

"I will," I promise.

"Okay, kid. Hope the rest of your day goes better."

Buzz Cut gives me a fatherly pat on the arm. "Have a good trip home, Steven."

I buy my ticket and as soon as they announce the all-aboard for my trip, I double-time it down the escalator, push past slower people lined up to board the train, and immediately find a seat.

Up until the second the train pulls out of the station, I'm sure someone—Magpie with his gun or a cop with handcuffs—is going to come for me. But miraculously, no one does. No one seems to notice me at all.

5

TWENTY MINUTES INTO THE FOUR-HOUR RIDE TO BOSTON, I finally relax, going over my itinerary in my head over and over again to settle my twitchy brain. The train will arrive at South Station in Boston. The lady in the ticket booth told me I should take a cab to North Station. And from there, a commuter train to Concord. If all goes well, I should get in about 4 p.m. today.

As for what happens after that, I have no idea. I'm trying not to think about that part. For now, I'm safe and warm, and sitting in this really comfortable chair watching the scenery go by. Buildings and bridges and concrete switch over to houses and trees and rivers. A lot of the tall grass I see is still kind of brown, and the trees just have buds on them, so I figure it's early spring sometime. A glance at the date stamped on my train ticket confirms it. Mid-April.

From the dining car at the middle of the train, I buy two hot dogs and take my time eating them. On the outside, I must look completely normal to people around me, who barely give me a second look. Just some kid eating hot dogs on the train to Boston.

But as soon as I'm alone with my thoughts, total panic is a heartbeat away. Is this really happening? Did I really almost kill a guy in an alley? What the hell kind of person am I? Simon's face, shocked and bloody, swims into my consciousness and it's a struggle to keep the hot dogs down. There is nothing "normal" about me. I have a knife injury that I have to press paper towels against to control the bleeding. I assaulted a guy in an alley. I came close to becoming Magpie's property in his creepy, surreal world of street kids and drugs. I'm worried about Jack and Nessa, who are still out on the streets, in danger. And then of course, there's that other detail—I still have no idea who I am.

Can't stand it. Have to think of something else or I'm going to curl up into a ball with my hands over my ears and start screaming.

Walden. I open the book with shaky hands and start to read, will myself to get lost in this book that might hold some clues for me. Completely submerge myself in the world I'm on my way to see.

I'm a crazy fast reader and finish most of the book even before we reach Massachusetts. Of course, there are pages missing here and there because of Frankie, but I can use my imagination to fill in the blanks.

To sum up—if I've got it right—this Thoreau guy was tired of civilization and how people become slaves to their own stupid houses and possessions. To prove he could be happier without those things, he stripped his life down to the simplest things he knew and took off to live alone in the woods. It sounds like he was really happy and at peace when he was in the woods like that, living by a pond. Must have been nice.

The lull of the train, swaying and click-clacking down the track makes me sleepy. I close my eyes.

My house was on the side of a hill, immediately on the edge of the larger wood, in the midst of a young forest of pitch pines and bickories, and half a dozen rods from the pond, to which a narrow footpath led down the hill.

The words appear like they've been etched on the inside of my eyelids. I recognize them as words I just read in *Walden*, but what the hell? Startled, I shake the words out of my head and stare out the window at the scenery, trying to clear my mind, just sleep. My eyes drift shut again.

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the

time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon weary-some and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.

It happens again. Whenever I close my eyes, entire pages and paragraphs of the book appear in my brain like snapshots in an album. If I wanted to, I could recite whole passages of *Walden* to the people sitting around me. I really could.

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he bears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he bears, however measured or far away.

Okay, so this is getting annoying. Maybe because I have so little information stored in my stupid brain, I can retain entire pages of the first book I remember reading. I guess that makes sense. Sort of.

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

After playing around with this bizarre phenomenon for a while, it occurs to me that what I've got has a name: photographic memory. And I almost laugh out loud, right there in the train. I'm a kid with amnesia and a photographic memory. Can't remember anything that happened to me before around midnight last night, but

everything I've read since then is chiseled into my brain. Talk about a memory gone completely twisted.



"Concord, CON-cord!" bellows the train conductor as he whips my ticket stub from a clip on the seat in front of me. Pressing my face to the smudged window, I watch the town of Concord come into view, then wipe away my fog breath with my sleeve.

It's possible that as soon as I step off the train in Concord, my whole life will come back to me in a rush. Or that somebody will recognize me and take me home. Would that be good or bad? Would I be taken to a house and family where I'm safe and loved, or will the police nab me on the streets of Concord? I have absolutely no idea. But I have to start somewhere. And this is it.

The train jolts to a stop, and I line up behind the other people getting ready to step off the train and onto the platform. The late-afternoon sun slants orange through a big maple tree when I step off the train, nearly blinding me, so my first view of Concord is splotted with stars. I blink hard to get rid of them, then take a few steps off the train platform and just stand there in a small parking lot, making the other people walk around me, some

peering back at me in curiosity. I watch everybody. Do they know me? Will they call me by the name I can't remember? Is this home? Nobody shows any recognition. I'm both relieved and disappointed.

Across from the depot is a restaurant with clumps of yellow flowers planted out front and next to that is a bicycle shop and a dry cleaner's. There are trees and shrubs on both sides of the narrow street, and everything looks scrubbed and clean, like maybe somebody comes out and washes the sidewalks every morning. A cool breeze blows my hair into my eyes.

Even as I absorb Concord, Massachusetts, even as I scan the street, searching people's faces, one thing is clear to me: I have no memory of this place. It's just a nice little town where people probably feel safe all the time and have nice families to go home to. A town where you don't have to worry about junkies in alleys pulling knives on you. I wonder if Concord even has alleys.

The train bell clangs behind me, and the train pulls away from the platform. All the other people are gone. I bite my lip so hard it hurts.

There's nothing else to do, so I step onto the sidewalk, look both ways and randomly head to the right. There's a gas station at the corner, a doughnut shop across the street. When I reach the curb, I squint up at the street

sign. Sudbury Road is the crossroad heading off to the right. I twist my head to get a good look at the name of the other road, the one I'm currently standing on.

Thoreau Street. The name of the place on which I stand is Thoreau Street. I stare down in amazement at Thoreau's book in my hands, as if it somehow magically made this phenomenon happen and can tell me what I'm supposed to do next.

When I glance up again, there's a girl standing next to me, waiting for the light to change so she can cross the street. She's pretty in a girl-jock kind of way, with reddish blond hair in a ponytail, navy blue shorts, and a yellow T-shirt that says Concord Lacrosse. I search her face, hoping to see something familiar there. *Do I know you? Do you know me?* It's not until she turns to gaze directly back at me that I realize how rudely I've been staring.

"Uh, hi," I say, trying—too late—to be polite. Then, I cut my eyes away and stare down at the sidewalk. But still, I feel her eyes on me, checking me out pretty much the same way I'd been doing to her. I wait for the light to change so I can escape.

"Hi back," she says after a moment. "You look..."

I tense up, expecting her to say something like, "you look like that criminal I saw on TV last night," or "you

look like somebody who lives in this town and vanished mysteriously a few weeks ago."

"...lost," she says. Her face is open, so different from the cautious eyes and shifty glances of people in the city. I guess when people are safe, they can afford to be friendly.

"I am lost." My mouth is dry and my voice comes out like a croak. "Could you tell me how to get—"

"To Walden Pond?"

I stare at her. "How did you know?"

