inside the hood and breathe a

small sigh of relief. My Ziploc full of money is still there. So is the List. The man must have not noticed the inner pocket in the dark.

I have to make a decision. I remember the lines and the mileage from studying the map the night before. I can make my way thirty-four more miles down the trail to the next real road. From there, it is only a few miles to the town of Rangeley. I can walk there to restock. Or I can try again to hitchhike from where I am.

Both options are terrible. I am in trouble. But I don't let myself panic. The past few days on the trail have taught me better. If I hiked, I would be in danger of running out of food. I'd have to plan things out carefully. Really test my ability to survive. To be in the woods, alone and hungry.

But then I think about those dark sunglasses, the sharp rotten stench of liquor, and I know I can't expose myself for ten miles down that stretch of road. I'd rather stick to the challenges of the trail than risk running into that man again.

I pick up my pack. "C'mon, Moose," I say, and head down the trail.

I walk steadily and carefully, conserving my energy. I run through my little stockpile of food in my head, calculating and recalculating how much I can eat over the next three days when I will run into another, hopefully friendlier road. I have about thirty miles to go on some candy bar bits and a small cluster of mud-covered M&M'S.

The first day, I eat my remaining food in spare bites. I can only give Moose half an energy bar, but he seems to

understand and doesn't beg for more. For lunch, I break out my stove and boil water. It's the only way I can sterilize it now. I pretend it's hot chocolate as I drink it. Hot chocolate loaded with gigantic fluffy marshmallows.

My stomach howls.

Thunder grumbles and threatens, but the rain doesn't come until late afternoon. We have been hiking since dawn, and by that time I have found the shelter. I use the broom in the shelter to sweep out the encrusted dirt in my sleeping bag and settle in for the night. By my calculation, I have only eighteen miles left to go.

Moose and I pass no one on the trail.

The next day I awake to thick, pounding rain. It is cold and heavy, and by the time I finish my meager breakfast of hot water and the last of my M&M'S, it has grown to a full-on lightning and thunderstorm. It is the first time that I've thought the phrase "rain coming down in sheets" and realized it could be so true.

I can't hike in this weather. I don't have enough food to keep me warm. I am eighteen miles from the road up ahead and sixteen miles from the horrible road behind me.

I decide to wait until the weather gets better. In the meantime, I open my water bottles and prop them up on a rock outside so they can catch the rainwater. I have no iodine and will need to capture as much rain as I can. And if it doesn't rain for a while and I run out, I'll need to boil it. And if my fuel runs out, I'll have to risk it with untreated pond water.

After setting my bottles outside, I return to the shelter and huddle in my sleeping bag with Moose. I boil more hot water, sipping it in slow gulps, conserving my energy. I watch as the rain and wind lash at the trees, painting dark streaks across their bark.

By the time the sky finally clears, it is early afternoon and I am down to half a Snickers bar and my fuel canister is rattling toward empty. I have no more food for Moose. As I pack up for my eighteen-mile hike, I hesitate when I spot the battered, useless tent. Lucas's tent.

I should leave it. It is unnecessary weight. Dangerous weight, even. I could collapse from lack of food if I'm not careful. A day of carrying an extra six pounds of nylon and broken poles is like losing at least two Snickers bars' worth of calories.

I place the broken poles in the middle of the tent and roll it up. As I put the tent in my pack, I feel like my promise to Lucas, to finish the trail, is wrapped up with it. The tent is heavy.

But so are some promises.

A mile and a half past the shelter, Moose and I come to our first river crossing. I can see the trail on the far side of the riverbank. There are a few stones braced against the current, but it will be impossible to cross without getting wet.

It's not a problem for Moose, though. He plunges into the river and is on the other side within a minute, shaking himself dry.

I kneel down and unlace my boots. I pull them off and peel my socks free from my feet. I stuff the socks deep into the boots, then tie the laces together and sling them around my neck. I roll up my pants as high as they will go, past my knobby knees and halfway up my thighs.

The stepping-stones are freezing cold. I curl my toes instinctively and brace myself against my trekking poles. Icy river water runs across my feet, then up my calves. I pick my way across the slippery crossing, wobbling a few times but never falling.

When I reach the other side of the river, I sit down and use my T-shirt to dry off my feet. My right hand shakes as it lifts a sock out of my boot, and I realize that I am trembling.

I finish putting on my boots and stand back up. I take slow, careful steps. From time to time, I lean on my trekking poles to take a break. When I feel like sitting down, Moose is always there to give me a nudge with his wet nose.

Even without thinking about my hunger, it is slow going. The trail is muddy and swollen with rain. I pick my way alongside giant boot-wrecker puddles. My feet squish into the muck and slurp from the suction as I pull them out.

My stomach had been growling, but now it is silent. It actually worries me. There's nothing left for it to grumble over. For the first time, I realize that even if I plan carefully, I could actually starve to death. I wonder if, after a while, the hunger pangs go away. If I'll ever stop being able to think about food. Because all I can think about now is that half

a Snickers bar waiting in my side pocket. It taunts me, those beautiful peanut pieces embedded in delicious chocolate and sugary caramel. My mouth waters and every ten minutes, my fingers lurch toward it.

Wait, my mind tells me. Wait until you really need it.

The trail climbs up a gentle slope, then descends into a forest of weathered spruce and pine. I come to another river crossing. This one is a little deeper and a little colder, but I navigate it with less fear than my first.

When the trail begins a steep climb back up, I suppress a small groan and keep going. My pack straps begin to pull down on my shoulders.

Up, up, up. A brief view at the top of a small, rugged peak, then down again.

When the trail goes up again, I take a tiny nibble of Snickers bar. I am down to a third.

