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Written by

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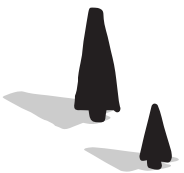


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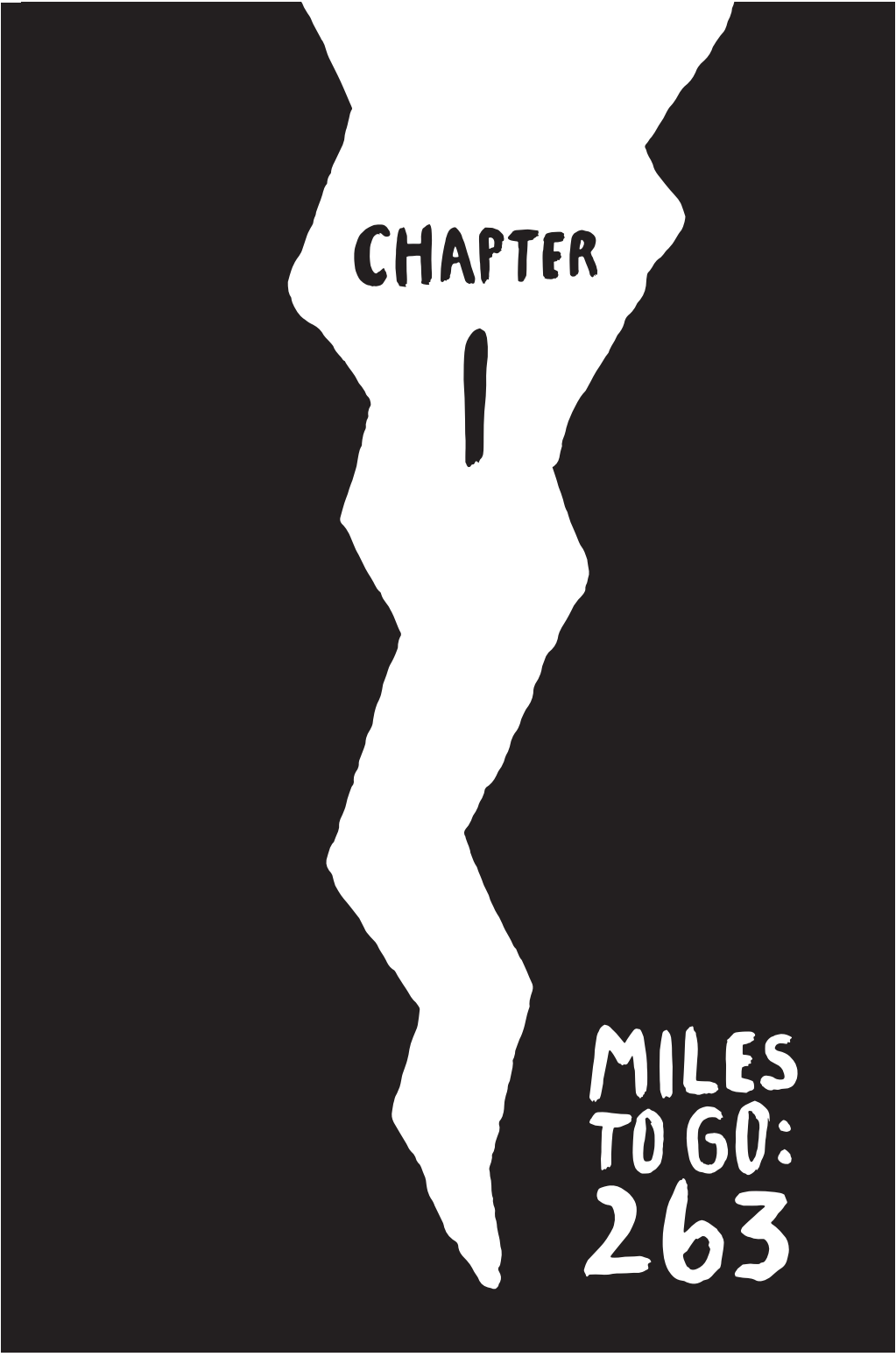
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CHAPTER
1
MILES
TO GO:
263

The mountain was calling me. I had to run away. I had to.

And I didn't need anyone to go with me.

I tightened the straps on my backpack and held the front screen door open with my foot. 'Come on, Beau!' I called, and my voice didn't shake one bit. It was strong. Like me.

Beau came rocketing out of the door, his tail slapping my legs. He danced on his front paws on the porch, his mismatched eyes smiling up at me, his tongue hanging out happy. I bent down and scratched him behind his ears the way he loved, the way only I knew how to do. 'You're always ready for a walk, aren't you, buddy?'

He panted out a yes.

'Well,' I said, grabbing the handles of my duffel bag and standing up. 'You're in for a corker.' I looked out to the horizon, to the white-topped mountains in the distance. 'The biggest walk of all. That's the truth.'

I slammed the door behind me and I didn't look back even once. I didn't worry about a key. I might not ever be coming back.

Beau walked right up against my leg the whole ten minutes down to the station. My camera swung and thumped against my stomach, dangling from a strap around my neck. When I saw the station up ahead, I ducked around a corner and crouched down in an alley. My breath came in nervous puffs. 'All right, Beau, now just like we practised.' I unzipped the duffel bag and spread it open. It was mostly empty. I patted

the inside of it. 'Come on, Beau. Get on in.'

