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DREAMING THE TRAIN UNDERWATER

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By

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ABSTRACT

DREAMING THE TRAIN UNDERWATER

By

Abigail Hope Keller

Dreaming the Train Underwater is a novella set in a fictional New Hampshire town. The novella occurs in three parts. The narrator, Lulu, is a woman who looks back on the events that occurred in her ninth year. Those events involve her mother, who has raised her, and her grandfather and cousin, both of whom she is introduced to in the opening chapters of the book. The novella explores issues of family history, connection to place, and a child's loss of innocence.

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INTRODUCTION

Dreaming the Train Underwater is a novella set in a fictional town in New Hampshire. The narrator, Lulu, is a woman telling the story of the summer of her ninth year. During that time, she and her mother travel to Kettleborough, a town that Lulu has heard stories about, but has never seen, or even understood as a real place. The town is where her mother is from, and where her grandfather and cousin, Henry, live. Prior to meeting these family members, Lulu does not know she and her mother have any family. Important to the novella are not only the characters, but also Kettle Lake, which borders the town, and the house where the family lives. In short, the novella traces Lulu's family history, and her loss of innocence. This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.

Part One

Chapter One

When I was nine my mother said, "Lulu, we're removing to Kettleborough." R*emoving to Kettleborough?* I rolled the words over my tongue until they turned out of a question and into a statement, *Removing to Kettleborough.* I'd heard of that place. My grandfather had appeared there at seventeen. My mother had been raised there. I'd heard of that place, where my mother insisted I would never go, but I hadn't ever understood that Kettleborough was real.

We lived in the mountains of Washington. A thin removable wall separated my room from hers, and for weeks before she announced our move I listened to her, crying and snorting and crying. She'd punch at her headboard and I would tiptoe around to her side of the separator, say *Mom? Mom are you alright?* I'd roll myself into bed with her and let her wrap her arms too tight around me, and we'd drift to sleep together on the boat of her sadness. But soon she stopped letting me in. *Go back to bed, Lulu,* she'd say, *I'm fine in here.* So I'd tromp back, my blanket tugged behind me, and my mom's sadness would move up over the wall and down into me, where I'd stare wide-eyed and blank at the ceiling through the night.

We didn't have much food. It happened suddenly. Everyday, first through third grade, she packed me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich folded into wax paper, two chocolate chip cookies loose at the bottom of my paper bag, an apple. But suddenly nothing. At school, I'd go through the hot lunch line and fill my plate, a carton of milk and a double-helping of mashed potatoes, string green beans turned brown, meat. When I got to the lady I had to pay, I'd search my pockets and pretend I'd forgotten my two

dollars in my backpack, in my desk, on the kitchen table. They got used to me. Let me eat. At home, beans and rice, rice and beans. Once I told my mom I was sick of eating that. She looked at me long, then slapped the dish to the floor like a bug that was biting her. The plate split up the middle, and the food stayed in one blob. My mother bent down, held her hands above it like a halo. Then she swore. I sat still, my hands grasped beneath the chair. I don't say much. So I didn't say anything. Just sat there wondering what happened to our life. Soon she came to me and put her hands on my head soft and kissed me and said we'd go to ice cream for dinner.

She didn't tell me, but I knew she wasn't working anymore. She knew I knew too. I didn't say anything though. Together we ignored the way she wasn't dressed for the store in the morning, wasn't worn from the store in the afternoon. They sold jackets and sweaters and warm winter pants, but maybe they went out of business. Because she couldn't have quit. And she wouldn't have been fired. They loved my mother. But one week she stayed home, and the next week we were poor. I kept going to school. Sometimes in the same clothes two days in a row, not because I had nothing else, but because I forgot. I was thinking of other things. When my mom would stop crying. How. She washed our clothes in the kitchen sink. Sometimes, she cooked only enough to fill my plate. When I didn't empty it, she'd move it over to her place at the table and eat her dinner. After a few months of that, she said we were Removing.

I wanted to remove. I had no friends. Just me and my mom in an empty little apartment. I don't know why people didn't like me. Maybe because I honked when I blew my nose. Maybe because I didn't say much. Or because I picked at my upper lip.

I'd never had friends. I'd tried a few times, asking a girl if she wanted to play cards with me after school, play jump rope during recess, go for a walk in the woods. But nothing.

My mom told me bedtime stories of Kettleborough my whole life. So I'd heard of the Kettleborough house. Big and filled: sewing machines and lamps, books I could keep under my pillow, shoes, paintings, dishes, jars of jam and knitting needles. And, a lake I could swim in. I dreamed the town to be alive with bells in the streets, hats and gloves on the women. Kettleborough, some other world. Kettleborough, so magic a place that they even had curses. A cursed train station. In the old days, it made trains stop there and never run again. They'd lumber up from Boston or down from Portland and they'd quit. At first the railway line had them towed out on cargo trains. But by the third time, Kettleborough was left to deal with it as a town. So they closed the railway station and pulled the train into the lake, and there it stayed. *All that wasted steel,* my mother would say as she told the story. *But they had no choice. Cursed.* I'd dream of diving off the dock, kicking down to the bottom, swimming in through the window of the train, waving my hands over its red carpet, floating above its dinner car. Traveling in a train underwater.

My mother and I had moved before. Oregon to Washington, Washington to Montana. Idaho. Back to Oregon. So when she said that we would remove, I knew the way it would go. Quickly. Silently. With no trace of our pasts left behind. I packed my suitcase: her old nightgown, cut at the sleeves and legs until it became short enough for me, my overalls and my shorts, five pair of underwear, five t-shirts, one sweatshirt with a picture of the moon on front, and one empty notebook, spiral bound and hard-covered,

the pages line-less. That notebook went on top, just before the strap and hook of the suitcase to hold it all together. That notebook, that I was saving, blank-paged, to fill someday with something important. That notebook, that I was waiting to have something happen for.

All my life, we'd lived in empty apartments. White walls and one bed, one pot and one frying pan, two bowls two forks two spoons, one knife. One book from the library for my mother at a time, one book for me. One bottle of shampoo plus conditioner, one bar of soap.

Even if my mother had been rich, I think she would have kept our house this way.

But she wasn't rich, and I understood. I understood that *We're going because we have no place else to go* meant *We're going because we have to eat.* We could have gone to another town though. Could have gone back to Idaho, found a new job in Montana. But this time I knew it was more. Deeper. She'd never cried before. Never. And she'd never stopped working. In the past, she'd work until the minute we moved. I'd wait in the packed car for her to finish her shift. They'd pay her in cash and wave goodbye on the street corner. This time, as I packed, I understood that it was different. And now, always would be.

Same as every time, I had no one to say goodbye to. She woke me in the morning. My suitcase was packed, with me in my sleeping bag. "We're going," she whispered. I climbed out, folded the bag in half, rolled it over, and pulled the elastic cords around its shape. I carried my suitcase in one hand and my sleeping bag in the other. The morning was purple. I left the door of our apartment open. "Put your things in the trunk," my mother said. But I didn't. I tucked my sleeping bag behind my knees,

and held my suitcase on my lap. My mother started the car. It was summer. "We'll drive all day and all night and all day again," she said. I held my breath. "You'll have to keep me company," she said. I pressed my fingers into my suitcase, felt for my notebook. "We'll live with family," she said when we crossed over the pass, into the Washington plains. I looked at her. Traced the shape of my nose. Family? I didn't know what that meant. I didn't know we had any. I thought all we had were stories. How at seventeen, my grandfather covered his eyes, pointed his finger, and spun in the air. His direction landed east and he bought a ticket. Portland, Maine, this city seeming to offer the right mix of bustle and country. The next morning, he boarded the train. Never spoke again of that place he had come from. He rode for one day and one night, and the next morning, the train squealed to a stop in what he didn't know was the new Kettleborough station. He got out for a stretch, only he never got back on.

My grandfather had seen a lake. But nothing like Kettle lake. Bigger than the sky. He leapt off the sidewalk and onto a beach-like pathway, slid his feet out of his penny loafers, and nestled them into the rock and sand. He turned pebbles over between his toes. He walked towards the lake, his vision straight ahead. Nothing else existed. The blue and purple and white of the water waved and ducked into corners and through islands, and reached up until it seemed to Otto that it made the sky and all the land in between. He wanted to cover his body in its sand and rocks, be rinsed clean in its water. He wanted to drink it. To become it.

He reached the pier, bent down to smell the sweet-wet wood of the splintery banister. He went down the wooden stairs slow, his heart beating faster with each step.

My grandfather knew one thing: even though he'd never imagined such a place, this was the place he'd been headed to all along.

There were three boats tied up on the single dock that extended from the pier. He watched a green rowboat rise and fall with the waves. His mind turned a clear blue; he felt at peace. He looked across the soft rolling waves until his vision met the soft rolling mountains. He felt as though he could see the way they had grown out of each other.

My seventeen year old not-yet grandfather stood on the dock by the water and knew that this was the most sure and clean and pure sighting of his life yet. He dropped his penny loafers onto the dock and took the first of many dives into the lake that would become his home.

The lake was soft glass waving to him. A promise. Something pure and honest to hold him. Underwater now with his eyes opened, he looked straight through the clear water to the colored lake floor, further down than he was tall. Secrets of rock caught the sun and glistened in and out of being. He watched the water run through the hair on his arms. He watched his hands move in front of him – estranged, beautiful, clean in this new-found world of water. He held his breath longer than he ever had, longer than he ever would again. He turned back towards the dock. Before rising to the surface for air he closed his eyes, relaxed. Kicked big and fast while he ran his fingers through his hair and felt his shirt billow. He waved his arms to the side in giant strokes, pushed his legs higher up and further down in their kick. It felt good, this last push before he came up for air, this feeling that he owned his body, that this body had come alive. When he couldn't hold his breath a moment longer my grandfather opened his eyes and popped his head up

above the water. He saw light for only a second before he heard the crash of his head against the dock. Darkness.

My grandfather had swum under the dock, and hit his head on the bottom when he came up for air. So on his first day, Otto floated upside-down and unconscious in the new lake of his. As his train blew its whistle and rumbled on north, a young boy came to the dock to untie his rowboat but instead tripped on one of my grandfather's loafers. The boy looked up from the shoes and skimmed the horizon of the water, looked for their owner. There, maybe seven feet out from the dock, lay my seventeen year old grandfather, floating in long pants and an un-tucked pin striped shirt, a leather belt. Without a thought the boy dove into the water and swam to him.

The boy placed one arm underneath Otto's back, rolled him over. He swam my grandfather to the dock, and used it for strength to pull him along the length of the wood to shore. At shore, the young boy couldn't lift Otto, so he pulled him by his arms until the man's head lay on the pebbly beach, the rest of him still waved by the shallow water.

The moment my grandfather's head hit the shore he became conscious. He looked to the boy, to the station where the train had been, to the boy again, and then, "I will live here forever."

The boy stood above my grandfather and watched a smile overtake his whole face – his mouth but also his eyes, his cheeks bunched into a child's, his nose flattened into the new-found width of face. The boy stood stiff above him, looked down at the dock and then up to the street, searched for another person. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and smiled back.

"What is your name?" the boy asked. He'd never asked someone this question before; he'd always been the one to be asked. But after moments of silence, the boy could think of nothing else to do.

"Otto W. Pearson," my grandfather responded with a smile.

"Good to meet you," the boy said. He had no friends, and was thankful to find one floating in the water. "Where do you live?" he asked.

My grandfather considered, sat up. "Across the street," he said. "Right there." He pointed above and behind his head without turning around.

The boy shook his head. His eyes grew wide. He stepped back one step. Otto had pointed at the old train station, abandoned the boy's entire life.

"No one lives there," the boy said. "It's abandoned," he said. "I know for sure."

My grandfather sat up. Looked about. Towards the lake and its islands and shores and then towards the spot where the train had been and then behind him to where he had pointed. Sure enough, he'd pointed to a boarded up train station.

"Not there," my grandfather told the boy. He skimmed his eyes up the street, towards a dirt road that led out of town, folded into a thickness of pines and maples and birches.

"There," he said, "I live up that way."

"Okay!" said the boy. He jumped on the dock. "I know where that is!"

Otto couldn't understand what the boy meant. He looked long at him. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Eleven! And happy to be!" He brushed his hair out of his eyes and sat on the edge of the dock.

My grandfather, still in the sand and water, looked long at the boy.

"Fireball!" the boy said.

My grandfather sat up, and pulled his arm around to cover his face.

"Fireball!" the boy said again.

My grandfather ducked.

"My name! Fireball! Pleased to meet you!" The boy held his hand out to my sopping wet grandfather.

My grandfather shook Fireball's small hand. Fireball turned, walked to the end of the dock, picked up Otto's loafers, and brought them to him. He thanked him, put them on, and stepped onto the dock and up the stairs towards the pier. Then he stopped, looked back down at Fireball as he untied his rowboat.

"Fireball!" Otto called. "Fireball!" The boy looked up. "Thank you!" he yelled, "thank you for saving my life!" The boy waved, and continued on his way, untying his rowboat and paddling out towards the middle of the lake, out past the no-wake buoy, out, and my grandfather walked up, up towards the house where he would make his life.

So I knew how our history had landed in Kettleborough. I'd heard it a thousand times, the story lulling me in and out of sleep. But my mother had never said my grandfather was still alive. Besides, I hadn't ever understood that it was really my grandfather. That the story was really real.

All the way through North Dakota, I said *family* under my breath. "Why don't you take that suitcase off your lap?" my mother would ask. *Family,* I would silently repeat. I reached up, turned the visor down, and looked into the mirror. Could family

mean another pair of eyes just like mine, staring back at me? I dug my vision into itself, trying to understand what it was that made me. I puffed my lips out. Could family mean my lips? *Family.* Would we sit at a table together, say grace, eat dinner?

In Wisconsin, when the land stretched on forever, no mountains or valleys to stop what might come rolling in, my mother said, "Grandfather. We'll live with your grandfather." I told her I had to pee. "Might as well get some gas," she said, and pulled over at the next stop. "You don't have to take your whole suitcase into the bathroom with you," she said. She took the gas cap off, and I carried my suitcase with me into the store, and asked for the key to the bathroom. "And," I said, "could I please have a pen?"

The first page of my notebook, blue ink that clotted when the pen stopped rolling, written while balancing the book on my knees: *Removing to Kettleborough. Family. Grandfather. Grandpa? Grampy?*

Chapter Two

My mother's fist banged on the bathroom door. "Let's get going, honey," she called. She hadn't shed a tear all day, and that made me understand that Kettleborough was the right move. I placed my notebook back on top of my clothes, fastened it in, and zipped the suitcase. "Ready?" she asked when I emerged. I nodded. Before she started the car she opened her purse and counted her money. Fives and tens and twenties, quarters. She scribbled numbers on a piece of paper, added map miles and gas. "We'll just make it," she said, and repeated herself, "just make it."

We'd never lived so far from the Pacific. We'd always stayed west, and that's what my mother said we'd always do. "Us," she'd say, "we're Western Girls." She'd tell me at the end of one of her Kettleborough stories, right after she'd zipped my sleeping bag as high as it would go and kissed me. That's when I'd always ask, "Why aren't we in Kettleborough?" and she'd look far out the window, as though the darkness was a movie only she could see, and then she'd come to, shaking her head, saying "Stories, just silly stories," and I believed her, and I thought it part of the game, my pretending Kettleborough was a place, a real place, as though her bedtime stories were something more, as though we had someplace to go, someplace to believe.

