

## **One**

### **To Disappear**

If I could have chosen how to have my head sliced into slivers, my psyche stirred into a mash, and my heart splintered into fragments, maybe a year per event would have been reasonable. First big disaster: age 16—fallibility of the parental units. Second big disaster: age 17—caregiver tragedy. Third big disaster: age 18—loved and lost. Fourth big disaster: age 19—best friends . . . how should I put this? . . . best friends spin off . . .? Give me four years to do all that and I'd be twenty years old and ready to hit the adult world, tough and calculated.

I've got five minutes to hit the road, tough and traffic-savvy. I wring the water out of my red bandana and hang it from the back of my hat. Keeps the mosquitoes and deerflies off the back of my neck. I run my hand across my jaw line, feeling my new beard. I stopped shaving during final exams, which annoyed my mother. For a few weeks my beard didn't look too promising because of the sparse patches, but the hair around them has more or less grown over and filled it all in.

My friend Devon peers over top of me into the tiny mirror by the washbasin and I see him rubbing his jaw line, too. "Hey, Walker, I'm giving up the project."

"You'll be deer-fly bait." We're working as flaggers on a road construction crew located near the top of Mudd Mountain this summer. Good and boring. Just what I need.

"But look at this yellow fuzz!" Devon is blonde, so his beard isn't as dramatic as my dark one.

"Give it another week."

"It itches."

"Yeah, but not as bad as deer-fly bites."

"Okay, one more week. Where'd I put my STOP sign?"

I hand it to him. "Which end do you want?"

"Doesn't matter. You took the hike yesterday, so I'll take it today." He whacks me with his sign like it's a tennis racket.

I'm standing in front of a line of cars, a STOP sign in my hand, watching them pile up. Devon signals me on his two-way radio a quarter of a mile up the mountain that he's stopping his traffic flow, so I watch for the last vehicle to come through. Girl in a red sports car slowing down. She rolls down her window and smiles at me. I just stare at her wondering what she wants until

she drives off. I signal Devon that I'm sending my line of vehicles through and does he know the girl in the red sports car? He doesn't, but he thinks she's pretty cute. I do, too.

We trade lines of traffic like that for a few hours. It's so perfectly boring that I love it. Devon and I have been friends for so many years that we practically think alike, so I don't ever have to second-guess him. Which means I can stand here and let the mountain sun beat down on me and not feel a thing inside. Exactly what I want.

I see it coming up the mountain from a mile away. It's this massive yellow Hummer. I'm trying to figure out if there's any way to keep some cars in front of him, but there isn't. He's got the road to himself and Devon's line of traffic has already started coming through. I hate this guy in the Hummer. He acts like my steel-toed boots are the stop line. It's not like I can give him a ticket for stopping two inches from my toes. I'm powerless and I know he gloats over it. I try to glare straight into his eyeballs through the front windshield, but he's looking off into the forest with a phone to his ear. I don't exist as far as he's concerned. I send the Hummer on through, glad when he's gone.

Nothing much happening on the mountain. I flex my knees and whip my arms around to ward off boredom. I study the trees and try to count the chipmunks chasing each other, except I'm probably counting them five times over. Then I run in and out of a line of orange barrels like I'm doing a giant slalom. Feels good. I call Devon on our ancient two-way technology. He doesn't have any traffic piled up either. A big forestry truck rumbles onto the road below me, and lumbers on down the mountain.

I try to keep my mind in neutral, but pretty soon I'm wondering if my dad would recognize his working-class son, the clothes, the beard. Haven't seen my parents all summer. They call pretty regularly, though. I'm the same height as my dad, I have the same cheekbones as his (but my mom's eyes), same dark curly hair as him, same shirt size, same . . . well . . . I'm wearing steel-toed boots and he's never owned a pair in his life. And last winter I learned that I don't think like my dad, either.

When he first brought up his vision of the ideal summer job for me, I told him no. That's not how I said it, to begin with, at least. I try to be diplomatic where I can. But I did say no. For two months I said no thanks every time he described his plans. Every time he asked me if I wouldn't rather be working at a job with a future, getting to know how a law office—his—works, I said, "Thanks for the offer, Dad. No." When he put on his scare-ya-ta-hell lawyer voice, I didn't back

down. I stayed even and quiet and said *no thanks* for about the hundredth time. When he finally got it, when he finally heard me, it took him a few weeks to re-group and I could see him doing the internal work of it. He came out of it by telling me about a road construction company that was hiring a summer crew. Even gave me some names, which I appreciated.

To be honest, it still surprises me when I disagree with him. I'm not like Howie, my other close friend, who says the opposite of whatever his dad has just said. It grew into a habit with them and they hated each other for it. With my dad and me, it crept up on us kind of slowly. He was my North Star through the murky world of middle school. I used to believe my dad was dead-on when it came to people, moral obligations, right/wrong, seeing things through, getting to the bottom of an issue—all that kind of stuff. But I've learned you can get to the same right places from different directions.

This summer I needed distance. From him. From my friend Howie. After everything that happened last spring, I wanted to take some time off from life. I can't tell you how hard I wished for a way to sort of float for a while and not think or feel. Being a flagger for a road crew on the top of a mountain is pretty close to it. I'd have disappeared if I could, but not the way Howie did. Devon and I promised each other, never that way.