

WAITING FOR THE NIGHT SONG

Julie Carrick Dalton

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

NEW YORK

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WAITING FOR THE NIGHT SONG

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For my husband, Sean, my true love, my best friend, my perfect coefficient.

And in memory of my grandmother, Althea Hazel Ross Carrick, a coal miner's daughter from Appalachia and the boss of every room she entered. A lifelong educator who taught countless children to read, she was the source of the ginger in my hair and the fire in my belly.

*Two weeks after my sharp-as-a-tack, fire-haired grandmother passed away at age 103, an editor with long red hair bought *Waiting for the Night Song*, my book about a little girl with flaming red curls. I refuse to believe that was a coincidence. I suspect Althea Hazel is still pulling the strings, just as she always has.*

Thanks for continuing to have my back, Grandma. I miss you.

Waiting for the Night Song

Chapter One

PRESENT DAY

Truth hides in fissures and hollows, in broken places and empty parts. It can be buried, crushed, or burnt, but the truth will always rise. The specific truth Cadie Kessler stalked came in the form of the mountain pine beetle. She pried a strip of bark off a dying pine tree. Her fingers, blistered and raw from hunting the elusive creature, froze as a gush of insects writhed against the exposed wood. They scattered for cover, but not fast enough.

“Got you.” Her voice, scratchy and dry from not having spoken in days, echoed off granite boulders in the sparse forest. She scraped the beetles into a small envelope and tilted her head up to the morning sun.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She braced herself and answered her boss’s call.

“What’s up, Thea?”

“I looked at the images you sent yesterday. How am I supposed to present this? You’re clearly on restricted federal lands.”

Cadie didn't respond.

"If we publish your research, we'd have to detail where we got the samples, then you'd get arrested for trespassing."

"This is bullshit and you know it. This is *public* land. I should be able to collect samples on public land." Cadie knew Thea agreed with her, but she needed to yell at someone. "If we don't get control of the infestation now, it's going to get out of control fast. And in this drought, it's all going to burn. Look what happened in California. It's the same beetle."

"Getting yourself arrested isn't going to help prove your case."

Taking advantage of the clear cell signal, Cadie checked her messages as Thea talked on speaker phone.

"I don't like it any more than you do," Thea said.

Cadie scrolled through messages, stopping at a subject heading that grabbed her attention. *Bicknell's Thrush*. The tiny songbird, a favorite from Cadie's childhood, had all but disappeared in the New England woodlands in recent years. The message came from a grad student named Piper. Cadie didn't have time to deal with students. But the thrush.

"Are you listening to me?" Thea said.

"Yeah. I'm here. What do you want me to do? Pretend I don't know the forest is at risk of a devastating fire

because of some ridiculous regulation?” Cadie said as she read Piper’s message. *Hey Cadence! I’m working on a project to re-create/protect habitat for Bicknell’s thrush and found what I think is a bark beetle infestation. Can you confirm?* Piper included a photo dated three days earlier, although Cadie knew the government had closed off that particular forest to environmental research in April.

“Where are you anyway?” Thea said. “Please tell me you aren’t anywhere near Mount Griffin. That fire’s moving fast.”

Uptick in local temps are driving Bicknell’s north, plus ski resorts, turbines. Then hurricanes in the DR, Cuba + deforestation in Haiti are eliminating the winter habitat and they aren’t surviving to return to New England, Piper wrote. Same conditions attracting your beetles are driving out my thrush. Can we share data?

“Cadie, are you there?” Thea sounded annoyed now.

“I’m fine. I’ll check in tomorrow.” Cadie zoomed in on Piper’s photos, which showed the beetle farther north than Cadie realized.

“Don’t get yourself arrested.” Cadie could hear Thea’s fingernails cantering against her desk. “I want to defend your research, but you need to give me irrefutable data and a legal way to prove it.”

“There is no legal way. If this forest burns before I establish the beetles are here, I won’t have any way to prove

my theory.” She looked again at Piper’s photo. “And it’s not just here. They’re farther north than I thought.”

“How close are you to the fire? This isn’t worth getting killed over.”

