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– Kate Allen, author of *The Line Tender*

LOON COVE SUMMER

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ALSO BY DONNA GALANTI

Joshua and the Lightning Road
Joshua and the Arrow Realm
Unicorn Island
Unicorn Island: Secret Beneath the Sand
Unicorn Island: Beyond the Portal

FOR ADULTS:

A Human Element
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PRAISE FOR *LOON COVE SUMMER*

"A warm-hearted novel, *Loon Cove Summer* shows how being open to new possibilities and connections can be a powerful remedy for grief. Readers will love the multi-generational cast of characters, all residents of the lakeside campground that 13-year-old Sarah's family struggles to keep afloat. Maine provides a rich setting for this charming novel that balances profound loss with humor and hope."

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"*Loon Cove Summer* is a page-turning read set in the wilds of Maine offering an intimate look into a 13-year-old girl as she navigates the loss of her mother and her father's subsequent depression."

– PAUL GRECI,
author of *Surviving Bear Island*

"In this unique and memorable setting, Galanti's lyrical prose and skillful balancing of humor and grief will make you feel like you've just spent a summer at sleepaway camp with close friends. The cast of unforgettable characters and tender relationships stay with you, making *Loon Cove Summer* the perfect beach—or campground—read for any young person searching for meaning and adventure in their own world of firsts."

– JESSICA RINKER,
author of *The Dare Sisters*

For all the "only children"
out there seeking a dream to
share with those they love.

CHAPTER 1

"In every fiber of my being, I felt the urge to travel and be one with nature. And at last, my journey began! I did not dread this strange new world filled with mystery and adventure—I yearned for it; I welcomed it."

— Cecilia Richardson, *Tales from the Trail*

My first Monday of summer vacation was a total fail. It did *not* include sleeping in, biking around town, and a Dilly's double-scoop ice cream cone but instead, involved a smelly trash pickup of cantaloupe peels and leftover hamburgers.

Uncle JuJu chugged along the campground path driving our rusty 1992 Ford truck as I stood in the open bed hanging on to the warped wooden rails. He came to a stop, and I jumped down at the next campsite, grabbed two bags of trash, and threw the stinky clumps high up into the back of the truck. It shuddered from the new weight, already straining with the refuse of summer campers.

I climbed back in the truck and rearranged the bags, so they fit snugly. We didn't need them flying out of this rust-bucket as we cruised down Route 3 to turn into the dump,

right before the sign: You Are Now Leaving Nikuwoss, Maine. Pop. 1,953.

"Onward ho, Sarah?" JuJu asked, peering out of the truck cab. His round face was cheery as usual, his speckled moustache twitching while black flies danced along his white hair.

I batted away the beastly bugs that cursed Maine in June. "Just go!"

JuJu flexed one of his gigantic biceps and threw the old truck into gear. I held on tight as we lurched to the next campsite.

Picking up rotten food was not the highlight of my day.

Making summer happen was. And with my best friend, Gemmi, around she'd make sure of it. Later today, after my volunteer job at Reenie's Raptor Rehab Center, Gemmi and I would officially launch our summer plans. A big one for me included convincing a loon expert to come to Nikuwoss Lake and research why our loons were disappearing. For months, I'd been emailing the University of Maine's Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Conservation Biology Research Unit to send us help. So far, I'd gotten one email back saying that they were limited on resources but would look into it. Sounded pretty lame to me.

"JuJu and Sarah, my sweeties," a familiar voice called. Everyone called JuJu by the name I gave him as a toddler. No one knew his real name. Well, except Dad, and he wasn't telling.

We chorused a hello. Miss Lilabelle's parked trailer was tucked away on the outer loop. Loon Cove Campground included fifteen sites for campers, trailers, and RVs, eighty-five tent campsites, and four cottages on Nikuwoss Lake. Only thirty percent of the sites were full right now, according to JuJu's daily report. The "perms" kept us operating all year long, but summer was the big season. We needed more perms like Miss

Lilabelle. She'd even stayed on after her husband, Gerald, died eight years ago.