She points at the book in my hand. "The book. Another friend of Thoreau. We're used to it around here."

"Oh," I mumble, oddly embarrassed to be just another random follower of Henry in this girl's eyes.

"Well, I can show you how to get there. It's not far, less than a mile. I came into town for Starbucks, but now I'm headed back to the high school for the late bus. If you walk with me, that'll get you most of the way there."

She looks sideways at me, and her ponytail swings behind her. Girls. Do I know anything about them? How to act with them, what they want? All I can say for sure is that I already like this girl, and so far she seems to like me back.

"All right," I say. "Which way?"

She points in the direction I'm already heading on

Thoreau Street. "Walden Pond is just past the high school, across the highway."

Walden Pond is within walking distance. Good. After all that sitting, I'd much rather walk than take a cab. If they even have cabs in Concord, Massachusetts. It seems like the kind of place where they automatically award every kid a Mercedes as soon as he or she passes driver's ed.

"I'm Hailey, by the way," she says as we approach the first crosswalk. She pauses, looks up at me expectantly.

The name thing again. I almost blurt out "Henry David," with more conviction than that first time with Jack, but catch myself just in time. Here I am, holding a copy of *Walden*, on my way to Walden Pond on Thoreau Street in Concord. No doubt about it, that's going to sound suspicious.

"I'm Hank," I say. Last names seem unimportant to Hailey, who nods and swishes her ponytail again.

"Where you from, Hank?"

I clear my throat, trying to buy time. "You first."

She has a pretty smile. Bright, trusting green eyes. And there's something sweet and fragile in her that reminds me of Nessa.

"Just up on Authors Ridge. You know, up near the cemetery where Emerson and Alcott are buried."

"Of course," I say, pretending to know who they are. Emerson is one of the writers Magpie mentioned when we were in his closet, but the name is all I know.

We pass a line of Victorian houses painted white and yellow and green, all with big front porches and shutters. After the claustrophobic vibe of the city, the town feels open, with wide expanses of lawn and blue sky.

"And...where are you from, Hank?" Hailey prompts.

"Well, I'm from, uh, near Boston. Probably moving to Concord soon."

Hailey pulls the hairband out of her hair, tucks it between her front teeth and gathers the hair back together to bunch back into a ponytail. "Yeah?" she asks through the hairband. "When?"

"Um. I'm not really sure. I mean, my parents work in Boston and want to move out of the city. When we find a house, that is." I'm surprised by how smoothly these lies slip out.

"Do you have brothers and sisters?" Hailey asks me.

I get ready to say *one of each*, the first response that comes to me, but that's not what comes out of my mouth. "Just a sister," I say.

"Are you okay, Hank?"

I've stopped walking and am leaning over at the waist, staring down at the concrete sidewalk. *Sister*. That word

again. Like a punch in the gut. I have a flash of something, shredded edge of memory. A sense of danger, panic. Is my sister in trouble? My gut seems to think so.

"Hank?"

"Sorry. Yeah, I'm okay." I push the memory back before the beast can claw at my insides. "It's just, um." I catch a glimpse of Hailey's T-shirt from the corner of my eye. *Concord Lacrosse*. "My leg. I pulled a hamstring running track. Sometimes it just zings me, you know?" I rub the back of my leg for dramatic effect, wondering about the lie that wouldn't come out and then the one that came so easy.

Hailey nods. "My cousin did that once, pulled a hamstring playing basketball. Sucks." This jock-girl knows her sports injuries. "You gonna make it, Hank?" "Yep. I think I'll survive." I limp through a few steps to appear convincing.

We get to a big wooden sign that reads, HENRY DAVID THOREAU REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL, near the entrance of a wide driveway. I almost laugh out loud. Is everything in this town named after Thoreau?

"Come on up and see the school," Hailey says. "Since you might be moving here and all." I follow her up the driveway.

Thoreau High School is small, just one story high, made of yellow concrete bricks. The bushes out front are early spring sparse, with little buds that seem a long way from opening. We pass a playing field with a scoreboard that says, *Home of the Patriots*. Kids are running around on the playing fields, practicing baseball and soccer and track. Some kids are just milling around, sitting on fences, talking and laughing. A few stare openly as we walk past them, and I feel sweat on the back of my neck.

Can they see I'm an imposter? That I have no identity and no memory? I adjust my walk to longer, more confident strides and stare back with hardened eyes, holding their glances hostage until they are forced to look away.

"Hey, Danielle," Hailey says to a tall blond girl near the entrance of the building. She's wearing a lacrosse uniform like Hailey's, although in comparison, the baggy clothes look shapeless on her.

Danielle smiles. "Hailey," she says, cutting a friendly, curious glance at me. But she looks back at Hailey and her smile falls. "Girl, you're pale. You need some juice or something?"

"I'm fine," says Hailey quickly. But I take a good look at her and see that Danielle's right. Her cheeks, which should've been flushed from walking a mile in the cold

April air, are white. I'd been too distracted by my surroundings to notice, which makes me feel like a jerk. "I might have some candy in my backpack," Danielle says.

"I told you. I'm *fine*," Hailey says, this time through clenched teeth.

Glancing from one to the other, I don't know what to do, other than change the subject and distract everybody. I clear my throat. "Hi," I say to Danielle. "I'm Hank."

Danielle looks me over, and her smile returns.

"I found him near the train station," Hailey says. "Trying to find Walden Pond."

"Hello, Hank," Danielle says. "Wow, you have the most gorgeous gray eyes ever."

"Dan-yell." Hailey flashes her friend a terse "cut it out" look. I try to hide a smile.

Danielle shrugs. "Well, he does."

I peer behind the girls into the high school building and glimpse a glass case of sports trophies and a hallway lined with lockers. Where did I go to school and what did I do? Did I actually run track? Was I smart? Did I have a cute girlfriend like Hailey who I took to school dances and made out with in my mother's car? That is, if I have a mother and if she has a car. Before another surge of blackness hits, I push these thoughts away.

"It's really nice to meet both of you," I say politely. "But I should probably get going before it gets dark, you know?" Besides, Danielle is still eyeing Hailey like she wants to give her CPR or a transfusion or something. None of my business, but I can see Hailey is embarrassed, so this would be the perfect time for me to disappear.

A flash of disappointment crosses Hailey's face, but then she recovers. "Okay, so keep walking past the school, down that road," she says, pointing off to the right. "You'll hit Route Two which is a major road, and cross over. Then all you need to do is walk like another half mile. Straight shot, lots of signs. You'll see it on your right."

"Great. Thanks."

Then she looks up at me and gives me this weird, sad little smile. Like she knows me and is sad to see me leave so soon, though in my bizarre rootless state, I could be imagining this. "So, Hank, let me know when you move to Concord, okay?"

I smile back at her. "Sure."

"Oh." She reaches into the back pocket of her shorts and pulls out a cell phone. "I should get your number then. And give you mine."

I pause for a beat. "My number?"

"Yeah. That's okay, right?"

I look at her phone. Surely I have one, or had one, back when I was a normal person. "Well, I don't have a phone right now. I'm getting a new one. With a new number." Hailey looks disappointed, like she suspects I'm trying to blow her off. "So, would you write yours down for me?" I ask quickly.

Hailey perks up again and I notice a dimple in her left cheek. "Got a piece of paper?"

"No." I pause. "But I do have this." I pull the book out of the back of my jeans and open it up to the back cover. "You can write it down here."