“Exactly my point. People are already dying in these fires. If we can prove they’re linked to the beetles, we can get the resources to get ahead of them.”

Thea took in a breath as if to say something, but did not speak.

“I’m not planning to get hurt or caught.” Cadie paused. “But if I do, I won’t bring you into it. As of right now, consider me officially rogue. I have to go.”

She hung up before Thea could respond. The idea that defying an executive order to collect insect samples could brand Cadie, a five-foot-two entomologist, as a criminal struck her as funny, despite the potential consequences.

Cadence Kessler: Outlaw Entomologist.

She tried to laugh at herself, but the gnawing worry in her gut reminded her the fire was serious. She needed to get down the mountain by nightfall. If they closed the road, she could be trapped, and since no one knew her location, no one would know to look for her.

When she got home she would storm Thea’s office, dump bags of dead beetles on her desk and her lap, and nail poisoned wood samples to the wall. No one who ex-

amined her evidence would be able to deny the insects had moved from the Rockies to New England. No one would dare arrest her when they understood the threat. “I told you so” burned sweet on her tongue.

Cadie shook the envelope to the rhythm of a song she couldn’t quite remember. The spirited rustle, like seeds anxious to be planted, emboldened her, even as her body ached under the fifty-pound backpack. She trudged on. Only fifty meters to Mount Steady’s summit.

She could get a better sense of how much time she had from a higher elevation.

Smoke scratched the back of her throat, confirming the late-summer wind was already pushing the forest fires east. She paused for a sip of water. Working alone in the woods, Cadie marked time in elevation and ounces of water. She was running out of both.

This drought. This spate of fires. This beetle. As the temperature ratcheted up four degrees in less than a century, New Hampshire had practically invited the tiny creature and the fires that came with it. Cadie could slow the wildfires if someone would just believe her. The anticipation of being right, of being the hero, had lulled her to sleep the past several nights under the canopy of stars. Cocooned in her sleeping bag, she’d written the opening to her imagined TED Talk. *When someone says you’re overreacting, but you know you’re right, keep reacting until*

it's over.

Cadie's backpack grew heavier, compressing her knees and spine, as if she might crumble into the rock under her feet. She forced herself up the final incline. If gravity pulled from the dense fist at the center of the Earth, then the higher she pushed herself up the mountain, the farther she removed herself from the core, the looser gravity's grip would be. It tugged at her heels and stole the oxygen from her lungs. Only on the summits did Cadie feel a lightness in her chest. She stood untethered in the rushing wind. Anything seemed possible from the top of a mountain.

Cadie dropped her pack to the ground. A gust whipped her hair across her face, carrying traces of pine and the reedy flute of a distant hermit thrush. Wind stretched the clouds below her like raw cotton on a comb, allowing the rusty tips of dead pine trees to peek through. She pulled samples of tree bark and pine wedges from her backpack and laid them around her in a semi-circle. The invasive beetle she had been hunting the last four days had carved lacy lines into the wood. The pea-sized creatures were killing off trees and leaving them as kindling in the parched woodlands. She stroked the delicate destruction with her finger. The beetles' telltale blue fungus—the color of the autumn sky before sunset—stained the wood. That color meant death to a pine.

She held a wedge to her face and inhaled the freshly cut wood. The tang of sap should have rushed in. But dead trees don't bleed. They burn.

Smoke blurred the edge of the mountaintops to the west. Mount Griffin rose from the mist, green on the north slope with a slow-burning char on the south. When she finally convinced crews to start thinning the pines, she would salvage a few trunks to mill into floorboards for her home. If she ever stayed still long enough to own a home. The grooves the beetles carved would feel better under bare feet than the slick linoleum in her one-bedroom apartment.

From the mountaintop, home felt distant, as if it might not be there when she came down. Time moved more slowly in the woods, sliding by like the lazy flow of pine sap. As a child, she used to imagine the outside world slipping away as she leapt from rock to rock through the ferny woods surrounding her home. The pine and beech trees had been her friends. They had guarded her, swallowed her secrets whole.

