

SUMMER'S END

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ONE

June 30

The red cardinal whistled a panicked, pained song. Its wings twitched frantically in the air. The rest of its body lay broken in the dirt, statue still. Its eyes, though. Its eyes — black like tar — were wide open, startled, very much alive. Jacob couldn't peel his own eyes away. The cardinal's gaze was pinned on the four friends — giants towering over the small, dying bird — who ringed it in the woods.

They'd come across the bird as they walked aimlessly through the forest behind Jacob's house, killing time and avoiding grown-ups on the first day of their summer vacation. When they had first set out, their conversation easily shifting from baseball to movies to superheroes, their moods were light and carefree. But now, knowing what they must do to end the bird's suffering, their moods had darkened like a storm cloud.

Hayden picked up a jagged rock the size of a human skull and handed it to Ichiro. "You do it."

"Chicken," Hayden's twin sister, Hannah, said. She punched him lightly on the arm.

“Am not,” said Hayden, rubbing his arm gingerly. “And also, ow!”

Hannah tucked her thumbs under her armpits and flapped her arms like wings. “*Bawk, bawk, bawk-bawk-bawk,*” she said.

Hayden sighed but didn’t say or do anything in response. Since he wasn’t putting up a fight, Hannah slowly stopped her chicken imitation, and their focus shifted back to the dying bird and the rock in Ichiro’s hand.

Ichiro turned it over and studied its surface, then raised it above his head. For a moment Jacob thought he was actually about to do it. But instead of striking, he lowered the rock slowly.

“No,” Ichiro said. “Jake should do it.”

“Why?” Jacob asked.

“You’re the oldest.”

It was true, by two months. A short amount of time that made a world of difference to the three younger friends.

Jacob’s birthday was in January, and the twins were born in March of the same year. They were fourteen, but Ichiro’s fourteenth birthday was still five months away.

Jacob knew growing up had its advantages. Adults trusted him to be on his own more often. He got to stay

up a little later, watch scarier movies. But it also had its drawbacks — more chores, the expectation that he act more mature, being handed a rock.

He took the rock from Ichiro. It was heavier than he expected. It slipped a little in Jacob's fingers, but he managed to get a hold of it before it fell completely from his grasp. He didn't look at his friends, afraid someone might be suppressing a smirk.

A cloud passed overhead and blocked the sun, giving the forest a grey, sluggish aura. A light breeze blew Jacob's hair and chilled the back of his neck. The cool air was welcome and refreshing. The town of Valeton was bracing for a scorcher of a summer. One for the record books. And with the heat would come the storms.

With his free hand Jacob brushed a strand of hair out of his eyes. He looked down on the cardinal. Its wings hadn't stopped twitching.

A string of muscles in Jacob's gut clenched. He tried not to think of the breakfast he'd eaten. He also tried not to think of the bird more than he had to, but that proved to be impossible. He hoped it wasn't a baby, just small. Maybe that would make killing it easier, somehow. Like swatting a mosquito or stepping on an ant. No one hesitates to kill an insect. Why should this be any different? Plus it was a mercy kill, the right thing to do. Leaving the cardinal — baby or not — to die slowly

and painfully would be cruel.

So why did it feel so wrong?

A shadow passed between two large trees, about fifteen metres behind Ichiro and the twins. He could have sworn it looked like a boy wearing a red ball cap.

“What are you looking at?” Ichiro asked. He turned around and scanned the woods.

Jacob shrugged. “I don’t know. Nothing, I guess,” he said weakly, but he couldn’t help wondering.

A boy in a red hat. Could it actually have been . . . ? Jacob shook his head. *No, impossible. It’s been four years.* And the longer Jacob stared through the woods without seeing anything, the more he began to doubt he’d seen anything at all.

“It was probably just my imagination,” he mumbled.

“Jacob,” Hannah said, with an edge of urgency but not without kindness, snapping him out of his thoughts. She could switch from sarcasm to sincerity as quickly as a darkened room suddenly lit with golden light. “The bird. It’s . . . It’s time.”

Jacob peeled his sight away from the distant trees and nodded. With a muffled grunt and a clenched jaw, Jacob raised the rock above his head. The forest grew unnaturally quiet, as if the wind and the trees were holding a collective breath. In the sudden silence, the cardinal’s panicked whistles were amplified, piercing

Jacob's skull with each rapid trill.