Danielle digs into her backpack and gives Hailey a pen. In big loopy handwriting, Hailey writes her name and phone number inside the back cover of *Walden*. For good measure, she draws a little flower next to her name.

"See you around, Hank," she says.

"Later, Hailey. Bye, Danielle."

And as I stride down the high school driveway, I feel Hailey's eyes on me, along with the eyes of her friends. To tell you the truth, it's not a bad feeling at all.



When I cross Route Two, I come to a big green sign that reads: *Walden Pond State Reservation*. Almost there.

The sounds of the highway fade as I take the road into the woods. The air is cool and fresh and smells like leaves and dirt and the pine needles crunching under my feet. I continue down the road and sense the presence of the pond even before I see it—an open space off to the right, a break in the thickness of the woods. Then, there it is, a smooth gray surface like chrome reflecting the sky.

This is exactly what I imagined last night—was it only last night?—reading behind the Dumpster, with Jack and Nessa sleeping nearby. I can't believe I'm here.

A steep walkway leads down to the water and a small sandy beach. I stand there for a while, listening to the quiet and breathing in the peacefulness of this place. A man and woman sit on a stone wall by the water, looking out at the spreading purple of the sky. A gray-haired man in hiking boots comes out of the woods and gives me a nod. Night is coming.

TO SITE OF THOREAU'S HUT

A sign with an arrow pointing to the right of the beach leads to a path along the shore of Walden Pond. The sun sinks and the temperature drops as I walk about halfway around the pond, looking for signs of the cabin.

I'm about to say screw it and just sit down for a while,

when I see another sign with the words *House Site* pointing up a small hill away from shore. Finally. I climb the hill, looking for the cabin. Instead I see a big clearing with more signs and a big pile of rocks and pebbles. But where's the cabin?

A few steps farther, and there's a group of carved stone pylons, like skinny headstones. About twelve of these waist-high stone pillars are arranged in a perfect square, and all but the two in front are attached to each other with chains. It's like some crazy outdoor exhibit at a museum. I lean over and squint in the dying light to read the words engraved on a metal sign: SITE OF THOREAU'S CABIN. DISCOVERED NOVEMBER 11, 1945.

Blinking hard, I read it again. *Site of Thoreau's cabin*. And finally, I get it. Yes, the cabin was here in this spot, a long time ago. But not anymore. Of course not anymore. I should have realized this. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I step inside the stones outlining where the cabin used to be. It's smaller than I expected. At the back there's a flat stone with some poem about Thoreau's hearth. That spot is where his fireplace was.

The sun disappears behind the horizon and I start to shiver. I wish that cabin was still here, with a big fire in the fireplace. Maybe hot stew or something cooking in a pot. But there's nothing for me to do but gather a pile of

dead leaves to make a pathetic pillow on the stone where Thoreau's hearth used to be. Lying down, I try to imagine there is still warmth in that old stone after all these years. I try to pretend there's a cabin built up around me, just like the one in my dream. I try to sleep.



Well.

No matter how amazing he was, or how much he loved the whole nature thing, even Henry David Thoreau would have hated being me at Walden Pond on a night like this.

It's cold and dark, there are weird rustling noises in the woods, and I'm so lonely I feel like the last person left on earth. I'm shivering so hard my teeth rattle in my head and I would give just about anything, including my left nut, for a blanket. This sucks. At least the train station in New York was warm. I hate Thoreau for luring me here and making me think that by coming here, I might actually figure out who I am. Dozing off and waking up, suffering through surreal dreams of being chased and eaten by coyotes and rabid foxes, somehow I survive the night.

Just before dawn, the woods grow dead quiet and there's something electric in the air. Somebody—or

something—is here, watching me. A presence. My eyes fly open in a panic, and I see him. Henry David Thoreau. He looks exactly like the picture on the back cover of *Walden*, his hair dark and curly, one hand gripping the lapel of an old-fashioned gray overcoat. Standing at the side of the stone pillars, he looks down and watches me shiver.

"What are you doing, boy?"

Did he really just speak or did I imagine it?

"I'm, uh, you know." My mouth is so dry I can hardly talk. "Trying to simplify, like you wrote about. Live in nature." Jesus. I sound like an idiot. But it's a little nerve-racking to talk to a ghost. Or the dream of a ghost. Or whatever this is.

Thoreau squints down at me doubtfully. "You read my book?"

"Yes," I tell him. "Every word." Well, every word except the ones on the pages Frankie ate, but I don't want to get into that.

He smiles at me, and nods his head toward the sign by the rock pile. Thoreau's smile turns into a dry, raspy chuckle. The sound gets louder, then suddenly he's bent over at the waist, hands on his knees, laughing his ass off. At me.

What's so damn funny? I look over at the sign, at the

quote printed there in the dim morning light, even though I remember perfectly what it says:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

No wonder Thoreau is laughing at me. There's such a thing as simplifying too much. Leave out the "essential facts of life" like food, warm clothes, and shelter, and obviously you won't be able to keep your stupid self alive.

I turn back to where Thoreau stood to say, point taken. But I don't have to cut back on too much stuff or food or money or a big house. I'm here, starting from absolutely nowhere with absolutely nothing. What better student could there be than me?

But Thoreau is gone and I'm alone, staring through the trees as a pale yellow haze begins to light the sky at the edge of Walden Pond. The wind rattles some dry leaves in the oak tree above my head, and it sounds a whole lot like laughing.

6

PAST THE CHILL, BEYOND THE SMELL OF DECAYING LEAVES and pine and the fresh mist of morning on Walden Pond, a man's deep voice reaches into my sleep. I'm outside under the sky and I hear his voice. It's not the ghost of Thoreau this time. The voice is more familiar.

Wake up, the voice says. It's time to gather wood for the fire and make breakfast. We've got a long hike ahead of us today.

I smile. So happy to be here with him. He calls me by the name I can't remember, and I can almost hear it, the shape and lilt of my forgotten name.

"Dad?"

A man clears his throat awkwardly. "Uh. Excuse me. I don't think you're supposed to be here."

My head jerks toward the man's voice, and I pull a stiff muscle in my neck with a twang. Some big guy with a black goatee stands looking down at me, clutching a crooked walking stick.

"The park isn't open yet," he tells me.

"What? Oh, sorry." My voice is thick with sleep, and my mouth feels full of marshmallows. Just the sight of his leather jacket and black wool hat makes me shiver, jealous of the warmth. I sit up, fighting grogginess, and rub the stiff place in my neck.

As he stares at me, I imagine my wild hair with leaves poking out of it, my wrinkled clothes and sleep-creased face. Surely he can see I'm merely pathetic and not a threat.

Leaning on his stick with one hand hitched up on his hip, he asks, "Did you sleep here all night?"

I scratch my head and pull an oak leaf out of my hair. "I wouldn't call it sleeping, exactly."

He smiles, which makes friendly creases around his eyes. "Well, just so you know, Walden Pond doesn't officially open until seven a.m." He pulls back a coat sleeve to consult his watch. "And it's about six forty-five at the moment."

My forehead crunches into a frown. What? Can they actually close the pond? Close the woods? I wonder if he's going to arrest me. With his bulky build and shrewd,

guarded expression, he could be a cop. Or maybe an ex-con. I want to ask what he's doing here if the pond is closed, but I don't want to sound like a smartass.

"I work for the park commission, and I come here for my morning walks," he explains, as if reading my thoughts. "I'm a Thoreau interpreter," he adds, like he's expecting me to be impressed.