She waved to me now from her stoop. Today, a blond swirly wig topped her head. A loud metal grinding struck the air as JuJu shoved the truck's knobby stick into first gear, easing decrepit wheels toward her door.

"Nice choice, Miss Lilabelle," I said. "I haven't seen that wig in a while."

Once an aging way-off-off Broadway star, Miss Lilabelle now sang for the woods and campers—and me.

Her face softened. "Sarah Richardson, you're so sweet. You need to meet a nice young boy. Maybe at that bird center you volunteer at."

"It's a raptor rehabilitation center," I gently corrected her. "And I'm only thirteen."

I'd *almost* kissed a boy a year ago at Amelia Skelly's lake party. But *almosts* didn't count, according to Gemmi.

"Who needs a boy anyway?" I said to Miss Lilabelle, twirling the ends of my scarf-of-the-day, stitched with white daisies against blue-and-yellow checkered silk.

She took my hands. "Oh, Sarah, we all need someone. I miss my Gerald. He kissed me on our first date at the theater." She shook my hands for emphasis. "Oh, what a kiss." She closed her eyes for a moment and pursed her lips.

Blech. Old people kissing.

But I smiled at her and chucked her trash into the back of our battered truck. Aluminum cans, emptied of tuna and chicken noodle soup, clanged together. Campers couldn't hide what they ate from me, Chief Wrangler of Refuse.

I pulled myself back up in the truck bed as Miss Lilabelle handed out her final words of wisdom before we left. "Love

keeps you happy." Then she added in a softer voice. "You need to find *your* happy. Your mother would want you to."

I forced a smile on my face. Yes, Cecilia Richardson had known about being happy. Until the cancer came.

"And we're off!" JuJu spouted. He understood loss. He'd lost his wife, Pim, four years ago. And then his younger sister, my mom, Ceci, this January.

I gave Miss Lilabelle a wave as we creaked and groaned down the rough dirt road toward the campground's outer loop and our house, a sprawling lodge way too big for me, JuJu, and Dad.

I pulled Dad's note from my pocket. He always left his morning notes by the dingy white coffeemaker listing my jobs for the week before hitting the road to his Monday-through-Friday job. These notes were the most conversation we'd had for months, even when he was home. Our silence could fill buckets, overflowing and dumped out each day to be filled up again the next.

He left every Monday because the campground couldn't make us enough money. Since I was nine, Dad had tried to make his dream work after giving up his job with an accounting firm. It didn't. So, he'd spent the last two years in a motel during the week, over three hours away in Bangor, to work as an accountant to pay the bills. This left JuJu and me in charge of Dad's dream.

I hadn't wanted to be in charge, but I'd been spying on Dad and JuJu's late-night conversations lately. They whispered words like: *bankruptcy, selling, apartment rental, moving on*. I couldn't lose my home, the raptor rehab center, *and* friends, too. I'd already lost Mom.

In a way, I'd lost Dad, too.

I missed him taking me to Dilly's. We'd gobble our dripping ice cream as we wandered down Main Street, peering in shop windows and making up silly stories about customers.

I missed him taking me fishing on the lake in our rusty boat. We mostly cruised past fancy lake houses, imagining our own. Dad wanted one with a bowling alley. I insisted on a trampoline room.

I missed his hugs.

But all that had stopped after Mom died.

I pushed those thoughts away and focused on Dad's neat, tiny block handwriting.

Sarah,

Please get the garbage collected with JuJu and to the dump by 9 a.m. The new campers should be here between 11 a.m. and 12 p.m. Stock up the store, and have JuJu check the generator because they're calling for storms this week. Call if you need me.

Love ya bunches kid, Dad

I shoved Dad's note back in my pocket as JuJu reached the Pruitts' site, another of my favorite perms who moved up from the South. We followed the delicious smell of country ham and fried johnny cakes.