By Indiana I was chewing my upper lip. My mother still hadn't shed a tear, but her eyes had turned out of something I knew and into a sort of animal. She wouldn't talk, but asked me to please tell a story. I leaned forward, looked out the windshield hard like her, and told the story she'd told me, The Story of the House.

After he fell in the water, after he'd met Fireball, my grandfather walked the narrow road out of town, the road he'd pointed to, and as the trees caved in over top of him, and the road turned itself into a path, he wondered just what it meant that he'd missed his train, and how exactly he'd make his life.

"All I need to find is a house," my grandfather said. "An abandoned house." And just then the trees opened into lawn, and at the edge of the lawn, a house, two stories, more tall than wide, paint-chipped with an attached barn that sagged at the beams. And outside, junk. Junk and more junk and more junk. My grandfather breathed deep and took it in: gas tanks and broken washboards, bamboo ski poles, empty milk jugs, boxes of yarn. He walked around to the front of the house, the side that faced the lake. *Who lives here? Anyone? Are they spring cleaning?* Bicycle wheels hung from the branches of a big maple. My grandfather stepped over a rake as he approached the porch. He walked the clear pathway carved between junk up the porch steps, tripped on a watering can, stepped over a shovel, and stood at the screen door, his hand balanced on a metal bed frame for a child's bed. He imagined what the house might look like cleaned. He saw rich people on the porch, fluffy hair and long fingers, lemonade in pink glasses, laughter and their heads tossed back.

"Okay," my mother said. She reached down, turned the radio dial on. "Let's sing."

I put my feet up on the dashboard. Stayed still while my mother rocked her head back and forth with the music. She unrolled her window all the way, told me to unroll mine. I did, and tilted my head so it was completely outside, hitting the wind. Night was

turning into morning and I'd never stayed up so long. Darkness gave a sort of permanence, like a promise, like my mother and I would stay there in the car and we would say things or we wouldn't, and it wouldn't matter what words we said when we did say things, and it wouldn't matter if we stayed quiet, because no matter what, all that was happening was important, and would last. And when darkness turned into the purple that we'd left in Washington, and then slowly into the blue and pink of the lake of my Kettleborough stories, I wanted it all to stay, to keep staying.

We were getting closer. My mother's skin was tightening. She didn't give any of the radio stations a chance. She reached forward and pressed the dial and we were in a silent box again, the world whirring by on all sides. Would my grandfather think I looked strange? Pretty? Would he look at me and know me? Know my thoughts? Know that I was his?

"Mom," I dared. Because by that time in the trip, she might as well have been shut into a bedroom. "Why didn't we go to Kettleborough before?"

She pressed the gas harder, then let up, and took a long look in the rearview mirror.

"What kind of dreams do you have?" she asked me. We went over a bump and I tightened my grip on my suitcase. Trees had moved in around us, and hills, and for the first time in my life, I couldn't see past the land. We were closed in.

"Why'd you ever leave Kettleborough?" I asked back. I'd never heard stories about her. I didn't know anything of her growing up. Only of the town, her father, and her mother, who'd played the piano so smooth and brilliant that she'd been discovered – Discovered, my mother always said, like a title, and she'd left, gone off to play her

calling in the big cities. And of Fireball, the strange boy who was a child of the town, as my mother put it, just the town boy who worked for my grandfather after my grandfather opened his business – Otto's Ice Cream. Because that's what my grandfather did – he walked into that house and called out – "Hello? Anybody home? Anybody live here?" and he found no one, and he shrugged his shoulders and considered his luck, then looked around, ran his fingers through his sand blond hair, and took in the junk of the inside. Its floors and counters and cupboards and corners were filled – boxes and books and dead plants, upside-down furniture and broken dishes, and a path running through the maze, making a space to walk from the door to the sink, the sink to the living room, the living room to the fireplace. My grandfather followed the path, checking behind him as he walked, feeling as though he were being watched but unable to find a watcher, sopping wet and holding his arms across his chest. He came upon a player piano, jingled the change in his pocket, and slid a penny in. The piano soared into a rag, and my grandfather, nervous for all the noise, hurried himself back out of the house the way he had come, tripped, and on the screened-in porch he landed on a swing-bed. And next to my grandfather on the swing-bed was a book, *The Art of Ice Cream Making,* by E.P. Starlet.

My grandfather picked up the book. Flipped through its pages. Remembered the man he'd seen from the compartment window, the man selling ice cream cones to a line of men and women and children long as the train. He swung back and forth on the swing-bed, listened to the sounds of the lake, and decided: he would make ice cream. He would bring homemade ice cream to the town of Kettleborough.

My mother lurched the car to a stop before I'd noticed that we'd moved off the highway. The sun was hot and my legs were sticking to the seat. I could tell from her stiffness not to say I was hungry. I knew I'd eat soon enough anyway. With my grandfather.

My mother didn't turn to me. She didn't tell me why we were stopped there on the side of the road, the highway roaring above us and a wall built of soft round stone like I'd never seen before to my right, but something about the way her knuckles had gone tight around the steering wheel, something about the way her eyes pressed forward as though the road were still moving ahead of us, something told me to be scared. Something told me to that she just might turn around.

"The lake will tell you things," my mother would tell me at night, my eyes closed, a lake of clear stretched across my mind. "Your grandfather, he discovered the way the lake will tell you things."

It was on his first morning in Kettleborough. He'd woken on the swing bed, and still no one had shown up in the house full of junk. He walked down the porch steps, across the lawn, through a thin line of pines, and there, the lake stretched wide before him, my grandfather raised his arms up in the morning sun. And then he breathed out, and then he breathed in, and that's when he discovered it – The Point. A bald rock jutted into the lake, the sun shining on it as though for that spot alone. My grandfather took his shirt off and lay his body down on the rock, spread his arms and legs wide at his sides, and howled up through the air. And he felt free. After some time, he scrambled his body around until his head instead of his feet faced the water. Then, he leaded over the edge of

the rocks, and dove his head through the plane of sun-danced water. He shook his head back and forth. He ran his fingers through his floating hair. And then, *What shall I do?* he wondered. *Stay in the house?* He pulled his head up and gasped. It was as if the lake had spoken. He squinted his eyes and pulled at his lips. "Yes?" he asked aloud. He leaned forward again, dove his head back under. *Will I succeed?* he wondered. *Shall I make an ice cream business?* He pulled his head back out of the lake. And he knew. It was if the lake had answered.

My grandfather continued to ask the lake, and the lake continued to answer. *Will forty cents for an ice cream sell?* The lake rolled a yes. *Can I figure a way to sell ice cream on the train?* A fish jumped another yes.

After a long silence, my mother turned off the car. "Aren't your legs asleep under that suitcase?" she asked. I shrugged. "Sometimes I wish you'd talk more," she said. I shrugged again. Traced my fingers around the edges of my notebook, freshly written in. "Maybe we should head back?" she asked. I sat up straight. I felt big, grown. Like I had some power in where we went. Like my choice might matter.

A truck sped by us, shaking the car. I looked out past the stonewall into the trees. "What kind of trees are those?" I asked.

"Sugar Maple," she told me.

"We should keep going," I said. "We should have family."

She nodded. "You hungry?" she asked me. I shook my head no. "Sure you won't put that suitcase in the trunk?" I shook my head no again. "I'll just fill the tank,

since we're stopped," she said. And she started the car, pulled down the road, and into the gas station parking lot.

When she was inside, I unzipped my suitcase, and pulled my notebook, with the pen from North Dakota, out from under the suitcase straps. *New York. Sugar Maple. Mom's not sure, but we'll keep going. I've decided.*

I shut the book and zipped it in before my mom came back. We sped onto the highway. My mother held the steering wheel with her knee while she pulled her hair into a pony tail. She told me to choose something on the radio. I pressed the button, and stopped it at classical. She leaned forward, pressed in a button I'd never seen her use. She reached into her purse, still on her lap, and fiddled her hands in it for a few minutes, then pulled out a cigarette. I'd never seen her smoke before. The button popped out, my mom lit the smoke, cracked the window, and pressed the gas harder.

"Just to help me stay awake," she said. "And, Lulu – " She stopped. Smoke billowed out her nose like a dragon. She licked her lips. "Lulu." She slowed the car. I nudged my suitcase forward and unrolled my window. Her blinker went on. I looked behind us. She was pulling off to the edge of the highway. The car rumbled and bounced. She left the blinker on and coasted real slow. She kept her eyes straight ahead, but I could tell she wasn't watching what she saw. "Lulu," she began again. "No more stories. No more Kettleborough stories. You can't tell them to your grandfather. You have to promise me. Lulu, it would break me."

I imagined what it might mean, to break a person, to have a person broken. My mother floated across my head. I looked at her and nodded. Coughed without covering my mouth.

She put her cigarette in her mouth, switched the blinker, and sped up. "Tell me when!" she said, but I didn't, and she pulled back into traffic on her own. Once we were there, safe in our lane, she looked at me for longer than she should have while driving. "And Henry," she said. "You are not to tell Henry our stories."

"Henry?" I asked.

"Henry," she said. "Your cousin."

My heart beat through my chest and into my mouth. Henry. Would he like me because he liked me? Or like me because I'm family? Would I have a friend? Later, at the next rest stop, I took my suitcase into the bathroom again. Page two of my journal, because he deserved a full page: *Henry. Cousin. Family. Henry.* And then in parentheses, written small beneath his name, *Mom has a sister?! A brother?*

Chapter Three

Kettleborough. The minute we were there, I knew it. I'd seen it every day of my life. I closed my eyes and opened them and closed them and opened them. This was real. We were driving slow along a lake. Kettle lake, the one that gave answers. Truths. I squinted, and the lake became a part of the sky, and the sky a part of the lake, whitecaps carving the space between the two. Is my grandfather looking at the lake right now? Is my cousin? The car slowed. I turned to my mom, and behind her I saw a line of brick town buildings exactly as I'd dreamed. The car stopped above the town docks and my mother dug her hands into her eyes. I could hear her dry cracked fingers rub into the skin of her face. She clenched her teeth and I could hear that too, as though she was chewing her own mouth. She lit a cigarette. I coughed. "Well," she said. "Never thought I'd be here!" She said it happy, like she could fool me. But she couldn't. Her legs were shaking up and down and she smelled terrible, like rotten onions.

"We could take a walk," I said. "To the lake."

She looked long at me then, and ran her hand across my face, held it there, like I was something new to behold. Then she let go, started the car.

Not many people came to Kettleborough. There were no stoplights in town, and no traffic. The road didn't lead anywhere. If people reached Kettleborough, they'd already reached what they were headed for. That, or they'd passed it. So I knew the way. Straight through town, straight up into the pines and maples and birches, straight down the dirt road, all the way, until it dead-ended. And there, my grandfather's house.

My mom crept the car along the drive, so slow I could have walked faster, even carrying my suitcase and sleeping bag. I had imagined a lot of things about Kettleborough, but I had never imagined that the house would still be the same. The same as I'd imagined. But there it stood, paint chipped and heavy, more tall than wide, an attached barn sagging at the beams. The wind circled. My mouth dropped open. The house was surrounded with junk, and as I knew it would, it felt like the junk belonged. Like the house put it there. The house, standing there all those years and spitting up its junk: a pink dresser with no drawers and an upside down green desk, a box spring for a child's bed, bait fishing poles, dairy crates. It ran along the edge of the house and out, covering the lawn and approaching the trees. It hung out the windows and covered the porch stairs. I looked at a shovel on the roof and then at my mother. I couldn't tell if I was scared or not. *You lived here?* I wanted to ask her, but didn't.

My mother turned the car off, but kept her hand on the key. With her other hand, she reached down and opened the door. She eased one foot out onto the driveway, but she kept the other on the gas. I sat still, waited. "We could go back," she said after a long silence.

I tipped my suitcase up on its side. Shrugged my shoulders. "Back where?" I asked. And she took her hand off the key then, stepped out, and slammed her car door shut. I followed, and as soon as I left the car I'd already entered the house. The space of it. My breath tightened. I held my suitcase to my chest and my sleeping bag on top, buried my nose in it. I ran to walk behind my mother. But she turned, told me to leave my stuff by the car. I put my things by the front tire, walked to her, then walked back, unzipped my suitcase and pulled my journal out, tucked it under my shirt. My mother

walked past a big maple, bicycle wheels hanging high in its branches. I ran to her side, grabbed her hand. We followed the edge of the junk around to the front, the side that faced the lake. I squinted my eyes and looked through the thin line of pines. I listened to the waves against the rocks. "Come on," my mother said. We headed to the screened in porch. A path to walk was carved up the middle of the steps, exactly as it had been in the stories of my grandfather at seventeen. A swing-bed blew in the wind. My mother and I stood at the screen door, and she lifted her fist as though in knock, then let it drop again. She pushed me forward, to the door. So I opened it, and walked in.

The moment I heard their voices, I wondered where my mother had brought me. If I'd live through it. I wanted my suitcase. I wanted my things to protect me. "Alla Malla Wu Shan," we heard from some place out of our sight. "Alla Malla Wu Shan," growing louder each time, louder, louder until the voice of an old man and the voice of a young boy had grown into one, loud as a crack of thunder across the silent house, and then quiet, more quiet with each round, and soon the voices whispered the words together like the death of a rain storm. I held tight to my mother's hand. We heard the cough of an old man, and then there he was, in the doorway of the room he'd come from. His back was curved into a hill and his head was bald, his arms shook as he stood there, and his eyes were the lake I'd just seen.

My mother pushed me forward again. "Introduce yourself," she said to me. I stood there. *Family,* I thought. She pushed me again. I wanted to turn and look at her, to ask her why she wouldn't introduce me. Why she would make me walk first into the house. Why my mother was acting scared as I should be. But I didn't. I sucked in a breath instead. I stuck my arm out straight. "Lulu," I said, and what I wanted to say next

was, *you are real. Your house is real. Or, I am in a dream.* But instead, "I am your family. You are my grandfather, Otto."

He didn't take my hand. Instead, he leaned over, put his hands on each side of me, and lifted me into the air, above his face. I was afraid he'd fall over. Afraid he'd drop me. I sucked in my stomach to keep my journal from falling. I hung there in the air and looked down into his face and he held me there and looked up into my face and soon he smiled, and then I smiled, and he put me down.

I stood in front of him, my mother at my back. The house smelled like the inside of an old book.

"Henry!" my grandfather called. I looked through the doorway. A boy, hair the sandy blond of the grandfather of my stories, hands hidden behind his back, legs tight together, and eyes straight into me, stood behind the table in the next room. Smoke billowed from behind him. "We had a fire," Henry said before I asked. I nodded. Looked back to my mother. She hadn't moved. Hadn't said a word.

"You are my cousin Lulu," Henry said. I nodded. "Where is your suitcase?" he asked.

I didn't know what to say. Was this what family knew? Or was he special, because he came from here? I began to shrug, but before I'd lifted my shoulders as high as I could lift them, my mother patted me on the head, then pushed past me, past my grandfather in the doorway, and into the dark room where Henry stood. She kneeled down in front of him. "Oh," she said. "Henry. How I've thought of you." She rubbed his hair over to the side. She pressed her hands into his cheeks. He nodded.