It was her turn to protect the forest.

Silence enveloped the summit, an island of stone floating in the low-hanging clouds. If only time would stop. Right here. Right now. The fires would stall, the beetles would stop their assault, and Cadie would remain at the top of the world, where she could hide from gravity.

She tried to quell the twisting in her gut that reminded her the fires presented an opportunity. If they proved to be a bigger threat than expected, and if Cadie's research stopped an inferno, it would transform her career, her future. She did not want to want that fire, but a small voice inside called out to the flames. *Come if you dare.*

Cadie selected a potato-sized stone from the ledge and dusted it against her thigh. She pressed her tongue to the rock, leaving a wet oval to reveal its hidden mineral life. The dull grays and browns of New Hampshire granite burst into streaks of silver and layers of radiant amber at the touch of her saliva. A creamy, jagged vein glowed in the sunlight. The oval shrank as wind sucked the light from the rock until it reverted to its flat finish. The iridescence of veiled colors fizzed on her tongue. Her mouth watered.

She tucked the stone in the bottom of her backpack, cradling it in the center of the tambourine she carried to scare off bears. *It's just one stone*, she told herself each time. When she built her own house someday, the rocks she'd collected would form the skirt around her hearth. Stolen pieces of every mountain she hiked, markers of time. The stack of stones—at least thirty by now—formed a cairn in her apartment. She often wondered if the dilapidated building could bear the weight, or if one day it would all come crashing down.

Her cell phone buzzed against the granite slab as a text came through.

It's Daniela. They found him.

The minerals on her tongue turned to acid. She read and reread the words until they became a jumble of illegible letters, and the screen powered down. She hurled a rock off the ledge and held her breath until it struck the slope below, unleashing a torrent of cascading stone. This couldn't be happening.

I'm home. I need you here, Daniela texted again. *They're questioning my dad.*

Cadie imagined the text message in Daniela's childhood voice and didn't restrain the sob that burst out with decades of compressed guilt. More than twenty-five years had passed since she had spoken to Daniela Garcia. If she acknowledged Daniela, Cadie would no longer be able to pretend that long-ago summer had never happened. The fiction of Cadie's childhood, rewritten and edited so she could sleep at night, would come undone. The single gunshot echoed in her mind.

Or she could stay on her mountaintop and turn off her phone. She could hide for a little longer, at least until the fires got too close. She put her head between her knees and stared down at the fissures in the slab. She scratched a rock on the surface of the ledge, leaving white letters next to her wood samples. *Cadie was here.* It felt childish,

but she traced over the letters until they stood out in bold blocks. *Cadie was here.*

Horizontal lines in the granite recorded time, a hundred thousand years between lines of crystallized minerals. Climbing her mountains meant traveling through time, treading on scars of each millennia. Unknowable catastrophic events had bent the stone, folding time in on itself. Moments that were never meant to touch, fused together in geological history.

She imagined the panic in Daniela's dark eyes. As much as Cadie wanted to hide in the woods, the ferocity of the bond Cadie once shared with Daniela swelled in her chest, shaming her for wanting to abandon her friend again, as she had done so many years ago.

Her thumbs felt thick and clumsy as she typed a response.

On my way to the cottage. Meet me at 9 tonight? The tacky layer of sap, which felt like part of her skin after four days of climbing trees, stuck to the screen as she typed. She added three rocks to a cairn someone else had built. An offering. A prayer. The chilled morning air telegraphed the metallic peal of mineral against mineral, broadcasting her location into the valley.

Daniela—like the forest—had been her ally, her friend, a keeper of her secrets. Cadie had played everything like a grand adventure back then. Until the game

became real. Maybe she had always hoped the truth would rise one day. Or maybe she had convinced herself that the deeper she hid in the woods, the more gently she walked this Earth, the more likely their secret would stay where they left it—where they left him. Buried in the woods.

Chapter Two

THAT SUMMER

The warped floorboards in the kitchen played like a piano under Cadie's feet. If she maintained her rhythm and bounced from the long board in front of the sink to the short plank behind her father's chair to the narrow strip in the middle of the room, she could coax the melody of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" out of the moaning, creaking wood.