Jacob sighed. He lowered the rock and closed his eyes. "I can't," he whispered.

Without warning someone pulled the rock from his hand. He opened his eyes and saw Hannah, her face as hard as the rock she now held. She cupped it between both hands, high in the air. In a flash she drove it down. It sank a good depth into the soft forest floor, burying the cardinal's crushed body beneath it.

Its left wing — the only part of the bird they could still see — went ramrod straight and then fell limp.

Time passed — a lot or a little, Jacob couldn't say — before he remembered to breathe again. No one spoke. The wind picked up once more, and the leaves rustled their familiar tune. A woodpecker tapped a tree trunk somewhere nearby.

The stone jutted out of the dirt like a tombstone. Jacob pictured himself and his friends dressed in black, someone reciting the Lord's Prayer. With this image in mind he had to suppress a nervous laugh.

Hayden broke the silence. "Hannah, what was that?"

She shrugged. "Someone had to do it. I got tired of waiting."

The three boys couldn't argue with that. Killing the cardinal had to be done, and none of them had been able to do it.

She bent before the rock as if kneeling to pray and yanked it free from the earth.

Ichiro groaned in disgust and Jacob flinched. He quickly looked away. The cardinal's body had been flattened. Blood pooled in tiny pockets of dirt. A small twist of intestine had ruptured through its breast.

Hannah tossed the rock aside. A small red feather was stuck to it. She kicked some dirt over the bird and stared at the forest floor, her expression unreadable.

Jacob had no idea what she was thinking. Nor was he sure he wanted to know.

Hannah's face softened. She even smiled. "C'mon. Let's get out of here and go swimming." She said it as casually as someone who hadn't just crushed a bird with a rock and her own hands. Without waiting for the others to respond, she walked along the path to the country road and the town limit sign where they'd left their bikes.

Jacob's eyes fell back to the thin layer of dirt that failed to fully cover the crushed bird. He groaned and quickly looked away from the gore.

"Well . . ." Ichiro said. After a few silent moments, it became evident whatever else he had planned to say was going to remain unsaid. But Jacob had a good guess what Ichiro and Hayden were thinking. Same thing as him.

It was no surprise that it had fallen to Hannah to kill the cardinal. Jacob had been friends with the twins nearly his entire life. Their house was around the corner from his. They'd been in a few scraps with other kids over the years and Hannah had always held her own. Often, she walked away from fights with fewer bruises and scrapes than anyone, boy or girl. She was tough, both of body and mind.

The grey cloud overhead rolled on, and sunlight once again fell heavily on their shoulders. The air was humid, thick with the earthy smells of an old, cold forest entering a heat wave.

Beads of sweat prickled Hayden's forehead and dripped into his eyes. He wiped his skin and said, "Hannah's got the right idea. Let's go to the beach." The plan sounded good to Jacob too.

They walked quietly, leaving the dead cardinal behind. Their final summer before they split up to go to different high schools lay ahead. The twins were going to Robert Koch Secondary School, while Jacob was going to Valeton's only other public school — Valeton High, which was on the other side of town. Ichiro wasn't only going to a different school — he was moving to a different country. The Miyazakis were leaving for Japan on the third of September, a few days before the start of the school year. Summer break was Jacob's

favourite time of year, but this one, he knew, would be bittersweet.

Hannah had already started pedalling away down the road, zigzagging side to side in a carefree manner. Ichiro and Hayden started biking to catch up, leaving Jacob alone for a moment. His bike was leaning against the town sign, which he read for the umpteenth time in his life.

Welcome to VALETON

Touched by the Past, Embraced by the Future

Population 16,600

Please Keep Our Children Safe

Years ago, someone had spray-painted a line through the word *safe*. Whoever had defaced the sign had done so hastily, and the red paint had run down the sign before it had dried. It was only the previous year that Jacob had finally understood the joke: Please keep our children. Period. And don't bother bringing them back.

Jacob hated that sign, especially the graffiti. It cut too close to the bone.