"Are you here to stay?" he asked.

She stood. Looked at my grandfather, who was looking at her. He didn't speak and she didn't speak and I think I knew at that moment, when their silence felt like a language I'd never heard, and didn't want to learn, that my mother and her father had torn themselves further away from each other than there was space in the world, and that we were back, but we weren't back. I think I understood, as I stood there with my grandfather behind me and my mother in front of me, Henry standing tall with smoke drifting from the top of his head, that there, where we had come from, had been one world, and that here, where we came to, would be another. I think I understood what it meant, Removing to Kettleborough.

Chapter Four

On Henry's page: *friend,* and *smart,* and *I think he knows more things than he can know.* And on the next page, *I have entered the house.* Henry gave me a room, a closet of a space filled with more stuff than my mother and I had ever had in an entire house, and it was the room I would have chosen, the room I had imagined all those years. Hidden and secret. That entire summer, I kept my things tucked in my suitcase, and compared with the chaos of the room, it made me feel small and in order, nearly invisible, and that made me happy. I had to slip under weaving looms and over magazines to get to my bed. Every night I'd roll out my sleeping bag, and sit there, legs stretched, taking notes on all that was happening to me:

My grandfather feeds me ice cream for breakfast and he might love me.

I am learning the lake.

My mother has disappeared inside her body.

I'd sit on that bed and listen to the loons call, and plan what books I would read and when I would swim the next day, I'd braid my bangs, scratch plaque off my teeth, and write in my notebook, over and over again: *how do I fix mom?* Because she'd started the day we'd arrived. Climbed up to the attic, smoked, and cried. Finally, when we couldn't keep walking through the wall of her sadness, Henry pulled my arm and said in my ear that we'd do something. Fix something.

He walked silent through the house then tiptoed to a stop. I bumped into him from behind. "Could be the ghost isn't gone yet," he whispered.

I didn't know what he meant, but didn't ask. It wasn't that I didn't believe there could be a ghost – I believed anything could be in that house. But I wanted Henry to

believe I understood. The way he seemed to understand. Instead, "How old are you?" I whispered. We were standing on our tiptoes in the entry way, afraid within the sobs of my mother.

"Two years older than you," Henry said. "Eleven."

I nodded. His lips were careful when he spoke, his hands tight to his sides. Standing there in the entryway, my mother's sounds upstairs, I was alone with my cousin. My cousin. Who knew my name and my age, who seemed to know I'd be coming here. Who wanted to be with me. Who might already love me. Automatically.

"Come," he said, so serious, and waved his hand at his side.

He took me up the stairs, through his bedroom, full as the rest of the house, into the closet, and went through a door that even we, nine and eleven, had to duck through. The door opened into the attic. I knew my mother was at the far end. Between her and us, the space was empty. My nose filled with the smell of the cracks between the floorboards. I pulled in a breath and looked straight ahead. All I could see was the hover of smoke in sunlight. For a moment, I lost sight of him.

"Henry?" I called, "Mom?"

Already, I was used to full, and in the empty space of the attic I felt scared to move.

"Lulu?" my mother called through her sobs. "Here, honey. Over here."

I chased her voice through the smoke-filled ray of sun, my arms stretched out in front of me as though I might fall into some never-ending emptiness. Before I reached her, I saw Henry standing in the haze of light. I grabbed his shirt without thinking. I'd never touched him before. He nodded his head. I dreamed us born in the same breath.

Henry took my arm and brought me to my mother. She sat in a small wooden chair at a small wooden table, a small attic window at her side. On the table was a pitcher of water, a glass, a filled ash tray shaped like a flower and another empty one, a lighter, and one crushed empty pack of cigarettes, one unopened one.

"Lulu," she said. "Henry."

She grabbed her arm around me and held me so tight I couldn't breathe, so tight I wondered if I still existed. She unleashed a tear and Henry headed back for the door. Suddenly, I didn't want to be left alone with her like this. I backed up. "Lulu," she said, then drew in a breath from the cigarette. I wondered if the breath would be her last. They looked like her last, those cigarette breaths, the way she held them in, coveted them. I dug my face into her neck and swallowed her sweet-sweat smell and I missed her, sitting there, missed her being in her. "I love you," I whispered, then let go, turned to leave. Henry was already at the far side of the attic, clasping the latch. My mother caught me by the wrist. "Careful," she said. "Tell Henry to take care of you." She shook me back and forth. "The house, Lulu. The house is something else."

But I kept it to myself. Didn't even write it in my notebook, *the house is something else.* Henry already knew to take care of me. I could tell – he knew everything. Knew we would arrive, knew my mother would disappear inside herself, knew he would have to teach me how to be there.

Boxes of dishes stood taller than me. Henry led me through the kitchen, past the fireplace, to the far corner of the dining room. On one wall was a door. He pointed to it.

"This door," he said, "is never opened."

I nodded.

"But, I know it goes to the attic."

I nodded again.

"And, the ghost was behind that door. In the staircase to the attic."

"Mm hmm."

"And Grampy and I set it free. You heard us your first day. Setting the ghost free. Alla Malla Wu Shan."

Grampy, I thought. *I call him Grampy.*

Henry went to the dining table, pulled a chair out, picked up a stack of books from the seat and piled them atop a stack of picture frames, and carried the chair to the doorway. He told me to stand up on it and face away from the door. I did.

A block of wall the size of two shoe boxes was missing, and covering the spot where the wall would be was a plate of glass, and behind the glass was a miniature inside of a house.

I recognized the shape of it. "It's our house," I said, and then it echoed in my mind, *our house.* I held my breath, hoping Henry wouldn't catch my slip.

But, "Right," he said. "Without all the junk."

Family, I thought.

I looked back. A miniature kitchen with a wood-stove and a big laundry sink. A towel hanging from the fridge. A jar of pickles, a dining room and a big table with curly feet. A big chair and a book opened to the reader's page. Candles and miniature photographs of a miniature family on the mantle, someone's knitting on the couch. A

piano. A cat. Bedrooms with quilts on the beds and lamps on the bed stands, a dresser and a pair of socks laid out for the next day. A fireplace with a fire in it. And across from the fireplace a doorway. A doorway that led nowhere.

"Henry," I said.

He nodded his head, like I understood.

I stepped down off the chair, and he pushed it back to the table, then replaced the pile of books as though that was the spot they belonged. My mother's sobs tumbled down the staircase and smashed into the door.

"It's a sign," he said, and I nodded, pretending to get it all. "My dad built the miniature house. I bet my dad's the ghost." He turned to me then, and we stood as close to each other as I'd ever stood to anyone, so close our breath passed back and forth.

"Why's your dad a ghost?"

"Cause he's dead."

"Why's he dead?"

"Cause he died."

"Why'd he die?"

That's when Henry backed up. A wind blew through the room and together we shivered.

Later, in the night, when I was buried in my sleeping bag, Henry came to my room and tapped me on the head. Before I'd emerged he began to speak in a hushed and urgent voice, "You never knew? Your mom never told you why my dad died?" I shook my head. "You never heard of Abram?" I shook my head again, understanding that

Abram had been his father. A loon mourned out across the night lake, and suddenly I also understood that he too didn't know why his father had died. How. "But it's why your mom is crying," he said, "it's why she hates Grampy. I know it is." He pushed his head forward, his breath falling into mine. "Lulu, I know." I nodded. He knew everything. Pines whispered at my window and time circled around us. Henry and I swallowed each other's eyes in the dark, and we dreamed ourselves underwater until we swam together, deep in Kettle lake, no fears about the way our family would fall.

Chapter Five

I liked my grandfather and Henry because they were family, and since they were family, they didn't care that I wore the same dirty overalls everyday, and didn't care that I took baths in the lake, without soap. My grandfather called me Lu La, and lifted me in the air every morning, and spoke to Henry like he was an adult, which he seemed like, planning our lunches and our dinners, waking our grandfather up in the morning to go to work. I wanted my mom to be a part of it, of this family we'd returned to for the first time. So instead of breakfast at the table one morning, early in the summer, I went to the attic with a bowl of cornflakes and a banana for her.

"Your hair needs to be brushed," she told me, and looked out the window, to the field. "We used to have a dog, you know. Panda. He followed your grandfather around everywhere. But your grandfather, he killed it. Pow! Buried under that dead apple tree." She pulled me onto her lap and pointed out the window. The field was green and the tree was gray, snarled and curly and beautiful.

I pulled at my overall strap and neatened my hair. My grandfather wouldn't kill a dog. I climbed off my mother's lap, dug my hands deep into my pockets. "Who's Henry's dad?" I asked her.

"Who's your dad?" she asked me back, and I turned away from her, because that wasn't a fair question, because I'd never had a dad, and I knew I'd never find out who he would have been, had I had one. I made it all the way across the attic before she called back to me.

"Abram," she said, and then more slowly, her voice surrounded in clouds, "my brother."

I walked back to my mother. She had a brother. I wanted a brother all my life. But she had a dead brother. I looked around the attic. "Why's it so empty up here?" I asked.

"His mother left after Abram died. Henry was a baby," my mom said. I didn't know if that was an answer. If his mother had taken the attic with her. If the attic had been their house. I imagined the shape of the place filled with a family, Henry and his mother spread on a blanket on the floor, my mom's brother singing them to sleep across the attic, the loon calls rolling in through the window.

"Why'd he die?" I asked her, and she looked at me for a long time. Then she stood, like she was going to leave the attic, like I'd done something right, and pulled her back out, into our new world. But she sat down again just as fast, and lit a cigarette. "You just be careful," she said. "You be careful. That grandfather of yours. You," she said, and she seemed to shake, "you know we have no where else to go. Lulu? Do you know that?"

I nodded. I knew. But then I didn't know. I knew we'd been poor before. Not poor like now, but I knew we'd been close. So I held my breath, counted to ten with my cheeks puffed out. My mom looked at me like I was crazy but used to that. After ten, I was ready. "Why did we come back?" I dared ask.

And like I knew it would be, it was the wrong question to ask. She slammed her fist on the small table and it toppled. She shook her head and rubbed her eyes like she wanted them to be erased. "Lulu," she said, like my name was an order. I kept my hands in my pockets. "Lulu, do you have dreams?" she asked me, like I was so stupid.

Dreams. Well, I dream of swimming underwater to the train. I dream of reading every book in the whole wide world. And at night, I dream different things. Silly things and scary things. I didn't know what kind of dreams she meant. "Yes," I said. A definite yes. I nodded my head up and down.

"Never mind," she said. "I'm sorry, honey. We wouldn't be here. If," she said, then stopped.

"I like Henry," I said. I wanted to be there. To stay.

She let out a small cry then, and a laugh, and she pulled me into her. "I try," she said. "I'm trying," and I wanted her to stop, because I hated it when she told me she tried, because then I knew I was supposed to tell her I knew she tried, and I didn't like it, being supposed to. She smelled different, like smoke sweat. I heard a chickadee call, and let go of her.

"Lulu," she said before I left, "you stick to Henry. You watch out. Your grandfather, Lulu."

The day and the lake were blue. I sat at Pearson's Point with my feet in the water. I wished Henry would sit with me. I reached off the rock and into the low-bush blueberries, picked the bluest one I could find.

"Not ready yet," Henry's voice said from behind. I put it in my mouth and soured my face, then spit. I waited for him to say *told you so,* but he didn't. My grandfather swam through my head, and I wanted to ask Henry. Wanted to ask him to tell me what my mom meant, and what was wrong with her, and if our grandfather would kill a dog.

"We'll ask the lake," Henry said. Like he could feel a question around me. And like it wasn't anything. Like everyone asks the lake. Or, like I knew how to ask the lake. Knew in my blood.

He turned his body around, lay on his stomach, pushed himself forward, and dove his head underwater. I followed. Bubbles rose. I turned my head to Henry and watched his eyes closed tight, his lips moving, the same motion over and over again. So I closed my eyes, blew bubbles out my nose, and repeated in my head, *Grampy, Grampy, Grampy.* And then, repeated back in my head, I heard *ice cream store, ice cream store, ice cream store.* I pulled my head back up and my chest beat heavy up and down. I looked at Henry. "Grampy's got the rowboat today," he said. "I row him to work most days, but he rowed himself today. So we'll walk," he said, "through the woods."

I knew all about the ice cream store. One of our Kettleborough stories. After he'd found the house, and then *The Art of Ice Cream Making,* my seventeen year old grandfather had found an add in the paper for a job at the candy store. Immediately, he put the paper down, flattened his hair, stood up, and walked straight to the store. "My name is Otto W. Pearson," he said, "and I will work harder than any man you have seen." The owner shook my grandfather's hand, brought him around the counter, and showed him how to dip the butter crunch into the chocolate.

My grandfather was true to his word; he did work harder than any man before him. Sometimes, he worked straight through the night and into the morning. And, he never forgot his goal. He saved his money, and before falling asleep each day, in that full and abandoned house that he had discovered, he studied the book of ice cream making

until he knew the entire process by heart. *Buy milk and cream,* he repeated in his head as he walked to the candy store, *and make the mix: milk, cream, sugar, and flavor. Make the ice cream in the freezer,* he said aloud, memorizing the glossary in the back of the book. *Pour into a 5-gallon steel can, move to the hardening room. Keep the room at 10-20 degrees below zero. Move to tempering room,* my grandfather would say as he stirred the chocolate at the candy store, *warm it up to 8-10 degrees above zero. Wa-La!* he'd catch himself saying aloud, *ready to scoop and serve.*

The shade from the trees was cool and the hair on my arms stood up. Henry led the way behind the house, across the field, and into the woods. Pine needles had turned the ground red and brown over the green. We followed a creek that ran between the base of two hills, and I practiced memorizing the way, practiced knowing that I lived here now, and could walk the woods or the road or the shore, or ride in the rowboat, all to my grandfather's ice cream store. I listened to the sound of our feet, the way our steps matched the wind through the trees. When we got to the top of a hill I brushed the hair out from my eyes and turned to face back where we had come from. Henry pointed – the cupola of the barn sat far in the distance. It made me feel big, grown, and I wanted to say something important, but had nothing important to say. Henry and I were quiet together, and I knew he was feeling the same.

When he turned, and stepped over the stone wall that marked the edge of our grandfather's property, I stood firm. I didn't mean to. My legs were frozen and I couldn't step over the wall. I looked at the moss and root that dug its way into the worn rocks. Sun danced uneven through the branches above us. Henry tugged my sleeve, and

standing there on the other side of the wall he seemed so far away, like he'd jumped himself out of our fishbowl and into another. He shrugged his shoulders and turned, started walking further away. And I knew he knew I'd follow when he did that.

On the other side of the stone wall the trees turned from pine to maple and birch, and the woods spread open with light. "We're far, huh?" I said to Henry. And I felt like it was the first time I'd been the one to start a conversation with him. Or anyone. But he kept walking, didn't answer. The noise of the woods and the wind seemed loud, but it was the kind of noise that seemed to have always been there, only now, waiting for Henry to speak, I heard it.

I liked the birch the best, liked the way the trees watched the woods with a thousand eyes, liked the way their small leaves caught the light. In the pines the woods felt dark, but the birches felt open as the sky. I ran my fingers through my hair. I felt free. I watched Henry walk and tried to walk like him, tried to hold my back straight and my head forward, tried to pick my legs up high and move with purpose, direction. To move like I mattered. And then he stopped, and I ran straight into him.