Ruby Pruitt waved us over to her grill, a plate in hand. "Morning y'all. Come eat!"

We always had time for ham, corn cakes, and the Pruitts' southern hospitality, JuJu said.

"Delicious!" JuJu ate a johnny cake layered with ham and butter in two bites. I mumbled in agreement, my mouth full of the same.

"You two are natural Kentuckians," Ruby said, flipping her cakes. They sizzled, shooting up more heavenly aromas.

Philly, Ruby's eight-year-old daughter, popped her head up from their nearby garden when she heard us. "Ooh, don't go yet!"

She ran into the trailer and came out with a piece of cardstock clutched to her chest and shoved it at me with a missing-tooth grin. A crooked watercolor sunflower waved in bright green grass.

"Another one for your collection." So, I could "plant" a whole field, in her words.

I smiled back at her. "I love it."

JuJu and I said goodbye as I wiped sweat off my neck. It was only eight a.m., and this historically hot second Monday in June promised to be full of annoyances. Like explaining to the Saxby twins about why we didn't have chocolate Pop-Tarts in the camp store, cleaning pine needles out of the pool, and registering new campers. And we still had twelve sites of garbage to collect and take to the dump. I'd rather be volunteering to clean bird poop at Reenie's Raptor Rehab Center. At least there I got to visit with hawks, eagles, and owls—not black flies.

We rumbled down to our next stop: Big Bob's RV. He stooped through the door of his camper, giving us a half-hearted wave. No sign of his grumpy nineteen-year-old daughter, Rachel, who he'd brought here for summer vacation to make things up to her. He hadn't been around much when she was growing up, or since the divorce. Don't guess his plan was working yet because she still hid in the camper, and he looked sad all the time.

After collecting his trash, I handed him his favorite tinfoil bundle from the truck's front seat, still warm.

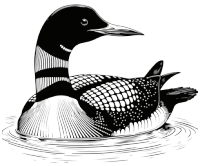
Big Bob towered over me, a rare grin on his face. "Aha, JuJu's famous biscuits."

"Enjoy," JuJu said, happy to spread his love for food with another foodie.

"Thanks. I'll share with Rachel." His grin faded and he headed back into the camper.

Poor Big Bob. He missed his wife.

I understood all about missing someone, but I couldn't help him. I had no idea how to stop doing that either.



CHAPTER 2

Reenie's Raptor Rehab Observations

- ✓ Softened dry dog food can feed nestlings (baby birds).
- ✓ Raptors are birds of prey and have hooked beaks and taloned feet.
- ✓ Peregrine falcons are the fastest creatures on earth. They can dive over 200 mph!
- ✓ Birds poop a lot!

I skidded into the parking lot of Reenie's Raptor Rehab Center, spraying up stones from the gravel road. I locked up my bike in the stand out front. 1:28 p.m. Two minutes before my volunteer shift.

I dashed through the glass doors to the education center, waved at Margo, the receptionist, and ran to the stockroom.

"Where's Reenie?" I asked Tom, our most senior volunteer. He'd been working here since Reenie started this place over forty years ago.

He took a break from restocking fresh bedding linens and jerked a thumb to the left. "In the infirmary, observing a case with Dr. Todd."

"Thanks!" I headed off to the back wing, reaching the double windows to the surgery room. Dr. Todd bent over with his back to me, blocking his patient from view, as Reenie stepped out into the hallway to greet me.

"Sad news, Sarah." Reenie's forehead crinkled. "A resident found a dead loon on Nikuwoss Lake."

"What happened? Is that it?" My words tumbled together as I peered around her.

She shook her head. "The loon preservation center up north picked it up. They'll do a necropsy and let us know how it died."

I'd already learned from Reenie that this was an animal autopsy. I'd seen some done on raptors here.

"We need a loon expert here to help the loons." I slumped.

