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BARBARA DELINSKY

Author of *Coast Road*

The *New York Times* Bestseller

LAKE NEWS

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I dedicate *Lake News* to my husband, Steve, who really got into the plotting of this one, and to our kids, always a boundless source of pride—Eric and Jodi, Andrew, and Jeremy and Sherrie.

Finally, to Ellyn's Lily, here it is!

Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence. Nations come and go without defiling it. It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh;—a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks, swept and dusted by the sun's hazy brush,—this the light dust-cloth,—which retains no breath that is breathed on it, but sends its own to float as clouds high above its surface, and be reflected in its bosom still.

from Walden, *by Henry David Thoreau*

CHAPTER 1

Lake Henry, New Hampshire

Like everything else at the lake, dawn arrived in its own good time. The flat black of night slowly deepened to a midnight blue that lightened in lazy steps, gradually giving form to the spike of a tree, the eave of a cottage, the tongue of a weathered wood dock—and that was on a clear day. On this day, fog slowed the process of delineation, reducing the lake to a pool of milky glass and the shoreline to a hazy wash of orange, gold, and green where, normally, vibrant fall colors would be. A glimpse of cranberry or navy marked a lakefront home, but details were lost in the mist. Likewise the separation of reflection and shore. The effect, with the air quiet and still, was that of a protective cocoon.

It was a special moment. The only thing John Kipling would change about it was the cold. He wasn't ready for summer to end, but despite his wishes, the days were noticeably shorter than they had been two months before. The sun set sooner and rose later, and the chill of the night lingered. He felt it. His loons felt it. The foursome he watched, two adults and their young, would remain

on the lake for another five weeks, but they were growing restless, looking to the sky lately in ways that had less to do with predators than with thoughts of migration.

As he watched now, they floated in the fog not twenty feet from his canoe, not ten feet again from the tiny fir-covered island in whose sheltered cove they had summered. The island was one of many that dotted Lake Henry. Between the clarity of the water, the quiet of the lake, and the abundance of small fish, those islands lured the loons back year after year—because they didn't do well on land. Their feet were set too far back under large, cumbersome bodies. So they built nests on the very edge of these islands, where they could more easily enter and leave the water. John found it painful watching them lurch even those precious few inches from water to nest.

In all other respects, though, the loons were a sight to behold. Since the chicks' birth, in July, he had watched their plumage go from baby black to toddler brown to a rather drab juvenile gray, but they had their parents' tapered beaks and sleek necks, and a promise of future brilliance—and those parents, ahhhh, those parents were brilliant indeed, even in fall, with their plumage starting to dull, even this morning, through the veil of an ashy mist. They were beauties, with crisp checkerboards of white-on-black backs, white-stripe necklaces around black necks, solid black heads, distinctive pointed beaks. As if that weren't impressive enough, they had riveting round red eyes. John had heard that the red enhanced underwater vision, and he could believe it. Those eyes didn't miss much.

The birds lay low in the water now, swimming gently

around the cove, alternately rolling and contorting to groom themselves and submerging their heads to troll for fish. When one of the adults compressed its body and dove, a webbed power propelled it deep. John knew it might fill its belly with up to fifteen minnows before resurfacing a distance away.

He searched the fog until he spotted it again. Its mate continued to float near the island, but both adults were alert, those pointed bills tipped just a little higher as they scoured the fog for news. Later that morning they would leave their young, run laboriously across the surface of the lake, and lumber up into the air. After circling a time or two until they gained altitude enough to clear the trees, they would fly to a neighboring lake to visit other loons. Breeding was a solitary time, and with two fledglings to show for months of vigilance and work, this pair had done well. Now they had to refresh their social skills in preparation for wintering in larger groups on the warmer Atlantic coast.

For an eon, loons had repeated this ritual. The same intelligence that had assured their survival for so long told the current crop of birds that September was halfway done, October would bring colder days and evening frost, and November would bring ice. Since they needed an expanse of clear water for takeoff, they had to leave the lake before it froze. And they would. In all his years growing up on the lake, then returning as an adult to watch again, John hadn't seen many icebound loons. Their instincts were good. They rarely erred.

John, however, erred—and often. Hadn't he done it again this morning, setting out in a T-shirt and shorts,

wanting it to be summer still and finding himself butt cold now? He sometimes had trouble accepting that he wasn't twenty anymore. He was over forty—and, yes, still six three and fit, but his body didn't work the way it once did. It ached around the knees, wrinkled around the eyes, receded at the temples, and chilled in the extremities.

But cold or not, he wasn't leaving. Not yet. There might not necessarily be the makings of a big best-seller in it, but he hadn't had his fill of the loons.