He mounted his bike and looked back down the path through the trees, into the woods. A cloud of small flies flew through the air and the leaves swayed in the

breeze, but Jacob didn't see any other movement. The boy in the red hat wasn't there. As Jacob suspected, he probably never had been there — just a figment of his imagination.

That was for the best. The boy in the red hat and what had happened between them was in the past. It was better not to dwell on it. Not to dwell on *him*.

As for the future, it was better not to dwell on it either — even if he had a bad feeling in his gut whenever he thought about starting grade nine. He didn't know what lay around the corner. By summer's end his life would be different, of that Jacob was sure. So for now he would focus on the present.

He snuck a final wary glance over his shoulder, then pedalled hard to catch up with his friends. "Hey, guys. Wait up."

TWO

July 4

Jacob and Ichiro coasted down the long, curving driveway. Tall maple and pine trees blotted out the sun and swayed in the wind, creating a soothing symphony of rustling leaves and creaking wood. The boys came to a skidding stop beside Ichiro's house and leaned their bikes against the garage. A little farther downhill sat the lake, gleaming, lapping, calling them toward it.

Nestled on a gently sloping hill on the north bank of Passage Lake, a twenty-five-minute bike ride from the centre of town and a five-minute ride from Twin Pines Resort, Ichiro's house resembled a castle of cement and glass in the woods. Mrs. Miyazaki had a senior management job at the resort, but she had recently accepted a new job in Japan. Ichiro's parents were both from Tokyo and they had long seemed eager for an excuse to return home. Jacob knew Ichiro was dreading moving in September by the way he refused to look at the *sold* sign on the front lawn every time they passed it.

Jacob left his bike behind and headed for the front door.

"Hey, Jake, hold up," Ichiro said. "We're not going

inside.” Without further explanation he turned and walked to a wooded path. Curious, Jacob followed.

The forest floor was covered by a blanket of brown pine needles that crackled underfoot. The twisty path was like a narrow artery choked on both sides by dense green foliage. The air vibrated with the buzz of insects. Jacob swatted a mosquito on his neck, leaving a small smear of blood on his skin, and stepped over a tree root. The path opened into a clearing. In the middle stood a fairly large wooden shed with two doors, sealed by a silver padlock.

“You want to take *Old Kablooey* out on the lake for a paddle?” Jacob asked, guessing why Ichiro had led him to the shed where Mr. Miyazaki’s canoe was stored. It was a beat-up blue canoe that had seen better days. Ichiro’s father had dubbed it *Old Bluey*. The first time he heard it, Jacob thought Mr. Miyazaki had said *Old Kablooey* and the accidental new name was so fitting that it stuck.

“Yes and no,” Ichiro said cryptically. “I have something to show you.” He pulled a key out of his pocket, unlocked the doors and swung them open. A little light fell into the shed. They stepped inside. The air was thick and musty. Slowly, Jacob’s eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Every shelf, every corner, every nook and cranny was

packed with *stuff*. Gardening stuff, home repair stuff and, best of all, fun stuff: lawn darts and horseshoes and croquet mallets, inflatable rafts and beach balls and water guns. And in the middle of the floor was *Old Kablooy*. Jacob thought that was odd because they had suspended it from the ceiling rafters the last time they had gone canoeing, just a few days before.

And then he saw something that made him forget everything else. It was hanging in *Old Kablooy*'s spot. A gorgeous, brand-new red canoe. Jacob walked over to it and ran his hand along the starboard gunwale. The craft was sleek, expertly made and could seat four with room to spare.

"Happy Independence Day!" Ichiro said, spreading his arms and grinning widely.

"We're not American," Jacob pointed out dryly.

"True, but let's not let that stop us from celebrating. My dad bought it yesterday."

"But you're moving in, like, two months."

"Yeah," Ichiro said. "He knows I'm not happy about it. I guess he feels bad. Mom was pretty angry when he brought it home, but we can probably sell it for some decent cash before we move, so she agreed to let me keep it."

Jacob allowed his eyes to continue feasting on the red canoe and whistled. "This is so much nicer than *Old*

Kablooey.” He looked at the sad, battered blue canoe as if it were a pitiful living thing and added, “No offence.”

Ichiro laughed. “I haven’t put it in the water yet. I thought I’d wait for you.”