I heard the ground rustling so strong the trees could have been pulling their roots up. Then a cough, a clearing of the throat. Henry turned and I turned with him, and then I saw it: a shape of a man puffing out from each side of a birch tree. He stepped into full view, yanked at his pants, wiped his nose on his arm, twisted his beard between his fingers, and mumbled a hello.

It was the same man I'd seen when my mother and I had driven into town, the man fat as any person I'd ever seen.

"Hello," Henry said, so formal. Then he tapped me on the back. I stepped forward an inch, dropped my head towards the ground, and said hi.

"Shit," the man said.

I stepped back. "This is Fireball," Henry said. "This is Lulu."

I about fell over. Fireball was real. My whole life existed because of Fireball. Fireball, who saved my grandfather that day in the lake.

"Skipping work?" Henry asked him.

Fireball shrugged and picked more at his beard. He stared at me and I backed up behind Henry. Then he bent over, picked up a piece of fallen birch bark. "They used to build canoes with this stuff, you know."

I shrugged. "We can take you to work," Henry said. "We're going to the ice cream store."

"Nah," Fireball said. "I like the woods." I stepped out from behind Henry, and stood as he did, with my stance wide, my arms crossed in front of my chest.

"But my grandfather will be waiting for you," Henry said.

"Nah," Fireball said again.

Henry shrugged. Fireball looked older than my mother, but something about the shape of his eyes, the way they hung down with his mouth and fat, his shoulders hunched over and his chin pointed towards his chest, something about the quiet way he stood made me understand that Fireball was a child like me. The wind blew and the sky darkened. I smelled maple and wondered if my arms would reach around his entire body.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked Fireball. I wasn't afraid to speak to him. I wanted to speak to him.

Fireball shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then leaned against a birch. "You bet I do," he said slow, a syllable between each word. He said it like he knew more than me who I was. He kicked the dirt, then pointed up; a hawk drifted wide-winged across the sky, and when the wind hit, the hawk moved backwards for a spell, flapped his wings, and soared again. "How much you know?" Fireball asked.

For the first time, Henry looked surprised.

"Rid of that ghost?" he asked Henry.

Henry nodded. He put his hands in his pockets and his head down.

"Ain't sure, huh, now that your family's here?"

Henry began to walk past Fireball, and I followed with him. I couldn't understand what was going on, but I wanted it to stop. I wanted to walk through the woods with Fireball, to keep him company for the day.

"You'll hear soon enough is all," Fireball called.

Henry stopped. I stopped with him.

"With Lulu and her mom and all. You'll hear, so might as well hear."

Henry turned around slowly, then looked up at Fireball. "About my father?" he asked.

Fireball shrugged. "Ain't like I got nothing to do with it though. I'll just stay out of it. See you kids." And then he turned, and started to walk away. He swayed as he walked, like neither knee would bend, so his weight just bounced back and forth, one side, the other, one side, the other.

"Wait!" I called, then put my head down, nervous for speaking out like that. I looked at Henry, but his eyes were far away as the lake.

"You want I'll show you something," Fireball said, and kept walking.

Fireball led us over another stone wall, lower than the first and older, along another stream that ran cold and clear, and into a clump of pines. He stopped there and turned to us. "I'll just show you is all," he said, nervous. We nodded. The world fell still.

Where the rest of the woods bent up in hills or down into streams, the spot Fireball led us to was different. The woods came to an edge, and at the edge the land caved in to form a perfect round, an upside-down hill. Fireball stood at the top of it.

"There it is," he said. "Some pit, huh?"

We stood together side by side and looked down into the hole as though it were the edge of the earth. At the bottom, in the center, was an old black car, rusted and turned on its side, windowless and curvy in the way I imagined the old days. Grass grew up from its insides. The tires were strewn along the edges, filled with water and flies. One seat was out, rested against the edge of the pit like a lawn chair. And surrounding the car was trash – cans and bottles and indistinguishable shapes of metal and wood. I wondered who could have kissed inside the car, crashed. Fireball started to walk down into the pit and Henry followed. Then they both turned, and motioned for me to catch up. Nothing so exciting had ever happened to me before. They wanted me. With them. I sat, and slid down the edge of the pit. I liked the pine smell that the dirt kicked up, and the way needles stuck with their sap to my fingers. It was quiet in the pit. We had jumped off the edge of the world. And I liked it.

"That's all," Fireball said. "I like it. Quiet."

I nodded.

"Who's car was it?" Henry asked, his head craned in the space where a window used to be.

Fireball coughed. "Shit," he said. "You kids don't know nothing, do you."

"That's not true," I said. I'd never been so brave. But Henry knew something. Henry knew everything. My cheeks flushed. I spit, then spit further, then ran my fingers through my hair and wondered if it was as light as Henry's, light as the sand.

"She's wrong," Henry said. "We don't know anything."

I crossed my hands over my chest and stood there still and strong as maple.

"Shit," Fireball said again. "What makes you think I know anything. Could be a town dump is all. Shit. You want to go out on the lake with me? You can if you want. You two come over when you want. I'll take you out."

"Now?" I asked. I hadn't been on the lake yet. I wondered if Fireball still had the same boat, the boat from the stories. If he really lived in a boathouse, really lived above the water.

"Ain't got time today," he said. "I work, you know. I got to get to work."

I knew about Fireball. Knew he was different, strange, knew people didn't understand what went on in his head and knew he'd never had a family to take care of him, and I also knew from the stories that he was good. That my grandfather loved him. So when he climbed out of the pit, bent down on his hands and knees to keep his balance, his pants hanging too low, and turned back to us, called, with dirt on his cheeks and hair in his eyes, called back to say, "Least no one died in that car. Almost did though. Don't know which is better though, Abram to die in that car or die in the lake," when he said

that, I didn't know what to think. I just waited, waited to understand how death had suddenly become a part of my life. Fireball left our sight, but we heard his footsteps as he headed back our way. "Anything's better," he called down to us, "then to think your father killed you!"

Later, when Henry and I returned to the house, I crawled to my bed even though it was only afternoon. I felt old and worn as the hills, exhausted already, at nine, of all the this life. I wrote before I drifted to sleep, *Fireball might help fix my mom.*

Chapter Six

I moved a broken sewing machine and a stack of doll magazines from the way, and sat on the floor in front of my bed, waiting for Henry to show up, to tell us what we'd do for the day. I stared at the cracks between the floorboards, wondered how the sewing needle I found had gotten there. If maybe it had been my mother's. Or even my grandmother's.

I knew what I felt: the house itself, and not the people inside of it, filled it inside and out with junk. But suddenly, as I pictured my grandmother losing a needle in the floorboards, the possibility of my family creating the clutter swam across my mind. I thought of the broken bed frames and old dressers, bicycle wheels, bait fishing poles, dairy crates. I knew the house couldn't suck all these things in. But still, I felt it. I couldn't feel what it meant to have my family collect these things. Rusted sewing machines. Broken telephones. Fence wire. I bit my lip, pulled my eyebrows, sighed. I'd never seen anything appear in the house, but still I knew the house kept filling. Was it full when my grandparents lived here? Full when my mother was a girl? When Abram was still alive? I turned over onto my back, leaned my head on a box of plant pots, pushed a pile of wool blankets over with my feet, and stretched out to think. And just as she did, smoke blew in over me.

"I had another baby, you know."

It was my mother. We hadn't spoken in days. I hated her for coming in like that now, for leaving me and then coming back to me, all in a flash. I climbed onto my bed and tucked my legs under my sleeping bag, my notebook zipped tight inside.

She put her cigarette out on a plate, bent down, and wrapped her arms around me tight enough to make my breath stop, then kissed me wet on the face and neck and on the face again. I heard Henry's footsteps.

"Lulu, honey, look at me." I looked. My mother held my face tight. "Lulu, I had another baby. A girl. A baby girl, honey. You would have had a baby sister. Morgan. Did you know that, honey?"

I shaped the name in my mouth, let Morgan roll out into silence. I let my eyes squint and chewed my bottom lip. I refused to ask what happened to her. Because I knew my mom was waiting for me to ask.

But she told me anyway. "Your grandfather, honey. He killed her. When she was still inside of me. Your grandfather," and then she patted my head, ran her dry-cracked fingers through my hair, "he hurt me."

I shook my head as though I expected to hear that. As though all this hurting and dying and killing was a part of the world. My world.

The wind rattled and the bedroom door blew opened. I thought of the ghost. Of the way my whole family, this whole house, everything but Henry, was probably the ghost. I stood up from my bed and that's when I saw him, standing there, waiting. Listening. My mother pulled me close, whispered that she loved me, then released me like a fish. I swam to Henry's side.

Instead of going the short way by road, or the long way by woods, we followed the shore to town. It was early summer and the loons were out and calling. When we'd first arrived in Kettleborough, I'd loved the loons for the way they laughed loud over the

lake. But on that day their call made me feel a heaviness so far from laughter that it seemed the loons never could have laughed before. They called long and lonely like all the world, and I wanted to sit and listen to them sing their loneliness forever.

"Do you think the loons can hear each other?" I asked Henry.

"Take your sneakers off," he said back. We'd reached the part of the shoreline where we had to walk in the shallow waves. I ignored him, and listened to the wet squeak of my feet in my sneakers, pretended I liked the way it felt. The loons called and called.

"Henry? Can they find each other?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

It was the first time I'd been to the ice cream store. I don't know why. Maybe because Henry hadn't taken me before. When we got to the town docks, and I walked where I knew my grandfather had walked on those first days, and we climbed up the pier, and I saw, straight across the street, hanging on a building that I knew was an old train station, and perfect as a dream, *Otto's Ice Cream*, I lost my breath. A loon called. Another called back.

Henry walked quickly across the street, like he had business to do. I held onto my overall straps and ran behind him across the street of Kettleborough.

When the screen door slammed to a shut, our grandfather looked up. "Just in time," he said. "Moving on to nuts now. You two must have come to wash the machine?"

After two years in Kettleborough, my grandfather went to the bank, withdrew his savings, went to the courthouse, and put his money on the desk in front of Ruby, the secretary. "What building can I buy with this?" he asked. Maybe she responded as she did because she was so startled to have a man put all his money on the counter like that. Maybe she thought my grandfather knew the story of the trains by now. Maybe she didn't have the heart to tell my grandfather that he couldn't buy a building for that amount of money. Or maybe she never did believe in curses. "Half your money," she said, without even counting it, "will buy the old train station." She put her arm out for him to take, and walked him to the front door, and pointed. "Perfect!" my grandfather exclaimed. He didn't know that he was looking at the cursed station. He didn't know that a train had been pulled to the lake, abandoned, because of that station. He thought he'd never known such luck. That is, until he took himself out to lunch on the pier that afternoon, in the restaurant that had hired a pianist for the summer. My grandfather fell in love that day.

Fireball didn't look up at us when we came in, and I wondered if he'd told us something he wasn't supposed to. Or if he was always this serious at work. He stood behind a big copper pot and stirred, and every so often he'd lift the wooden spoon out of the mixture, and run his finger down the line. I knew this trick from stories. I knew that when the ice cream holds its shape, it's ready to go in the freezer. I sat on a cooler and looked around. I liked the ice cream store. The back room of the store. Like I was special, allowed. Spoons clanked against bowls, freezers clicked on and echoed, and Henry went to the giant sink and to wash the machine. They all had something to do,

some part in it all. I kicked my legs against the cooler and pulled at my lip. My grandfather came to my side. "You need to learn the flavors," he said. "When Henry's an ice cream man, you'll be his helper!"

Henry and me. Making ice cream. I held my breath, said "Yes sir."

"Vanilla, coffee, chocolate, chocolate chip, WASH," he had me repeat after him. Henry joined in, "Butter almond, maple walnut, WASH. Strawberry, WASH!"

"AND PUT THE ODDBALLS WHERE YOU WANT 'EM!" Fireball yelled at the end of the round. It was the first time he'd spoken since we'd arrived. But he still hadn't looked at us.

When Henry finished washing the machine, my grandfather handed us each a cone, vanilla for Henry, strawberry for me. We sat together on the cooler and ate, and I watched my grandfather at the machine, and I bounced my feet, and I felt happy. I loved my new family.

My grandfather began to pour the nuts into the hopper, and as he did, he started talking. "A York," he called over to us. "The best company. Took the train all the way to Pennsylvania to buy it, and when I got there I knew I had to have two. If I was going to be a real ice cream man, Henry, if I was really going to do it – " and then he cut off. "GD IT," he started yelling, "GD IT." I saw the ice cream, spilling out all over him and onto the floor. He hadn't been paying enough attention, and the nuts had clogged the barrel. He turned in our direction, his teeth clenched and his veins bulging in his forehead. I moved closer to Henry. Henry began to stand, but eased himself back onto the cooler and stayed stiff. My grandfather kicked a metal barrel and it rolled fast across the floor, and ran into Fireball's feet. Fireball looked up from his mixing, his mouth

gaping open. My grandfather went to him, grabbed the arm Fireball held the spoon in, and pushed it hard back into the mix. "What are you, Fireball," he said, his voice hard but smooth, "fucking stupid? Keep GD stirring," he said.

I pulled at the straps of my overalls. My face went hot. I held my breath in. I was so scared I could have cried. I'd never seen someone angry like that. Because it wasn't a normal angry. It was a mean angry. I looked at Henry, but his eyes were far away in that way they would get, in that way that told me he had gone somewhere I couldn't reach.

My grandfather went to the bathroom, then came back, and stood in front of us, a new apron tied tight around him. He put his arms at my sides and lifted me into the air. His teeth were clenched. I thought of the dog, Panda. I thought of Morgan. His arms shook as he held me high above. His head was red. "Careful, Grampy," I said. "Don't try to kill me."

And that's when he dropped me. I couldn't breath until Henry jumped down from the cooler and grabbed my wrist, sat me up and hit my back. He dragged me outside without saying goodbye.

We ran all the way back to the house, taking the road instead of the shore, ran so fast my breath went hot in my throat. Henry turned at the Point and I followed, and when I got there his head was already underwater. I pulled in my burning breath and stuck my head underwater next to his, and yelled to him through the bubbles. We both pulled our heads back out, and suddenly a wave splashed over us, wetting our entire bodies. The lake rolled rough and black.

"Go inside," Henry said.

I didn't move.

"I'll meet you out back," he said, and pointed to the far side of the house.

I stood up.

"Just go inside and get your notebook and a pen. Don't get caught. I'll meet you in the room that used to be a room. You'll see it."

I ran to the house, skirted my way through the path of junk, up the stairs and to my bedroom. My notebook was tucked deep inside my sleeping bag. I tucked it in my shirt and turned, and there stood my mother. "Where were you?" she asked.

"Ice cream store," I said, and when I said it my voice shook with a tear, and my grandfather slipped like ice cream through my mind, and I wanted to run to my mother, to have her wrap her arms around me, to breathe in the smell of her neck. But Henry was waiting for me. I stood still, sucking my belly so she couldn't see my notebook inside my overalls.

"And does Mrs. King still spend time there?" my mother asked. I shrugged. I had no idea who that was, or what had happened to my mother. I wished Henry had come inside with me. But then my mother turned, lit a cigarette, and walked away.

