

summit of Mount Katahdin, the highest point in Maine. We're talking true wilderness, the tail end of the Appalachian Trail, the real deal. Concord was a luxury vacation in the Bahamas compared to this."

I imagine Thoreau standing on this mountaintop in Maine, not the cocky, cranky guy from Concord I've gotten to know, but someone out of place, completely amazed by his surroundings. Scared and humbled by his own existence on the planet.

"I keep meaning to go to Maine, retrace Thoreau's steps, with a canoe and camping gear. I even went out and bought a tent and backpack but never got around to going. One of these days." He flips through the book, gazes at pictures of sweeping vistas from the top of Mount Katahdin. "You know, sometimes I wonder if it bugged him that he never actually reached the summit. He was close, and at the time he thought he made it. I guess that's what's important." Thomas shrugs. "Anyway, guess we'll never know." He hands the book to me. "Here, read it. A modern-day Thoreau could kick ass in the Maine woods."

I run my fingers over the picture on the cover, thinking of woods and waterfalls and acres of true wildness far away from the sounds of a highway or a train or best of all, people.

HIKING THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL—ALL 2,181 MILES OF IT, from Georgia to Maine—was something my Dad and I used to talk about all the time. It was like all our other camping trips were just training runs for the real thing, the ultimate hike we would take. Someday.

This is probably one of my last nights in Concord, and I'm sitting on a moss-covered tree trunk on the banks of Walden Pond. I watch the purple and pink of the sunset reflect in the smooth surface of the water, try to empty my mind and let Walden do its magic. This is where I started and this is where I'd like to end, but better equipped this time. On a rock behind me sits a backpack containing my supplies for the night: A blue sleeping bag I borrowed from Thomas, breakfast food

inside a plastic container to keep animals away, and extra layers of clothes in case it gets cold.

Just being here, ready for a campout, reminds me of the last camping trip I went on with my dad.



It was last summer in Hayward, Wisconsin, way up by the Minnesota border. We found this great campsite right on Lake Chippewa. I remember that day so clearly, kicking back in camp chairs, Dad cooking burgers over the campfire while I paged through one of my hiking magazines in the fading daylight. I remember everything we said and did, like it's a movie in my head.

"Hey, Dad, I found this article with a list of potential hazards on the Appalachian Trail," I said to him. "You want to hear it?"

"Of course." He flipped the burgers with a spatula and sent grease sizzling into the fire. "We need to be prepared."

"Okay, let's see. Mosquitoes, biting flies, poison ivy," I read out loud. "Are you kidding me? You call those hazards?"

"I don't know. Poison ivy all over your face and body and nether regions? I'd call that a hazard," Dad pointed out.

"Yeah, but come on. Just wear heavy duty bug repellent and stay away from shiny three-leafed plants. That's like Hiking 101."

"You'd be surprised how many boneheads think they can hike the trail and don't know what they're getting into." Dad took off his Chicago Cubs cap, the one he wore all summer long because he thought it would give our team luck, although it seemed to have the opposite effect. He scratched his head and smashed the cap back down. Black hair stuck out in tufts over his ears.

I scanned the rest of the list. "'Severe weather,' duh. 'Steep grades,' also duh. Ah, now we're talking. 'American black bear' and 'venomous snakes.' Those are hazards I can respect. Oh, and here's the last one: 'Diarrhea from drinking water.'" I glanced up at my dad. "Seriously?"

"Hm. Black bears and diarrhea. I'm scared already. Maybe we better just pitch a tent in the backyard."

Dad scooped the burgers onto buns I'd set out on metal camping plates and handed me mine.

"We should definitely do it." Dad took a big bite of his burger. "Hike the Appalachian Trail."

"Well, yeah," I said. "We've been talking about it since I was twelve."

"I know, but I think it's time we actually made some plans."

I stopped mid-chew to stare at my dad. "For real?" To tell the truth, I always figured the Appalachian Trail was a dream we liked to talk about, but that would never happen. After all, it's over 2,000 miles long and crosses through fourteen states. To do that on foot would take an entire summer at least. There's no way my dad would take that much time off work.

"For real."

"When?" I popped the last bite of burger into my mouth.

"Next summer, after you graduate from high school. That would be a great way to celebrate, don't you think?"

"Well, hell yeah. That would be amazing. Let's do it."

The Appalachian Trail meant hiking through the woods of Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and finishing up in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. The hike itself would be incredibly cool. Also, for the rest of my life, even when I was old, I could work into conversations, *Now that reminds me of the time back in the day when I hiked the Appalachian Trail.*

"It would be a great way for us to spend some quality time together before you head off to college." Dad threw another log on the campfire. The embers crackled and jumped.

College. This was the last thing I wanted to think

about. Contemplating my future was like peering into a black hole. But Dad had expectations. College is just what people did. Everyone should have it all worked out by age eighteen: a list of goals, a total life plan. Yeah, right. I was terrified to tell anybody this, but I didn't have a plan. I didn't even have a clue.

"So, have you started your applications?" He tried to sound casual, but I was losing him. He was switching from Dad, my camping buddy, to Dad, the parent who knows what's best, the one who says I better step up or obviously I'll be a major disappointment. A subtle shift, but it was there, loud and clear. "It would be a good idea to get started on your essay this summer."