At the top of the next mountain, there is a small outcrop of rocks and a view of the valley below. I settle myself into sitting and take a look. What I see nearly makes me cry. At the bottom of the next valley is a real road. It glides west to east, like a smooth silvery lifeline.



CHAPTER 35

WHEN I TRY to stand up, my knees buckle underneath me. I lie there panting for a moment, my elbows bent as I prop myself up against the rocks.

It is time. I break out the last of my Snickers and let the chocolate and caramel and nougat dissolve slowly in my mouth. Only when the nubbins of the peanuts are bare do I chew. I give Moose two peanut pieces. He swallows them whole.

About two miles later, we come across a lean-to with shiny metal roofing and old weathered logs. I pause for a nap. Route 17 is less than five miles away.

We can make it.

We get four miles before coming upon the third river crossing. It's a turbulent one, with foaming white water churning above a swift current. There are no stepping-stones—it is all one high wall of angry water, high and fast, seething with mud and tree branches from two days' worth of storm.

Boots off. Socks off. Laces around my neck. Pants above

my knees. I know the drill by now. By the time I am standing at the river's edge, Moose is waiting for me on the other side.

The water nearly takes out my leg when I step into it. It is much, much stronger than the past two crossings. I grit my teeth and brace myself, moving in a long shuffle. The water rises to my shins, then my knees.

A sudden dip, and I am waist-high in water. The bottom of my pack is soaked.

There is a loud crack.

I look upstream and see a huge downed oak tree thrashing in the water. It is heading straight toward me, its branches dragging trails of grass and muck behind it.

I can't move fast enough. I see the thick, dark roots of the tree spread out like a net. It is going to nail me no matter what. *You're going to die*, I think.

Then I see Moose on the river's edge, barking his head off. "No, you're *not*," I tell myself.

It takes a lightning second to unloop my trekking poles from around my wrists and toss them. I unclip my pack and shrug it off into the river. It has kept me alive, but if I get caught with it under a tree in floodwaters, there is a very good chance that I will drown. Freed of my poles and my pack, I gulp a mouthful of air and plunge under the river just as the tree sweeps down upon me.

Churning water floods up my nostrils. My waterlogged boots hang at my neck like a noose. I half swim, half tumble as I feel the tree roots rake across my side. I twist by them and feel the trunk slide by, missing my head by inches.

Branches catch me on the arms and legs and scrape my ribs. They hit me in the stomach, nearly knocking out my mouthful of air. I kick hard against the bottom of the river, my bare feet scrabbling against the slime-covered stones.

I claw my way to the surface and take one big, sweet gulp of air. The bulk of the tree has passed me. I've made it.

I'm too shaken to swim properly, but I flounder my way to shallower water. I plant my feet on the ground. Here, toward the edge, the current is less brutal.

Then a stray branch at the top of the tree hooks itself around my laces and lifts my boots off my shoulders.

I grab the leather below the eyelets. "No!" I scream. I lean back and brace myself.

I am in a tug-of-war against an oak tree. I will not lose.

The laces tighten and it feels like my arms are being pulled from their sockets. There is a snap as the branch breaks. Drops of water fly free as I pull my boots to my chest, and the tree continues its journey downriver.

Clutching my boots, I wade to the far shore. Moose licks my face joyfully, and I shake off the river—the mud, the water, the rotting leaves and soaked moss. I remove my shirt and wring it out, then do the same for my pants. My socks are swollen and wet, but still lodged inside my boots. I take them out and squeeze out the water, then lay everything on a sloped boulder warmed by the early July heat.

As I wait for my clothes to dry, I walk down the river to look for my trekking poles and pack. I don't have much

hope, but as I scan the water, I see a flash of blue nylon on the near bank.

By some miracle, my pack has floated into an eddy. I climb down the riverbank and pull it out. It is heavy and slumps wetly against the ground.

I drag it to the boulder where my clothes are and unclip the hood. Everything is completely waterlogged but still there.

I'm not going to make it to the road in this state. I am too weakened by hunger and the river to carry soaked gear another mile.

But I realize that somewhere outside my fog of hunger, it is a nice day. Lots of sun. Wearily, I lay all my gear out to dry. My sleeping bag, Lucas's tent, my extra clothes. My headlamp doesn't work, so I pry open the battery door and take out the batteries, hoping that some time in the sun will get the electrical bits working again.

The afternoon sun hits me hard. I curl up on the rock next to my stuff and drape a bit of tent flap over my face. I let the warmth of the July sun soak into my bones. I am tired. I am hungry. But I am not afraid.

The next thing I know, it is late evening. My boots are still a little damp, but the rest of my belongings are so sun-dried they crinkle like potato chips. I gather everything and put it all back in my pack, except for my sleeping pad and my bag, which I lay out on a soft piece of grass by the river. I've survived one night without shelter. I can survive another.

As I get into my sleeping bag, Moose walks over. He lays his head next to mine, and together we fall asleep under the stars.



The next morning, I wake to find my skin burning. My entire body has turned a deep sunburned pink. I press a spot on my arm. It fades white, but goes right on back to being lobster colored.

It hurts to put my backpack on. It feels like red-hot pokerers are digging into my skin as the straps dig into my chest.

I will get to the road; I will get to a town, I chant over and over in my head as I walk. *I will get to the road; I will get to a town*.

Now it is less than a mile to the road. I am in pain, and my stomach is hurting so badly it feels like it is devouring itself.

I try to quiet my mind, to accept the pain of the trail, but not to despair or to give in to it. *I will get to the road; I will get to a town*.

I descend a final hill and break out of the trees, and there it is: Route 17.

My brain explodes in the victory dance that my body can't manage, but my celebration is brief.