Jacob answered by flipping a bucket upside down and stepping on it to unlatch one of the cords that strung the canoe to the roof. Ichiro took care of the other side. The canoe was surprisingly light. They lowered it to the ground and tossed a couple of paddles and life jackets in its hull.

The boys carried it by the handholds down the hill to the edge of the lake and slid it into the water. The red paint cast a crimson reflection like a bloodstain around the canoe. They put on their life jackets, climbed in and sat in silence for a moment, relishing the gentle rocking of the boat and the sound of waves lapping against its sides.

“Where to?” Ichiro asked.

“Anywhere,” Jacob said. That was the beauty of it. Thanks to its horrible condition, they had been too afraid to take *Old Kablooey* far from Ichiro’s house. This new canoe equalled freedom. They could go anywhere. It was the beginning of summer vacation, they had no responsibilities and it didn’t matter where they went or what they did. Fun was guaranteed.

“Aye, aye,” Ichiro said. “*Scarlet Sails* is setting out for

adventure. Destination: unknown.”

“You named the canoe *Scarlet Sails*?”

“I did.”

“Even though canoes don’t have sails?”

“I never said it was a good name.”

“What are you, three years old?”

“Hey, man, I’m not the only one who gives stuff lame names. I know you called your teddy bear Mr. Jingles.”

“Yeah,” Jacob said, “when I was *three*.”

“But you still sleep with Mr. Jingles, don’t you?”

Jacob chose to ignore that comment and directed the conversation back to *Scarlet Sails*. “Well, it could’ve been worse. You could’ve named the canoe *Emerald Engine*. Or *Purple Propeller*.”

“Don’t be dumb. I might not be a boat expert, but I know colours.”

Jacob laughed and dipped his paddle into the water with a satisfying splash. They pushed off the shore and cut into Passage Lake. Their strokes fell into a rhythm and they picked up speed quickly. The golden sun beat warmly on their backs as they passed million-dollar summer homes. Some were owned by movie stars and pro athletes who vacationed in Muskoka, but most were owned by wealthy business people. A speedboat rumbled past, pulling a water skier who waved at the boys. They waved back.

Time dipped and dived with their paddles, leading around bends, past bays, through creeks, taking them deeper into Passage Lake and farther from home. A multitude of small rocky islands dotted the water, some home to cottages, some too small to fit more than a tent.

Ichiro pulled his paddle out of the water and Jacob followed his lead. They hadn't taken a break for a long time and his muscles burned. It was a good feeling.

"Would you rather fight one hundred duck-sized horses," Ichiro asked, "or one horse-sized duck?"

"What?" Jacob shook his head and wondered if he'd heard his friend correctly.

"It's a very simple question," Ichiro said with mock restraint. "One hundred duck-sized horses or one horse-sized duck. Who would you rather fight? You know, to the death?"

So Jacob *had* heard Ichiro correctly. He shrugged his shoulders, gave the question a little thought, and then dived right in. "Do I have any magical or super powers?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I'm fighting ducks or horses that have swapped sizes. I'm assuming this battle isn't taking place in the world as we know it."

Ichiro considered Jacob's question. "No powers. It's hand-to-hand combat. Or, well, hand-to-hoof-or-webbed-foot combat."

“Do I have to fight the one hundred horses at the same time, or one after the other?”

“Why would they line up and wait their turn? The horses might be miniature, but they’re not idiots. They’re coming at you all at once.”

“All right,” Jacob said with a nod. “I’ll fight the horses. What are they going to do, run over my toes until I give in? A giant duck, on the other hand, has a giant beak. One hundred duck-sized horses — that’s the correct answer.”

“There’s no right or wrong answer,” Ichiro said. “But yeah, the horses are totally correct. Only a crazy person would pick the horse-sized duck. What about this? If you could be any of the X-Men, who would you be?”

Jacob considered the new question for a moment, but Ichiro answered first, as if he’d asked it more to make a statement than to hear Jacob’s answer.

“I’d be Wolverine so I could heal myself. And so I could make claws jut out of my hands.” He made a fist and ran a finger over his knuckles. “What about you?”

“Healing and claws would be cool,” Jacob said, nodding and staring at the shore across the water. “But I’d be Professor X.”