He sat rock still in the canoe with his hands in his armpits for warmth and his paddle stowed. These loons were used to his presence, but he took nothing for granted. As long as he kept his distance and respected their space, they would reward him with preening and singing. When the world was eerily quiet—at night, at dawn, on mornings like this when the fog muffled other noise that life on the lake might make—the loons' song shimmered and rose. And it came now—breathtaking—a primitive tremolo released with the shiver of a jaw, so beautiful, so mysterious, so wild that it raised the hair on the back of his neck.

It also carried a message. The tremolo was a cry of alarm. Granted, this one was low in pitch, which made it only a warning, but he wasn't about to ignore it. With the faintest rasp of wood on fiberglass, he lifted his paddle. Water lapped softly against the canoe as he guided it backward. When he was ten more feet away, he stabilized his position and quietly restowed the paddle. Hugging his elbows to his thighs for warmth, he sat, watched, listened, waited.

In time, the loon closest to him stretched his neck

forward and issued a long, low wail. The sound wasn't unlike the cry of a coyote, but John would never confuse the two. The loon's wail was at the same time more elemental and more delicate.

This one was the start of a dialogue, one adult calling the other in a succession of haunting sounds that brought the distant bird gliding closer. Even when they were ten feet apart, they continued to speak, with their beaks nearly shut and their elongated throats swelling around the sound.

Goose bumps rose on his skin. This was why he had returned to the lake—why, after swearing off New Hampshire at fifteen, he had reversed himself at forty. Some said he'd done it for the job, others that he'd done it for his father, but the roundabout truth had to do with these birds. They signified something primal and wild, but simple, straightforward, and safe.

A loon's life consisted of eating, grooming, and procreating. It was an honest life, devoid of pretense, ambition, and cruelty. The loon harmed others only when its own existence was threatened. John found that totally refreshing.

So he stayed longer, though he knew he should leave. It was Monday. *Lake News* had to be at the printer by noon on Wednesday. He already had material from his staff correspondents, one per town. Assuming that the appropriate bins held articles promised by local movers and shakers—"movers and shakers" being a relative term—he would have a wad of reading and editing, keystroking, cutting and pasting. If those articles weren't in the bins, he would call around Lake Henry and the four

neighboring towns serviced by the paper, take information on the phone, and write what he could himself—and if he still ended up with dead space, he would run more Thoreau.

There wasn't a book in that either, he told himself. A book had to be original. He had notebooks filled with ideas, folders thick with anecdotes he had collected since returning to town, but nothing sparked an urge to hustle—at least, not when it came to writing a book. He *did* hustle when it came to *Lake News*—but mostly between noon Tuesdays and noon Wednesdays. He was a last-minute kind of guy. He wrote better under the threat of a deadline closing in, liked the rush of a newsroom filled with action and noise, liked the perversion of keeping the managing editor on edge.

Of course, he was the managing editor now. And the production editor. And the photography editor, the society editor, the layout editor. *Lake News* wasn't the *Boston Post*. Not by a long shot, and there were times when that bothered him.

This, however, wasn't one.

His paddle remained stowed, and the loons continued to call. Then came a pause, and John dared mimic the sound. One of the loons said something in return, and in that brief, heady instant, he felt part of the team. In the next instant, with a resumption of the birds' duet, he was excluded again, a species apart.

But not cold. He realized he was no longer cold. The fog was burning off under a brightening sun. By the time patches of blue showed through the mist, John guessed it was nearly nine. He straightened his legs and, easing

back, braced his elbows on the gunwales. Turning his face to the sun, he closed his eyes, took a contented breath, and listened to silence, water, and loon.

After a time, when the sun began to heat his eyelids and the weight of responsibility grew too heavy to ignore, he pushed himself up. For a few last minutes he continued to watch and absorb the whatever-it-was that these birds gave him. Then smoothly and silently, if reluctantly, he retrieved his paddle from the floorboards and headed home.

The beauty of a beard was that it eliminated the need to shave. John kept his cropped close, which meant occasional touch-ups, but none of the daily scrape-and-bleed agony that he used to endure. Same thing with a necktie. No need for one here. Or for a pressed shirt. Or for anything but denim down below. He didn't even have to worry about matching socks, since it was either bare feet and Birks in summer or work boots in winter, and then he could wear whatever socks he wanted and no one would see.

He still felt the novelty of showering, dressing, and hitting the road in ten minutes flat, and what a road. No traffic. No other *cars*. No horns. No cops. No *speed limit*. The road he drove now was framed by trees just shy of their peak of fall color. It wove in and out in a rough tracing of the lake and was cracked by years of frost heaves. Most other roads in town were the same. They imposed speed limits all on their own, and Lake Henry liked it that way. The town didn't cater to tourists as many of the surrounding lake towns did. There was no inn. There

were no chic little shops. Despite a perennial brouhaha in the state legislature, there was no public access to the shore. Anyone who went out on the lake was either a resident, a friend of a resident, or a trespasser.