I know it's only a few more miles into town, but I'm not sure I have the energy to take another step. As I am standing, unsteady on my feet and uncertain of what to do, a small red Toyota pickup truck comes rumbling down the

road. It slows and pulls off a few yards in front of us. The passenger-side window rolls down, and a teenage girl with freckles across her tanned face leans out. "Hey there. You need a ride to town?"

I'm wary after my last hitchhiking attempt, but there's something about the girl's face that is kind. Trustworthy. I nod. "Can you take my dog, too?" My voice is scratchy and strange-sounding.

"Sure." The girl looks down at Moose. "Huh. That's funny."

"What is?" I am immediately on guard.

"I swear I've seen that dog before."

"Oh, I've had Moose since he was a puppy." The lie slips easily out of my mouth. When it comes to protecting Moose, I will do anything.

The girl shrugs. She thumbs over to the driver's seat, where an older man with a gray beard that travels all the way down to his belly button holds on to the steering wheel. "I'm Sadie and this here's my dad, Jim. We're going to the grocery store in Rangeley. We can take you as far as there."

"Are you heading back this way once you're done shopping?"

"Sure are. We can take you back here if you want." The girl's thumb travels to the open cab. "Hop on back."

I bring down the tailgate, and Moose jumps up into the cab. I sling up my pack and follow with my body a moment later. As I collapse against my bag, the truck rumbles to life, and we set off in the morning heat toward town.





CHAPTER 36

AS WE PULL up to the parking lot of the grocery store, Moose whines uneasily. “Shh,” I tell him. “I know you’re hungry. Just wait. I’ll have food for you soon enough.”

After weeks on the trail, the glaring fluorescent lights and bright bleached floors of the grocery store catches me off guard, and I wince under the artificial lights and smells. But they don’t stop me from rushing into the checkout lane and grabbing two Snickers bars from the candy display. I’m already tearing off the wrapper to one of them as the pony-tailed teenage cashier rings me up. I ignore her raised eyebrows as I simultaneously gobble down the bar and root in my pack for my money.

The first Snickers is gone before I’ve been handed my change. The second one disappears before my shopping cart has left the produce aisle. As I wander past shelves chock-full of food, I try not to let all the Little Debbie’s, the Ho Hos and Twinkies, the Nutty Bars and dozen packs of powdered doughnuts distract me. I’ve fed myself. Now it’s time to think about feeding Moose.

I find the pet aisle and get yet another ten-pound bag of Purina for Moose. Then I turn around and begin to shop for my next couple of days on the trail. In addition to stocking up on dinner food, I pick up a three-pound bag of M&M'S, a family-sized pack of Nutty Bars, and a thirty-two-ounce tub of peanut butter. By the time I'm done, my shopping cart looks almost exactly like the basket I had at the Cumberland Farms gas station. I feel a sting of irritation at having to pay for groceries twice.

I eat the Nutty Bars as I unroll two twenties and pay at the checkout lane, muttering a small curse on the man in the sunglasses. Once again I ignore the ponytailed cashier, who by now is openly glaring at me, as though she's caught me picking my nose instead of eating food in a grocery store.

I tuck everything into the empty spaces of my pack and cinch the hood closed. As I put my remaining dollar bills back into the Ziploc, I pause for a second to count it. I have eighty-two bucks left. I gulp. That's only enough for two more resupplies, three if I really scrimp. I'm going to have to be careful about spending money from now on. Maybe I should have kept that sixty-seven cents at the last grocery store. It could have bought me most of a Snickers bar.

As I'm looking down at the last of my money, wild barking erupts from the parking lot. I know that sound. I drop everything and rush through the sliding glass doors into the hot summer air.

Someone is climbing into the cab of the red truck. He is tall and stocky, with a pockmarked face and a half-smoked cigarette dangling from his mouth. A wide, saggy beer gut hangs over his thick silver belt buckle. "Buster!" he shouts. "Shut up, Buster!"

Moose is backed up and crouching behind the wheel well. His claws scrabble against the plastic of the truck bed as he tries to mash himself into a tiny ball as far away from the man as he can get.

"Stop scaring him!" I have reached the truck. I put my hands on one side and a foot on a wheel to hoist myself up. I get halfway up when my arms give out on me. I tumble backward onto the parking lot. My hands hit the asphalt and I cry out as twin jolts of pain run up my wrists.

From the top of the truck bed the man looms up, at least a foot taller than me. He looks big. And mean. His sausage-sized fingers clench into a massive, hairy fist.

"Look here, boy," he says. His voice is ugly. "Buster here is mine. I don't know what you're doing with him, but you have no right to tell me how to talk to my own dog."

"He's not your dog!" The words escape my mouth before I can stop them. "I found him in the woods miles from here. I fed him and bathed him and took care of him. He's with me."

"Listen, you little toad. I've owned Buster for two years. Just because he decides he's going to run off don't make him yours."

“What’s going on here, Lewis?” Jim has returned with a shopping cart full of groceries.

“Boy’s trying to steal my dog, that’s what!” shouts Lewis. “And what’s he doing in the back of your truck?”

“Dad, what’s going on?” Sadie has come out. She is holding a gallon of milk in one hand and a bag of potatoes in the other.

“Sadie, get back in the store,” Jim says. “Lewis, what are *you* doing in my truck?”

Lewis draws himself up to his full height. “I am getting my dog back!” He reaches down and grabs Moose. Moose howls miserably.

“Lewis, calm yourself.” Jim has let go of the shopping cart and has both of his hands up.

“Don’t tell me to calm down, Jim. I’m taking Buster back to the farm. And you and this little hippie runt had better not try to stop me.” Lewis jumps down from the cab, his arm crushing Moose’s bruised side.

“Let him go!” I scream. Lewis is twice as big as me, but I don’t care. I rush him. With a short, ugly laugh, he shoves me, and I hit the tar parking lot hard.