"I know, Dad. Look, can we talk about something else?" I started to feel sick, dinner churning in my stomach.

"But, Danny, you need to get serious about—" Dad began.

"Yes, I know, Dad. 'Danny, it's time get serious about your future, your education, your career, blah blah blah.' But it's not like you can squeeze all your wise fatherly advice into one week and then disappear on another business trip."

I felt bad as soon as I said it, but it was the truth. He was always out on the road even, I suspected, when he didn't need to be.

Dad stared into the fire. He didn't even try to deny it. "I'm sorry, son."

Neither of us said a thing for a long time, just watched the wood burn down into glowing red coals as the sky grew darker. Crickets and cicadas started their night sounds and fireflies flashed signals in the tall grass by the pond. When I finally spoke, what I had to say came out so low I wasn't sure he could hear me. Or if I even wanted him to.

"Dad, how come we never talk about Cole?"

He drew in a quick breath. For both of us, hearing the name out loud felt like a blow to the heart. "You know why, Danny."

"No, Dad, I don't."

He took his hat off and raked fingers through his hair. "It's your mother," he said. "She feels responsible for what happened. I thought you knew that."

"How could I know when we don't talk about it? It's like Cole never existed."

Tears prickled behind my eyes then, as they do now, as I sit by the edge of Walden Pond and remember.

When I close my eyes, I can still see Cole that last morning when I glanced back at the house on my way to school. He was standing at the living room window like he did every day, wearing his Batman pajamas and waving good-bye.

Everybody said he looked exactly like I did when I was two, with his gray eyes and hair all black and thick like mine.

That afternoon, when the guidance counselor came to get me, we were working on the isosceles triangle theorem in eighth grade geometry class. He whispered something in my teacher Mrs. Pearson's ear, and then they both looked over at me. Somehow I knew something bad had happened, like a premonition.

At the funeral, everybody talked about what a terrible tragedy it was. An accident. Mom had been working on the garden like she did every May, planting flowers around the pool fence. Cole was doing what he called "helping," using a beach shovel and a Tonka dump truck to push dirt around.

When the phone rang that day, Mom picked Cole up and carried him into the house with her. But when she went looking for a pen and paper to write something down, he ran back outside, probably to get his truck. He loved that truck, partly because it was my favorite truck when I was little, and I gave it to him. By the time Mom finished the call and realized he wasn't playing at her feet like she'd thought, Cole had opened the closed gate around the pool—we still don't know how he did that—got too close to the edge, and slipped silently into the deep end, still holding on to that truck.

Cole would've turned seven years old this year and been a second-grader, but his life ended the year I turned thirteen and Rosie was four. He drowned in the pool at our house in Evanston, and Mom was so devastated that we had to move. In fact, we moved three times in five years, each time to another house in a different suburb. On the outside, every one of those houses was really pretty. But inside those houses, nothing changed. Mom was drinking, Dad was leaving, and Rosie and I were trying to be perfect. No matter how many times we moved, we were still us. And to be honest, it wasn't working out so well.

"Are you and Mom getting a divorce?" I whispered to my dad by the campfire that night in Wisconsin, unable to be silent on that too.

Dad looked down at his hands, rubbing dirt off his knuckles. "I'm...not sure. It's complicated, Danny. I don't expect you to understand."

He was right. I didn't understand why my family's world continued to fall apart and I was completely powerless over everything. Whether it was fair or not, I blamed my father for not making it better. He was the dad, and it was his job to make it better. Without another word, I unrolled my sleeping bag by the fire, turned away, and pretended to go to sleep. We didn't talk about hiking

the Appalachian Trail again for the rest of that trip. In fact, neither of us ever brought it up again.



At Walden Pond my thoughts are full of these things I'd forgotten. Like losing Cole and fighting with Dad. Camping and the Appalachian Trail.

If Cole had lived, we would've taken him camping, and I would've shown him how to do everything—like build campfires, find stars and planets in the night sky, and hunt for wild blueberries. But I never got a chance to show him much of anything.

Picking up flat stones on the shores of the pond, I chuck them at an angle and they skim across the surface, five, six, seven times. I was a rock-skipping champ. I would've taught Cole how to do that too.

I pick up a couple more stones from the edge of the water and examine them on my open palm. One is a perfect oval of quartz, smooth and white. The other is a chunk of gray granite, with rough edges and tiny mirrors of mica in it.

Maybe if I'm lucky, Thoreau will visit me in my dreams, so I can talk to him one more time. Sounds goofy, but I really want to know: if he were in my place, What Would Henry Do? Would he go home and face the

mess he left behind? Or would he strike out on his own, start a new life and never look back?

A few feet away from Thoreau's cabin site is a huge pile of rocks called a cairn that has been growing on this spot for decades. People who visit the site place rocks on the cairn, basically to honor Thoreau, acknowledging that he was somebody special, to say hey Henry, whassup, I was here to see you.

I set my gray stone on top of the pile gently, like a sign of respect. Or a good-bye. The smooth white stone I slip into my pocket, a tiny souvenir of Walden to take with me, wherever I end up next.

Then, instead of settling myself on the hearth of Thoreau's former cabin like that first night, I find a dry, hidden spot to lay out the sleeping bag behind a boulder. The warmer weather has attracted a lot of random hikers, and I don't want any company. Hopefully I'm still close enough for the spirit of Thoreau to know I'm here.