"Someday, Sarah, it will happen." She turned to the surgery room window. "For now, let's care about the birds we *can* help."

"Is it a raptor?" I strained to see the bird Dr. Todd was working on.

Reenie clasped her hands behind her back with a nod. Most birds that came in were raptors, but we took in all injured birds. This was our busiest time of year between May and August, especially for baby birds. I secretly hoped someday to get a loon. Not that I'd want a loon to be injured, but to care for one up close would be amazing.

"A hawk?"

She shook her head.

We liked to play this guessing game each time a newly injured bird came in.

"Owl?"

She peered down at me over the rims of her glasses. "Yup. But what kind?"

Up to eleven species of owls lived in Maine, depending on the time of year. I named my top one, after my favorite permanent owl resident here, Winky. He'd lost an eye in a car accident and was deemed un-releasable. "Eastern screech owl."

Reenie gave me another hint with a soft hoot.

"A barred owl!"

She laughed. "Good job."

Dr. Todd straightened and moved aside. A brown and white owl lay on its back, the bars displayed on its feathers providing its name. Its black eyes stared at the ceiling.

"Poor thing." Reenie leaned into the glass. "She has a compound fracture in her left wing and also suffers from a blood feather problem. Dr. Todd pinned her wing and gave her medication."

"I wish I could help care for her."

Reenie nodded, securing her long, gray ponytail tighter with its rainbow scrunchy. It was the only bit of color on her aside from her brown khaki shirt and pants. "When you turn eighteen, you can work with the raptors, kiddo, you know that."

I sighed. That was five years away. Right now, the most exciting part of my job as a junior volunteer was to feed the non-raptor baby birds. Nestlings ate *a lot*. Every thirty minutes, twelve hours a day. But *someday* I'd carry an owl on my arm. Feed a bald eagle. Save an injured loon and release it back to its family.

"Can you help Tom feed the nestlings first thing?" Reenie said.

"Totally." Rescued baby songbirds were so cute, begging for food with their featherless little bodies and closed eyes. They couldn't walk, hop, or fly yet.

Reenie placed a hand on my shoulder. "After that, I need you to clean the floors of the non-raptor cages."

I sighed. *Great. Extra poop*.

She squeezed my shoulder. "The things we do for those we love, right?"

I frowned. "I guess."

"Remember, every day we help some of these amazing birds get back to where they belong."

"Yeah. So, they can poop in their own home."

Reenie chuckled and strode off down the hall to the center's administrative offices, her boots thumping with purpose.

I put on my overalls and waders, headed to the non-raptor cages, and spent the next few hours feeding tiny bites of softened dry dog food to nestlings, washing out food and water bowls, and replacing dirty newspaper from cage floors.

My final cage held Ryker, the raven. He swooped over my head with a croak, his sleek, black feathers gleaming in sunlight that shone down through wooden cage slats.

I croaked back and shook a finger at him. "I hope you're saying sorry for your mess."

He hopped about, staring at me with glittering eyes. Probably not sorry at all.

When he came here, Ryker had suffered wing fractures and developed metabolic bone disease. Now, he'd become too imprinted on people and could never be released. Ravens can recognize human faces and hold grudges, but also remember the people who are nice to them. And when a raven dies, other ravens gather around and mourn together, like humans do. I was extra nice to Ryker. He'd lost his family, too.

He cocked his head, snapping his beak at me.

"Sorry, you know I can't feed you. You'll have to wait for Tom to feed you worms."

He squawked and flew off to a high perch as if miffed. I didn't blame him.

Finally, my reward. I headed for the raptor aviaries. Winky the owl lived at the end of the compound. He was sleeping on his favorite large, twisted branch at the top of his aviary.

Reenie appeared by my side, sipping an iced tea. "I'm taking a quick break. We've already had eight calls today to pick up injured birds."

Before I could ask, she shook her head. "No loons, Sarah." She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "That's a good thing."