By the time I’m back on my feet Lewis is striding over to a rusting Ford pickup and tosses Moose inside. He climbs into the driver’s seat and guns the engine. Tires squeal as he peels out of the parking lot and down the road.

“Hey. I’m sorry.” Sadie has ignored her father and is right behind me. She puts her groceries down and pats my shoulder uncertainly.

My pack suddenly becomes a million pounds. I stagger against the tailgate and rest it against the bumper. I close my eyes and let fury and hatred mix all up in the pit of my stomach.

When I open them, I know what to do.

"I've got to get him back," I say.

Jim begins piling the groceries into the back of the truck. "That's not a good idea. Lewis has a bad streak. He won't take lightly to having Buster stolen."

"He ran away for a reason." I'm already trying to figure out a game plan. "When I found him, he was in horrible shape. He was starving. His hair was tangled and dirty. Part of it might have come from being on the trail, but he did not have a good owner to begin with."

"He's right, Dad." Sadie lifts the potatoes and the milk into the cab. "Everyone in town knows that Lewis treats Buster like dirt."

Jim shakes his head. "Still. It's not right to come between a man and his dog."

"I'm not asking for your help." And for once, I mean it. Moose is my responsibility. I brought him straight to the owner he'd tried to escape. And it's up to me to get him back. "All I need to know is where he lives. Just drop me off close to his home. That's all I want."

Jim folds his arms. "And what do you think you're going to be able to do once you get there?"

"I'll think of something."

Jim hesitates for a minute, then gives a long sigh.
“Hop in.”

I climb into the truck bed once more and rest my head against the back window as we pull out of the parking lot. My brain is buzzing with a bazillion ways to rescue Moose. I have visions of scoping out Lewis’s home and returning in the middle of the night to free Moose from being chained to a doghouse or tree in the backyard. Calling to him through the window and having him break free of Lewis to be with me.

The truck slows to a crawl, then stops on a familiar piece of road.

“Hey. This is where you picked me up,” I yell through the back window.

Jim rolls down the window and sticks out his head. “That’s right. You get going now. There ain’t nothing you can do for that dog.”

I wait for a wave of helplessness to wash over me, like it has so many times before. The feeling of defeat and despair, of bad luck hammering down to remind me that I’m cursed and I can’t do anything about it.

But those feelings don’t come. Instead, for the first time, I feel something else. It fills me, thick and fast and powerful.

Rage.

“You don’t know that!” I scream. I pound my fist on the back of the window. “I don’t care if Lewis is twice my size, I’ve got to save Moose. Turn around. Take me back!”

"Son." Jim is calm. "I feel for you. But I'm not sending you to a crazy man's house so you can steal his dog."

"He's *my* dog!" I shriek. I slam my hands against the roof. "Take me back!"

Jim doesn't say anything. The truck idles as I bang the roof over and over and over again. I am so viciously angry I feel like I could punch a hole right into the truck.

Finally I toss my pack over the side and jump out of the cab. If Jim isn't going to drive me, I'll go and find Moose myself. I sling my pack on my shoulder and start marching back to town.

The truck pulls alongside me. "Kid," Jim says.

I don't look at him. I focus my eyes on the road.

"Kid, turn back. Or I'm gonna turn you into the police station. You gonna get yourself killed if you go after that dog, and I ain't gonna be responsible for that."

I stop. If I get turned in, I lose everything. Moose. The Trail. My promise to Lucas.

Everything.

My hands rise to my face and my fingernails bury themselves in my temples. I scream so loudly that a flock of birds rise from the trees and fly off in a panic.

I turn around. Away from town and from Moose and from any chance of saving him.

"Good luck with your hike, kid," Jim says.

Sadie doesn't look at me. She's busy scribbling away at a piece of notebook paper.

"Thanks for the ride," I say sarcastically.

As the Toyota drives away, a crumpled scrap of paper falls out of the passenger-side window.

I go over to pick it up. I tuck it into the Ziploc bag with my matches and the List and stuff it into the side of my pack. It'll be good starter for the next time I have a fire. Or feel like burning down the forest.



CHAPTER 37

I HAD PROMISED Moose I would take care of him. That he could depend on me. That he would be safe.

But instead I led him straight to a man who had starved and abused him. A man with big knuckles and a big belt buckle. Who threw Moose into his truck. Actually threw him.

I stop on the trail and lean against a tree, breathing in short gasps, trying so hard not to cry. I feel almost like I did when Lucas died. That heavy sick feeling is back, as though a gallon of slime has been poured down my throat. My stomach lurches.

I've failed another friend.

I'm not just bad luck; I put my friends in bad situations.

I don't remember how long I am there, grinding my forehead into the bark of the tree trunk, trying to erase the memory of Lewis throwing Moose into his truck. But no amount of physical pain is going to take back the past.

Finally I step away. I stare blankly in front of me. And then I begin to hike. Because I don't know what else to do.

The trail leaves the road and climbs through thick spruce forests. The steepness should slow me down, but instead I speed up until I'm nearly running. I have to get away from Moose and what I did to him. I race up a giant mountain, willing myself to go faster and faster.

The trail is muddy and full of roots and rocks. It's not fun at all to hike. I'm nearly at the top of a mountain when a guy comes toward me, his long arms and legs a blur of motion. He is tall and lanky and smells exactly like a thru-hiker—unwashed pits, dark-brown hair matted with sweat and grease, boots and calves stained with a thick layer of mud.

I huddle off to the side of the trail to let him through. Just like his pace, his eyes are manic. They stare straight ahead, calculating the dips and dives of the tricky footing of the trail in nanoseconds. He doesn't even see me. It's as if I'm no one.