I walked fast through the blue haze of the house, outside, to the room that used to be room. It was a foundation that stuck out from the back of the house in the shape of a small square room, but only one wall was left, and that wall, blue on the outside and set against the dirty white of the rest of the house, blocked off the whole world. The wall had one broken window in it, and its inside was covered in yellowed peeling wallpaper. We sat behind the wall, so secret.

Henry held out his arms, waiting for me to give him my notebook. I stayed stiff. His lips were puffed out and his back was straight, and I knew, sitting there on my knees and looking at him, that he wouldn't read what I'd already written. I reached into the front of my overalls, and pulled the notebook out. His finger skimmed the edge of the pages and he opened to an empty one. Without looking up, he held his hand opened again. I placed the pen in it.

Henry Pearson, he wrote. "Write your name," he said to me. I went to his side, reached over, and wrote my name as he held the notebook steady. "Now," he said, "what is everything your mother has told you?" Everything my mother has told me. Everything my mother has told me. "About my father," he added. I shrugged. "We'll just make a list," he went on. So we made a list. A list of all the secrets we knew.

1. *There might be a ghost in the house.*
2. *Fireball might know everything about it.*
3. *Grampy might have killed a dog.*
4. *Grampy might have killed Morgan.*

"Now we'll swear," Henry said. He signed his name, then handed me the notebook and I signed mine. Then he stood, and punched the glass left in the window of the remaining wall. A triangle broke off and dropped to the ground, specks of glass chasing it in the light. Henry checked his wrist for blood. It was clean. "Give me your arm," he said. I held my arm to him. "We will swear," he said, "to discover the death of my father." I pulled my arm back.

"Henry?" I asked.

He looked up at me. His eyes were mine and mine were his, and I knew why we were doing what we were doing. But still, I asked.

"Because," he said. He breathed deep, wiped sweat off his forehead. "It will fix your mom," he said. "And, it will free the ghost." He shook his head then, like he'd misspoken. "It will free the house," he said.

I nodded. He didn't say it would free him. He took my arm again. I closed my eyes tight. I grinded my teeth as the glass scraped across my skin. I opened, and watched as Henry pierced his own skin. Blood pooled small and slow from our cuts. He turned his arm over top of mine, and we held our wounds together.

"We're blood sworn now," he said, then looked up to the sky.

We breathed deep. Full. Together.

Part Two

Chapter One

I don't know how the dreams stared coming. I only know this: after we shared cuts in the room that used to be a room, Henry was there, in me. It started in the night. He would give me his dreams. I'd sleep, and he'd appear, his form transparent and hovering above my body, and inside his body, the shape of what Henry saw. The first was the boathouse.

I'd been wrapped tight in my sleeping bag, my notebook under my pillow. In my dream, dark waves of the lake filled the shape of Henry, and spread a layer below the lake was the boathouse, shining yellow as an invitation. I woke and sat up fast, and when I opened my eyes, Henry was there, at the end of my bed, waiting.

"We're going to the boathouse," he said.

I nodded because I already knew. Something about the way his eyes bore out the window and into the night told me not to say aloud that he'd given me his dream. Pine branches trembled at my window and I trembled with them. I climbed out of bed and followed him under the weaving loom and over the boxes, through the doorway, across the hall, down the stairs, and outside.

I'd never been in the late of night before. Except in the car, with my mother, on the way to Kettleborough. But I'd never been in the open of night. In the free. The purple of the night made the lake alive with whitecaps, and the whitecaps reflected back to the sky, to the stars, until it all became one. I wondered if Henry had ever seen his Kettleborough so beautiful.

He walked quickly in front of me, his back straight and his hands swaying at his sides. Like such an adult, his corduroy pants and striped shirt tucked in. I was in my pajamas, and I wished I was in his clothes. Wished I could be like Henry, understand the world like Henry. I ran to his side.

"How do you know the way?" I asked him.

He shook his head, like I shouldn't ask such stupid questions.

"Even in the dark, though," I added.

"Lulu," is all he said, shaping my name downhill. I nodded, fell behind him again and walked.

The lake and the woods and the town and everything, the whole world, seemed different at night. The silence of the dark, the way the dark I could see through, out there alone with Henry, made me feel. Like I could turn into an owl. Or a coyote. Like the store might disappear. Like Henry could cry. Like anything. But at the same time, as I followed Henry, his hands swaying tight at his sides and his steps so even, his back so straight and his pace so quick and smooth, I knew that none of it would happen. It would only be this.

"Henry?"

He kept walking.

"Are you scared?"

He stopped. He didn't turn, didn't look to the side or up or down. Just stopped. And, "No," he said, "and you're not either."

And so I wasn't.

The boathouse stood tall and yellow like the stories I'd heard it in and the dream I'd seen it in, a layer of house up high and a layer of water below. We walked to the door that led to our grandfather's boat, just on the edge of the water. Henry pulled. It was locked. Without a word, he reached his arms up above his head and dove in the water. I called to him, but he didn't answer. I stood there alone, my body tight and my breath held in, as he swam along the wall of the boathouse in all his clothes. I backed up when I heard footsteps, and gasped when I heard a crash at the door.

The door opened from the inside. Henry, soaked in all his clothes. Just the way my grandfather had arrived in Kettleborough, so many years before. He pulled the light on and I stepped in. Cobwebs layered the walls. Spiders dipped down above our heads. Black and bottomless water echoed against the aluminum boat. I was afraid to move.

Henry lay inside the boat, a map of the lake spread before him. I stood at the edge, wondering if I dared crawl in, wondering what would happen if I fell in between the boat and the dock. If I'd disappear. Forever.

When I heard footsteps and a cough outside I didn't turn from Henry. I thought he heard them too. But by the time Fireball had walked in, and stood at my side, Henry still hadn't looked up from the map of the lake.

"Grandfather's map," Fireball said to him.

Henry scurried up quick as a spider then, and held the map behind his back.

"Evening, Fireball," he said. Always like such an adult.

"Good night out on the lake."

Henry nodded, so I nodded with him. A good night out on the lake.

"You two stealing your grandfather's boat?" Fireball asked.

I didn't know. I wondered, but Henry didn't answer. He stepped out of the boat, the map now tucked into his back pocket. Fireball scratched at his beard and pulled his dirty pants up so his belly wouldn't hang out. I stared at him, wondering if Henry and I together could reach our arms around his middle, a full hug.

"Lulu would like some hot cocoa," Henry said, and tugged at my arm. Fireball turned, and we walked upstairs.

His house was just one room. A bed next to a kitchen table, a woodstove next to the sink, a couch in the middle. Tools and woodchips covered all the floors and counters. "Sit down if you want," Fireball mumbled. "Don't have to though. Can if you want though." Fireball had Henry put water on the stove for hot cocoa, then tipped his chair back, rested his hands on his stomach, and repeated, "Nice night out on the lake."

Henry and I nodded again. And Fireball said it again. I nodded. He kept opening his mouth, like he had something important to say, but the same words kept falling out. Nice night on the lake. I kept nodding. Maybe that's all he had to say. Maybe that was what was important. I could believe that. But before Fireball could finish saying it for the last time, Henry interrupted me. "What is it," he said, "that you want to tell us, Fireball?"

I looked at Henry. Tried to understand how a cousin of mine could be so big. So brave. I wondered if his blood would speed mine up.

"What you got?" Fireball asked Henry. I considered what we had, and what I would give for what Fireball knew that might help me fix my mom. My sleeping bag? Everything in my bedroom?

"Map is all," Henry said. My face went red.

"Let's see it."

Henry stood slowly, and eased the map out of his back pocket. He ran his hands over top of the table, then unfolded the lake before us. He kept his hands tight around the edges, and wouldn't let go. I went behind him, leaned over his shoulder, leaned into his lake smell. Islands I couldn't imagine existing dotted the blue, and the blue seemed to go on forever. Henry pointed to where we lived, and where Fireball lived. I couldn't understand it. Couldn't understand how we were there, and more than that, how Henry knew where we were in the world.

"You two know the lake?" Fireball asked. He was standing with me, behind Henry, and Henry stayed in his seat, the map before him like a masterpiece he'd painted.

"Henry knows the lake," I snapped out before I knew I would.

Henry turned and looked at me, surprised I'd spoken. "No," he said, "She's wrong." And then he moved his hands across the center as though there were a fortune to be told, and when they stopped, I saw what he'd been staring at.

"This island," Henry said. "East of loon."

Fireball went to the sink, turned the water on and let it run.

The place on the map that Henry pointed to had been blacked out with pen and marker, in angry sort of rushes, so hard a hole had bore through the middle.

"Fireball," Henry called. "What is the island?"

Fireball turned the sink off and began walking in circles, scratching at the balding spot on his head and alternately yanking at his pants. The tea kettle whistled and Fireball jumped. "Oh, Jesus," he muttered. "Oh, Jesus." After he gave Henry and me our mugs,

he went to the dresser and pulled out a leather case the size of a wallet, threw it on top of the map. Henry didn't move, so I reached over him, and opened the case. And, "Dollar," Fireball yelled across the room, "If you have to know, it's Dollar Island. If you have to know, it's your grandfather's island"

I opened the leather case. Inside, an old and yellowed picture. There were three people in it. The woman was so beautiful. I tucked my hair behind my ears and looked down at my pajamas and I wanted to disappear. Her long white dress that blew forward in the wind, hair down to her belly and a smile like the peace of the water on a windless day. Her eyes were fixed straight into the camera. She held a sunhat in one hand and the hand of a boy in the other. The boy stood on his tip-toes in shorts and suspenders, caught between the picture and the life behind him. The picture had been snapped just as he'd been turning his head to look towards the man who stood at the edge of the photo, fists clasped tight and his head to the ground.

Before I could tell Henry that the people in the picture looked like him, Fireball spoke. "I ain' t up this late at your age," he said. He took our hot cocoa from in front of us. "You two get. I ain't getting in no trouble over you."

We took both home – the picture and the map. On the way, when I told Henry that the people in the picture looked like him, he pointed to the woman and told me of Mrs. King. The same woman my mother had asked about. He told me that she'd never had a husband, never a child. Just liked the name, Mrs. And, he said, "The woman who used to live in our house. When our grandfather found it."

When he found it, not abandoned.

We opened the back door of the house and slipped into a haze of blue. My mother appeared in the haze, dressed in a gown, and for a moment I thought I was looking at a ghost clouded in smoke. Then she reached out, grabbed my arm. The leather case fell. She picked it up.

"No," Henry said, but she'd already opened it. He grabbed for it. She hit his arm away. I'd never seen my mother that way. Like a wild animal.

"Wow, Mom," I said. "You look pretty tonight." I was trying to calm her. But it didn't work. She looked into the picture and she started breathing heavily. Her hand went to her belly and then to her mouth. She stuffed the picture into the front of her dress, stuffed her cigarette out on the corner of the table, and yelled Henry's name like a dog's. He stood firm, arms at his sides. My mother picked up a glass of water from the table and threw it down onto the floor. It splashed and shattered. The night had gone so dark.

"It's mine," I said. "The picture's mine."

My mother took a long step across the kitchen then, and turned with her head poised like a dancer. Her dress twirled. Knotted hair landed in her eyes. She held my chin, and my skin began to creep into the skin of her hands, turned dry in these weeks in the house.

I turned my head to Henry. He was on the floor, piling the shards of glass and sponging the water up. My mother pulled the picture out of her dress, went to the floor, and crawled on her knees to Henry. She held the picture against his eyes, shaped the

middle of it against his nose, then reached her arm around back of him, and plucked the map from his back pocket.

"Don't," he said, so firm, so calm. "Please."

She opened the map. "Dollar Island," she said. She grabbed Henry by the hair and pulled his face up to hers. "You want to know the truth of your family? You want to tell my daughter all these little secrets? Is that it, Henry?"

"Yes," he answered, polite. I could think of nothing worse than to watch him there like that.

"Well, now you have it," she said. "A picture of your father and your grandfather and your grandmother. Now you want to go to Dollar Island? You want to die too, Henry?"

I was biting my lip so hard it had begun to bleed. In the dark, the full of the house had turned to shadows in every direction. I stood there for a long while and watched the movie of it all, the way it wasn't real, this mother of mine in the middle of the night. I tasted the blood and traced my scar and I pulled my leg back and I kicked. But I couldn't kick my mother. Instead, my foot went to the woodstove. The door swung open and ashes billowed out, covered her face. I spit on the floor. "It's my picture anyway," I said again, and ran through the spaces of the house to my bedroom, where I closed the door and pushed the weaving loom in front of it.

In my notebook: *Grampy owns an island where people die, but Mom tells lies.* I looked out the window and the whole world had gone black. I traced the scar Henry had given me. I didn't care about fixing my mom anymore. I lay back in my sleeping bag and

remembered the way she'd tell me her Kettleborough stories, and remembered the way they hadn't been real then, and thought of the way they weren't real now.

Chapter Two

I stayed in my room for a long time. Henry brought food to the door. I looked out the window and thought of my mother, and wondered why she would bring me to this place that made her so crazy. And after I could find no answer, I decided I'd better keep searching. With Henry. So I climbed out of my sleeping bag, tucked my notebook in its feet, and weaved my way to the door. When I opened it Henry was already standing there.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded. He had two yellow rain suits in his hand. He handed me one, turned, and walked away.

It was a clear blue day, the kind with owls and bears and dragons in the sky. We stood at Fireball's doorway. I didn't want to knock. I didn't know why, but I kept seeing the first time we'd gone to Fireball's doorway, and kept thinking of how I couldn't go back to that time, or this time, or any other time. I knew that if I knocked, I wouldn't be able to again. Henry waited next to me, and he wouldn't knock either. We just stood there, looking together at the peeling yellow paint. And then we heard his sounds. A cough and grunt, footsteps across the floor. He opened the door.

"Bring a rain suit," Henry said.

The wind blew and I tightened straight as Henry had been, and he tightened more.

His boat was tied to the dock outside the boathouse. Just the size of a rowboat, but it had an engine attached. Henry and I got in without saying a word. Fireball pointed to the stern, telling Henry to sit there, by the engine. Then he stepped into the middle. I

held my hands on the sides of the boat to sturdy it, but Fireball's weight didn't even rock the boat. He slipped in like it was where he'd been born.

Henry drove us slow out of the cove. The day began to fall dark like the water. After the no-wake buoy, Henry drove fast, cutting the boat hard into the black water, leaving behind a trail of white. We passed islands that extended bigger than the length of my vision, hilled up out of the lake and tree-covered green. I bounced on my seat and opened my mouth, let the fast air stream in. My hair waved up behind me. I held my hands out like wings to catch the water drops, closed my eyes, and soared through the lake, Henry as my silent guide.

He'd already memorized the path from studying the map. Out of the cove, East towards Coyote, through the open water with Three and Four Mile to the West, then North until Loon emerged. And there, East of Loon, Dollar Island. Henry tapped my shoulder and I opened my eyes. It sat so small in the middle of all that big water, small as our house. I wondered how an island would get like that, so small and alone. The shore of the island was sand and rock, and a thick stand of pines filled inland into darkness. Henry slowed the boat, and Fireball reached over him, lifted the engine. We eased our way in.

"Your grandfather named this here island," Fireball said as he stepped out onto shore. He said it proud, like our grandfather was a character in an old famous story. Then he turned, headed straight for the woods. We followed. "Your grandfather bought this island," Fireball said as we entered pines. He yanked at his shorts, scratched the top of his head. "Tried to run away to this island once," he said.