*Please come, Henry. Please. I need to talk to you.*

The minutes tick by, but time seems to pass slower here in the woods. The sky is sprinkled with a million stars, and the pines are silhouetted against the deep blue stretching over my head. An owl hoots from somewhere high in an oak tree. Some small animal rustles in the bushes at the shore of the pond. A mosquito whines in my ear.

I wait. And wait. The night stretches on before me and all around me, envelops me. It's also waiting but for nothing, it turns out, other than itself.



A loud chorus of singing, twittering, trilling birds wakes me up the next morning, and I duck my head inside the sleeping bag to muffle the sound, but it does no good. The birds have decided it's time to get up, and it's pointless to try to get more sleep. Okay, okay. I'm up already.

Thoreau never came last night. There was no visit, no dreams. Nothing. I avoid the chilly morning air by hunkering down in the sleeping bag with only my hair sticking out of the top, listening to the songs of all the birds, like a crazy orchestra tuning up. Here in the woods, I can almost convince myself that my problems in the human world don't even exist. Which is maybe what Henry has been saying all along. *Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity.* Don't take more from the world than you need. Don't need more than you take. Somehow nature puts things into perspective.

"What the—are you kidding me? Hey, kid! Get back here with my stuff!"

From somewhere near the pond, I hear a guy's voice thundering into the woods. At first I think he's shouting

at me, which makes no sense. Then I hear someone crash past me in the underbrush, not ten feet away. Popping my head out of the sleeping bag, I see some kid in a plaid coat, red scarf, and black knit cap pulled down low over his head running up the hill, a bundle in his arms. I scramble out of the sleeping bag and stand up to get a better look.

There, in the clearing by Thoreau's cabin site, is a guy with bushy red hair, dripping with pond water, wearing nothing but a pair of drenched boxers and shivering with cold and fury. The guy breaks into a clumsy, barefooted run into the woods after the thief who apparently stole his clothes. After running just a few yards, he bellows in pain, grabs his foot, and unleashes an amazing tirade of creative cursing about what he intends to do to the thief, his entire extended family, and any domestic animals they happen to own. I'm so impressed that I just stand there, staring.

Spotting me there beside the boulder, the guy actually shakes his fist at me and says, "What are you just standing there for? Stop that bastard now, for the love of God!" He gestures toward the crashing figure, swiftly disappearing into the woods.

The insult and indignity of the guy's situation strikes me. Besides, what else am I going to do, say, *Nah, you're*

*on your own. You just stand there and freeze your ass off. I don't care?* Of course not. So I step out of the sleeping bag, slip on my sneakers without lacing them, and bound into the woods after the kid who was cruel enough to steal a half-naked guy's clothes when he was looking the other way.

The thief has grown momentarily silent, maybe realizing that twigs breaking and dead leaves crunching under his feet give away his location. He must be hiding now, crouched behind a bush or a large rock.

But then I spot his red knit scarf, caught in a branch near his hiding place by a toppled pine tree, and all hell breaks loose as he gives in to the chase. He ducks behind a stand of maple trees, but I spot him at the top of the hill, trying to find a shortcut out to the street.

"Hey you, stop!" I shout, which is stupid of course, because this only makes him run faster. He stumbles on a branch, almost falls, and I finally gain on him. Reaching the back of his coat, I grab on, tackle him to the ground, and we somersault together in the leaves. I roll him over, pin him down on the dirt with my knees on his shoulders, and get a good look at him.

Huge blue eyes stare up at me, the bottom half of his face covered by the flipped-up collar of the plaid coat. A strand of long blond hair sneaks out from under the

wool hat. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a minute. This is no guy. It's a girl.

"Sorry," I stammer, all embarrassed, until I remind myself she's a thief, even if she is female, with long blond hair and pretty eyes. "I mean, come on, who steals a guy's clothes?"

The girl blinks at me, dark lashes, eyes that look familiar somehow.

"Hank?" she says.

"Nessa?" My voice comes out something like a squeak. Stunned, I scramble to my feet away from her, and with her hands freed, she yanks the hat off her head, pulls the collar away from her face, and I see her huge smile.

"Hank!" she cries out, and she's throwing her arms around my neck, practically jumping all over me. "I found you!"

Nessa is here, hanging off my neck, here in Concord, Massachusetts, and I'm too startled to convert any of the questions in my head into coherent sentences. I register that she's a blond now—after the makeover Magpie ordered—and that although she's still pretty, her hands, face, and clothes are filthy.

"Yes, you found me," I say at last. "I...here you are, and I have so many questions about that." I shake my head to

clear it, like shaking off a crazy dream that makes no sense. "But you know, there's a guy standing down there shivering in his underwear, and he needs his clothes back."

She grins, but lowers her eyes like she's at least making an attempt to be ashamed. "I'm sorry," she says.

"Look, just give me his clothes," I say. "I'll tell him you got away, but that you dropped all his stuff. Okay?"

She shrugs, then nods. "Okay, Hank." Before I can scoop up the clothes, she grabs my hand, her blues eyes searching my face. "Promise you'll come back?" She's squeezing my fingers so hard it actually hurts. "Please?"

"Of course, I will. I promise."