It is dark by the time I reach a shelter. I set up and go to sleep, alone in my despair.

I deserve to be alone.



The next day I summit four peaks. The sky is blue and the views are clear, but I don't care. I've lost Moose, and no amount of fine weather is going to make me feel better. As evening falls I descend a long, rocky hill and break out of the

trees onto a real road. There is a car parked on the side of the trail. A Subaru Outback with the hatch flipped up. Sitting in the back, their feet swinging, are a man and a woman. A beat-up red Coleman cooler rests between them.

The man has bright blue eyes and a grizzly beard. The woman is plump and deeply suntanned, with kind brown eyes.

As I get closer, I see a piece of paper duct taped to the cooler. On it are two words handwritten in permanent marker. Two simple words: "Trail Magic."

When the man sees me, he waves me over. When he opens the cooler, I peer in and see soda cans scattered in ice. I reach straight for a Coke. The dark fizzy liquid hits my tongue and I want to weep. The instant sugar is making my head light, so I drink slowly, burping with appreciation.

The woman hands me a sandwich. "Here you go, dear," she says. Turkey and mayo, tomato, and lettuce between two slices of homemade bread studded with sesame seeds and oats. I blink and chew.

The man watches me eat. "Marsha, get the fellow another one," he says when I am done.

The woman hands me another sandwich. It is gone in a few hurried mouthfuls.

After I finish the Coke, the man pulls out a gallon jug of water and hands it to me. "You're lookin' a little parched."

"Thank you, sir."

The man nods. "Name's Clyde," he says.

"Tony." I am grateful for Clyde and Marsha, but it doesn't stop me from being wary about my name again. "Thanks for all this."

"Least we can do. Our son, Alex, started thru-hiking two months ago. You must be his age, or a little younger. What are you, fifteen?"

I realize that after only a few weeks on the trail, I already seem a lot older than I am.

I nod, not wanting to tell Clyde my real age.

"Alex is seventeen. We made him a promise that we'd set up some Trail Magic every Sunday until he finished. Figured it'd be good luck for him." Clyde points to the water. "Have the whole thing—we've got five more gallons and'll be packin' up in about an hour. Don't think we're in any danger of runnin' out."

I slug back a quarter of it before refilling my empty water bottles.

"Oh, honey." Marsha touches my arm gently and I wince. She frowns. "You've got a wicked sunburn, too. I've got something for that." She reaches behind into the magical backseat and brings out a bottle of aloe vera gel.

I pump some of the gooey green liquid into my hand. As I spread it across my reddened skin, soothing coolness travels across me.

"Keep the bottle. And take as much food as you want," says Clyde.

"Hon, do you need a night off the trail?" Marsha asks me. I can feel her eyes on me. They are warm. Motherly.

She points to a white clapboard house with green shutters and a screened porch just down the road. "We live right there. You could spend the night with us, if you'd like."

I am tired. I am sore. The next shelter is five miles away, and I have only another hour before dark. All I want to do is curl up in a real bed and cry.

But I also don't want to accept any help. After losing Moose, I don't deserve help. I'm just about to tell Clyde and Marsha no when my eyes fall on my pack. If I don't take some time off the trail to fix my gear, I'm going to be in trouble. I have to repair the tent in case I can't make it to shelters on the remote stretches of trail through the Maine woods. Seal up the gash in my sleeping pad. Get more iodine pills. Maybe some more food. I need to be smart.

I decide to compromise. "That's awful kind of you. I don't want to be too much of a bother, though. Could I just sleep on your porch tonight?"

"Of course." Marsha smiles. "You go on right ahead. Clyde and I will be there in an hour. Door's open if you want to use the bathroom or anything."

I thank them and head over to the house. As twilight falls, I set my pack on the porch, and I switch on the porch light and settle cross-legged on wooden decking with my belongings. There is a patch kit in a small pocket in the sack of my air pad. I take out a circular patch and a thin tube of glue. I cover the gash in my pad with the patch and set it aside to dry.

Next, I take a look at the tent poles. They really are badly mangled—I can't save them. I think about how they

were pieces of the shelter that was going to keep Lucas and me safe and dry on the trail.

I can't give up Lucas's tent. I need to have something of his with me when I reach Katahdin. I take the broken tent poles and roll them up in the tent fabric. I open the tent bag and place everything inside. I'll find a way to make it shelter me, somehow.

As I'm cinching the tent bag closed, I notice the Ziploc with my matches and Sadie's tossed-away crumple of paper. I open the bag and check the matches. They are still dry. Good.

The paper is dry as well. I smooth it out to refold it into a neat square to tuck into my hood pocket. And that's when I see it.

Sadie hadn't thrown away a piece of scrap paper. She had drawn me a map to Moose.



CHAPTER 38

IT IS A detailed map, with the Rangeley grocery store as a central marker. Past the grocery store, Route 4 heads east for several miles before a side road branches off into a cluster of back roads.

It is at one of these back roads that Sadie has made a stick house with the word “BUSTER” hastily scribbled over it. There is also a phone number.

I stare at the rumpled paper and realize that I have been given a choice. I can continue on the trail and finish what Lucas and I started. I can tick off number ten on the List and keep my promise to my dead best friend.

Or I can go back to save a dog.

It’s the hardest decision that I’ve had to make. I don’t want to give up on either Lucas or Moose.

For a second, I wonder if Lucas’s voice will come back into my head to tell me what to do. To lead me to the right choice. Instead, I hear nothing.

Then, in the stillness of the night, I see a flicker of light. And another. And another.

Fireflies. They appear in the field, magical little blinks that light up the field like it's Christmas.

I remember the last time I saw them. Lucas and I had set up camp in his backyard and had watched them come out as we talked about hiking the trail together. It had been just a few days before the quarry accident.