Standing at the threshold between the kitchen and the hallway, Cadie mapped her route across the kitchen, seeking out the stiff, mute boards that promised silent passage to the door on the other side of the room. Thin light filtered through the muslin curtains at a familiar angle. Six thirty A.M.

Cadie often stole mornings while her parents slept to practice in case she ever needed to escape from something. What she would need to escape from, she did not know yet. Notice your surroundings. Know your escape route. Like Sherlock Holmes. With six leaps, she landed

in front of the screen door and eased it open enough to squeeze her torso through. If she opened it one inch too far, the squeak would alert her parents.

Outside, a frothy mist hung over the lake. She tiptoed out to the end of the rickety pier and sat, letting her feet dip into the tepid water. At first Cadie didn't notice the boat, half obscured by the fog. But as it crept closer, the small vessel broke through the gauzy curtain. A yellow rowboat, drifting alone with no captain, no passengers. She stood up to see inside. Maybe someone lay on the bottom. A lost child. Maybe a murderer ready to jump out and grab her. Pressing up on her toes, stretching as far as she dared over the water, she still couldn't see inside.

The boat floated closer, closer, then passed by her pier on the barely noticeable current without pause.

The morning sun infused the mist with a creamy, molten glow. Pressure swelled inside Cadie's rib cage. A longing rippled through her muscles and clung to her bones, pulling her toward the boat as if the universe needed her to act. If she hesitated, if she went inside to ask permission, it would be gone. Disappeared into the clouds, like a dream she would never remember. She peeled off her pajama top and shorts and looked back at the house. Her toes curled around the edge of the warped gray boards, clinging to the rules she always obeyed.

She filled her chest with the misty air, pinched her

nose, and jumped.

The lake water caught her as it had a thousand times before, but its embrace felt foreign at this early hour. Her limbs felt dense and stiff as she chopped through the water, trying not to sink too deep, where the water grew cold. From eye level the billowy vapor distorted her depth perception and she lost perspective of where she drifted, where the boat hid. Or the shore. She kept paddling forward. It had to be there. She tried to whistle a low tone to echo off the boat, but humid air absorbed the sound as it escaped her lips.

Finally, her outstretched hand swept the cold aluminum side of the boat.

“Hello?” she whispered, and rapped on the side. Fog muffled the hollow echo of her knuckles on the hull. She pushed the front of the boat and kicked with all her strength. The abandoned craft resisted, but as Cadie fought, the boat slowed, then grudgingly reversed direction. Her labored breath echoed off of the boat with a hush. As she entered the shallows in front of her secluded beach, she lodged the wayward craft in the sand and stood up.

Two oars lay next to a rope coiled on the bottom. Plenty of dings, but no holes. A perfect vessel. As if it had drifted to her, for her. Someone meant for her to find this boat. She would explore the whole lake on her own, dis-

cover a place no one knew existed.

Cadie surveyed her house, and, seeing no sign of her parents, she dragged the boat fifty yards around the shoreline and tied it to the drooping birch branches behind the rocks where she used to play pirates. She ducked as a ribbon of starlings curled above her head, their wings murmuring secrets she couldn't understand. The arc of green-black wings swooped toward the water where she stood, wet and naked. She hugged her arms around her waist and hurried through the shallows to get her pajamas from the pier.

Cadie's knees shook as she eased the screen door shut behind her. She snuck back over the creaky kitchen floor, the nighttime chill held firmly in the peg nails securing the warped planks. She pressed her back against her door. Water dripped off the ends of her red ringlets, forming puddles near her feet.

Cadie slipped into the shower to hide her morning swim. She wanted to keep the boat. But even if no one claimed it, her parents would never let her take it out alone. She would be too scared to disobey them. She imagined her boat with no captain and slammed the shower door.

The smell of coffee greeted her as she reentered the kitchen. Her mother blotted a tangle of bacon with a paper towel and offered the plate to Cadie. The salty, chewy

bacon exploded in her mouth, filling her nostrils with the bold smell of hickory.