At that particular moment in time, with summer residents gone and only year-rounders left, the town's population was 1,721. Eleven babies were due, which would raise the count. Twelve citizens were terminally old or terminally ill, which would lower it. There were twenty-eight kids currently in college. Whether they would return was a toss-up. In John's day they left and never came back, but that was starting to change.

He made what he intended to be a brief stop at the general store, but got to talking national politics with Charlie Owens, who owned the store; and then Charlie's wife, Annette, told him that Stu and Amanda Watson's college junior, Hillary, was home for a quick day after a last-minute decision to spend the semester abroad. Since Hillary had interned for John two summers before, he had a personal stake in her success, so he detoured to her house to get the story, take her picture, and wish her luck.

Back in the center of town, he turned in at the post office and continued on to the thin yellow Victorian that stood between it and the lake. Climbing from the truck—a Chevy Tahoe, one of the perks of the job—he reached across the seat for his briefcase, shouldered its strap, and scooped up the day's editions of four different newspapers, a bag of doughnuts, and his thermos. With the bag clutched in his teeth he sifted through his key ring as he crossed the dirt drive to the Victorian's side door.

He was still sifting when he shouldered open the

screen. The door behind it was mahogany, highly varnished, and carved by a local artist. Between swirls on its bottom half were a dozen slots identified by small brass plaques. The first row, politely, was devoted to the neighboring towns—*Ashcroft, Hedgeton, Cotter Cove,* and *Center Sayfield.* The lower rows were Lake Henry–specific, with slots assigned to things like *Police and Fire, Congregational Church, Textile Mill,* and *Garden Club.* Eye-high on the door, with no slot attached, was the largest plaque. *Lake News,* it read.

The door moved even before John inserted his key. As he elbowed it the rest of the way open, the phone began to ring. "Jenny?" he called. *"Jenny?"*

"In the bathroom!" came the muted yell.

Nothing new there, he thought. But at least she had come.

Tossing his keys on the kitchen table in passing, he took the stairs two at a time, past the second floor and on up to the third. There were no dividing walls up here, which made it the largest room in the house. The addition of a slew of windows and skylights also made it the brightest. Most important, it was the only one with a view of the lake. That view wasn't nearly as good as the one from John's house, but it was better than no view at all, which was what the lower rooms in the Victorian offered. Three willows, arm in arm and more fat than tall, saw to that.

The attic room had been his office since he had returned to town, three years before. It was large enough to house the newspaper's sales department, the production department, and the editorial department. Each had a

desk and a view of the lake. That view kept John focused and sane.

The phone continued to ring. Letting the papers slip to the editorial desk, he dropped the bag from Charlie's on top, stood the thermos nearby, and opened the window wide. The lake air was clear now. Sun spilled down the slopes of the east hills, setting fire to foliage in its path before running out over the water. A month before, it would have hit a dozen boats captained by summer folk who were grabbing precious last minutes on the lake before closing up camp for the year. The only boat on the water today was one of Marlon Dewey's prized Chris-Crafts. The sun bounced off its polished oak deck and glittered in the wake spreading behind.

He picked up the phone. "Morning, Armand."

"Took you long enough," his publisher said in a rusty voice. "Where you been?"

John followed the course of the handsome Chris-Craft. Marlon was at the helm, along with two visiting grandchildren. "Oh, out and around."

The old man's voice softened. " 'Oh, out and around.' You give me that every time, John, and you know I can't argue with it. Damn lake has too many bends, so I can't see what goes on around yours. But the paper's my bottom line, and you're doing that okay. Long as it keeps up, you can sleep as late as you want. Did you get my piece? Liddie put it in the slot."

"It's there," John said without checking, because Armand Bayne's wife was totally reliable. She was also totally devoted to her husband. What Armand wanted done, she did.

"What else you got?" the old man asked.

John clamped the phone between shoulder and ear and pulled a handful of papers from the briefcase. He had dummied the week's pages at home the night before. Now he spread out the sheets. "The lead is a report on the education bill that's up before the state legislature. It's a thirty-inch piece, across the top and down the right-hand leg, photo lower left. I'm following it with opinion pieces, one from the local rep, one from the principal at Cooper Elementary."

"What's your editorial say about it?"

"You know what it says."

"The na-tives won't like it."

"Maybe not, but we either put money into schools today or into welfare tomorrow." The source of that money was the problem. Not wanting to argue it again with Armand, who was one of the wealthiest of the landowners and would be soaked if property taxes doubled, he pulled up the next dummy. "Page three leads with a report on Chris Diehl's trial—closing arguments, jury out, verdict in, Chris home. I have a piece on profit sharing at the mill, and one on staff cutbacks at the retirement home. The newcomer profile is on Thomas Hook."

"Can't stand the guy," Armand muttered.

John uncapped the thermos. "That's because he has no people skills, but he has computer skills. There's reason why his business is worth twenty million and growing."

"He's a *kid*." Spoken indignantly. "*What's* he gonna do with that kind of money?"

John filled his mug with coffee. "He's thirty-two, with