Nessa helps me gather up a denim shirt, black jeans, a pair of cowboy boots, and a backpack, and I jog down the hill to where the guy is pacing around the clearing with a limp, his arms wrapped around his chest, shivering even harder now, his lips turning blue. Close up, I can see the guy is older than I thought, probably in his forties. He has thick red hair on his chest and back, almost like fur, but it's obviously not enough to keep him warm on a chilly spring morning in New England.

"The kid got away," I tell him. "But the good news is that he dropped your stuff. Here."

He grabs the bundle of clothes, and he's still cursing like crazy under his breath, not that I blame him. He

looks so funny, I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

"All I wanted to do was come to Walden Pond and emulate Thoreau by taking a morning bath in these sacred waters like he did," the guy murmurs, eyes still blazing. "But then some asshole runs off with my gear. I bet *that* never happened to Thoreau."

Emulating Thoreau, eh? I look at his drenched boxers. They're pink, covered with red and white hearts, like joke underwear his wife or girlfriend gave him for Valentine's Day. *Nice boxers*, I almost say out loud.

As if reading my thoughts, the guy blushes and pulls his pants on, right over his wet underwear. "Okay then," I say, hoping to spare either of us both further embarrassment. "Sorry this happened to you. Have a good day now." I turn away, still fighting a smile:

"Wait," he says hastily, and I turn back. "Uh, thanks. You did a good thing."

*You did a good thing.* A good thing. Well, that's nice for a change.

I grab my sleeping bag from behind the boulder, stuff it into the pack and swing it onto my back before heading up to join Nessa. I find her right where I left her, sitting cross-legged on the ground, ripping the bark off a dead branch.

"Hank," she says, nodding as if to reassure herself. "You came back."

"Of course I did."

She sighs, a deep inhale and exhale that racks her small body. Then tears start rolling down her face, leaving tracks in the dirt. Damn. I hate to see a girl cry. It just makes me want to go find the person who hurt her and beat him up.

"What's going on, Nessa?"

"It's Jack," she says in a whisper. "He's hurt, bad."

"Where is he?"

She scrambles to her feet and grabs my hand with icy fingers. "I'll take you."

Holding my hand tight like a little girl, Nessa leads me through the woods and down to the path, then over fallen trees and new spring undergrowth, to a hiding place on the other side of the pond.

"We came to Concord to look for you," she says, anticipating my questions. "You left us plenty of clues, like your name. Henry David. Jack remembered that. And he remembered the book you showed him, *Walden*, and how you said it was a clue to who you are. It wasn't hard to do a little research and find out where Walden is. We figured if we hung around here long enough, you might just show up. Which you did."

"But why did you steal that guy's stuff?"

Nessa's face is dirty, but a red flush shows through. "I just happened to walk by and saw clothes and thought maybe there was food in that pack. We need clean clothes and we're hungry. Do you blame me?"

I shrug. Doesn't matter now. Plus, it's not like I can judge stealing after all the laws I've broken in the past few weeks. "So why did you leave New York? And what happened to Jack?"

Nessa pulls the black hat down over her ears. "Things got bad with Magpie, so we had to get out of there." she says. "He was really mad after you left, even though Jack told him he tried to stop you from leaving. But he was pissed at both of us. I thought he liked us, that he wanted to take care of us, but he got so mean. He started getting meaner and meaner. He started hurting Jack almost every day. And then, me."

"Magpie was hurting you?" I ask Nessa. She nods, not meeting my eyes. All I want to do is take Magpie by his proper English neck and squeeze the proper English life right out of him.

"The worst was a couple days ago. Magpie sent Jack to collect a debt from one of his clients. The guy wouldn't pay. But when Jack came back empty-handed, Magpie didn't believe him. He got so mad he beat Jack

up. I think he broke his arm." Tears streak down Nessa's dirty cheeks. "I was so upset, I went to the client myself and made him give me the money." I don't even want to know how she managed that, so I don't ask. "But then Jack and I ran away. There's no way either of us was going back."

"You mean, you stole the money from Magpie?"

"The way we saw it, he owed it to us. Every penny."

"Somehow, I don't think he'd see it that way," I say. A realization dawns on me. "Hey, did you come looking for me at the high school? Did you ask a lady janitor about me?"

"Yeah. Jack thought he saw you walk into the school. I didn't think the guy looked like you, but Jack is not always so clear on stuff these days."

So it was Nessa, dressed as a boy, and Jack, who came looking for me and talked to Sophie. Not Magpie or any of the scary guys who work for him. I'm safe. Maybe we're all safe.

"Jack was in so much pain the whole way." Nessa leads me off the path to push through some thicker underbrush. She swipes at her nose with the end of her scarf. "I had to give him something."

"Like what?"

"Something for the pain."

"Jesus, Nessa."

"They were pills. I don't know what kind. Magpie gave them to us, and we were going to sell them. But Jack needed some."

Shit. This keeps getting worse. I have no idea what I'm going to find when I finally lay eyes on Jack.

We skirt around a thick oak tree and see their hiding place under the ledge of a huge lichen-covered rock. Jack is there, and at first, I swear he looks dead lying there on a bed of brown leaves, his worn army jacket laid over him like a blanket. Sleeping with his mouth open, he looks six instead of sixteen. Nessa kneels next to him in the leaves and rests a hand on his shoulder. I drop my pack on the ground and stand looking down at them both, feeling helpless.