I stared at Winky, dozing on his perch. "I know."

"Have you heard yet from the university?"

Reenie was committed to checking in about my email writing to the University of Maine. Each week I sent a new email to *please, please send a naturalist here to find out why the loons are disappearing from our lake*.

"No." With that one word my mission seemed dumb. I was a kid. Why would scientist people listen to me?

Reenie drummed her fingers on her cup then turned to me. "Sarah, why don't you go out on the lake and record what you find? Like loon nests, number of eggs, loon behavior, predators in the area, and pollution that could affect them. Email the university your findings to strengthen your request."

Reenie was right, but I hadn't been out on the lake since Mom died. We'd watched the loons together and named them. Lady and Lewis, a pair at Drake's Island, had been our favorite.

"But I'm just one person."

Her phone went off. "I'll be right there." She ended the call and slid the phone into her pocket. Reenie had pockets everywhere, stuffed with pliers, gloves, banding tape, and more. Anything she might need in the moment as director of a bird

rehab center. She never got rid of anything if it still worked. *Like our birds*, she once told me. *You don't give up on something just because it's a little bit broken.*

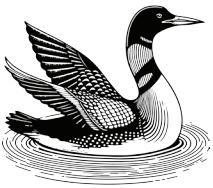
"I've got to go, but I'll leave you with this." She gestured with a finger in the air like she did in her education programs to the public. "Every big idea starts small with one person—and one bird. That's how this center was built. From an injured hawk found in my back yard decades ago. Now we help thousands of birds a year. So, go—be that one person who makes a change for the better."

"Thanks, Reenie. I will." Hope filled me with a new purpose—and a mission. Observe the loons. Gemmi and I could do it together this summer!

"Good. Don't give up, Sarah. When you love wild birds like we do, we must be custodians for them—and fight for their survival." She took off at a jog past the aviaries and into the main building.

For one moment I had the urge to tell Mom all about my new loon project. As always, her loss hit me fresh after reality struck, but the sadness didn't drag me down this time. She'd want to know I was helping the loons.

But Mom wasn't here anymore to encourage me. Maybe I had to encourage myself.



CHAPTER 3

Gemmi showed up after I got home from volunteering. She couldn't wait to eat her favorite JuJu meal, Thai Panang chicken curry. One of my faves, too. He even closed the camp store early to make it for dinner.

I plopped down next to her in our front lawn hammock. My feet hung out of it while hers disappeared in it. Tallest friend in the world, meet shortest friend in the world. We swung back and forth, higher and higher, until one of us flipped out. She usually won. She did again. I landed on my face with an *oomph*.

"I've got bad news." Gemmi bit her lip.

I stayed sprawled on the ground, waiting for it. Maybe her parents weren't going for the public-school thing this year. It bummed me out that Gemmi was homeschooled. I wanted us to have lunch in the cafeteria, sit next to each other in class, and have lockers in the same hall.

She blew out a big breath and tossed her hair. "We're going to Oregon tomorrow."

I jumped up. "For how long?"

"Well … we're driving across the country."

"All the way across?" I plopped back down on the grass.

"That's usually how across-the-country goes." She swung harder in the hammock. "We'll be gone six weeks."

This was a disaster. "Six weeks!" Maybe I could hide in their trunk, except with my height, I'd have to cling to the roof.

Gemmi grabbed her backpack from the ground. "Let's go to the barn."

Only serious talk was conducted in the barn. We climbed its rung ladder and sat in the open loft window, swinging our legs. It held the perfect view of our house, the campground on one side, and the lake on the other.

She pulled out her iPad. "Let's create a list of fun things to work on while I'm gone."

"We're supposed to do summer *together*." I wiped grass off my leggings and tucked myself in beside her, the sun's early evening rays catching me low across my face.

She opened a new document. I peered over her shoulder as she typed. *Summer Dream Do List.*

"But you're gone like half the summer." I failed to remove the whine from my voice.