I stand up and brush pine needles off the sleeve of my sweater. "You...translate his writing into other languages?"

He stares at me, then a chuckle erupts from somewhere deep in his wide chest. "No, not that kind of interpreter. I'm a historic interpreter. I pose as Thoreau, wear the kind of clothes he would have worn, make appearances and give talks. That kind of thing. People ask questions and I answer as Thoreau. It's fun."

I narrow my eyes at his tall, muscular body, trying to imagine him in an outfit like Thoreau's. He doesn't look anything like the short, thin version of Thoreau I saw—dreamed, hallucinated, whatever—but he seems like a nice guy so I don't want to hurt his feelings.

He takes a deep breath of morning air, and looks out at the misty lake reflecting the sun. "*A morning walk is a blessing for the whole day*," he says. I recognize the quote. Thoreau, of course.

"Only that day dawns to which we are awake," I quote back automatically, stifling a yawn.

The man laughs. "Clever," he says. "Very clever. By the way, my name's Thomas." He extends a hand. I try to muster a decent grip inside his paw of a hand.

"I'm Hank."

As soon as he takes my hand, Thomas yanks his back in surprise. "Christ, Hank. Your hands are like ice." For the first time, he notices that I'm shivering my ass off. He stares at me, trying to figure me out.

"You need a ride home, Hank?" he asks.

Home. "Uh, no thanks." I stuff my hands into my pockets and stare at the ground. When I glance up again at Thomas's face, I see kindness.

"Well at least let me help you get warmed up. I have hot coffee in a thermos and a couple bagels back at my vehicle. I'd be happy to share them with you."

I squint into the morning sun behind his head and say, "Sure," trying to sound casual. But I'm suddenly feeling so grateful that I have to swallow the lump in my throat.



After crossing the street with Thomas, I spot Thoreau's cabin. The cabin isn't on the hill by Walden Pond where

it belongs, but all the way over here, practically in the parking lot.

"Why is the cabin *here*? It doesn't belong here," I say, pissed. If I'd only known last night that it was here all along, so close.

Thomas stands with his keys in one hand. "It's a replica," he tells me. "The actual cabin was moved and collapsed years ago. So they built this one from old photos and descriptions in Henry's book."

A replica. I walk closer, peer in the window.

"Do you want to go in?" Thomas smiles at me. "I have the key. It's time to open for the tourists anyway."

"Yeah, I would."

"First let me grab breakfast." He jabs a thumb toward a motorcycle parked about twenty feet in front of us, black and chrome, reflecting the morning sun. A historian with a Harley. If that historian was anybody else, it might seem strange. But somehow, it fits Thomas. I watch as he saunters over to the bike in his black boots, opens a compartment in the back, and takes out a backpack.

Inside the cabin, it's just the way I imagined it when I read the book, almost exactly the way it looked in my dream. A bed. A desk and table, painted green.

"Three chairs," I say, unconsciously quoting Henry again. "*One for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.*"

Thomas lifts his eyebrows. "That's exactly right." He sets his walking stick in a corner and sits in the chair closest to the fireplace. He takes a thermos out of the backpack and pours steaming coffee into a plastic mug, which he offers to me. I cup my hands around its warmth.

"So, they lock this place up at night?" I ask casually and sit on the edge of the bed. The mattress crackles under me, like it's filled with straw. The coffee is black and tastes bitter but warms me from the inside out, so I don't mind.

"Of course. Concord's a nice town, but they can't leave it open." Thomas takes off his leather jacket and drapes it over the back of the chair. "Some vagrant might show up and try to sleep here."

I nod sympathetically. "Yeah." Some vagrant. Like me. I examine the windows, wondering how hard it might be to jimmy one open.

Thomas hands me a buttered bagel in a plastic bag. I rip the bag open and eat too fast, realizing I haven't had food since yesterday afternoon on the train from New York.

"Hungry?" Thomas takes a civilized bite into his own bagel and smiles.

"Growing boy," I say with my mouth full, but try to take smaller bites so I won't look like a total pig.

Thomas pours me more coffee. "Well, you look better now than you did when I first saw you this morning." He reaches over and picks up my copy of *Walden* from where I'd set it next to me on the bed and flips it to the back, to the photograph of Thoreau with his pale-eyed, serious expression. "You looked like you fell out of the sky or something."

Wiping my buttery fingers off on my jeans, I hope I don't look like too much of a slob. When I glance up at Thomas, he's not looking at the book anymore, but intently at me.

"So where did you come from, Hank?"

I shrug, feeling slightly buzzed from too much caffeine and too little sleep. "I guess I fell out of the sky or something." Why not? It's as good an explanation as any. And even though Thomas has been kind to me, I decide not to tell him the truth. There are still so many questions I need to answer for myself first.

"I see you value your privacy, and I respect that," Thomas says, looking down at his hands. "But come on, I have to ask. Why were you sleeping outside at the cabin site? Don't worry, you're not in trouble. I'm just curious."

"Well," I say reasonably. "I wouldn't have been sleeping outside if the cabin had been there like it was supposed to be."

Thomas smirks. "Fair enough."

I stand and nonchalantly try to open one of the windows, like I just want some air, and all I manage to do is disturb a spider, who scuttles to a corner of his web. The window is nailed shut. Figures. Outside, instead of a view of trees and bushes that should be there, there's a view of the parking lot and the road, where rush hour cars are whizzing by. Not the best location for a hideout.

"It's not right," I say, half to myself. "It doesn't belong here."

"I'm sure Henry would agree with you," says Thomas. He reaches up to scratch the back of his head. That's when I notice a design in black ink on his upper arm, showing under the left sleeve of his navy blue T-shirt.

"What's the tat?" I ask.

He pulls up his sleeve to show me the tattoo of a man's face in profile, a man with an old fashioned black beard. Under it is written in fancy script lettering like a signature: "Henry D. Thoreau."

"You know." I pause, uncertain how to say what I'm thinking. "I hope you don't mind me saying this, but—" "But I don't act like a stodgy Thoreau-loving historian-slash-scholar who works for the park commission?"

"Something like that."

"Yeah, I know. I get that all the time." He gets up, screws the top on his thermos and gathers the remains of our breakfast. "I'm heading into town. Want a ride?"

A ride on the Harley? Hell, yeah. We head out to the parking lot and walk to the motorcycle. "For a kid who worships Thoreau enough to stay all night at his cabin site, you have a lot to learn," Thomas says, handing me a spare helmet from the back of his bike. "Thoreau was a rabble-rouser in his time. A free spirit. A rebel." He pulls on his own helmet, straddles his bike, and flashes straight white teeth. "Why do you think I like him so much?"



After Thomas drops me off in town, I aimlessly walk the streets of Concord with my hands stuffed deep into my pockets. I can't stop thinking about seeing Thoreau last night. Sure, it was probably just some freaky dream. But what if it wasn't a dream? What if Thoreau's ghost knows stuff about me and is watching over me like a guardian angel or something? Maybe that's why I woke up with the book next to me at the train station. Maybe it was a sign, a gift from Thoreau himself.

Now that I've had some food to start my day (Essential

Fact of Life Number One), I decide to address Number Two—clothing—at a sporting goods store on Main Street. I buy a warm coat (on sale, half off), plus black sweatpants and a thick gray sweatshirt. I put the sweatpants and sweatshirt on in the dressing room, and stuff the clothes Magpie gave me into the plastic bag. Now I've got two sets of clothes. Nothing fancy, Thoreau wouldn't approve of fancy, but enough to keep me warm.