"You?" I asked.

Henry clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Grampy," he said. And in his voice, I knew I understood so little. Henry had the picture of Mrs. King and our grandfather and his father tucked into his back pocket. Already he knew the story of the house, not abandoned. He'd seen in his mind the way my grandfather had approached the back door and heard the player piano through the screen window. The way he'd knocked, and met Mrs. King at the door, her long hair let down heavy like a river. "Can I help you?" she'd asked. My grandfather was still soaked from his fall in the lake. "Ma'am," he began, but couldn't seem to speak further, for in that moment, Otto felt he had found what it is called love. He stayed on in trade for work, taking the swing bed on the porch instead of the room upstairs. Henry knew.

And now, already, Henry understood that Mrs. King was his true grandmother. That after weeks at Mrs. King's, cutting back the grape vines, trimming the high bush blueberries, removing the storm windows, one day, when the lake was calm and the sky was blue, before he'd started a job at the candy store or opened the ice cream store, before he met my grandmother, my grandfather looked out over the water and he felt as though he were watching his life unfold before him, years and years of success down the line. He felt proud. He could do anything. He made his way through the mess of the porch stairs, and onto the porch. He stopped at the screen door and looked to his left. There, Mrs. King lying in the swing bed where he slept at night. Reading a paperback and humming with the water. My grandfather stood above her and not until that moment, with Mrs. King's skin wet in the sun, did he admit the thoughts he had of her. Those dreams of her loose sun dress falling off, the way he smelled her towel in the morning.

He let his fingers drop to her leg, and she began to hum. And the whole time, her hum didn't miss a beat. And Otto was gone.

The woods were thick and fast; we walked from one side of the island to the other in five minutes. From any spot on the island, if I squinted my eyes, I could see through the trees to the other side. Fireball led us to a stream thin as one line of water.

"Spring water," he said, and nodded his head towards the spot where the water began, then patted Henry on the back. "Drink," he said.

Henry and I took our turns, lips against the cold rock and drops falling in one by one. It was the best water ever to fall into my mouth. Clear and pure and cold and alive. It made me feel good like I hadn't felt in so long. Like all the darkness we'd begun to learn could melt away with the water.

When Fireball's turn came, he pulled his shorts up before he moved in close to the spring, then began to kneel as we had. But as he bent one leg down his body stiffened. It wouldn't fit into that position. He grumbled aloud, and folded his own leg down with his hands. When he got to his knees, his stomach squeezed in on itself and he couldn't lean forward enough to reach the water. He balanced himself on the rock, sat back, then tried to lean in again. He still couldn't reach. I watched him and I hated the world, hated everything but Henry and Fireball.

Fireball stood up without a drink. I looked at Henry and a drop of water moved down his cheek like a tear.

"Well," Fireball said. "This is the spot. Count seventeen." We walked behind him and mouthed the numbers as Fireball counted his steps aloud. At seventeen, he

stopped. Instead of the pine floor of the island, dark and full of needle and rock, we stood in a spot that opened into a field of green grass and sun. Fireball grumbled as he leaned over and balanced his hands on the ground so he could let his body fall to a sit. After sitting, he began to push at the grass with his hands, spreading the blades opened from each other, searching. We were silent and we knew we should be. Henry and I moved to the ground and copied Fireball. Our bodies formed a triangle in the grass. I felt something hard and cold, and I knew I'd found what we were looking for. I spread the blades of grass. We all leaned in.

"That's it," Fireball said.

Henry's breathing changed. One flat rock, one scratch dug across its length. He held his hand to it as though it were a body. The green sun of where we sat turned dark.

"Thunder," Henry said, without releasing his hand from the stone. A sound like the world turning over rumbled up from the ground. Fireball jumped up faster than we knew he could.

"Better go," he said. "Storm's coming."

I put my hand on top of Henry's.

"Gonna get caught in the storm if we don't go now," Fireball said.

Henry looked up at me, and I left myself then, and entered into him, and for the length of our look, I saw through his eyes, and I understood. The miniature house in the wall appeared in my mind. I thought of Abram building it. Building his dream of what a house could be. Clean. Unburied. Without secrets. I didn't know if there had been a ghost. I'd never seen one, and didn't know what it might mean, or feel like. But I held

Henry's hand and I trusted him, and I knew. Our hands were on his father's grave. And to fix us, us all, the house had to be emptied.

We got to the boat in time to put our rain suits on. Fireball started the engine, but Henry didn't get in. I waited with him on the beach. The rain began to fall. Fireball motioned his head, but Henry stood firm.

"Got to," Fireball said. "She's a big storm."

Henry shook his head in agreement. But he didn't move towards the boat. "Who put it there?" he asked instead.

Fireball took his hand off the engine and looked up at the sky. He held his breath for a few seconds, then told us again to get into the boat. The rain was loud now and we had to yell over its pounding. I heard Henry ask again. I sat down, leaned over onto my knees, tucked my head into my arms, and counted the seconds it took for Fireball to answer Henry.

"We'll die if we go," Henry finally yelled. I looked up. My breath caught. I'd never thought of it before, that I might really die. I'd said it – said it to my grandfather, and heard it from my mother, but I'd never really thought it. Dead. I saw my body floating to the bottom of the lake, turning into sand and making waves. I believed him, and Fireball did too. He turned the engine off.

"Your grandfather," Fireball said. "He put the grave there. Buried your father there. Ain't no one really know though. Who done it. How I mean. Your grandfather buried him there, I mean. But who knows if he killed him. Ain't like I hate your grandfather or nothing. Ain't like I think that of him."

I looked up into the rain. The sky was falling apart.

Chapter Three

We watched the storm roll in slow from the direction of town, and knew that it hit there first. We sat on the beach together and waited. Henry had memorized the lay of the map, and pointed to the islands, teaching me. Bear, Coyote, Loon. I knew we were safe out there, safe with Henry to take care of us.

Seconds before the rain hit us, Henry went to the woods, and returned with branches and pine boughs, and shaped them into an umbrella big enough for all of us to sit under. I pushed in close to Fireball, and Henry pushed in close to me. Rain fell heavy, like the sky had stolen the lake, tipped it upside down and started pouring. The branches caved, and rested on Fireball's head and back. Henry leaned back, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a bag of tobacco, rolled a cigarette, then reached into his pocket again and found matches, lit one. "What will you be when you grow up?" he asked me. My mouth gaped. Henry could do anything. Thunder that seemed born from the lake and the sky together rolled hard away from us.

"An ice cream man, probably," I said. "Like you." I breathed in his smoke and didn't cough.

He dragged in long and slow. "Lulu, you will not," he said. "And I won't either. I will leave." He said it so sure, so true. Shivers ran through me and into Fireball. *I will leave.* Like to leave was what he would be, forever.

"I'll have one of those," I said to Henry, and ran my fingers through my hair, then held out my hand.

He lifted the bag of tobacco and put it back in his pocket. "You're too young," he snapped. Then he leaned back as far as he could, and crossed his legs. Like we were living the life.

Before the dark of night the sky turned a black kind of purple, rain kept falling, and I wanted to know what it felt like from underwater. What it might mean, to be a part of the storm like that. I looked to Henry, smoking, then to Fireball on the other side of me, his eyes straight ahead, like there was something to be found in the water ahead of us. In a flash I stood, stripped my rain suit off, and ran to the water without even knowing I would. I lay on my back underwater and listed to the falling, the way the drops hit then echoed into some other sound, quiet, and so big. I heard Fireball's shouts and splashes. He stood above me, and through the water his body looked small as mine. He reached his arms down around me, picked me up, and carried me to the shore. I stayed stiff as he lowered me to the ground. Fireball's whole body was shaking, even his eyes. His lips disappeared into his mouth and his body was cold. "How Abram died, you know," he said.

I rolled my head in the sand and turned towards Henry. His vision stayed in the storm above the lake. And when the sky of the sky fell into the sky of the lake, and the moon emerged from behind Coyote,

and we entered that world of not sleeping, that world I'd so recently discovered, when in the push of night it feels like it's all so important, so real, like it will stay this way forever, then Fireball started telling us the Kettleborough stories.

Of course Fireball was scared. My mother and I back, a ghost in the house. He thought he'd done wrong, keeping it all to himself all those years. He didn't tell us all of it. Didn't give us the details, didn't paint our grandfather vicious as he'd been. But Henry understood, and in time, in dreams, he gave what he saw to me. Because as Fireball spoke, Henry saw the way my grandfather slumped into the ice cream store one morning while Fireball stirred the cream and sugar, not a year after he and Millie had been married, eased the screen door shut, and tiptoed past Fireball. "You're late," Fireball announced, proud. "Yes," my grandfather answered. "Millie had a baby this morning." Fireball kept it to himself, the way he knew Millie couldn't have been pregnant. The way he'd seen her everyday, laying on the Point in the afternoon sun as he rowed by. He'd seen her just yesterday. No baby in her belly. None at all. But he did look up. Look into my grandfather's eyes. Otto walked past him, spread the flavors for the day out on his work counter, told Fireball that they would make forty batches of vanilla first. Then turned, dropped his apron to the floor, and pushed his hands hard against Fireball's cheeks. "If you ever," he said. Fireball shook. "Don't you say one word," he said. "Not one. It will cost you your life, Fireball. Your life."

And he never did say a word. Not when Mrs. King moved out, alone, to the house on the hill. Not when, a few years later, my grandmother left him. Not even when he knew no one else would tell Abram the truth.

Mrs. King had come to the back of the ice cream shop years after she'd left the house. Fireball heard the knock on the back door, the whistle, the "Hello in there!" calling like a bird. He turned from the big copper bowl and saw Mrs. King holding the screen door opened a crack, peering in just enough to give her lips entrance into the

room. "Hello!" he called, then dropped his spoon to the floor. He remembered the way Mrs. King shouldn't be coming around, remembered the way Otto said he'd *ruin every last bit of her* if she appeared in his store. Fireball felt a burn in the pit of his throat and tried to swallow. He clasped his hands together in hopes that Otto wouldn't emerge.

But Otto came whistling from the front room.

"Hello, Otto," Mrs. King said. She brushed her long fingernails through her thinning white hair, then pulled at the straps of her yellow summer dress.

Otto choked on his whistle. He spoke with worms crawling up his throat, across his tongue. Through his teeth. "Get out," is all he said to her.

Fireball backed away from Otto as though he were a flame. Otto stepped closer to Mrs. King.

I can see it now, my grandfather, the way his life flashed before his eyes, the whole lake disappearing. He stepped closer to her. Fireball watched Otto's eyes shaking, threatening to come loose from his skull.

"Otto," she said. "I want to tell Abram. I want my son. Otto, you owe me this."

My grandfather lifted his hand slow through the air, angled it in over her mouth. Turned her. Gently. He led her to the screen door and let her body push it opened. He walked her out the door, his hand still tight but soft over her dry mouth. Outside, he slid his face in close from behind her, reached it around, through her hair and to her ear. And then he whispered. Fireball didn't hear what he said, but he saw my grandfather gather the strength of the lake in his arms and push Mrs. King face first to the ground, kick her while she lay there, spit on her, then return to the ice cream. The sun emerged from behind the clouds. The door chimes chimed.

The next day, Otto asked Fireball to take him on the lake. To an island.

Fireball brought my grandfather to the nameless island too small for anyone to care about. Otto was near crazy that day, building a fire and walking in circles and hitting his head and saying he'd lost it, lost the life he could have had. Mrs. King had come back to him, saying she wanted to tell Abram the truth. Because Abram never knew. No one knew, no one but Fireball. Otto stood on the island and pointed to his boat and told Fireball to drive into town and buy the island. No matter the cost. He wanted a place he could run away to, a place of his own. Fireball drove fast. Nearly flipped, but kept going. Went to the county courthouse and found out what no one knew: Mrs. King owned the island. Fireball was stumped. *No matter the cost,* he heard Otto say, *no matter the cost.* So he went to Mrs. King's house. Told her Otto wanted the island. Shook as he said it, scared of what kind of mistake he was making. "One dollar," Mrs. King said, "and the island is his." She never wanted it anyway. Fireball smiled, shook his head, pulled a dollar out of his pocket. Change and lint and candy wrappers fell to the floor of her cottage. She put her hand on Fireball's cheek. "You just tell Otto," she said. "Tell him to pay me a visit."

When the storm hit its peak, rain loud as thunder and the waves crashing tall as the ocean, and we could hardly hear Fireball's voice anymore, Henry stood and told us again that he'd be back. Fireball and I sat together under the pine boughs. I asked him if he had a real name. "Yup," he said. I asked him how he got Fireball. "Used to run real fast, fast as a Fireball, I guess." I nodded. I didn't like Henry being gone. Without him, I didn't know what to say or how to say it. I called his name. After a while Fireball

called his name with me. But he didn't answer. So together we crawled out from under the branches on the beach, stood up in the dark rain, and turned slowly in circles. I hadn't been cold before, but suddenly a chill ran through me like I'd never be warm again.

"We should look somewhere," I said.

"Yup."

I wanted Fireball to say where. He knew the island. But he just stood there, waiting for me to take charge. We waited together. Until I knew there was nothing else to do. No one to guide me. "We'll run the circle of the island," I said.

We stayed to the beach, screaming for Henry the whole time. Once, when I stopped to wait for Fireball to catch up, I looked out across the storm of the lake and I saw a figure bobbing in the water and I called and called to it and waved and I knew it was Henry, knew I'd found him and would be safe again, but Fireball caught up, pointed to the spot I called to, and said "Buoy. Ain't nothing else."

We ran on, screaming wet and heavy. But I knew our screams blended with the storm and disappeared.

Before Fireball and I reached all the way around the island, I ran my foot into something on the beach, then fell. I traced my hands around myself. I'd fallen into the middle of circle of rocks, shaped like a fire pit.

I can see now what my grandfather must have been like that first day he came to Dollar Island. He sat alone on the beach and imagined running away to the island with his family. With Abram and my mother. He thought of leaving it all behind, leaving the

man who lied, who threatened Fireball and knocked Mrs. King to the ground. He gathered rocks from the edge of the water, and formed them into a circle. Then sticks from the edge of the woods. He piled them in a pyramid in the center of the rocks, reached into his pocket, found a pack of matches that he hadn't known he'd had. He stuffed birch bark into the center of the pyramid and just as the fire caught my grandfather felt something bubbling and buoying in his head. In his mind he was pushing himself back and forth, spinning, collapsing. His breath quickened and he began to circle the fire as though possessed. His body leaned forward, following his head, until he fell straight onto the beach.

When Otto hit the ground he felt as though he had no memory. As though his name was nothing and his history invisible. He had died alive. My grandfather watched himself from above, hollow. There was no fire. No sand. No boat and no island to buy. No Otto. Nothing. Nothing but the lake, blue across the universe.

He breathed.

Sat up.

Walked to the woods and gathered more firewood. He sat down next to the fire and my grandfather wondered how he had gotten there. He looked at the lake as though for the first time. He breathed in the sweet wonder of the world. A loon called. He called back. The wind blew and a clump of pine needles landed on his shoulder. He would tell the truth. He would buy this island and give it to Abram, a gift. He would bring his son here and tell his son the truth. Let his son know his mother. His heart beat steady. He stood up and saw Fireball on the horizon.

"Yours," Fireball said, stepping out of the boat.