I had been so worried that something would go wrong, that we wouldn't finish, that it would all end in disaster. Finally Lucas had said, "You know what, Toe? It doesn't matter if we get to Katahdin. What matters is that it's going to be you and me, two friends having the adventure of a lifetime."

I gaze out at the fireflies. They are like little flashes of hope in the night.

That was it. I didn't have to finish the trail to prove to Lucas that he meant so much to me. Just being out here, being on this adventure was enough.

I had started the trail to get over the guilt that had weighed down my every step since last summer. But then I met Sean and Denver. They had taught me that, just like how Denver wasn't responsible for Harry's accident, I wasn't responsible for Lucas's death. Lucas made a choice, and so did I. I will always miss him, but he was the one who dove into the water.

Then I think about Wingin' It and his story. How his friend came back for him. Because that's what friends do.

I know what I have to do next.

I fold up the paper and tuck it in my pocket. There's a wooden shed housing a few metal trash cans next to the

driveway. I pick up Lucas's broken tent and walk off the porch and to the shed. I open a can and carefully lay the tent inside.

As I walk back to the house, Clyde and Marsha pull into the driveway. I ask Marsha if I can use her phone. I dial ten numbers. After the fifth ring, a girl's voice answers. "Hello?"

"Hi, Sadie. This is Toby. I found your map. I'm coming to get Moose."

"Hold on a sec." There is silence on the other end, and then Sadie's voice comes back on. "When can you get here?"

"I think I'm about twenty-five miles away from Rangeley. I can get there tomorrow."

I hear some yelling in the background. Sadie's voice comes over, hushed and urgent. "Toby, I've got to go. If you can, give me a call when you're close tomorrow."

"I'll try." I hang up the phone and return it to Marsha. By the end of the evening, all my things are packed away, I've taken a good hot shower, and I have a promise from Clyde to drive me to Rangeley the next morning. I crawl into my sleeping bag and fall asleep to the sounds of crickets.

That night I dream that Moose has become a snarling wolverine, and Lewis a twelve-foot troll. They hunt me through a dark forest with trees oozing sticky black blood, down a trail scattered with broken tent poles as white as bone. They corner me against the rotting roots of a dead tree. Lewis aims a pitchfork at my heart. "My dog," he screams. I wake covered in sweat. It takes me a long time to settle back down to sleep.



The next morning I wake to the smell of bacon and eggs. Clyde opens the door and looks down at me. "You're coming in to have breakfast," he tells me. It is an order. I go in.

"How did you sleep, honey?" Marsha is in the kitchen in front of the stove. She fills a plate of crispy warm bacon and scrambled eggs glistening with butter and gives it me with a fork.

"Okay." I don't tell her about the nightmare as I sit down at the table.

Marsha fills a tall glass with orange juice and sets it in front of me. "Well, once you finish up here, Clyde can take you into town. He's aiming to leave around nine."

An hour later Clyde and I are rumbling into Rangeley. It is a fine, warm day. Clyde rolls down the windows and I stick my hand out, letting the wind stream through my fingers.

When we get into town, I ask to borrow Clyde's phone, and with it I dial Sadie's number.

"Where are you?" Sadie asks when she hears my voice.

"The grocery store in Rangeley," I tell her.

"I'll meet you at Keep's Corner Café. It's about a mile west of you on Route Sixteen."

Five minutes later we pull into the café. I hop out of the truck and go over to the driver's side. Clyde shakes my hand. "Good luck, Tony," he says to me.

I lean over and give him a hug through the window.
“Thanks for everything, Clyde.”

“You take care, young man,” he tells me. He puts the truck in gear and rumbles away.

I am alone again. But not for long. I am going to get Moose back. It’s the only promise that matters now.



CHAPTER 39

AN HOUR LATER, Sadie comes into the café. She gets a coffee and I get hot chocolate. We order two cinnamon rolls and pull up two chairs around a table to talk.

I have to ask the question. It has been bugging me ever since finding that map of Lewis's place. "Why are you helping me?"

Sadie bites into a roll. "This is the north country. Up here you're taught to leave your neighbors alone. Not to butt in, even if you see something that's wrong. We respect one another's privacy and right to do whatever we want. But Lewis has been abusing that dog ever since he got him.

"I remember the first time I was riding my bike past his place when he came raging out of his house holding Buster by the scruff of his neck." Sadie's eyes darken. "He threw Buster. He threw him off the front porch, and Buster hit the dirt.

"I've never forgotten the way he yelped, and the way he whined when Lewis came off the porch to get him. I stopped and yelled at Lewis. I told him that was no way to treat a

dog. Lewis told me oh yes it was if the dog pissed on your floor. I told him that's what puppies do, they don't know any better, and Lewis said he was gonna make sure that Buster would know better next time. And he told me to mind my business or I was gonna get it."

Sadie takes a swig of coffee. "You've seen Lewis. He's a big guy. I was afraid. I pedaled away and left him with Buster lying in the dirt. That was two years ago. Since then I haven't seen Lewis say one kind word to that dog, or give him more than curses and kicks. If there's someone who's willing to take Buster away, I'm gonna help 'em. And that someone looks to be you."

I nod. "What do you know about Lewis?" I ask. "Do you think he's home right now?"

Sadie asks me for the map she drew. When I show it to her, she points to the stick drawing of the house. "Lewis grows corn across the road from his house. Usually he's out on his tractor during the day.

"If we can get there soon, the farmhouse should be empty. We can find Buster and get him out of there before Lewis returns home." Sadie nods toward the door. "I've got my four-wheeler outside. You ready?"

I pick up my pack and heft it onto my shoulders. "Ready."

We put our dirty plates in a brown plastic tub and head out. Sadie's four-wheeler is parked across the street.