Through the window she spied a glint of gold peeking between the rocks where branches left a sliver of the bow exposed. It glowed, singing a come-hither song only she heard. She squeezed her knees together and prayed her parents wouldn't notice the blaze of anxious yellow.

She *would* take her boat out. No one would ever know.

After breakfast, Cadie wandered around the cottage, bumping into chairs, rereading the titles of books she had read again and again. She fingered the roughly hewn frame around a photo of her parents working on a farm in Canada before Cadie was born. Now her parents painted landscapes and made pottery in the woods of New Hampshire. They canned vegetables and chopped wood. Cadie had never even been outside of New England.

She flopped down on a small rug in front of the fireplace, stroking the woven fibers of dark red and burnt orange set off by flecks of turquoise and fuchsia—colors that did not exist in New Hampshire. She closed her eyes and willed the carpet to soar through the clouds, to take her back to Persia where it came from. Anywhere but the woods that framed her entire life.

"You're making me crazy," her mother said. "Do you want to throw a pot?"

The slip of clay moving through her hands, the sen-

sation of art flowing from the tips of her fingers teased Cadie with possibility every time she sat at her mother's pottery wheel. But Cadie's vessels usually flopped. Despite having two working artists as parents, Cadie had inherited no artistic skills.

"I don't feel like it."

"You could go pick some berries. Then we can make something."

Cadie knew the berries would sit in the fridge and rot, but she grabbed a plastic container from under the counter and slipped on her mud-crust-ed sneakers.

"Come, Friar," she called to her border collie, and they ducked into the woods. Soggy twigs bent under her weight instead of snapping against the spongy forest floor. Shafts of sunlight broke through the canopy of maple, oak, and pine.

The closest neighbors lived so far through the forest, Cadie imagined herself alone in the world. Mud sucked at her shoes as she approached the swollen creek. According to her father, their creek came from an underground source. The water, filtered through the minerals on its way to the surface, was the purest water anywhere, her dad had told her over and over. She scooped up a mouthful.

Instead of heading toward the blueberries, Cadie followed the creek deeper into the forest in search of the

spring she half believed existed. The property along the creek belonged to the state, a wide swath of conservation land dividing her property from that of the neighbors she had never met.

Cloven moose prints and the delicate handprints of raccoons marred the soft mud. Some days she found evidence bears had stopped for a drink. Large trees never took root on the soft banks. The saplings that tried, tipped and fell as soon as they reached adolescence because the soil turned to soggy cake during the spring thaw and couldn't support their roots. A wide, treeless corridor on either side of the creek let the light pour in.

The Granite State was famous for its thin, rocky topsoil. Farmers pulled stones out of the fields when they cleared the land, but new rocks surfaced every year. The rain came, the freeze, the thaw, shifting the soil so the smaller particles slipped below the stones and pushed rocks up, the way Brazil nuts always rise to the top of a bowl of mixed nuts. The soil shuddered and moaned, heaving new stones up each spring.

But not around Silas Creek, where Cadie could sink up to her ankles in the brownie-batter mud and never hit a rock. The silty mud dried like a dusting of cocoa-colored baby powder on her ankles whenever she tromped through it.

Countless times, she had tracked the windy waterway

deep into the woods where a rusty barbed-wire fence cut through the forest, spanning the creek before she could get to the underground source. The fence created a barrier between her property and protected marshlands on the interior of the peninsula where she lived. She had tried to shimmy under the wire, but dead vines clinging to the fence gave her the creeps. A single rusty scratch could give her lockjaw, according to her mother. She always chickened out.

As she turned a bend in the creek, Cadie halted. A birch tree, reckless enough to take root on the bank, had lost its footing and fallen, buckling part of the fence to expose an opening barely big enough for Cadie to slither under.

She splashed through the icy water and dropped to all fours. First one shoulder, then the other under the treacherous wires. Stones shifted under the slick soles of her sneakers. Friar huffed his disapproval.