"Jack, I found him. I found Hank," she says softly. Nothing. He doesn't even twitch. "C'mon, Jack, wake up." She jiggles his shoulder, but he's motionless. We lock eyes. Did they make it all the way here to Walden only for Jack to overdose and die here in the woods? Nessa shakes him again, harder this time.

"Fuck!" Jack jolts straight up, his eyes bulging. We rear back, taken totally off guard. "Goddamn, Nessa," he moans, falling back into the leaves. "That's my sore arm."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she murmurs, tears flooding

her eyes. "I...I found Hank. I brought him here."

Jack holds his arm close to his chest like it's a broken wing, eyes screwed shut against the pain. Then takes a couple deep breaths before looking up to acknowledge my presence.

"Hey, ugly," he says at last, like the first time we met, and I almost smile. But his voice is weak and slurred, and there's a purple bruise on his cheekbone.

"How you feeling, Jack?"

He winces. "Terrible, man. I think my arm's broke. Magpie—"

"Yeah, I know. Nessa told me."

He needs help. But here we are, way off the path in Walden Woods, too far from the road for a car to get in. And there's no way I'll be calling an ambulance or alerting the park rangers.

"Can you eat, Jack? You hungry?"

"Always hungry."

I reach into my backpack and pull out the food I brought along for breakfast. "Here. You're even skinnier than the last time I saw you. Eat this."

I hand him a couple glazed doughnuts and open a container of apple juice. He wolfs the doughnuts down like he hasn't eaten in days. Nessa eats one and lets Jack devour the rest.

"Okay, Jack, this is what we're going to do," I tell him. "Nessa and I are going to help you walk out of the woods, and we'll find a place for you to sit, closer to the street. Then I'm going to go get help."

"No, Hank." Even though he's sick and hurt, there's no doubt Jack would attack like a rabid dog if he felt cornered. "We didn't come all this way for you to get us sent back to our fucking father."

He scratches at his face like he wants to peel off his own skin, and Nessa starts to whimper again. I pull his hands from his face.

"Jack, relax. I promise that won't happen. I have friends here, and I trust them. One is a nurse. She helped me when I was sick, and she'll help you."

"We don't have a choice," Nessa whispers gently to Jack. "We can't go back to New York. We have to trust Hank."

Jack gives me a long look that flickers between suspicion and hope. "Okay," he says at last.

I stuff my backpack under a rocky ledge and make a mental note of its location so I can pick it up later. Then together, Nessa and I help Jack to his feet. I pull my own coat over his shoulders as he cradles his injured arm. His other arm, I drape around my neck.

The three of us stagger through the woods near the beginning of the path to Walden Pond, not far from the

parking area. "Stay here," I say. "I'll be back with my friends as soon as I can. Don't go anywhere. Promise?"

The two of them sit down on a stone wall near the beach area of the pond. Jack stares hollow-eyed into the shallow water, clearly surrendering to whatever might be next.

"Right. Where else we gonna go?"



"Sweetie, I'm so sorry, but this is going to hurt," says Suzanne in a soft voice.

Jack is lying on the green leather couch in Thomas's living room. Suzanne kneels in front of him with his injured arm cradled in her hands, while Nessa, Thomas, and I stand nearby, feeling useless. Still dressed in the blue scrubs she wore during her overnight shift at the hospital, Suzanne is in total nurse mode.

"The good news is that your arm isn't broken," she says. "The bad news is that it's dislocated, and getting the joint back in place takes some messing around with your sore shoulder. Ready?"

Jack's face is white and his eyes look enormous in his thin face, but he nods. Nessa buries her face in my shoulder as Suzanne takes hold of Jack's arm, pulls it toward her, then pushes back. Jack howls in pain, but through gritted

teeth, says, "Do it," so Suzanne does. With a sick, audible pop, his shoulder slips back into its socket.

"Better?" asks Suzanne.

"Yeah," says Jack in a strangled whisper. Nessa lets out a deep breath into my chest and I feel the heat of it through my shirt.

Suzanne folds a big black bandana into a triangle and knots it around Jack's neck to create a sling. Gently, she tucks his arm into it and presses it against his chest.

"It's still going to hurt for a while, Jack. But you should feel better in a few days."

Jack closes his eyes without responding, and Thomas pulls an afghan off the back of the couch and spreads it over Jack's body. He looks so small just lying there with the fight drained out of him, but I know it's temporary. Jack's a fighter. He'll be back.

"Get some sleep now, buddy," Thomas says.

Suzanne turns to Nessa. "So, Nessa," she says, using her nice-nurse-lady voice, like she's talking to a five-year-old. "Would you like to take a nap too or maybe a bath?"

After all the sick adult stuff Nessa has been through on the streets, it probably feels good to have somebody speak to her like she's a child. She smiles and I get a glimpse of the girl she might be if she'd had a normal life. "Both, please," she says. "Can I have the bath first?"

Suzanne leads Nessa upstairs. We hear them discuss bubbles versus bath salts, whatever those are, and Nessa sounds so happy being normal, just being a kid and a girl.

Thomas juts his chin toward the kitchen. "Coffee?" he asks me.

"Sure." We go in, and I sit down at the nicked wood table.