Next up: shelter.

There is one hotel in town, the Colonial Inn, with a sign outside that says it was built in 1716, but I ask the price at the front desk, and it's way too expensive. My money, Simon's money—*don't think about that*—is dwindling. My shelter has to be safe and it has to be free, someplace where I can stay long enough to get my thoughts together. Just until I remember more about my life and figure out what to do next.

Somehow, I wind up back at the Concord train station, and being there reminds me of meeting Hailey. I think of her smiling green eyes and I get this feeling like, hey, I'd really like to see her again. So I retrace the steps we walked yesterday to the high school. But as soon as I start up the long driveway to the school, I realize something is different. To start with, there are only a few cars in the parking lot. Plus, I don't see any kids outside,

playing sports in the fields or sitting on the stone wall. It's a weekend or holiday or something. No school today.

At first I'm disappointed. But then it occurs to me that I need shelter, and here is an entire building comprised of shelter and nobody around. If I can just get inside, there has to be someplace in that big building where a guy could curl up and get some sleep.

I try the front door, but it's locked, so I circle around to the back. Along the side of the building, a red minivan pulls up, and two girls, both with brown hair and pretty faces, pile out of the back seat. Do all the girls in Concord look like perfect little cheerleaders? One of them cuts a glance in my direction with interest but no recognition. They head to a side door, open it, and go inside. I wait a beat or two, and follow them.

Inside, it smells like floor cleaner, sneakers, and pencils. I pass rows of lockers and follow the sounds of the girls talking and giggling, their voices echoing in the empty hallways. When they pass through some double doors, I peek through a small window in one of the doors into the high school auditorium. Rows of red seats face a stage where a group of people are working. Some are standing on ladders with electric drills and hammers, a couple of guys carry in boxes and set them on the side of the stage, and a few girls are painting sets off to one

side with black paint. A tall guy with gray dreadlocks, probably the school janitor, pushes a humming vacuum cleaner up the side aisle. He's wearing jeans and a faded tie-dyed T-shirt.

Then I see her. Hailey, sitting on the edge of the stage, swinging her legs back and forth and talking to some guy. *She's here.* Now, instead of wearing her loose lacrosse uniform, she's wearing a tight red sweater and jeans. Her hair is down instead of up in a ponytail, and it's long, curling around her shoulders. Yeah, she looks *hot*.

The guy she's talking to is really into her, gesturing his hands around a lot and talking. I can't tell if she's interested back. He's shorter than me and kind of scrawny, with shaggy brown hair and black jeans. His cap is on sideways and there's a chain attached to his belt, like he thinks he's some suburban punk gangster. Trying to decide whether I should go up and talk to Hailey or just sit in the back of the auditorium, I open the door slowly and slip inside. The heavy door swings shut behind me.

BOOM!

There is a loud cracking sound, and before I can even register what happened, a flash of scrambled images bursts inside my head, metal reflecting twilight. Colors, blue and red, fireworks bursting, a cry like an ice pick in my brain.

I fall to the floor, curl up in a ball, hands over my ears.

"Whoa, buddy. What happened? Did you trip?"

I open my eyes, and a big guy with gray dreadlocks and intense blue eyes is staring down at me. After blinking hard for a few seconds, I can finally talk.

"Yeah, I guess so." Foggy, confused. "There was this really loud noise."

"It's that damn door," he says, shaking his head. "I keep trying to fix it, but it needs to be replaced. Every time it slams shut, it's like a bomb went off."

"A crash. Or something," I say.

He looks at me, all curious, but then just nods. "You okay, then?"

"Oh yeah, definitely," I say lightly, though my head is throbbing. He offers a hand to help me to my feet.

Nervously, I glance at the stage, imagining every face turned toward me, staring. But nobody other than the janitor seems to have noticed that I just fell to the floor like I'd been shot in the head.

The janitor nods slowly, as if he's reassuring himself I'm not a lawsuit about to happen. "Okay then. Take it easy." He lifts up the vacuum cleaner with one hand and walks out of the auditorium, keys jangling on his belt.

Sitting in the last row, I wait for my head to stop vibrating, for the gray spots in my vision to clear. Why the hell would the sound of a crashing door cause me to

throw myself to the floor like that? Another question without an answer.

I stuff my plastic bag of clothes under the chair in front of me and turn my focus away from my problems and on to the redheaded girl sitting on the stage.

As if sensing my eyes locked on her, Hailey turns and looks up to where I'm sitting, leaning my arms on the seat in front of me, watching her. She squints, and then with one hand, shields her face from the lights on the stage so she can see me better. Encouraged, I stand up and start walking toward her.

Hailey hops off the stage and we meet in the aisle. She looks happy to see me.

"Hank," she says, and gives me this sweet, shy smile. "What are you doing here?"

"I, uh, well, my dad is in town, looking at houses and property and stuff, and I didn't feel like going along. I went for a walk and ended up here." These lies come so easy, I'm proud and ashamed at the same time.

"Does that mean you're transferring soon?"

She sounds hopeful, and I wish I could tell her yes. I wish I was a normal person who could go to this school and attend classes and take Hailey to dances and cheer for the Patriots sports teams.

"I might," I tell her. "Although it's so late in the school

year, I might just hang out in Concord and, you know, do stuff on my own."

"Stuff on your own?"

"Like home-schooling. To finish up the year." I shrug and go for a confident smile to back it up.

She turns her head to one side and crinkles her forehead at me like she doesn't get it. I notice that she's wearing two different earrings, a dangly gold musical note in one ear, and a silver G-clef in the other.

"But where are you living, if your parents don't have a house out here yet?"

"Oh, I have this, well, uncle who lives in town. I'm staying with him." All these stacked-up lies are starting to make me nauseous. I gesture toward the stage. "So, what's going on here?"

Hailey looks behind her at the stage. "Oh, it's this thing we do every year called the Battle of the Bands, coming up in a couple weeks. It's a big deal, with sets and lights and fog machines and stuff. A big deal for us, anyway."

"That's cool. You in the show?" I ask.

She looks away, shrugs. "Nah. I'm just helping backstage, organizing and stuff."

From the stage, the suburban gangster is staring at the two of us.

"That your boyfriend?" I jut my chin toward the kid.

Startled, Hailey follows my gaze. "Cameron? No. He lives next door to me and we've known each other since we were kids. That's all." She shrugs. "Well, I should get back to work. Stick around for a while if you want."

"Sure. Can I help?" I ask her.

Hailey introduces me to this hyper blond lady named Ms. Coleman who's obviously in charge of the event. "This is Hank, he's a new student here," Hailey says, cutting me a look that says, *just go with it*. "Can he help out?"

"Of course, of course," Ms. Coleman says. She's so busy she barely even looks at me. "Welcome aboard." She points out a toolbox and gives some vague directions about building sets.

For about an hour, I join the other kids (who ignore me for the most part, which is fine with me), working on the sets and trying to be helpful. It turns out I'm good with my hands, adept at drilling into wood frames and thinking through how things should fit together. Building stuff comes naturally to me. My hands remember. Maybe my dad taught me.

Then I recall the voice I heard in the woods this morning, calling me. It wasn't Thoreau and it wasn't Thomas either. It was my father. I know this. Although I can't conjure a picture of him in my head, at least there's no warning slash in my gut when I try.

"Hey, you." There's a voice coming from somewhere above my head. I glance up to see Cameron standing on a platform above the stage. "Can you bring up that spotlight for me?"