“Professor X? Why? Mind reading?”

“No. Not for his powers. Because he starts a school to protect other mutants and makes new friends, like a family.”

“You have friends. And family,” Ichiro said. “Your mother.”

“I love my mom, but it’s just the two of us and she works a lot.”

Ichiro nodded sympathetically. “Well, we can hang out all summer long.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate that. I just want to play baseball, ride our bikes around town and canoe.”

“That sounds awesome.” Ichiro smiled with a far-away look in his eyes. “I want to make the most of this summer too, you know? I’m not exactly jumping for joy at the thought of moving. Just because my parents are from Japan doesn’t mean it’s going to be easy for me. I’ve never been there. Everything looks completely different from Canada, and I mean everything. I don’t even speak much Japanese. What if I ask for some chocolate ice cream in a restaurant and accidentally order octopus ice cream?”

“Octopus ice cream? You made that up.”

“Did not! I saw it on YouTube! This guy did a video review and ate, like, half a tub of the stuff. I’m not even kidding.” Ichiro pretended to vomit and they laughed together.

“Look, I get it,” Jacob said. “You’re worried next year is going to suck. I’m worried too. So let’s make sure this is an epic summer. One we’ll never forget. Deal?”

“Yeah, man. Deal.” Ichiro turned his gaze and scanned the shores of the lake. There was a marsh, nearly hidden by the overgrowth of large trees and wild bushes, not too far from where they sat. “How about we check out what’s down that way and then head home?”

“Sure,” Jacob said. “No time like the present to start our epic summer.”

They began to paddle again and the canoe slowly picked up a little speed. Their wake was an ever-widening V, tiny ripples of water that rolled to shore. Small cottages — the type that have curtains for bedroom walls, creaky floorboards and sinks with hand pumps — surrounded this part of the lake, packed tightly together. But they petered out the closer the boys got to the marsh. There must have been more than fifty metres between the last cottage and the waterway’s opening, which was odd. There was plenty of room for another two or three small summer dwellings there.

Somewhere across the lake an owl hooted, and the sound carried clean across the water as if the bird was right beside them.

Hoot. Hoot. Hoot.

Hoo—

The bird’s call died abruptly as Jacob steered the canoe into the marsh, and there were no other sounds of

life. Craggy trees and plants grew wild in tangled walls on both sides of the marsh, so thick and twisted that very little sunlight passed through. Everything was dark green, brown and black. The canoe's colour was so bright in comparison to the overgrowth that it seemed unnaturally red.

They passed a row of rotten wooden posts that jutted out of the murky water. It looked to Jacob like the submerged skeleton of a drowned sea monster left to decompose in this watery wasteland where time seemed to slow to a crawl.

"Make me a promise, Jake," Ichiro said. His voice echoed back.

"Sure, what?"

"If I get eaten by the Kalapik, tell my parents I love them. Then delete my computer's browsing history."

Jacob laughed. "There's no such thing as the Kalapik."

"Yeah, I know. But if he did exist, this is where he'd live."

In his mind, Jacob was suddenly a six-year-old boy again, being tucked in at night by his mother. She reached for the switch on his bedside lamp and hesitated. "You know what you did today was wrong, right, Jake?"

Young Jacob pulled his bedsheet up to his chin and nodded.

“I was so scared. I thought I’d lost you.” Tears welled in her eyes. She nearly stopped talking, and then continued. “I thought the Kalapik had gotten you.”

A shiver spread through Jacob’s body. “What’s the Kalapik?”

His mother sighed. “A monster with green skin, black eyes, long hair and claws for fingernails. It lives at the bottom of the lake and steals children who disobey their parents, and then keeps them forever. You must never, ever go swimming alone again. Do you hear me?”

He burst out crying and clenched his mother’s arm and promised never to go in the lake without her again. He pleaded with her to leave the light on and stay all night in his room, in his bed, right beside him, so the Kalapik wouldn’t take him away.

He soon discovered that other parents had also warned kids at his school not to go swimming or boating alone lest the Kalapik drag them down to the bottom of the lake. And a few years later, when Jacob was ten, a classmate named Colton disappeared. A search party combed the woods, and the police dragged the bottom of every lake within a thirty kilometre radius of Valeton, but the boy’s body was never discovered. Although most kids in Jacob’s class were too old to believe that there was a monster at the bottom of one

of Valetton's lakes, it didn't take long for a rumour to spread through the school that Colton's paddleboat was found adrift somewhere in the lake and he was the Kalapik's latest victim.