The forest on the other side looked similar to hers, but the forbidden woods seemed thicker, denser. She cocked her head to see if the sky looked different from the other side. A stone shifted and she fell to her elbows, her chin hitting the water. Sharp rocks dug into her knees, distracting her so she didn't feel the stabbing in her shoulder at first. An inch-long gash on her upper arm beaded with blood droplets where a rusty barb had torn through her

flesh. She crawled backward out from under the fence.

Friar whined and wriggled himself next to Cadie in the water.

“It’s okay, boy.” The smell of wet dog comforted her.

She splashed the wound, rubbing the cut. If she could have bent her neck only two inches more, she would have sucked the poison out like snake venom. Cadie moved her jaw from left to right and straightened her back as she stood knee-high in the water.

Instead of trying to squeeze under the fence again, she picked up a stone and hurled it at the opening between the wires. The rock passed through without touching a single mangled wire. Kids made fun of Cadie’s knobby knees and her clumsiness, but she had perfect aim.

She turned her back to the fence.

The best berries grew on the far bank, flush with a water source, rich soil, and unobstructed morning light. Friar stopped as they approached the clearing where the blueberries grew and growled a low, deep warning. He stiffened his back and pricked his ears up. Cadie froze. She turned the plastic container over and beat on the bottom like a drum.

Bears.

“Come on, Friar. Home.” She edged backward. ““Oh, I went down south for to see my Sal, singing Polly Wolly Doodle all the day,” she sang and backed up, maintaining

the steady, hollow rhythm on the plastic tub.

Friar darted toward the noise.

"Friar!" She inched backward. The bushes rustled and parted. "Friar!"

She curled her toes inside her sneakers and fought the urge to run. Never run from a bear. "'For my Sal she is a spunky gal, singing Polly Wolly Doodle all the day.'" She matched her drum to every other beat of her pounding heart.

"Don't stop singing because of me," a voice called.

From behind the bushes stepped Daniela Garcia, a grade ahead of Cadie. They lived in the same small town, went to the same school, but they didn't really know each other.

Daniela wasn't a Girl Scout.

A hot blush slithered up Cadie's neck, her ears, her face.

"You thought I was a bear, didn't you?" Daniela said.

"No." Cadie didn't need another reason for the kids outside the 7-Eleven to laugh at her. Her flaming hair and giant freckles gave them invitation enough. Now she would be the girl who sang to bears in the woods.

Friar ran over to Daniela and jumped up on her, leaving muddy splotches on her shorts. Cadie's stomach lurched.

"Down, Friar." Cadie tried to pull him off Daniela.

“Sorry.”

“Fryer? Like a fryer hen?”

“His real name is Friar Tuck, from Robin Hood.”

“You shouldn’t yell for him like that.”

“Why not?”

“I thought you were yelling *fire*,” Daniela said. “Not what you want to hear in the middle of the woods. I mean, geez. If you lived on a beach, would you name your dog Shark?”

Daniela dropped to her knees, allowing Friar to lick her face.

“You can call him Tuck if you want.”

“Nah, Friar’s cool. Why’d you sing anyway? I would’ve run if I saw a bear.”

“You don’t run from bears. You move slow and make noise. And never look them in the eyes.”

“You’re a pretty awful singer. Are you picking blueberries?”

“Yeah. My mom wants some.”

“Me too.” Daniela swept her arm toward the bushes. Cadie took it as an invitation.

Cadie wished she had braided her hair, which had dried into a red puffball. Her pink terry cloth shorts did not match her blue tank top. Daniela wore cutoff denim shorts and a button-down short-sleeved shirt made of red handkerchief fabric. Her black hair hung in a loose

ponytail. Although Daniela's parents spoke with thick accents, Daniela had no trace of an accent, unlike the other Mexican kids who transitioned in and out of her school. Other kids moved from farm to farm, there one school year, gone the next. But Daniela had always been there. Cadie often saw her on the porch of her father's hardware store when she walked home from school.

"Why are you in my woods?" Cadie said.

Daniela raised her eyebrows in high, sweeping arches and put a hand on her hip. "Why are *you* in *my* woods?"

Cadie slapped her leg to call Friar closer.