He points to a black unit by my feet, with metal flaps in front of a large bulb, and a loop on top like a handle. "Sure." It's heavier than it looks. The only way up to the platform is a makeshift ladder, blocks of wood nailed into the wall. With one hand carrying the spotlight, the other grasping the ladder, I climb up to where Cameron is kneeling at the edge of the platform. It's hard to stand there and lift up the light without losing my balance, but I manage.

Cameron waits a beat longer than necessary to reach out for the light, like he's hoping maybe, just maybe, I'll slip and fall. I see it in his eyes. He reaches to lift the spotlight out of my hands, but just as I'm letting go, he releases his grip and the weight of it comes down on me. Asshole. Instinctively, I reach for the spotlight with both hands, afraid to let the unit go crashing to the floor, and I almost fall backward off the ladder. Just in time, Cameron grabs my arm. "Sorry," he says, not looking in the least bit sorry. "Lost my grip."

I smirk at him, drilling into him with my own unflinching eye contact. "Yeah, right." I say.

He turns away from me to hang the spotlight, standing on a narrow catwalk and reaching up into the black-painted rafters. The platform at the top of the ladder is not a big area, just about the same size as Thoreau's cabin. Still, there's enough space for a guy to stand and hang lights. Or hide.

"Okay, good work, everybody," Ms. Coleman calls out. "We've made a lot of progress. Let's clean up and have some lunch."

In the kitchen, there are boxes of pizza somebody ordered for the cast and crew. I feel awkward around the other kids, like an intruder, but the last thing I'd do in my situation is refuse free food. So I take a couple of slices of pepperoni and chow down. The other kids sneak glances at me, but nobody talks to me. Fair enough. I don't try to start a conversation either. It's hard to talk to people when I'm a stranger, not just to them, but to myself.

I look for Hailey, but Cameron has taken her aside, doing his possessive act again, telling her some long involved story (she keeps looking in my direction; am I only imagining she wants me to rescue her?), so I casually slip out of the kitchen.

With nothing better to do, I wander into an open room adjoining the auditorium. There are music stands,

lockers, instruments, and random pieces of sheet music scattered on the floor. The band room. And there in a corner, somebody has left an acoustic guitar. It's not a fancy or expensive guitar, just a dusty old Yamaha, but for some reason, I'm drawn to it. I pick it up, run my fingers over the wood on the neck. Placing my fingers on the top frets, I play a D chord, and wince when I hear how out of tune it is. So I twist the pegs, get it in tune, and start playing a song I don't recognize, but my fingers seem to remember by heart.

Now *this* is cool. I know how to play guitar. Music, as it turns out, feels as natural to me as breathing. Feels so good, I forget where I am. Close my eyes, let my fingers fly, and play the hell out of that old guitar.

At first I think I'm imagining things when I hear singing. But I open my eyes, and there's Hailey, leaning against the lockers.

"No, Hank, keep playing," she says. "I love the Beatles. My mom played their stuff all the time when I was little."

So the song I'm playing is something by the Beatles. A spark of memory snaps into place, like synapses repairing themselves. The Beatles. Of course.

I try to start the song again, but I'm flustered and forget how to play, unable to pick up where I left off. Then I make myself relax, return to that place where my

fingers did the remembering. It comes back, and Hailey sings. She has a gorgeous voice, silky but with this raspy quality that makes it unique. Sexy. Here and there I miss a chord because I'm distracted by her singing, and she misses a few words, but while we're playing, I feel like I'm on a different planet. A planet where only Hailey and I exist, like we've been making music together forever.

And as she sings, I listen to the lyrics and remember the name of the song. "Blackbird."

The last notes of "Blackbird" hang in the air for a while after we're done, and I hold my breath. "Wow," I say at last. "You have the most amazing voice."

She looks away from me then, shrugs. "I dunno," she murmurs, but I can tell she's trying not to smile.

"So explain to me why you're not performing in the Battle of the Bands."

Hailey plays with the zipper on her red sweater. "Couldn't get a band together. I mean, I did it last year, but it didn't work out this time."

"When is the show?"

"Two weeks."

"That's enough time to pull your band back together, isn't it? Maybe I can help." Call me delusional, call me impulsive, whatever, but under the new influence of music, I feel like anything is possible. Plus, I'd grab any

excuse to spend more time with this girl. There's just something about her.

"I don't know," Hailey says. She won't look at me. "Last year, there was this thing. But look, it's no big deal. We can talk about this later. Even if we don't enter the competition, we can play together for fun if you want. You still have my number, right?"

"Yes," I say. "I'll call you. Definitely."

She nods and smiles this cool, really pretty smile. "I'd like that. Thanks."

I set the guitar back in the corner, and together, we head back down the hallway and into the auditorium.



Later, I stand inside the front lobby of the school with the rest of the kids, pretending to watch for my parents' car pulling up in front of the school to fetch me. After Hailey leaves, giving me a wave and flashing that dimple, I excuse myself to go to the boys' room, but nobody seems to hear me, or even notice I've slipped away. Perfect. I hang out in the bathroom until all is quiet, and I'm pretty sure the last kid has left.

Blending into the hollow silence of the school, I set out to explore. Walking down the empty hallways is kind

of creepy, like being the last person left alive after a nuclear attack. But then I start thinking, hey, if there was a nuclear attack and I was the sole survivor, everything I need to keep myself alive is right here at Henry David Thoreau Regional High School.

Clothing? All set. Not just the clothes I already own, but when I investigate the boys' locker room, I find a big cardboard box shoved up against a wall in the corner, marked *Lost and Found*. It's full of T-shirts and gym shorts, collared shirts and jeans, even sneakers and jackets, and some look like they're my size. How rich are the kids in this town that they can completely forget to bring home all these clothes? I'm sure Thoreau would have plenty to say about that.

As for food, the cafeteria has all the food I can eat, if I can get past the locked door. Through the window in the kitchen door, I see enormous cans of food like applesauce, tomato sauce, and peaches stacked on the counters. I'd never go hungry.

Turning away from the kitchen door, I'm trying to figure out where I can lie down and get some sleep. All the classroom doors are locked, the nurse's office is locked, the library is locked. I'm thinking maybe the best I can do is head back to the auditorium and try to curl up in one of those red seats, when a woman in a plaid

flannel shirt and jeans comes bursting out of a closet clutching a mop. We collide right into each other and she tumbles backward, landing on her butt on the floor. The keys attached to her belt loop make a jangling crash, and the mop goes flying.

"Oh man. I'm so sorry," I say, reaching over to help her to her feet.

"Excuse me," she says, wide eyes startled. She has gray-streaked hair in frizzy curls past her shoulders, but her face looks young somehow. Innocent.

Once she's on her feet again, I get the mop and hand it back to her. "Are you all right?"

The woman stares at me for a long moment, narrowing her eyes. "Michael?" she whispers.

My heart lurches. *Do you know me?* I search for something familiar in her thin face. She's sort of pretty in an all-natural, former-hippy kind of way.

"I'm sorry." She shakes her head as if she's trying to wake up from a weird dream. "You look like somebody I knew once," she says.

Michael. I examine the name, repeat it in my head, but feel no spark of recognition.

Heavy footsteps approach, then a man's voice interrupts. "You still here, kid?" Turning, I see the dread-locked janitor. His intense eyes snap at me with

intelligence and suspicion.

"Well, I—I was helping out with sets, and my dad hasn't come for me yet. Can you tell me where there's a phone so I can call him?"