He pours a cup for me in a blue mug that says *The Thoreau Society* on the side. Hands it to me with a tight smile.

"I'm sorry, Thomas," I say, low enough that Jack won't hear me, if he's even awake enough to listen. "I didn't know they'd follow me here."

"Well," he says slowly, and I can tell he's being cautious. It was one thing for Thomas to help me out, but another to take in my messed-up friends. "Obviously, they need help."

"Yeah, they do." I think of the bruises on Jack's face, remember Nessa crying in the shack behind the Dumpster that first night. And Magpie's cruel smile. "They really do."

Suzanne comes downstairs and joins us in the kitchen. "Poor thing. She's filthy. I put her in the tub for a nice, long soak. I just hope she doesn't fall asleep in there."

After pouring herself a cup of coffee, she joins us at

the table, adds a spoonful of sugar to her coffee, and stirs while we watch in numb silence. "So, Hank, we need to call somebody. You know that, right?"

Alarm prickles my scalp. "Like who?"

"Child services."

"They can't be sent back to their dad. He was abusing them."

Thomas's eyes harden and his big, callused hands flex unconsciously into fists on the table. If he knew the whole story, he'd want to smack more than a few people around. The thought of Thomas in warrior mode is weirdly comforting.

"Would they have to go back home?" I ask. "I mean, if the authorities knew they were here?"

"Not if there's abuse," Suzanne says. "They might be placed in a foster home."

Thomas clenches his jaw and his temple throbs. "That's not always the best solution either."

"Not always," she agrees, and I can tell by the way she covers one of his fists with her hand that she knows at least something about his past. "But it's better than being on the streets."

"They can't go out on the streets again," I say, thinking of Magpie and all the other potential Magpies out there. "There's no way."

Suzanne takes a thoughtful sip of coffee. "There are programs through the hospital to help kids like them. Let me make a few calls."

"Okay, thanks," I say, wondering how I could ever fully thank them for everything. After draining my coffee cup, I excuse myself and go into the living room to check on Jack.

"You okay, dude?"

Jack opens one slitted eye and groans.

"So sorry about the shoulder, Jack," I say. "That really sucks."

"Hank," he says through teeth tight with pain. He shoots a glance toward the kitchen and then waves me closer so I'll lean in to listen to his lowered voice. "It's not just my arm. Need some pills. Just a little Oxy would do it. Or Xanax. Please, Hank?" He holds out a pleading hand, and I can see how badly it's shaking. "Something, anything," he murmurs.

"Can't do it, buddy." I feel that familiar dark urge to wrap my hands around Magpie's neck and squeeze, because I'm sure he's the one who got Jack hooked. It's possible Jack was even an addict when I first met him, but I didn't recognize the signs. "I'm sorry."

The only thing I can do for Jack now is just be with him and be his friend. So I collapse into an overstuffed

chair and watch over him as he shivers and twitches and eventually falls asleep. Laying my head back, I close my eyes and start to doze off too. I'm exhausted after my restless night in the woods and everything that happened at Walden after I woke up.

Funny, I went looking for Thoreau and found Jack and Nessa instead. And that's good, I guess. But I can't help wondering if I'll ever see Henry again.

16

HAILEY LOOKS SMOKING HOT WHEN SHE DRIVES OVER TO pick me up for the Battle of the Bands that night. Smudged black lines around her eyes make them smoky and sexy, and she's wearing this tight black outfit and black leather boots that make her look like a rock star, or maybe Catwoman. Like I said, hot.

"Hailey, you're gorgeous." I give her a kiss. Her lips are trembling. So are her earrings, one a red feather, the other black. "You're going to kick ass tonight."

She smiles and reaches over to wipe her red lipstick off my mouth. "You too," she says. But her fingers, shiny with black nail polish, are shaking as they grip the steering wheel. She pulls the keys out of the ignition and

holds them out to me with a pleading expression. "Will you drive, Hank? I'm too nervous."

Automatically I accept the keys, but my blood turns to ice. The last time I drove a car was that day with Rosie, the day of the accident. Just the feel of the keys forces the bitter smell of brake fluid into my sinuses and I see the gray truck coming for us before the memory shuts down. I'm so dizzy I want to rest my head on the dashboard for a while, but I don't. Forcing the memories away, I cram them into a closet and slam the door.

Today is about Hailey. I have to pull Hailey through this night before I can consider my own ruined life. So we switch seats and I get behind the wheel like everything's cool, turn the key, put my foot on the brake, and adjust the rearview mirror. Then I turn up the classic rock radio station—some rocking tune by Aerosmith—and give Hailey a cheesy double thumbs-up to show her all is well. Then, with the car jerking forward as I remember how to work the accelerator, we drive off to school for the Battle of the Bands.



The auditorium has been completely transformed into the closest thing a high school auditorium can be to a dance club. White lights are strung everywhere, silver

disco balls and stars hang from the ceiling, and a light machine sweeps multicolored beams around the room. The first several rows of seats have been pulled out and put into storage to create a mosh pit—dance floor area in front of the stage.

Two performance areas are set up, splitting the stage in half, both with drum kits already assembled, speakers, monitors, and amps all in place. All the musicians need to do is plug in and play. While one band is in the spotlight, the next band can get ready for their turn on the darkened half of the stage.

"Whoa, this is awesome," I say.