That was ridiculous, of course. As Jacob grew older he realized that the town's adults used the legend of the Kalapik as a scare tactic, a way of keeping their young children out of the water unsupervised. A young kid swimming in the lake alone could drown. A young kid too scared of a monster to dip a single toe in the water could not.

"Don't you think, Jake?" Ichiro asked, a hint of annoyance creeping into his tone.

The sound of his friend's voice ripped Jacob out of the past and back to the present, back to the red canoe, back to the dark marsh. "Don't I think what?"

"That this looks like it could be where the Kalapik lives?"

"Oh, um," Jacob said, as he straightened his back and cleared his throat. "Yeah, I guess it does." He didn't want to talk about the Kalapik any longer. He'd managed to keep the creature, and Colton, out of his thoughts for a few years, and he'd rather keep it that way. Luckily, he spotted something that allowed him to change the subject.

"Look up ahead," Jacob said.

The marsh opened up into a larger body of water, allowing sunlight to pass through once again. They paddled into the open water and took in their new surroundings. The water was clean and calm, ideal for swimming, and the trees were tall and lush. There was even a rocky cliff, ten metres tall, on the far shore, both scenic and perfect for cliff jumping. And yet there wasn't a single cottage or home anywhere to be seen. It was as if they'd paddled into a separate lake forgotten by time, an undiscovered body of water. Like *early explorers*, Jacob thought.

"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore," Ichiro said. "This must be a different lake, right? This is even nicer than Passage Lake."

Jacob searched his memory, recalling a map of the area he'd studied before. "Yeah, I think it's called . . . Seppu . . . Seppuk . . . oh, I remember. Sepequoi Lake."

The lake and surrounding woods were silent, and the splash of their paddles sounded muffled. Jacob rubbed his ears. They felt like they were under tremendous pressure.

Ichiro rubbed his ears too. "You feel that?" he asked.

"Yes. What's causing it?"

"Dunno."

As they rubbed their ears and talked about the odd sensation, it slowly dissipated. The water gently lapping against the side of the canoe suddenly sounded

louder than usual. It seemed to play a quiet and soothing melody. *Splish-splish splash. Splish-splish splash. Splish-splish splash splash, splash-splash-splash.*

Sitting in the dead centre of the water was a single solitary island. It was choked with dark trees that concealed what lay at its centre. Grey rock with streaks of red minerals ringed the island's shore.

They began to paddle again and travelled the rest of the distance to the island in silence. It didn't look too far away, but perhaps by optical illusion, the island appeared to retreat as they neared it. Ash-grey clouds stretched across the sky like a veil.

Then, as if time had skipped a beat, the island suddenly loomed before them, its tall pines towering overhead. Without wind to bend their branches, the trees stood still as statues.

The canoe bumped gently against the rock and slowly twisted to sit parallel with the shore.

"I have a strange feeling about this place," Jacob said, trying to look through the trees but seeing only darkness.

"Me too," Ichiro said.

"Do you want to head back home?"

"Are you kidding me?" Ichiro smiled. "This island is weird and, yeah, I'll admit it, a little creepy. There's no way I'm going home before we check it out!"

Jacob returned the smile. “Good. Me too.”

He picked up the rope and looked for a low-hanging branch sturdy enough to secure the canoe.

“Wait,” Ichiro said. He pointed over Jacob’s shoulder.

There, not too far away, was a dock. It was old and beaten but solid enough to hold their craft in calm waters.

How did we not see that before? Jacob asked himself. They paddled over and Jacob hopped out. He tied the rope to a cleat and helped Ichiro onto the dock. The wood shifted and groaned beneath their weight. The boys walked to land before the dock decided it didn’t want to hold them any longer.

A thin path cut a dark hole through the woods. It looked like it had once been wide enough for a truck to pass through, but the bush had reclaimed it over time. Now it appeared to be used only by passing wildlife.

Jacob felt something pulling him forward, daring him to look.