Beau stepped right in, spun around a couple of times and then flopped down. He looked up at me. 'God, you're a good dog,' I whispered. His tail tried to wag inside the duffel bag. I fished in my pocket for a biscuit and he snuffled it out of my hand in one chomping gulp.

I zipped the bag almost all the way closed. Beau disappeared into the darkness inside. I stood up and Beau's weight pulled my shoulder down. I tightened my grip. 'I'm glad you're not a St Bernard,' I whispered down to the duffel bag, then walked out around the corner and up to the ticket window.

The man behind the window squinted up at me from the magazine he was reading. I straightened my bright red baseball cap and cleared my throat.

'I need two tickets,' I said.

'Bus or train?'

'Bus. To Spokane.'

'You travelling alone?'

The word *alone* rang like a broken bell. I licked my lips. 'My dad's in the toilets,' I answered. 'He gave me money for the tickets.'

The man nodded and yawned. People are lazy. That's what I was counting on.

'OK. One adult, one child, Wenatchee to Spokane. That's forty-four dollars.'

I pulled the money out of the pocket of my blue jacket and handed it to him.

'Bus leaves in ten minutes from right over there.'

I took the tickets and walked the way he'd pointed. A couple of buses were rumbling next to the kerb. One said *Spokane* on the front, just like my tickets. I looked over my shoulder. The man behind the window had his eyes back down on his magazine. I walked right past the bus and around the corner of the building.

To the train platform.

There was the little covered seating area I'd seen when I'd made my plans. The one with the rubbish bin chained up behind it, mostly out of sight. I ducked around to the bin, took a quick look to make sure no one was watching, then slipped off my blue jacket and stuffed it into the rubbish. My red cap and the two bus tickets went in after it. I grabbed the dark green woolly hat out of my backpack and pulled it on.

When I turned to go, I felt the bulge in my pocket. I took a shaky breath and pulled out the watch. It was an old-fashioned silver pocket watch with a round glass face. A present from my dead grandpa. I bit my lip, hard. I could feel the watch ticking in my hand. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* Time, running out.

Here's what I don't get: why anybody would want to carry something around that reminds you that your life is running out.

I threw the watch to the ground as hard as I could. It smashed against the concrete. The glass cracked but didn't break. My jaw clenched and I stomped on it, so hard my foot hurt. The glass shattered and I stomped again, and the clock hands bent. I stomped again and again.

I had my foot raised for another stomp when I heard Beau whine from the duffel bag. My lungs were heaving. My breaths were hard and fast, and my stomach was starting to feel sick. A thin ache had begun to poke in my head. Beau whined again.

'It's OK, Beau,' I panted and lowered my foot. I reached down to throw the watch into the bin, but stopped. I looked at the bin, looked at the ruined silver watch. I straightened up and felt the camera against my body. I lifted it to my eye and snapped a picture of the broken pieces of watch lying scattered on the ground. Then I kicked them behind the bin.

When I walked around the corner I saw the train waiting. It was sleek and silver and rumbling like a bottled earthquake. I fished in the pocket of my grey hoodie and found my train ticket, the one I'd ordered online the night before with the credit card I'd snuck out of my mom's purse. My belly lurched.

'Heading to Seattle?' the lady asked when she took my ticket. I nodded and started to climb aboard. I didn't want her to remember me. 'All by yourself? You need help with your bag?'

I tried not to give her a dirty look. 'No,' I said without

looking at her, and climbed up the stairs on to the train, my legs and fingers burning with Beau's weight.

The train was mostly empty and I found a seat in an empty row at the back of the carriage. Outside the big window was Wenatchee, the home I was leaving. The sky was getting dark. The low buildings and warehouses around the train tracks threw long shadows. The clouds were dark and heavy. A storm was coming, and so was night.

Somewhere out there in that darkness was Jessie, my best friend. And my mom and my dad. Their faces floated into my mind. They had no idea I was leaving. They had no idea where I was going. They wouldn't be able to find me. They wouldn't be able to help.

I blinked my eyes hard and shook my head. 'I don't need them,' I whispered, squinting out at the town, the shadows. 'I don't need anybody.' It was true, maybe, but I didn't like how my words sounded more mean than strong. I touched the cold glass with my fingers, looking off into the distance towards the empty house my parents would come home to. 'I'm sorry,' I said even softer. 'I'm sorry.'

I pulled a little notebook and pen from the outside pouch of my backpack. I flipped past my homework and doodles and opened to the first empty page, then thought for a minute. I felt around in my head, trying to find the words for the moment. An idea came, slow and shy. I nodded. I counted a couple of times on my fingers, my mouth moving silently with

the words. Then I wrote them down.

Outside, I heard the call – 'All aboard!'

Then the rattling crash of a metal door closing.

I looked down at the words I'd written on the paper. Three lines:

Alone, leaving home.
A new journey, a new road.
Off to mountains now.

I slid my hand into the duffel bag on the seat beside me and found Beau's head. He licked my fingers. His tongue was wet and his breath was warm. He felt soft. He felt like a friend. I scratched him behind his ears and tried not to cry. I tried hard to remember that I wasn't scared. Of so much.

I let my head fall back on to the seat and tried not to think about anything but mountains.

In a couple of hours, my mom would get home.

A couple of hours after that, the police would start looking for me.