"Duuuudes." A deep drawling voice comes from behind us, there's Sam, wearing a black T-shirt with the word *Zildjian* across the front in white letters, his drum brand of choice. Drumsticks stick out of his back jeans pocket.

"Nice set-up, eh?" I ask him.

He sweeps the stage with a sleepy gaze and a slow smile spreads across his face. "Sweet." The guy is so relaxed I wonder if he has a pulse. I wish he could transfer some of his laid-back calm to the girl currently cutting off all circulation to my arm.

"Hey, guys."

I turn, see Ryan, and do a double take. He's wearing tight white pants, a black shirt with a white tie, and shiny

black ankle boots. If that wasn't enough, he's got a black fedora pulled down over one eye and sunglasses with red frames. The three of us stare at him, taking this all in, not sure what to say. Then Sam snorts, and we all start to laugh.

"What?" Ryan pulls off his sunglasses.

"Nice outfit," I say.

"Dude, are you wearing makeup?" Sam asks.

"Just a little eyeliner. I borrowed it from my sister. Come on, we're rock stars tonight, why not look like it?" He smiles, punches me in the arm.

"Better to play like one than look like one," I say, punching him back.

"Ah, here they are, *Carpe Diem*." Ms. Coleman approaches us, clutching a clipboard. She's wearing huge dangly earrings that look like disco balls and a silvery shirt that reflects the colored lights sweeping the auditorium. "There are ten bands playing tonight. You're scheduled here." She jabs a finger at her list, and we circle around to see.

"Next to the last," Sam observes. "That's actually a really good place to be. We'll be fresh in everybody's mind when they do the voting."

"How does that work, anyway? The voting?" I ask.

"It's based on applause," says Ms. Coleman. "At the

end, the bands line up on the stage, and the crowd cheers for their favorite band. The one with the loudest audience response wins a trophy and two hundred dollars."

Ryan and Sam exchange crooked smiles, no doubt imagining a crowd gone wild. Would be nice. But I have my doubts.

Hailey buries her face in my shoulder. "Next to the last," she whispers, and I know what she's thinking. For her, the waiting will be torture. She's got all night to be nervous.

"Make sure you're ready to go on stage at around nine thirty," says Ms. Coleman. Not waiting for a response, she clutches the clipboard to her sparkly shirt and rushes off.



Within the hour, the Thoreau High School auditorium—dance club is rocking with noise and lights and people, and I'm wishing Joey and Matt were here to share this with me. With Joey on drums and Matt on bass and vocals, we would've blown these uptight New England bands out of the water with some of our rocking original songs. Not to brag or anything, but we were pretty damn good. I wonder if Joey's Uncle Phil actually gave our CD to that guy at the House of Blues. I wonder if

his record label ever tried to contact us and I screwed things up for everybody by running away.

At about eight thirty, Hailey is in the girl's room. Again. She says she just needs to check on her makeup, but I know she's in there with Danielle and some of her other friends trying to stay calm. I hope it works. Even if her blood sugar is under control, she could psyche herself out so bad that the stage fright could still get her.

The band onstage is this punk group called Snapper, playing a mangled version of a Sex Pistols song. So far, none of the bands have impressed me, so I'm starting to think we might actually have a chance to win some cash. I scan the crowd, and I'm surprised to see familiar faces. Thomas, Suzanne, and Nessa. A grin on my face, I push through the crowd to get to them. I search for Jack too but don't see him.

"Hey, what are you guys doing here?" I shout to be heard over the music.

"You think we'd miss this?" Thomas asks, and he gives me a hug that's more like a pound on the back. "Although this song is causing me actual pain," he admits. "My band used to do it. A whole lot better too."

"I can believe that."

Nessa looks up at me with this shine to her eyes like she thinks I'm amazing, and I won't lie, it makes me feel

really good. Dressed in a clean white shirt and jeans, without all that dark makeup she used to wear, she doesn't look anything like a street kid anymore. Just another cute girl at Thoreau High. I don't know how she did it, but Nessa has been able to hold on to a sweetness and innocence in spite of everything that's happened to her. Jack seems to be suffering more than she is.

"I didn't know you played guitar," she says, acting shy with me.

"There's a lot I didn't know either when I was with you guys," I say. "Hey, where's Jack?"

The three of them exchange a furtive look, and nobody says anything. The blush drains from Nessa's face, and she goes pale. Uh-oh. This can't be good.

Suzanne clears her throat and loops an arm in Nessa's. "Come on, girlfriend," she says. "Let's see if we can go get a program." The two of them turn toward the back of the auditorium and work their way through the crowd. Nessa glances anxiously over her shoulder at me.

Thomas stands in front of me, arms folded across his wide chest like he's trying to protect us both. "Jack ran away, Hank."

I must have heard him wrong. "Ran away? What happened?"

"Not long after you left with Hailey, I caught Jack rummaging through my medicine cabinet. He was stealing prescription pills. I think he took some—antibiotics probably—without even knowing what they were."

I bury my face in my hands. "Shit. What did you do?"

"Laid into him, of course. Shouted at him, threatened him a little. Did my best to put the fear of God into him. The kid's a junkie-in-training."

"It's not his fault. It's that guy Magpie who—"

"Look, I've seen what drugs do to people. I was pissed, and I was really hard on the kid. I didn't think he'd take off like that, but I can't say I'm sorry for yelling at him."