"I know." She rolled her eyes and gave me a why-am-I-friends-with-you look. "If I *were* here, we'd spend all summer hanging out."

True. And now I'd be stuck here all summer alone.

But Gemmi wasn't stuck. She was going places. Literally. Driving across a bazillion states to Oregon and back. But Gemmi seemed kind of happy to go and this should make me happy for her. JuJu 101: *Bring happiness to others and you will be happy.*

So, I pretended to be excited for Gemmi even though I was mourning the loss of my best friend forever for SIX WHOLE WEEKS. No friend to bike with into Nikuwoss village to get icy

frappes, hang out at rock concerts in the square, or tent camp in one of our sites and stay up all night whispering by lantern light. No one to observe the loons with. I should have made more friends but that was hard when all your extra time went to work on our campground.

Gemmi typed furiously on the iPad. "Okay, we need five things each to do while I'm away."

Under Gemmi's Dream Do List she'd put her first item: *Kiss six boys in six states.*

"What the heck?" An Ultimate Mega Cross-Country Kissing Spree.

She grinned and cocked her eyebrows one at a time, back and forth in Gemmi-fashion. She'd always been multi-talented. Not fair. Now at thirteen she'd be multi-talented at locking lips.

"I told you it's a D-R-E-A-M list." She quickly typed up four other items on her list. "Okay, now some for you."

My mind was blank. I leaned on the barn frame, trying to drum up dreams. Maybe, like Reenie said, I could start small. "Rescue a loon."

Gemmi wrote it down then stuck her pen in the air with an *ah-ha!* moment. "You still need your first kiss." She looked down her nose at me.

"Fine, whatever." My list was now doomed.

Gemmi looked at me expectantly. "Three more goals."

The sun sank lower below the trees, sucking the colors away and leaving us in cool shadows. Summer's first fireflies popped up from the damp grass, blinking across the lawn. The last swimmers left the pool.

I shrugged. "Prank the Saxby twins?"

She poked my arm. "Awesome. Get back at those little jerks." She typed it in. "What else?"

"Stand under a waterfall?"

"Yeah, right," she snickered. "Where you gonna find one?"

It suddenly came to me. "On the Appalachian Trail."

She refused to type it.

I tapped her iPad. "Come on, you said anything."

"Nothing dangerous, silly."

"*You're* silly," I shot back.

She shifted on the edge of the loft to face me. "Is this about your mom?"

I rubbed a finger along the barn door, picking at the red paint. Gemmi knew me too well. I didn't answer but watched JuJu in the kitchen window bopping about as he cooked.

"We've heard the story from JuJu like a hundred times, Sarah. Before your mom had you, she thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail." Gemmi deepened her voice and shook her hands in the air like JuJu. "She courageously hiked solo for 2,200 miles all the way from Georgia to Maine but couldn't climb Mount Katahdin. A nor'easter snowed her in, forcing her to turn back." She flung her hands down with dramatic effect. "She never finished the trail."

"It's only five miles up Katahdin," I said, remembering this fact from Mom's secret trail journal I'd found last week hidden in the back of her closet. I'd told no one about it.

"Up. A. Mountain! *And* five miles back." She pursed her lips.

"It's not like I'd hike the whole thing, but there's got to be a waterfall on it."

"Fine." She sighed, putting it on the list. "Anything else?"

The trill of the late spring peepers rose and fell around us, as a lone bull frog down by the nearby creek bellowed out a sad song. "Get Mom's scarf back."

Gemmi's eyebrows jigged up and down like mad. "I thought you were gonna say something like … meet my long-lost multi-millionaire cute cousin. That would be a good one. For you *and* your best friend." She finished typing my item. "You haven't talked about the scarf in a long time."

Mom's missing scarf was purple with white smiling bear faces on it. I'd lost it last summer on a kayak outing with Joey Skelly, his sister, Amelia, and their friends. They bet me to jump off Dare Rock, but I'd been too scared, and the water was freezing. Joey took my scarf when I lost and climbed the tree to tie it on. For over a year it had been waving to everyone who cruised the lake.