"The island?"

"Yup. All yours." He said it proud. Held his hand out, waited for Otto to shake it.

"Well! What do you know? An island! My island! I could move here, Fireball! I could live here all my life. Bring the kids. We could live on an island!"

"Might be hard," Fireball said. "In between winter and spring and all." He scratched his beard. "Could do it, maybe."

"But I could!" my grandfather exclaimed. And I can see the way he wanted to ask who had owned the island, and how much it had cost. But of course he didn't; he knew to savor the simplicity of it. He sat in the sand. Looked out towards the Kettleborough of his life. "I have known such luck," my grandfather said. "My house, the ice cream store, the island. Such luck, Fireball." He patted the sand next to him.

Fireball shook his head back and forth. Breathed out heavy. Sat next to my grandfather. "And with the store being cursed and all," he said.

My grandfather weaved his fingers together, pulled them apart, and weaved them together again. The lake went dark. He began to shake. Fireball threw a handful of sand in the air, let the stones bleed down through his fingers. Otto stared at Fireball as though he'd spoken a foreign language. Fireball breathed heavy. Finally, "You ain't never heard the story? Figured you would hear it, owning it and all."

Otto looked to the sky. He knew a storm would hit this time tomorrow. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He closed it again. "Impossible," he finally said. He put his hands to his forehead, squinted his eyes, and picked with his fingers as though he were trying to peel off a layer of skin. His hands shook like he'd run a

hundred miles without a drop of water. With the sun dropped down behind the hill on Bear, Otto's hair took on a shine of gray like the skin of a fish.

"You okay?" Fireball asked. "You want some water or something?"

"No." Otto said it fast. Then he leaned back, breathed with the waves, and listened to the story of the cursed train station. When the story had ended, and my grandfather looked up at Fireball, who now stood at the edge of the water, a flash of panic took him over. "Whose island was it?" my grandfather asked.

"Mrs. King's," Fireball said calmly.

And that's when my grandfather's world began to spin again. The next he knew, he was in the sand, and Fireball was splashing water on his face. When my grandfather opened his eyes his breath went short. He hated Fireball for bringing Mrs. King back. Hated him for ruining what he had just found. Finally, my grandfather spoke. "Fireball," he said. "Sometimes, I want to make Mrs. King disappear. Or to disappear myself. Or to make my whole family disappear. It's as if, sometimes, as if – " and then my grandfather stopped. He waited a moment, and started again – "as if maybe I wish Abram was never" but he stopped. And never finished what he'd meant to say.

But Fireball imagined what Otto might have said. He completed the sentence in his mind and it made enough sense that he could have heard it – *almost as if I wish Abram was never born.*

And it was the next day that Otto brought his son out to the island, out to the storm he knew would hit, the next day that only Otto came back.

"Damn if that fire pit's still here," Fireball said to me. He stood me up. The moon came out like a sliver of lighting that got caught on the way down. Thunder struck. Fireball called Henry's name again. I lost my breath, and for a moment I thought I'd never breath again. The waves crashed rough. Lightening came down like it was headed for the center of the island. I didn't want to have to go there. To the grave. I didn't want to have to go to through all those pines in the storm.

"We could check the woods," Fireball said. I nodded slow. My mouth went dry. I traced the scar Henry had given me. And then I knew. He was at the spring.

Sometimes, in that Dollar Island disappearance, I think Henry was preparing me. But we found him quick enough, and my panic turned calm as the sky opened into color, purple with the water. His head was on the rock and he was drinking from the spring. He didn't say why. Didn't apologize for leaving us. Didn't act surprised that we'd found him. He just looked up at us and said "It's good. It is so good." And I understood. That island spring water, sacred.

We went back to the beach. It stopped raining, but by then I'd already forgotten the rain, forgotten I was wet, forgotten that it hadn't always been like this. The sky lightened as the moon rose. "Is morning close?" I asked Henry.

He shrugged. "Not really."

Fireball came back from the water's edge. The sky lit up like a ghost.

"Here it comes again," said Fireball, but Henry shook his head and stood up, walked to the shore. We followed.

"Your grandfather," my mother used to say when she tucked me into bed at night, back when we were Western girls, back when Kettleborough was a dream, "he says that during a storm, the loons hide under islands. He's seen it. Swam down there underwater in Kettle Lake, all the way down under the islands, down to the other islands, the islands under water. And there, during a storm, that's where all the loons hide. Hundreds of them. And when the loons come out, all together at once, that's when the storm ends."

The three of us stood at the end of the beach. And in one breath, the loons came out. They echoed across the water, close and far away and close and far away, calling and calling back, echoed as though their sounds would last forever. Henry's fingers slipped into mine, and none of it mattered anymore. I was free.

Chapter Four

After Fireball dropped us back at the Point, I went to my room to find none of my stuff – not my sleeping bag, my suitcase, not even my notebook. I ran through the house, tripping over boxes of silverware and knocking over piles of magazines. I screamed for my mother, and then I found her, outside, in the driver's seat of the car. My suitcase and sleeping bag were on the passengers seat.

I hadn't seen my mom out of the house since the day we'd arrived in Kettleborough. I stood there for a long moment, looking at her, at the way the house had changed her. She looked yellow, loose skinned, old. She stuck her head out the window. "Lulu," she snapped.

I went to the passenger's side door, opened it, and reached for my things. She grabbed my arm fast and hard, pulled me into the car with her. I wasn't even in the seat by the time she started backing out.

"We're just going somewhere else," she said, as though I'd asked.

I turned around, shoved my things onto the floor, and climbed into the seat. I didn't buckle up. "Ain't like we got nowhere to go," I said.

She hit the brakes then. We weren't even down the driveway. She glared at me, and I thought she'd slap me. But instead, "Isn't like we have," she said. "Where'd you learn to talk like that?"

"Fireball," I said, proud.

She hit the gas again. She seemed calm, but not a scary kind of calm, not the kind before a storm, but a kind calm, simple. She was out of the house.

I missed Henry already, but something told me we wouldn't make it out. I could feel it. I wasn't afraid. If I was being taken away from Henry, I'd be crying, screaming, kicking. But I sat stiff. "And by the way," I added, "I'm not leaving." I put my hand on the door latch, and clicked it open.

My mother was looking at me, and trying to pull me back into the car, and not watching the road, and I was looking out the window, to the lake, wondering if Henry was out there, rowing quiet somewhere. And that's how it happened. My grandfather, slow and old, walking across the street, from the ice cream store to the docks. But we were going slow too. After we hit him I jumped out of the car and ran to his side, wrapped my arms around him, and I knew he was still alive. And I loved him. I looked at my mother, standing above us. I felt like I'd seen it all happen before. We'd have to stay.

My grandfather stayed in bed for weeks, and my mother gave him food, changed his sheets, and helped him to stand when he needed to. Sometimes, I'd hear their voices in the night, my mother on the other side of the door, speaking with her father. Once, I heard Morgan's name. Another time, when Henry and I went to his room, bringing him a bowl of vanilla ice cream, I stood on my tiptoes and looked at his dresser, covered in framed photographs. It hadn't been like that before. The dresser used to be covered in spools of thread and shoehorns and coffee mugs, sweaters, glasses cases. Now, the dresser seemed the only place in the house that had a purpose. Where things were displayed to be displayed. Henry came to my side and held my hand for balance. Of all the pictures there, he knew just the one I was looking at. And when he reached up,

wrapped his long fingers around the silver frame, and brought the picture to our eyes, our grandfather, all the way from the other side of the room, in his bed, looking at his vanilla ice cream, knew which too. Abram had bought the car. Worked two years at the big white restaurant by the docks where my grandmother had met my grandfather, waiting tables for the tourists, serving clam chowder and corn on the cob. The car was black and curvy. Nicest in Kettleborough. Drove it for a couple years. As a baby, Henry even rode in that car.

My grandfather never talked much to us. Unless about ice cream. Making ice cream, selling ice cream. The facts of his life. But as I felt my hand in Henry's tracing that car's shape that day in the pit with Fireball, our grandfather eased his legs out from beneath the sheets, held his arm tight to the bedpost, and stood himself up. He stepped to our sides, brushed his hands over top of our heads, and went to the window. "Millie," he muttered, and the sun stretched its wings through the room. We waited. Our grandfather sat back on the bed. Breathed out heavy, his nose running down his face, his back hunched. "Henry," he said.

"Yes, sir," Henry answered.

"Henry, that car is in the woods."

"Yes," Henry said. He squeezed my hand. The sun hadn't shifted.

"Your father crashed it the day before he died. Slid on maple leaves wet from the drizzle of the oncoming storm." He patted the bed. We went slowly to him. "Most ice cream I ever froze in one day was one thousand gallons."

"Wow, Grampy," I said.

"Death signals itself," he said like a response, like an explanation to his ice cream making. Death signals itself. I think of that. That, and our grandfather, sitting there so helpless on the bed in the sun, so good. Our grandfather.

Fireball had been on the lake the day after it happened, Abram's death. When he came to shore he tied his boat up at the Point and headed through the tent of pines, headed to our house that sat full and overflowing on the hill. He ducked under the bicycle wheels and frames that hung from a tree. He to see if Otto was okay. About the island. If he felt better. If it mattered, Mrs. King owning it. He wanted to apologize. He didn't know yet that Abram had died. He walked up the porch steps as though he knew exactly where the baskets and broken dishes, bed frames, ski poles and maple sugar buckets would be. As though his feet knew the thin path carved up the stairs. As though the path to the screen door had been paved years ago. He knocked. Opened. Suitcases and dish towels and magazines and paperback love books. My mother sat at the table, her face tied tight into the cup of her hands. He skirted through the clutter without touching one box, one pile. Silent.

He went to the table and said my mother's name.

Her face drew back from her hands. "Fireball, dear," she said. She put her palm to her mouth, to her belly, to her heart, back to her belly, to her mouth. "Could you please fill my glass of water?"

He skirted the path to the sink. In spots he had to walk sideways, his body too wide for the hallway the family had created. He turned the tap on, put his hand under the

water, let the warm run into cold, waited for the smell of iron to melt away into the air. He put my mother's cup under the faucet.

There was a crash, a fall, another crash, loud as the night's storm pushed into one thunder. The house rattled like a train and a great wind blew through like a ghost. Fireball dropped the glass, let it shatter clear against the porcelain sink. He turned to my mother. She sat still at the table, her hand on her belly, her eyes the lake on a clear day. Fireball turned away from her, tripped on a cardboard box. Fell. Breathed heavy, pulled his shirt down, flopped over like a walrus, and pushed himself up. He ran to the back of the house, through the door to a bedroom, towards the noise.

Abram's bedroom was gone, crashed to the ground by Abram's crashed car.

For a moment, Fireball thought Abram was the one driving the car into the room until it turned into what used to be a room. He ran through the missing wall, towards the car that now headed through the field. "Abram!" he called, "Abram!" But as he neared, he saw Otto, driving Abram's car. It had been Otto, crashing Abram's car into the wall of the house. Otto didn't look at Fireball. He kept driving, further across the field, past the apple tree, into the woods.

My mother went to Fireball's side. The wind blew. "I can smell him," she whispered. "It's like I can smell him now, now that my father's let him die. Can you?" That day, after the baby in her belly fell out of her and into the toilet, she walked to the driveway, started her car, and never came back.

While my grandfather and mother were in the room, healing, Henry and I had tried to empty the house. We'd started with his room. Piled flannel shirts and rubber

boots into boxes of catalogues. Stacked used check registrars and plant pots into maple syrup buckets. We piled and piled and carried, but it never seemed like the room was emptying. We dropped bungee cords and tin cans into the trash, cut our hands inside a wicker bin of broken light bulbs. We piled trash bags and boxes and broken chairs and magazines into heaps outside. But each time we went back inside, the room didn't look any emptier.

Henry pulled me out of bed one morning. "Let's do something together," he whispered to me. He said it like we didn't have much time. When I opened my eyes and looked up at him I remembered my dream, and I didn't know what it meant, Henry giving me his dream of the boathouse burning underwater. I looked into his eyes and I watched as the boathouse swayed slow with the waves, until branches of fire stretched across its roof, then in through the windows, up from underneath, until the boathouse had been eaten by flames and only the lake remained. And I remembered my mother, on the drive to Kettleborough, asking me what I dreamt about. My breath stopped as the wind blew. She'd known. The dreams of the house. She'd been given them. They'd drawn her back.

We walked past my grandfather's room. The sounds of a piano rolled from under his door. "Player," Henry whispered to me. And I knew the one. It's how my grandmother fell in love with my grandfather. She'd never seen such a thing before. A piano that played notes like a ghost, the keys pressing in and out with no fingers, nothing but a penny. That piano had made up for all the junk in his house. She sat before it and didn't touch a thing, but all the same a rag blew out, and she watched as the chords and

wires pulled and lifted, turned. She sat in front of that piano for the entire length of their first date. She'd ask if she could come over after work, to watch the piano. Like magic. And after my grandmother left, my grandfather never again put a penny in the player. Until.

Henry and I went to the Point. He dove his head under and I dove mine with him, but I didn't ask anything. Just listened to the sounds. The storm underwater. Henry came up and I came up with him.

"Soon we'll set it all free," he said to me, drops of water falling from his small lips as he spoke. Henry could say anything, and it would make sense. I lay back on the rock.

"How 'bout one of them smokes," I said to him. He stood up, took his tobacco from his pocket, and rolled a cigarette for me, broke the tobacco off from the ends. He handed it to me with a handful of matches. I sat there for a long while, holding the two. I wasn't too young anymore.

"Put it in your mouth," he said. I did. "Strike the match along the rock."

I did, and held the flame in my hand, watched it eat the wood. "We could burn the house down," I said. I lit the cigarette and looked out over the lake. I shook my head, trying to see the mouth those words had fallen out of. Confused with who I'd become.

"Henry?" I asked him. "Do you think you know the truth?"

He held my eyes with his. Our feet were in the water. Smoke drifted up around our heads. He leaned in, and I felt his breath come into mine, and mine into his, back and

forth like the loons calling, and for our moment, that's all there was. Us. What we were, sitting there, our feet in the Kettle Lake of answers, was as much truth as we'd ever need.

But Henry stood up, and ran off the Point. I followed him into our house. We ran through the kitchen, into the dining room. We stood before the door that was never opened. Henry put his hand to the latch. He tilted his head, and I knew something was wrong. We turned. Over the miniature house in the wall was an old painting of our lake. We looked long together at it. He grabbed my hand. Our fingers weaved in and out of each other's, and a wind blew through the room, rattling the glasses on the mantle and lifting the picture so slightly.

He let go of my hand. I turned, and quickly opened the door that was never opened.

"Wait," Henry said.

I looked into his eyes. If we went through the door that was never opened, things would never be the same.

"Okay," he said, after a long minute. We ran up the stairs. Warm air passed through us like a cloud of ghost. The staircase seemed to last forever. I stopped in the rectangle of light cast long across the attic.

"Lulu," he said. "Before I go, we have to make a list."

"Go where?"

He sat down by the window where we'd found my mother sobbing weeks ago. He rolled a cigarette. I looked outside. A pine whispered at the window. Chickadees called. "We'll just make a list up here," he said.

"Why here?"

"I have your notebook."

I nodded. He could have my notebook. He could have anything he wanted.