For such a quiet, isolated island, there was a ton of energy in the air. It made it hard to focus, difficult to think. The small tendrils of an oncoming headache worked their way into the extremities of Jacob’s brain. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

“Hey, look.” Ichiro, oblivious to Jacob’s discomfort, pointed above their heads. A piece of rusted metal

peeked out from behind a few branches. It was curved and shaped into an intricate lacework. A single word could be seen through the leaves:

END

Jacob grabbed a branch and bent it so they could read the rest of the sign. The branch snapped immediately and he dropped it to the ground. It looked healthy on the outside but the centre of the branch was black and decaying. It looked like a broken bone with rotten marrow at its core. The tree was dying slowly from the inside out. *Heart rot*, Jacob knew. A fungal disease. But he thought it only affected old trees, not trees so small and young.

He could now read the rest of the sign:

SUMMER'S END

"It's a gate," Ichiro said.

"On an island. In the middle of nowhere. What is this place?"

"No idea."

Jacob shrugged. "Let's find out."

The air was hotter and heavier the farther inland they walked. It wasn't altogether unpleasant, and

smelled of moss and summer berries. Jacob saw plenty of moss — it coated the floor like a spongy green carpet — but there were no berries.

“You know what’s weird?” Ichiro asked, as they ducked under branches and twisted their bodies through the overgrowth.

Plenty, Jacob thought. *Plenty’s weird about this island.* “What?”

“I haven’t been bitten by a single mosquito. Haven’t even had to swat one away.”

Bush this dense, that was weird.

They carried on toward the centre of the island in silence.

Another few steps and the path suddenly ended, widening to reveal a large clearing. A crushed stone walkway led to the front door of a large house.

Jacob’s headache began to fade.

The house sat at the far side of the clearing, surrounded by trees and tangled bushes. Against the backdrop of the grey sky, its red-brick chimney looked out of place — the only splash of colour on the black and grey house. The lack of colour made the house look like a dead thing, a pile of bones stripped clean of flesh by time and sun and rain. The sloped roof and a large bay window above the front door gave the old building a hunched look. A dormer window juttled out of

the second floor. When Jacob looked away he thought he saw a flash of movement in the window out of the corner of his eye, but when he looked again there was nothing there. The house's face was scarred by cracks in its rotting wooden boards, and most of the first-floor windows were dirty and shuttered. The porch was caked in mud, but the front door appeared to be in surprisingly good shape.

On a rusty pole beside the house, in a flower bed overgrown by weeds, was a wrought-iron sign that was a twin to the one they'd seen near the dock:

SUMMER'S END

"So this is Summer's End," Ichiro said. "What do you think has better odds: That a serial killer lives here or a crazy old cat lady?"

"For our sake, I hope neither," Jacob responded. "Have you ever seen a place like this?"

Ichiro shook his head.

"It looks like it hasn't been lived in for decades."

"No kidding," Ichiro said. "The serial killer cat lady should spend a little time fixing the joint up."

Jacob's laughter was genuine but contained a shred of nervousness. "Let me guess: you want to look inside."

"I want to look inside," Ichiro said.

“So do I.” He looked at his watch. It was a couple of minutes past six o’clock. His mother had picked up an extra shift at The Hot Plate and wouldn’t be home until late, but Jacob didn’t want to still be on the lake when it started getting dark. “Five minutes. Then we should head back.”

“Sure.” As they crossed the clearing, Ichiro pointed to a crumbling stone well covered in moss and vines. “That’s where I’d dump the body parts. You know, if I was a serial killer — with twenty-nine cats.”

The front steps sagged as they walked on them. After a brief moment of hesitation, he found the courage to knock on the front door. The sound echoed across the clearing. They listened for the sound of footsteps on the other side of the door, but heard nothing but the wind behind their backs. Jacob gripped the door handle but pulled his hand back immediately.

“What is it?” Ichiro asked.

“It’s cold.” He tentatively grabbed the handle once more. The thick door was fastened to its frame with large iron hinges. It was so heavy that Jacob had to push it open with his shoulder, but it swung open without a sound.

Shafts of light streamed into the front entrance through the open door.

“He-hello?” Jacob called out. He hoped Ichiro wouldn’t give him a hard time later about his voice cracking. “Is anyone here?”