"You know, you'd have to go out on the lake to get the scarf back … to rescue a loon, too," Gemmi said quietly.

I nodded, hoping to summon the courage to go. JuJu often said, *put your wish out there and the universe will conspire to make it happen*.

Gemmi didn't push the scarf issue. "Okay, whoever gets the most done on their Summer Dream Do List by the time I return wins. And the loser has to buy the winner frappes at Dilly's for the rest of the year."

Dilly's Diner had the best frappes in Nikuwoss. Thick, slurpy, and creamy.

"Dinner in five minutes, girls!" JuJu yelled through the open window, his white hair extra spiky. He yanked on it a lot while cooking.

Our Summer Dream Do List was official now.

Gemmi quickly read it aloud.

Summer Dream Do List

Sarah	Gemmi
#1 Rescue a loon	#1 Kiss 6 Boys in 6 States
#2 First kiss	#2 Oregon Mud Run
#3 Prank the Saxby twins	#3 Go blond
#4 Stand under a waterfall	#4 Get a dragon tattoo
#5 Get Mom's scarf back	#5 Whitewater raft down the Colorado River

We each had five things. Although, I don't think Gemmi knew she had to be sixteen to get a tattoo (I remembered from JuJu's random facts). I also didn't tell her that I wasn't even going to try for #2 on the list. I didn't mind buying Gemmi frappes, but she didn't need to know that. At least I had a job. Dad paid me for working the campground.

We ran down the barn ladder and skipped, arm in arm, across the lawn, to enter a spicy paradise. I kept my happy face on all dinner, but a knot twisted in my stomach. As of tomorrow, June 11, I'd be Gemmi-less.

Needing a distraction after she left, I headed to my room and pulled out Mom's trail journal. I opened to my bookmark. One new page a day. Those were my rules. With it, I could dole out Mom in bits, as if that would piece her back together by the end. Her voice sprung from each page. One hundred and fifty pages in length, five months stretched ahead with Mom still beside me. Only seven pages in, I'd read all about Mom preparing to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail before I was born.

I clutched the journal with a daring new thought. Mom had been prepared. Her notes could prepare me. Maybe, I was

meant to find more than just a waterfall. Maybe, finding her journal was a sign to finish the journey she couldn't. I grew dizzy with the idea, holding my breath with the magnitude of it. Terrifying and awesome all at once.

Slowly, I exhaled and read a new page.

Cecilia Richardson, Tales from the Trail
Georgia, April 2009

And so, begins my own trail. I kissed Tom goodbye this week, shouldered my 52-pound pack and began my journey from Georgia to Maine. April is glorious in Georgia. The trail calls to me. It's the call of adventure, solitude, and freedom that moves me as I walk across ancient mountains. The trail supports me as I walk it from one end to the other, from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to Mount Katahdin, Maine. All 2,200+ miles.

Even as I start this journey, I'm readying for another. To be a mother—someday. Tom and I are going to try and start a family when I return. For now, I'm grateful for this journey of a lifetime. Tom understands I need to do this first, as he understands my heart. I believe this solo journey must be taken now, before we have children—or never. Because a child changes everything.

My first week out here and already my perceptions have shifted. If everyone would only take the time to walk wherever they are going, the world would be a much better place.

And amid the wonder of nature that has stood here for millions of years, I feel close to something bigger than me. My importance in the world is diminished next to such grandeur. Who

will I meet on the trail? What adventures shall I have? What kind of person will I be in this world when I return … what kind of mother will I be to you when we decide to have you someday, young one?

The kind I miss.

My tears wet her words, blending us together. I fished a pen out from the end table and wrote on the blank left side of her entry.

Mom, what kind of person will I be in this world without you in it?

Our questions faced each other, neither answered.