Henry wouldn't tell me what any of it meant, but I knew he was trying to make the house safe for me. Covering the possibility of a clean and empty house with the old picture of the lake, running up the staircase that was never used to knock the ghost out.

"What kind of list do you want to make?" I asked him. Dust danced through the light of the attic. His smoke twirled. He shrugged. "Maybe not a list."

"Okay."

"Maybe a note."

"Okay."

He lifted my hand and placed it into his. Wrapped my fingers around the pen, and his fingers around mine. Steady. Calm. His breath in my ear.

I, my hand in his fell into writing, *Lulu Pearson, will set it all free.*

I wasn't sure what he meant. How to do that.

I like to think of Henry's lips, tight against his face and so serious, but so soft, so slow. His hands, the way my skin could tremble within them. His nose set out far on his face, his eyes, the way they changed with the lake in seasons.

I couldn't find him after he left the attic. He ran and he didn't come back and I couldn't catch up to him and he wouldn't stop when I called and he wasn't anywhere in the house or at the Point or the ice cream store, and by the time I go to Fireball's nobody was there either, and by then, the dream Henry had given me was already echoing in my mind, and somewhere in there, I thought I knew the answer.

Chapter Five

The door was locked. I dove in and swam around to the front, the way Henry had done weeks ago. I wasn't even scared of the endless black boathouse water. I climbed up onto the wooden platform alongside of my grandfather's boat. I didn't even cringe away from the spiders.

I hadn't planned to do anything. Just sit in the boathouse. I didn't think about it when I climbed into the motor boat and reached into the glove box, let it drop open and present old newspaper cuttings and matches. I opened the paper. *Abram Pearson dies in lake, search for body ongoing.* I read all the articles. They never thought the body was found. But I knew Abram was there, buried under stone, seventeen steps up from the fresh water spring, buried by my grandfather.

I held the matches and papers in one hand, and climbed out of the boat, back onto the wooden ledge. I sat in the corner by the door. I lit one match and dropped it on the floor, afraid I'd burn my hand. Just before the flame flickered out, I dropped one newspaper clipping on it. It caught and curled and flared. Sparks of paper lifted into the air and flew out above the lake. I lit another match. Held it as long as I could, until the fire touched the tips of my fingers. Then I threw it down. It landed on the newspaper and caught. I watched the flames without backing up. Then I picked up the entire pack of matches, and threw it into the burning paper. They exploded up in flame without a noise. I stood, walked to the end of the boathouse, dove off into the dark water, swam around the corner and back to shore, while my grandfather's path to the island, the place that harbored all his secrets, began to burn away.

I hid in the woods behind a maple, rocking back and forth and shaking. I could smell the smoke. I knew the boathouse would fall, as I'd seen in my dreams. I felt an immeasurable hotness.

I didn't know it then, but he told me later – Henry hadn't gone far. Only to the cupola at the top of the barn. He stood there turning in slow circles, his hands outstretched, taking in the land. The woods and the lake and the field and it all. And then he lifted his arm to his brow, wiped the sweat that beaded down his forehead. He breathed quickly. Felt so hot. His stomach hurt. He peered out the eastern window of the cupola. Smoke billowed. He ran from the barn, and into the house. Our grandfather had gotten out of bed. He sat at the table with my mom, eating a bowl of oatmeal, silent.

"Can't find Lulu," Henry told them. And he looked into our grandfather, and at that same moment I thought of our grandfather, and together in our minds, all that we had learned, everything our grandfather may have done and may have hid, all the stories my mother may have told me, it all melted away in our mind. Henry sweated. Waited for my mother and grandfather to do something. "I have a feeling," he added.

And that's when my grandfather stood up.

I was still under the maple by the time they rowed to the boathouse. The world had gone black and I couldn't see through it, but when I heard their voices calling long and lonely to me like all the loons of the world I stood, and I still couldn't see, but I ran, carving a space through the dark, carving a space to my family.

I saw Henry first. His shape emerged, rowing solo out of the black, the circles of his oars so steady, so forever. As the world re-opened into view, I saw Fireball out in his

boat, out past the no-wake buoy, standing, watching. And then I turned to see what he watched. The burning remains, half-sunken wooden rafters making the boathouse look like it had grown up out of the water with its fire. Henry jumped out of the rowboat and steadied it for our grandfather. I watched the skin of his arms hang in a sag, watched the way his back bent forward and the way he shook like water. He stood and turned to my mother, held his hand down, and helped her to climb out of the boat. My mother had closed her body in on herself. Her teeth were clenched. She walked towards what used to be the yellow boathouse. She hadn't been on the lake since Abram disappeared.

Henry moved closer to me. I moved closer to him. We froze, together, and stood with our grandfather in front of us and my mother behind us, Fireball out on the lake and watching, the moans of the wood burning and drowning, no remnants of the living.

When the last beam of the house tipped itself over, our grandfather's boat bobbed to the surface. First its bow peaked out of the water, and then the whole boat tipped out, right-side up.

I pulled my cousin's sleeve. "Henry," I whispered to him. "Henry, I – "

He pulled back on my arm. "No you didn't," he said through his teeth. "It wasn't you."

"Henry," I began.

"No," he repeated, quick, angry. "It was me."

And then we heard a yell, old as the lake. We looked out across the dead house in the water. It was Fireball, standing in his boat, moaning *No* with the creaks of the wood, *No*, turned ancient and long, *No*, echoing and answering itself. And then he pulled his motor on, sat, dipped out around the back side of Coyote, disappeared.

Part Three

Chapter One

I found the slice of glass we had cut each other with, and used it to dig a hole in the room that used to be a room. I let my fingernails push upward with the small stones underneath. I smudged dirt across my face as I wiped my sweat and lay the notebook down in the hole. I spit on it, then rubbed my scar. Covered the notebook in the dirt and left the room that used to be a room. Abram's room.

We stayed for a couple more weeks. Ate our meals quiet together at the table. Helped my grandfather and Fireball at the ice cream store. I moved out of my room and into Henry's, even though that reminded me of him. I was glad it didn't work, emptying it. I sat on the floor and traced my fingers over the shapes of the sewing machines he'd touched, the floorboards he'd walked on. Full as it was, there was order to his room. Books in one pile, frames in another. One empty cooler in a space of its own. I liked his room, my head on his pillow at night. Closer to his dreams.

Fireball came around sometimes. Once, he took me to the island with him. I brought my suitcase. He didn't ask me why. We went to the Point first, where he'd tied up his boat. "I'm just going to ask the lake something first," I told him. I eased myself to the edge of the rock and dipped my head upside down underwater. I wanted to cry out the tears of all the lake, my head under there alone. I just hung there for a while, no questions. I kept my eyes open, searching for Henry somewhere at the bottom. Fireball had already started his engine, and it sounded like a train down there, in Kettle Lake.

I climbed in the boat, and held my suitcase tight on my lap. I pulled my knees in closer to my chest and pulled at my overalls. I smelled Henry.

We rode slow out onto the lake. Fireball took me in close to the shore of Coyote, into a little cove. There, he pointed to a beehive hanging from a birch, dipping out over the lake. We watched together. I wondered what it might look like inside, all those rooms and all that family. After a while, he said, "Welp," and we were off. I looked back behind us just as a hummingbird dove its beak into the hive. The hive fell. A cloud of bees swarmed away.

At the island, we drank from the spring. I carried my suitcase the whole time. Fireball didn't ask me about it. When we got to the grave we didn't sit there or anything, didn't hold our hands on it the way Henry had done. We just walked through the green field of the island, nodded our heads at what we knew was the right time. Then we went to the beach. And that's when I opened my suitcase.

I don't know what Fireball would have thought I had in there. I hadn't worn anything but my overalls all summer. Plus, I wore Henry's old t-shirts. So he should have figured it wasn't filled with clothes. But he didn't figure that. So when I opened it, he was surprised.

Inside, I had all this stuff. The pen Henry had used to write our final note. The bag of rolling tobacco he'd left behind. Old sneakers. An afghan we'd lay upon.

"Help me dig," I said to Fireball.

"What the," he said back. But just the same, we started digging. We were down close to the water, and it didn't lake long to pass through the dry sand and into the soaking.

"Do you think it will all make it?" I asked him.

He shrugged, then looked up at me, waiting for me to tell him what I meant.

"To the islands," I said.

A loon called. He nodded. Knew. To the islands underwater.

Throughout those weeks before we left again, my mother's stories changed, grew. She'd come to my bed at night, sit on the end of it, where Henry used to sit, and talk and talk, telling stories like they were for the house to hear, and not me.

"I never meant he'd really killed my baby," she'd say, or, "it wasn't that he really killed Abram." She'd go on and on, retelling everything she didn't know I'd already learned with Henry, reshaping the tales of Kettleborough that she'd told me, reshaping them into something that could forgive my grandfather.

I can see it in my mind, the way my grandfather took Abram to the island. The way he took him to

tell him. To set them all free. I can see the way he couldn't wait, even if there was a storm coming. Because Abram had just crashed his car. He hadn't even gotten hurt, but he could have. And that taught my grandfather. He couldn't keep waiting. I can understand his urgency, the way he needed to mend what he'd broken.

I know my grandfather knew there would be a storm.

But I think Abram must have known too. Because my grandfather always knew, and Henry always knew.

He must have looked like Henry then, Abram. Blond and quiet and full of grace. When I think of him I wonder if he felt it. The way death signals itself.

"Mrs. King is your mother," my grandfather could have said. "Your other mother, the one you miss, the one who left us, she left because of that. Because Mrs. King is your mother." Abram could have understood. Could have said "okay," and shrugged. Could have wondered what they were doing on Dollar Island. But he could have gotten angry, could have climbed into the boat and rowed out onto the lake alone.

Maybe they walked to the fresh water spring first. "It's yours!" my grandfather could have exclaimed, as his son kneeled over and drank that cold crisp water. "An island with spring water!" And Abram would have loved nothing more in the world than that spring water. Would have thought of Henry, of bringing his son out to be rinsed clean in the water.

But maybe my grandfather told Abram as soon as he pulled the boat up onto the sand and wrapped the lead rope around a pine. Maybe he didn't waste any time letting the truth out. And maybe Abram got angry right away. Or maybe he didn't get angry at all, ever.

Henry might not have gotten angry.

Henry might have simply wanted to be alone on the lake. Climbed back into the boat and rowed out straight in front of the island, waved to his father to say "I'm okay, I'll be back," and drifted. Liked the rain when it started to fall. Put his head up to catch drops as they landed on his eyelids and trailed their way down his face. When the sky lit itself into purple and thunder came, he might have stood in the boat, raised his arms big and free to the Kettle Lake sky.

Lightening hit the boat. My grandfather couldn't have waited to save him. He must have seen it. Must have dove in the water and swam to him knowing all the while

lightening could hit his back as he kicked his way to what he had to have known was his dead son's body.

He swam the body into shore. Laid Abram's head on the beach, let the rest be washed by the surf. I wonder how long he stayed with his son there, by the water. I wonder how long it took him, carrying Abram on his back through the pines to the fresh water spring.

I know he wanted to leave him there, by the water. But it was rocky, and he couldn't dig. So he walked on. Up. And he counted as he walked, and when he hit seventeen, he'd hit the field of his island.

He dug a grave in the rain. My grandfather's body must have been brown and red with earth.

By the time morning threatened to rise over the island, he was finished.

He couldn't have done it any other way. He must have rolled his son's body into the grave, let it fall.

And then jumped into the grave. Tried to die into his son. Lay upon his son through the rise of morning.

And then, he drove home broken.

Chapter Two

My mother told me to take what I wanted from the house. But I didn't want anything. Nothing I'd come with, nothing I'd found. She didn't want anything either. My grandfather though, he took my suitcase and filled it with the pictures from his dresser. I watched as he placed each one so gentle atop the next, wrapped them in cloth napkins and scarves from the closet.

We hadn't talked about what we would do, but we all knew.

The same way we all understood about Henry. He'd asked so many questions about trains in those last days. "Grampy," he'd said, "does the train run daily? Lulu? How much do you think you need for a train ticket?" We remembered it all after he'd gone, though we never said it aloud. But the money from the ice cream store was gone, and we knew. Just as my grandfather had begun us in Kettleborough, Henry had ended us. With a train. He had to. He had to have known. Nothing would get us out of the house but that. Him. Henry, gone.

The three of us began to walk out of the house together. But before we reached the door to the porch, my mother caught my grandfather's arm and the strap of my overall. She ran back through the kitchen, into the dining room. There, across from the staircase that was never used, over the miniature house in the wall, she lifted the great old painting of Kettle Lake. The lake from our spot on it.

Fireball had come over to help us move a couch to the lawn. He'd never asked about the boathouse. I don't know what he thought. Henry, me. Henry had left though,

ran away, so just as he'd wanted it, it looked like he'd done it. That's what most people thought. That's the way it looked. But we'd searched. Searched all we could.

The couch was green with yellow flowers embroidered into it. The smell of mock orange filled the yard. My mother laughed. She laughed.

We all sat on the couch, me squeezed between my grandfather and Fireball. And we sat. And we sat. We watched and waited and we knew it would happen. We talked some. My grandfather told me it was about time I changed my clothes. My mother said she liked my style. I tucked my hair behind my ears and I knew that we were all missing Henry like all the world. Fireball said the center beam would go first. But we knew that wasn't the way it had happened.

I know they'd had the dream too, my mother and grandfather. That Henry sent it to make it happen. They wouldn't have listened to me otherwise. I lay in my sleeping bag, my head on Henry's pillow, and before I drifted to sleep I whispered to him, asked him to send me a sign. And that night he came to me, his body hovering over my vision and the house transparent within him, transparent and crumbling. It started with the barn. The cupola fell in on itself, pulling with it all the ages of wood, collapsing the walls and sliding doors and rafters and beams into the whirlpool of falling. And like a snake the falling trembled itself over to the house, where it fell from within. The first floor first, then the second, as though waiting its turn.

"The house is going to fall today," I said in the morning. My mother and grandfather were at the table, silent, looking out over the sea of junk, out the window, towards the gnarled apple tree at the edge of the field.

After a while they both breathed out at the same time. My grandfather nodded long and slow as the summer air. "That's right too," he sighed. And I knew they knew.

When the barn fell I almost clapped my hands together. But a sadness came over me too. A sadness deep as all the joy I'd ever felt.

It sounded like a soft thunder. A thunder that rolls and roars but tells you it won't do any more than that.

The falling lasted through the night. When the roof landed on the pile of walls, and bounced, and landed again, we all breathed out together but didn't move. My grandfather spoke first. "The loons," he said. And then the loons came out. We heard them roll up from the water and across the Point, through the thin line of pines and to us. We didn't turn around to face the lake. Just kept our eyes on the house until all together our eyes closed, and we were in the lake, floating free with the loons.

Sometimes, now, when it's cold and wet and I'm tired, I can find Henry in the faces of the men I see, Henry gentle and safe, instead of the way he went, alone and afraid, so grown but so young, like my grandfather. Instead of the way he went, away, thinking he had to, to save us all.

I still dream the train underwater. That train they pulled into Kettle Lake so long ago. But this dream doesn't exist inside the form of Henry. In this dream, Henry is

inside the train, and the train is rolling, lumbering on fast and strong, a definite west. The train cuts through the blue of the water and turns it into white, and Henry's eyes are closed, and he knows he's headed to the islands under water.