"You don't have a cell phone?" he asks. "I thought all you kids had phones."

"I don't have one at the moment. It...broke, and I don't have my new one yet." With his unflinching gaze on me, my lies seem completely transparent.

"There's a pay phone by the front door," he says. "You never noticed?"

"I never noticed," I say lightly in what I hope is a charming way. That's when I see something shimmering on the cafeteria floor, where it skittered under a chair. It's a set of keys. They must have fallen off the janitor's belt loop when she fell. I rip my eyes away from the keys, hoping the janitors won't notice.

The woman clears her throat softly behind me. "Billy," she says. "Doesn't he look a lot like Michael?"

Billy's expression softens when he looks at the woman. "Maybe a little. Around the eyes. But come on, Sophie, we need to finish up. Some kid puked in the back hallway." He cuts a resentful look in my direction, as if he suspects me. "As soon as we get it cleaned up, we can get out of here."

I wonder if the two janitors are a couple. Billy and Sophie, lovers and high school custodians. Michael's parents?

Sophie opens the closet next to the kitchen, takes out a huge wash pail on wheels, and pushes the handle into Billy's hands.

Please don't notice the keys on the floor. Please don't notice the keys.

"I was just leaving," I say to them both. "Have a good one."

With one last wistful look at me, Sophie follows Billy down one of the long hallways, and I head toward the front door. I put the heavy black phone to my ear and pretend to make a call.

Once the two janitors disappear, I set the phone quietly in the cradle and slip back into the kitchen, making sure my sneakers don't squeak on the clean tile floor. With an eye on the cafeteria door, I reach for the keys under the plastic orange seat of the chair. Scoop them up, muffle the jingle, and stuff them into the front pocket of my jeans.

Then I slip noiselessly into the auditorium and ease the door shut slowly, so it won't make that crashing sound. Grabbing my bag of clothes from the place where I tucked it under the seats earlier, I hurry toward

the stage. Imagining I hear a sound like maybe a tall janitor wielding a large mop, I scale the ladder to the upper platform in seconds.

Curling up on my side, I make a pillow of the clothes Magpie gave me and a blanket of my coat. I stay there on the platform until my heart rate slows down, until the building grows dark around me with the setting sun. Until I fall asleep.

7

SCUFFING THROUGH THE DEAD LEAVES AND PINE NEEDLES at the side of the road, I head back to Walden Pond the next morning. I'm drawn there, like maybe this is the place where I can find some answers. Which is tough, considering I'm not even sure of the questions.

Last night I slept like a dead person on the stage platform at the school, and woke up in the same position I went to sleep in, my back stiff and no dreams to remember. With Sophie's keys giving me free reign of the school, I took a shower in the boys' locker room and picked out a change of clothes from the lost and found—faded jeans and a long-sleeved black T-shirt. In the cafeteria fridge, I found some ham and cheese sandwiches, milk, and an apple.

My side hurt and was bleeding again, so I let myself into the nurse's office to get antiseptic and bandages. The cut should be better by now, but it's still red around the edges and hurts to touch it. Worst of all, it reminds me of Simon.

In my imagination Simon is a zombie, withered hands reaching, eyes glazed, blood streaking down his forehead, nubby teeth grinning. Will he be looking for me too, like Magpie and those guys who work for him? But no, none of them can find me here. There's no way.

Don't think about it.

Walden Pond is a mirror, reflecting gray-blue skies, the pines, and oak trees with new leaves pushing out of fat buds. Some people are out hiking, but the deeper I go into the woods, the more alone I am. Walking faster, I break into this little trot, a comfortable jogging pace that just feels good. Maybe I really did run track in my former life, because running feels as natural as walking, as playing guitar, as breathing. Somehow I'm even able to set aside the pain in my side to focus on the running. My legs and breaths settle into a rhythm that calms every cell in my body like meditation, like some kind of drug. Even though my body is moving, my mind is relaxed.

A collage of images floats into my consciousness, snapshot memories of Jack and Nessa, of Magpie and

Simon. Thomas. There's Hailey smiling at me and Cameron glaring. Ms. Coleman. Sophie and Billy. In such a short time, my weird disjointed life has put me in contact with a lot of people. Some I'm glad to have etched on my brain. Others I'd erase in a nanosecond if I could figure out how.

Leaves and pebbles and pine needles crunch in cadence under my sneakers, lulling me into a comfortable trance, and in this frame of mind, I try to access the memories that lie just out of reach.

Gently pressing my memory to the edge of places that don't feel safe, I think: *Dad*. Then I think: *Mom*. The beast inside twitches in its sleep, but I refuse to surrender, focusing instead on my pumping arms and legs, my breaths. Inhale. Exhale.

Dad. Mom.

Like a camera taking a picture, an image of my dad flashes behind my eyeballs. Tall man, dark hair, wire rimmed glasses, gray eyes like mine, a kind smile. We are outside, Dad and me. We're in the woods, building a fire. We have sleeping bags and backpacks and compasses. This is something we do together, something that belongs to us.

Now I see Dad clutching a suitcase, waving good-bye. There are no words, but I know he is going, leaving

again. My heart clenches like a fist. Don't go, Dad.

I almost trip over a fallen branch on the trail, but as I regain my footing, another image floats into my consciousness. Mom. Hair blond and wavy, face anxious and thin, a half-empty glass of red wine clutched in her hand as she stares out a window. Doesn't look at me, doesn't see me. I yell something at her, then turn and charge out a blue door with a half-circle window. I slam it shut, the window shatters, and glass skitters on the floor, but she doesn't even turn around.

My breath hitches in my chest, but I press my memory even further, contemplate another word: *sister*.

The beast roars awake as if I poked it with a stick and I completely lose the rhythm of running and breathing. Stumble off the path into a small inlet next to the pond, hidden from the path by a hill and a cluster of evergreens. Leaning against a tree branch, wheezing, I peer into the green-brown water of Walden Pond.

Searing pain blinds me and I grab my head to keep it from exploding, forcing myself to go there again. *Sister*. The thing inside expands, rips at the lining of my stomach, squeezes my lungs. *Sister*. It's trying to kill me, wants me dead. Better dead than to remember.

My legs are rubber, give out, and I collapse on a big rock, doubled over to cradle my seizing stomach. My

God. My entire body drifts toward unconsciousness, and I'm falling. No. Can't let myself pass out. Have to remember.

Sister.

Too close to the edge of the rock, I slip on a sludge-coated corner and tumble forward into the water, shatter the smooth surface, and go under. Cold water seeps into my hair, my clothes and shocks me to my core. I float, stunned and weightless under the green water, at the edge of unconsciousness. The cold seeps into my skin, legs, arms, ears, internal organs, the roots of my hair. But still I float, serene, not even trying to kick my feet or pull toward the surface.

The water is shallow, no danger, not really. And yet. Deep enough. A calm feeling spreads through my veins like water warmed by a secret hot spring. Drowning would be so easy, so sweet.

Then a strange image flashes behind my eyeballs. Open music box, tinny music playing, plastic ballerina twirling. And then I see her. My sister. Big blue eyes, long eyelashes. Yellow-white hair, pink shirt, one pink sneaker. The music box grinds to a halt, ballerina twisted to one side, broken. And there is blood. My sister's screams fill my head, jar me from my peaceful drifting.

Save her.

Jamming my feet down, I find the pond's spongy bottom and push myself to the surface, where I fill my lungs with cool fresh air and cough and cough.