"But...how could he leave Nessa behind?"

"Probably the best thing he could do for her. We had a long talk with her after he bolted. She's tired, done with running, and she wants stability. She's going to stay with Suzanne until Monday morning, and we'll talk to somebody in child services. Nessa is stronger than you'd think. She's going to be okay, Hank."

"And what about Jack?"

"That's up to him."

I think about Jack's hands shaking, his bruised cheek, dark circles under his eyes. The guy is probably deep into withdrawal by now. Maybe even sick from taking too many random drugs from Thomas's medicine cabinet.

Thomas gives me a hard pat on the back. "Try not to worry about this right now," he says. "You focus on the music. I'll keep on the lookout for Jack."

Snapper finishes its second cringe-worthy song, and Ms. Coleman grabs a microphone and takes the stage, silver shirt reflecting lights like crazy. "Next up, let's hear it for Red Tide."

The darkened side of the stage is now bathed in light, and the next band launches into a Coldplay song. This group is good, really good. Peering closely at the band members, I recognize the girl with the pink-tipped hair, the lanky lead guitarist with his cap on sideways. It's Cameron's band. I want them to be terrible, want to hate their music, but I can't. The singer is good too, just not as good as Hailey.

"This group is the best so far," Thomas says as they launch into their second song.

I shrug, not wanting to agree, even though he's right. *Yeah, but the lead guitarist is an asshole*, I want to say. When they finish, the crowd goes nuts, hooting and whistling like crazy.

"Well, I should get going for now, look for the rest of my band," I say. "We'll be up in a little while."

"Okay, Hank, good luck. We'll be here," Thomas says, giving me another manly whack on the shoulder. "Don't

worry about anything. We'll figure it out."

I head backstage and Cameron is there, basking in the glow of a bunch of people who want to tell him how great he was, so I hang back in the wings, not wanting to deal with him. There's no way in hell I'll offer him any praise. To my surprise though, Hailey goes up to him and gives him a long, warm hug. I fight back an attack of jealousy. After all, she's with me, not him. Right? Well, sort of.

They talk quietly, but within a couple minutes their voices rise and they're arguing. Again.

"But I don't want to drive into the city, Cam," Hailey is saying. "Can't you get somebody else?"

"I tried. I couldn't get anybody else," Cameron says. "Come on, Hailey. You said—"

"I know what I said. And now I'm saying you're stressing me out. Can we talk about this some other time? Seriously, Cam."

"But I need to do this tomorrow, Hailey. We can't talk about it another time."

She doesn't need this tonight of all nights. I walk up behind Hailey and stand there like her bodyguard, glaring at Cameron until he notices me. He gives me a double take through suspicious, squinty eyes.

"Nice shirt," he says.

I glance down. The black T-shirt from Nashville. Crap. I wasn't even thinking when I put the damn thing on.

"Thanks," I say. "I like it too."

"Give it back."

Yeah, like I'm going to whip it off right now and hand it to him. "No."

Hailey stands between the two of us, looks ready to burst into tears. "Stop it, you guys. I can't deal with either of you right now."

Cameron and I cut smoldering looks at each other, but for her sake, I shrug. "Nothing to stop, Hailey. Everything's fine."

She closes her eyes, takes deep breaths to control the tears. "Look, I need to go to the girl's room. Brush my hair. Whatever." She walks away, leaving Cameron and me standing there, glaring at each other.

"Why don't you just leave Hailey alone," I say. A statement, not a question.

"And who are you to tell me that? I've known Hailey since we were in kindergarten."

"Guess that gives you a right to bully her into driving you around like she's your chauffeur."

"I lost my license for that chick," Cameron says. "She owes me."

The next band, comprised entirely of girls with blue

hair and white leather miniskirts, walks by. His gaze drifts to follow them, not that I blame the guy. But I don't take my eyes off Cameron's face.

"Let's take this conversation outside," I say. Not to beat him up, just to talk. That's what I tell myself, anyway.

He nods, leads me to a back door, pushes it open and we're outside in a deserted courtyard. It's a coolish spring night, but crickets are already chirping in the long grass behind the school.

"So what's your deal, Cameron?" I ask, stuffing my hands in my back pockets so I won't hit him. "Are you really that much of an asshole that you want to get Hailey all upset just before she has to perform? You trying to sabotage her and have her mess up like last year just so you can prove some point?"

Cameron flinches, obviously not realizing Hailey told me the whole story, but then he regains his swagger by changing the subject. "Hey, I can prove that's my shirt." He jabs a finger in my face. "My name is sewn into the collar."

I stare at him with a snort of laughter. "Oh yeah? Your mommy sews name tags in all your clothes? Is that what you're saying? So little Cammy won't lose his precious clothes?"

He lunges for me then, tries to pull at the neck of the shirt so he can search for his stupid name tag, but I shove him away with both hands like he doesn't matter. Can't get into a fight, not now, when I'm due to play guitar for Hailey in less than an hour.

Cameron comes at me, fists balled, aiming at my nose, but I dodge him, and he swings at the air. I laugh, which just pisses him off more.

Out of the darkness behind the school comes a raspy shout, and the two of us freeze. "Back off," it says. "Or I'll kill you."