"We just moved here," Daniela said. "The cottage by the water off Woodside. It's my woods."

Although the two properties butted up against each other, their driveways connected to different streets. Cadie had never even seen the cottage, other than glimpses from out on the lake.

A slow grin spread across Daniela's face as she looked Cadie up and down. "Did you fall in the creek?"

Cadie shrugged. Mud clung to her knees. She wiped away the blood on her arm.

"At least it's warm out." Daniela stepped aside to make room for Cadie. "It's sunnier over here. You'll dry off faster."

Daniela paused from picking berries to grab Cadie's wrist and look at her woven bracelet. "What's this?"

“Paracord. The knots unwind to seven feet of rope for, you know, emergencies.”

“Are you guys survivalists or something?” Daniela asked.

“No. I just like it.”

“Cool.”

They picked berries quietly for ten minutes. Daniela surveyed each cluster before picking it, occasionally stepping away, tilting her head up, and swaying her back to look at the sky. She whistled a mournful song Cadie did not recognize. The soft edges of each note rose above the bushes as if they came from a perfectly tuned flute, not Daniela’s chapped lips. The drawn-out notes whispered of melancholy, but as Daniela swayed in rhythm with her own music, the corners of her mouth curled up and her eyebrows arched, convincing Cadie the song wasn’t meant to be sad.

Cadie paused several times to look through the bushes toward the lake, hoping to catch a flicker of yellow between the branches. Daniela turned and followed Cadie’s gaze. Her song drifted into a final note that left Cadie feeling unsatisfied, as if the melody asked a question Cadie could not answer.

“Are you still looking for bears?” Daniela said.

“No.” The warm flush crept up her neck as she twisted the bottom edge of her shirt around her finger. “Can you

keep a secret?"

"Of course."

"Follow me." Cadie sprinted into the woods, Friar close at her heels.

"If it's the patch of berries down by the water, I already found it," Daniela called.

She heard Daniela running to catch up, but she didn't slow down. The smell of damp pine and stagnant water intensified as they got closer to the lake. Water bugs skittered over pools of still rainwater. Chunks of granite, dropped by glaciers during the Ice Age, ranging in size from a softball to a pickup truck, littered the forest floor, forming crevices that could snap her ankle if she lost focus. She leapt from rock to moss-covered rock, to leaf-strewn patches of forest floor, holding her breath to duck through clouds of mosquitoes. The cheerful trill of a Bicknell's thrush encouraged her to run faster.

As she approached the edge of the lake, she wriggled under a few low-hanging hemlock branches, dripping with the previous night's rain, and stepped out onto a large slab of granite erupting from the woods toward the lake.

Tucked into the nook where the rock met the water, Cadie's boat waited for her.

Daniela emerged from under the hemlock branches and joined Cadie on the rock. "Okay. It's a boat. I don't

get it.”

“I found it floating in the lake this morning. I swam out and rescued it. My parents weren’t even awake yet.”

Three inches taller than Cadie, with a confidence Cadie longed for, Daniela turned to Cadie as if seeing her for the first time. She looked at Cadie’s muddy sneakers, her bony knees, mismatched clothes, and unruly hair. She had made a mistake. If Daniela told anyone about the boat, Cadie would lose her chance to explore the lake. Daniela might think Cadie was being childish for hiding the boat, or unethical for not trying to find its owner.

Or, like Cadie, Daniela might be looking for something more than blueberries.

“Whose is it?”

“It’s mine now.” Cadie pressed up and down on her tiptoes.

Daniela stepped closer to the boat and ran her hand across the rim. Yellow paint flaked off and she flicked it in the water.

Friar sniffed at the boat and growled.

“After my parents go to work tomorrow, I’m taking it out. You can come if you want.” Cadie rubbed Friar’s ears.

Daniela squinted at Cadie, at the boat, then back at Cadie.

With her shoe, Cadie scratched at a patch of lichen clinging to the rock.

“No one else knows about this?” Daniela said.

“No one else can *ever* know.”

Daniela slapped a mosquito on her arm, leaving a bloody smear. “What time should I be here?”