I take the long way back to the high school, through the woods, away from the streets. My teeth are chattering and my body is shivering so hard it hurts. Icy pond water squishes in my sneakers with every step and my cold, drenched clothes weigh about fifty pounds, or at least it seems like it. By the time I get there, it's afternoon and the school is already growing dark and silent under clouds threatening rain.

Opening the back door of the school with Sophie's keys, I'm thinking of warm, dry clothes from the lost and found and a hot shower in the boys' locker room. But then I'm stopped short by a shrill beeping sound. It's coming from the keypad on the wall near the door, which flashes the words *enter code* in a small gray screen.

Oh crap. Even though I opened the outside door with the key, there's some kind of backup security system that needs a code. Just a few numbers punched in, that's all. In a panic, I pound a few keys, as if somehow randomly I'll hit the right combination. Stupid. After about thirty

seconds, it's all over. The burglar alarm starts screaming, a continuous, pulsing wail. The police are probably on their way.

I run down the hall, toward the auditorium to my hiding place above the stage. Just in time, I realize I'm leaving wet footprints behind me. The pond water is squishing out of my sneakers leaving a trail. I duck into the boys' room, where I take off my wet sneakers, my wet clothes, and quickly dry off with paper towels. Then I wad up more paper towels, rush back into the hallway and do my best to dry the footprints, pushing the towels around with my feet. I run back to my hiding place, dressed only in my underwear, clothes bunched in my arms.

Just as I'm scrambling up to the platform above the stage, the sound of a door forced open echoes down a long hallway. There are low murmurs, voices I can't make out. Abruptly, the alarm is silenced, leaving my ears ringing as I huddle in a ball, shivering. I'm terrified that I left footprints leading to my hiding place; sure they'll hear my heavy breathing and the jack-hammer of my heart.

Disembodied voices and footsteps echo through the school. Approaching, closer. Too afraid to peer down into the auditorium space, I try to slow my breaths. Two men are here. I hear their voices.

"Just a false alarm, Terry. Second time this month. Everything seems secure."

"Well, hold on," says the cop named Terry. In moments, his footsteps echo on the wooden stage. I can see the beam of a flashlight, sweeping the stage. Can he hear me breathing? I cringe, motionless. Then I hear the drip.

The wet pile of clothes next to me is dripping through the spaces between the platform boards. Water pllops gently to the floor below.

Eyes shut tight, I wait for the officer to shout orders at me, or climb up to get me, handcuffs ready to snap on my wrists.

"Terry, come on, there's nothing here."

"There's a little water here on the floor," the cop says. I imagine the flashlight examining the puddle, then sense its beam sweeping up to my hiding place above his head. I hold my breath.

"Just a leak," he murmurs. Then louder he says, "Okay, Jim, let's go. Everything checks out."

I'm still holding my breath as I follow the sound of their footsteps on the hollow stage and then disappearing down the hall. Finally, I let the air out of my lungs with a low hiss, but I'm still too terrified to move. I stay there for a long time to reassure myself they're

really gone, until my trembling knees and elbows make knocking sounds on the wood.

Still dressed only in my underwear, I go into the boys' locker room and start a shower, let the room fill with steam and stand motionless under the hot water until the cold leaches out of my body.

I pull on dry clothes from the lost and found—a striped shirt missing a button, baggy jeans, and sneakers about a half-size too big. I focus on these tasks, even though my entire body hums with restlessness.

All I can think about now is my sister in danger, blond hair, pink sneaker, and too much blood. Big eyes so scared. If I thought it would help, I'd be sprinting down the streets of Concord now to get to her. But that would accomplish nothing. First, I don't know how to find her. Second, my body is weak, exhausted, depleted. I can hardly even think.

Only one true, clear thought slices through my exhaustion: I have to find out who I am, so I can figure out how to get to her. This is not about me anymore. Even the beast can't keep me from her or prevent me from remembering more. I won't let it.

For now though, my mind and body are numb. Just need to get warm. Just need to rest. Build up my strength so I can focus on finding her.

Using Sophie's keys, I let myself in the nurse's office to put fresh bandages on my side. It hurts more than before, and now there's yellow pus oozing out of the cut. The red skin around the cut is hot, and my face feels hot too. At the same time, there's this chunk of ice inside me. So cold. I find blankets on a cupboard shelf, lie shivering on one of the cots, and the tide of sleep takes me under in a heartbeat.



"Time to wake up, son."

A voice jolts me from a dream, and my eyes fly open to see a woman sitting in a chair like she's been there a while, watching me sleep. Gray-streaked, curly hair. Young-old face with sad brown eyes. It takes a moment to recognize the janitor.

"You're not supposed to be in here, you know." Her voice is firm, but also kind.

"I'm sorry," I say politely, as if I've taken a wrong turn and wandered by accident into her fancy rose garden. "I'll go." My temples pound when I sit up.

But she just sits there, head cocked to one side like she's in no hurry for me to leave. "It really is amazing how much you look like Michael."

"Michael is...your son?"

Sophie nods, focusing dry eyes on the medicine cabinet over my shoulder. "He died a few years ago, when he was thirteen. Leukemia. But I bet he'd look a lot like you now. What are you, seventeen? Eighteen?"

"Um, yeah."

"By the way, I also know you're not a student here." She frowns at me, but she doesn't actually seem angry. "You're lucky Billy isn't good at remembering faces like I am. You're trespassing on town property."

"I'm sorry," I say again. For some reason, I can't lie to this woman who watched me sleep and called me by her son's name.

"So, tell me. What are you doing in the nurse's office at six in the morning when nobody but the janitors are supposed to be here?"

"I'm here, because—" A hundred lies pass through my head and I discard them all. "I'm here because I ran away from home and there's no place else to go."

Her face is soft and sad as she reaches out to touch my cheek. Her fingers are ice cold against my skin, and I flinch. "You're feverish," she says with such deep concern that all I want is to lie on this cot and let this nice lady take care of me so I can feel better and find my sister.

The distant sound of a man whistling off-key echoes

down the hallway. "There's Billy," says Sophie. She rises to her feet and peers down at me. "You need to go. Even if I wanted to let you stay, I can't. I'd lose my job."

"I understand," I say.

Reaching out a finger, she brushes hair out of my eyes. "What's your name?" she asks me.

"Hank."

"Hank, call your mother," she whispers, like she knows something about me that I don't. "I guarantee she would sacrifice her own life just to have you back home. Understand?"

I nod, my eyes burning. She turns toward the door, clears her throat, and asks, "By the way, you didn't come across a set of keys the other night, did you?"

I don't even try to sidestep the question. Instead, I reach into my pocket and give her an apologetic smile as the keys chink into her open hand.

"Good boy," she says, and she leaves the room. The words float in her wake, and something inside me longs to follow after her. But I just lie there and listen as her footsteps echo down the hallway and disappear.

8

IT'S EARLY MORNING IN DOWNTOWN CONCORD, BUT already the entire town seems wide awake. Sitting near the window inside the doughnut shop, I watch normal citizens go about their normal lives. Just the start of another day. A line of people snakes out the door, waiting to order their large coffees, doughnuts, and breakfast sandwiches. My coffee is black and I nibble on a double chocolate doughnut. Chocolate for breakfast. I thought it would cheer me up; make things look a little better. It doesn't.

Once again, I'm in search of shelter. It's hard to focus on moving forward in my completely unsettled life when I don't even know where I'm going to sleep tonight.