Sadie has brought a few bungee cords and she swings them in the air. "Take your bag off and relax for a second." I hand her my pack and she lashes it to the black metal bars

on the back of the four-wheeler. As I roll my neck, she asks, "What are you going to do when you get Buster back?"

I have been thinking about this a lot. "Part of me wants to finish the Appalachian Trail. I . . . had a promise I wanted to keep to a friend." I shake my head. "But I'm going to go home. Moose needs some love and attention. Real dog food. Rest. I will hike the trail. But I'm going to do it when he's ready. And when he is, I'll be, too."

Sadie swings a leg around the front the vehicle. "Hop on," she tells me.

I climb behind her and grip the bars under the pack. Sadie turns her head. "No. You gotta grab onto my waist. And hold tight. We've got bumps ahead."

I wrap my arms around Sadie as she flips a switch on the four-wheeler. The engine rumbles to life, and we are off with a jolt.

After a few miles, Sadie turns off the main drag onto a narrow dirt road. The motor thunks when she switches it off. "Lewis's place is a half mile farther," she says.

I hop off the four-wheeler and decide to leave my pack behind so I can be light on my feet for the rescue. We make our way down the road to an old, ramshackle farmhouse with faded white paint. Ivy chokes the rain gutters and creeps down the corners of the house.

I look across the road, to a large field covered in corn, their silk tassels rustling in the summer wind. I spot a big straw hat in the middle of the rows.

Lewis.



I nudge Sadie and point to the hat. She nods and we duck around to the back of the farmhouse, out of sight of the cornfields. There is a half-falling-down barn with moldy, rotting shingles and a sagging roof out back.

And then I see him. Attached by a thick iron chain to a pole in the ground. Panting in the sun, with no shade. Or water. Collapsed on the ground and barely breathing. Moose.

I forget to hide. I break out from the side of the house and run to him. He struggles to his feet when he sees me, but something is wrong with one of his legs. He is limping, his right paw up.

My vision goes red with rage. I unclip his collar from the chain. "C'mon, Moose. I'm getting you out of here."

"Are you now?" I turn around. Lewis is in the farmhouse, grinning at me through an open window.

For a second, I refuse to believe it's him. I've seen his straw hat. Saw it bobbing in the fields across the street.

And then it comes to me. Scarecrows in cornfields also have straw hats.

Lewis reaches down with one hand. When he brings it up, it is holding a shotgun. He rests the long barrel against the windowpane and trains the muzzle straight at me. "You are trespassing, you no-good, dog-stealing runt. I have every right to blow you away."

"Lewis, don't!" cries Sadie. She runs out and stands between me and the gun. "We'll leave, promise. We won't give you no trouble."

“Hey, Lewis.” My heart is thumping like a jackrabbit’s, so hard I’m afraid it’ll burst out of my chest. But my hands are steady. “Hey, Lewis. I’ve got a deal for you.”

I reach into my pocket and take out my Ziploc with my trail money. I had hoped to make a clean getaway with Moose, but it was time for plan B. I hold up the money and wave it in the air. “What do you say I buy Moose from you? I’ve got eighty-two dollars. If I give you every last penny I have, will you give him to me?”

Lewis lowers his gun for a moment. Then he shakes his head and retrains it on Sadie and me. “First of all, this here dog’s name is Buster. Not Moose. Second of all, your money’s mighty tempting, but you’re not getting my dog. He’s *mine*.” The last word is accompanied by the click of the shotgun hammer as Lewis removes the safety.

Plan C, plan, C, plan C!!! my brain screams. I don’t have a plan C, but words start tumbling out of my mouth. “Well, then, how about this. We have a contest. We put Moo—Buster between the two of us and call to him. If he comes to me, I get him. But if he goes to you, you get him—and all my money, too.”

Lewis works over the details in his head. It takes him a while. “So if Buster comes to me, I get my dog *and* your money?” He lowers the shotgun and smiles. “You got yourself a deal, kiddo.”



CHAPTER 40

WE FACE OFF behind the farmhouse. Sadie draws a line in the dirt with her toe and tells me to stand behind it. She counts ten paces, scuffs out a center mark, counts ten more paces. She draws another line in the dirt with her toe, and Lewis swaggers over to it.

Sadie gently takes Moose by the collar and leads him to the scuffed-out center mark. “When I count to three, I’m going to let go. Both of you do what you think you gotta do to get this dog behind your line. No moving one toe over your line. Ready?

“One, two, three!”

I can do this. I crouch down and lay my elbows against my knees. “Here, Moose! Here, boy!”

On the other end, Lewis’s voice booms out. “Buster! Get yer mangy butt over here!”

Moose looks back and forth between us. His tail thumps the ground uncertainly.

“BUSTER!” Lewis stomps his foot on the ground.

Moose plasters his ears against his head and whines.

Lewis jerks his finger down and points toward the dirt beside him. “NOW!” His fixes Moose with a stare so vile, so full of anger and hate, that Moose’s legs buckle, leaving him cowering on the ground.

I thought this would be easy, but now I’m starting to realize how powerful fear is. What if Moose is so scared of Lewis that he won’t disobey him? I hadn’t truly thought that Moose might go anywhere but straight to me.

I’m not giving up, though. “Hey, Moose. Hey.” My voice is nowhere near as powerful as Lewis’s. Or as commanding. I clap my hands, trying to distract Moose from Lewis’s hypnotizing glare.

One of Moose’s ears perks up. It’s as if he can hear me, but from an ocean away.

“You scruffy flea-ridden mutt!” screams Lewis. “If you don’t get yourself over here right now, you’re gonna wish you were never born.”

Moose whines. He hears the venom in Lewis’s voice. And the promise of violence. He starts to slink toward Lewis.