No one answered.

Dust painted every surface. Tangled strands of cobweb clung to the ceiling. A long, narrow hallway was dissected by four closed doors, concealing whatever lay in wait behind them.

Jacob began to picture an assortment of horrors hiding behind each of the doors. He’d watched too many horror movies, read too many Stephen King books, and his imagination was making things worse than they were. This was just an old house that hadn’t been lived in for years. Nothing else.

“All right,” he said, “I’ve seen enough for now. We can go.”

Ichiro nodded distractedly. His gaze had fallen on a small table near the front door. A snow globe with a boy and a girl building a snowman caught his attention and he picked it up. It played a few chiming notes in his hand, a holdover from the time someone had turned the metal crank long ago. The unexpected music startled Ichiro and he nearly dropped the globe. Jacob flinched and looked around wildly, fearful that the music might awaken something. His imagination, once again getting the better of him. What had he

expected to happen? Some madman to burst through one of the doors with an axe?

Nothing happened. Ichiro placed the globe back down on its circular footprint in the dust.

Beside it was a wooden photo frame with words carved into it:

*Family
Where life begins
and love never ends . . .*

There was a torn piece of glossy paper in the bottom of the frame, as if an old photograph had been quickly removed. Ichiro picked up the frame for a closer look.

Something shiny caught Jacob's eye. "What's that? On the back?"

Ichiro turned the frame over. It was a necklace, taped to the back of the frame. Ichiro peeled the necklace free. The yellowed tape practically disintegrated at his touch. The necklace was silver. Dangling from the thin chain was a pendant in the shape of a capital C. At the tip of the C was a small red gemstone that resembled the mineral that was embedded in the rocky shoreline of the island.

It twirled hypnotically as Jacob wondered who it might have belonged to and why they had hidden it in the front hall.

Before he had time to figure it out, a shadow passed over the wall at the end of the hall. The pitter-patter of small, bare feet echoed through the house. A medicinal smell seeped into the air.

“What was that?” Jacob whispered urgently. His body seized up.

“I don’t know,” Ichiro said. “Let’s get out of here.” The necklace slipped from his fingers, clattered to the floor and slid under the table, but the sound fell on deaf ears.

The boys turned and ran out of the house. Without pausing to shut the front door, they sprinted past the sign, past the well and across the clearing. At the edge of the woods they stopped and looked back.

Time stood still. A cool wind swept through the trees, bending the grass and making the ground look like a rolling wave. The surrounding trees rustled impatiently. Jacob took his first breath since they’d fled. He stared at the open door with wide eyes.

Something moved inside. He grabbed Ichiro’s arm and prepared to run again, but then the something hopped out of the door, down the front steps and landed gently in the grass.

It was a rabbit. It stood up on its back legs and looked in their direction, its nose twitching and its straight ears swivelling side to side. After a moment it hopped away into the woods.

Jacob and Ichiro burst out laughing, and their bodies shook for the better part of a minute. Jacob punched Ichiro playfully on the arm and Ichiro hit him back. They turned and headed back to the canoe.

“I knew it was a bunny all along,” Ichiro said.

“Liar! I saw your face. You were as scared as I was.”

“Okay, fine. The bunny freaked me out.” Ichiro brushed a low-hanging branch of pine needles out of the way as they walked.

As they neared the water, away from the heart of the island, away from the house, Jacob’s feet felt heavier. Like his shoes were full of water. As if something was trying to keep him there.

The world was a silhouette, the trees nothing but black shadows and outlines against the blazing summer sky. The canoe banged gently against the side of the dock.

As they paddled out into the sparkling golden lake, Jacob said, “This island is pretty cool.”

Ichiro turned around to face Jacob. “Yeah. I’m going to my aunt’s tomorrow, but let’s come back soon. This could be our summer hangout. I think there’s a lot more to see. What do you think?”

“I don’t think I could stay away if I wanted to,” Jacob said.

For some reason he couldn’t quite explain, he

instantly felt a twinge of doubt and anxiety. He shook it off and dipped his paddle into the calm water.

Before them, the sun lit their route home. Behind, whorls of mist drifted off the lake's surface and encircled the island, wrapping it in fog.