“That’s what I thought, you ugly cur. C’mon.” Lewis reaches his hands out.

“Moose, no!” I am about to lose everything. All my promises. All my hope. I start to take a step forward.

“Get back behind the line, you filthy maggot!” Lewis’s fingernails are inches from Moose’s collar. He glares at me.

He’s no longer looking at Moose.

My foot hovers, an inch from the line.

“Back!” Lewis bellows.

I step back and whistle. Moose, free of Lewis’s gaze, perks up his ears and swings his head toward me. I can see the whites of his eyes. “Moose,” I say. “Moose. Buddy. Listen to me. You don’t belong here. This isn’t your home. I am your home.” My voice cracks. “Hey, Moose. Hey. I love you.”

Moose turns. He straightens up and starts to move back toward me and my heart soars—and then Lewis makes a grab for him. Moose swerves and dodges, avoiding Lewis’s big hands, and in a few hobbled bounds he is over to me and I’ve got my arms around his neck and my face buried in his fur.

“Good Moose,” I say. “Good dog.”

“He chose Toby!” Sadie shouts. “Deal’s a deal.”

Lewis doesn’t answer. He turns toward the farmhouse, and even though I want to believe that he’s going to be true to his word and will let me and Moose and Sadie go, I know that he’s going for his shotgun.

I pick up Moose. “Run,” I tell Sadie.

We flee past the house and down the dirt road. Moose is heavy in my arms, but it doesn’t stop me from running faster than I ever have in my life. I hear cursing behind me, foul words that singe my ears like flamethrowers. I look back. Lewis is on his front porch, the shotgun stock braced against his hip. He pumps it once.

I tackle Sadie, and we both go down. I arch sideways, keeping Moose from hitting the ground as my shoulder absorbs the impact.

Lewis fires the gun. There's a roar, and dirt kicks up twenty feet away from us. "Give me back my dog!" he screams. He throws his gun down and starts toward us.

Sadie pulls me up. "C'mon."

Adrenaline explodes through my veins. My shoulder aches, but I barely feel it. I focus on the road. My breath is even. My legs move like pistons. The endurance and strength I have built over the weeks on the trail steady me as I sprint forward, a twenty-pound dog clutched in my arms.

We make it to the four-wheeler. Lewis is thirty yards behind us, but closing fast. Sadie yanks on the starter rope. The engine sputters and dies.

Sadie yanks again. The motor catches and rumbles to life. She hurtles onto the seat. "Get on!" she yells. Lewis has ten yards before he is on us.

I swing behind Sadie, one hand around her waist, the other wrapped around Moose. Sadie throws the four-wheeler into first and slams on the gas just as Lewis reaches us. I glance behind me and see a meaty hand slam onto my tied-down backpack.

"Faster!" I yell as Sadie switches into second. I look back. Hand over hand, Lewis is climbing over my backpack and onto the four-wheeler.

There is no time to think. I let go of Sadie and twist around, unhooking the bungee cords keeping my pack in place. The cords whip through the rack, and suddenly they are free and tumbling off the four-wheeler, along with my pack and Lewis.

Sadie hits third, and my heart begins to slow as Moose's former owner fades into the distance.

I let out a wild scream of victory.

I've got my dog back.



As I ride along the bumpy road, I glance down at this dog. I think about Lucas. And the trail. And promises—the ones that were meant to be kept. And the ones that turned into other promises.

It's not about finishing the trail. It's about finding what's important in life and fighting for it. It's about friendship and adventure and realizing how strong you can be.

Back at Sadie's house, I ask to use her phone. I dial a number I know by heart.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Gran." My voice nearly breaks. "I'm ready to come home."

After I hang up the phone, there's one more thing I have to do. I fumble in my pocket and pull it out. It's weather-beaten and beyond crumpled, but the words are still so clear. Almost all of them are crossed out.

There's a cup full of pens on the kitchen counter. I take one and go outside with Moose. Together we walk until the woods surround us, where all I can see are trees with their summer green leaves and the unmarked ground ahead of

me. Unlike the Appalachian Trail, there is no path to follow,
no white blazes to show me the way.

I take the List and rest it against the bark of an old oak
tree. The tip of the pen touches #10, and I draw one long,
unbroken line.

It's time to make my own trail.

TOBY'S JOURNEY

ALONG THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL



STRUCTURE



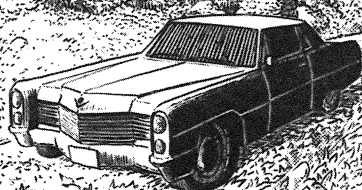
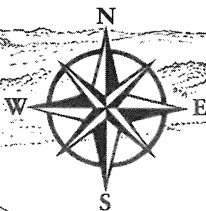
MOUNTAIN



TOWN

SCALE IN MILES

0 2 4 6 8 10



EUSTIS RIDGE

FLAGSTAFF LAKE

Bates Ridge

Mt. Bigelow

Sugarloaf Mtn.

WYMAN LAKE

RANGELEY

Poplar Ridge

Brimstone Mtn.

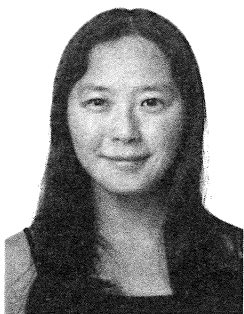
MAHOOSUC RANGE

BY HAMPSHIRE
TO MAINE



A graphic of four dark, textured mountain peaks of varying heights. The text 'ABOUT THE AUTHOR' is printed in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the peaks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MEIKA HASHIMOTO grew up on a mountain in Maine. She has traveled the world in search of calm forests and beautiful peaks, and found them aplenty. When she is not hiking and climbing, she is a children's book editor in New York.