

“A mesmerizing confluence of intrigue and suspense.”
— Jamie Ford, author of *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*

LEARNING TO SWIM

A Novel



SARAJ. HENRY

Praise for *Learning to Swim*

“A single woman dives headlong from a ferry into Lake Champlain to rescue a child and then she must figure out what to do with him. Compulsively readable, this is all about what we do for love.”

—*Boston Globe*

“In Henry’s tense first novel, a young woman rescues a boy from the waters of Lake Champlain, only to see her unruffled life abruptly give way to an unfamiliar world of wealth, privilege, and danger.”

—*New York Times*

“From the opening page, *Learning to Swim* is a terrific debut. This moving and insightful psychological thriller features the inspiring Troy Chance—an everywoman hero who women will admire and men will want to meet. I can’t wait for her next adventure.”

—[Michael Robotham](#), bestselling author of *Bleed for Me* and *The Wreckage*

“Readers will root for Troy Chance from the dramatic opening of *Learning to Swim* right through to its surprising close. Move over, Kinsey Millhone.”

—[Meg Waite Clayton](#), bestselling author of *The Wednesday Sisters* and *The Four Ms. Bradwell*

“*Learning to Swim* is a gut-wrenching, heart-thumping twist of the knife. A compelling tale of a mystery’s holy trinity: love, loss, and betrayal.”

—[Reed Farrel Coleman](#), award-winning author of *Hurt Machine* and *Gun Church*

“From its shocking opening to its stunning conclusion, *Learning to Swim* is a frightening ride. Sara J. Henry will quite literally take your breath away.”

—[J. T. Ellison](#), award-winning author of *Where All the Dead Lie* and *So Close the Hand of Death*

“*Learning to Swim* is a thriller of the most thrilling kind—a smart and crafty story with whiplash of *Rebecca* that insists from the first sentence that you sit down and not stand up again until you’ve read the last word. Tell your loved ones to take care of themselves.”

—[Quinn Cummings](#), author of *Notes from the Underworld*

“In her debut, the first in a projected series, Henry proves herself to be a smooth and compelling storyteller. And her lead is highly appealing: an athletic, fiercely independent young woman who, like crime-fiction author Gillian Flynn’s feisty females, is capable of making delightfully acerbic observations.”

—*Booklist*

“Sara J. Henry’s debut starts with a bang—or, more literally, a splash—and doesn’t let up until the final page.”

—*BookPage*

“Freelance writer Troy Chance, the protagonist of Henry’s impressive first novel, impulsively and literally, dives into trouble when she sees a youngster fall from a ferry boat on Lake Champlain.... Henry adroitly handles Troy’s exposure to new emotions as she reexamines her life and relationships.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A compelling plot, a pervading sense of foreboding, well-constructed characters.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Take a gulp of air before diving into Vermonter Sara J. Henry’s new mystery, because you’re likely to hold your breath for the whole first chapter.”

—*Rutland Herald*

“This debut novel is a stunner. This disturbing, moving, compelling book will keep readers engaged until the very last page. It is smart, intense, and full of unexpected plot twists.”

—*Tucson Citizen*

“Part mystery thriller, part family tragedy, part tentative romance, it succeeds on all levels.”

—*Knoxville News Sentinel*



**LEARNING
TO SWIM**

A NOVEL

SARA J. HENRY

CROWN PUBLISHERS  NEW YORK



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*To my dad, who taught me how to read, and
made sure I always had plenty of books.*



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“Swimming is a sport that is not natural to everyone.”

—*from a Learn to Swim blog*

PART I

IF I'D BLINKED, I WOULD HAVE MISSED IT.

But I didn't, and I saw something fall from the rear deck of the opposite ferry. It could have been a bundle of trash; it could have been a child-sized doll. Either was more likely than what I thought I saw: a small wide-eyed human face, in one tiny frozen moment as it plummeted toward the water.

I was on the late afternoon ferry on Lake Champlain, the big one that takes an hour to reach Vermont. It was overcast and misty, one of those in-between Adirondack days just before summer commits itself, and I'd pulled on a windbreaker because of the occasional chilly gust of wind. I was the only one out on deck, but the closed-in lounge with its narrow benches and tiny snack bar makes me edgy. And I love watching the water as the ferry carves through it. Today the water was calm, with no other boats out except this one's twin chugging stolidly in the opposite direction.

What I did next was a visceral reaction to those small eyes I thought I saw. Without conscious thought I vaulted onto the railing I was leaning against, took a deep breath, and dived.

It's amazing what you can do if you don't stop to think. The coldness of the water seemed to suck the air out of my lungs, but instinctively I curved upward, fluttering my feet.

In the weekly mini-triathlons in Lake Placid where I live, I'm always one of the last out of the water. The closest I'd ever come to underwater swimming was picking up my hair clippers at the bottom of a friend's pool, and that had taken two tries. And whenever I see a movie with scenes where the hero has to swim through a long, narrow passageway, I always try to hold my breath. I never make it.

But I was in the lake, committed, and surging strongly underwater. By the time I broke the surface, I'd traveled more than a third of the way to where I'd seen the thing go in. Both ferries had gone onward, in their opposite directions. There was no one in sight. No shouts of alarm, no ferry slowing and turning about.

I kept my eyes fixed on the water ahead, and saw something bob up, too far away. My stomach gave a nasty twist. Then I swam, harder and faster than I ever had in a mini-triathlon with middle-aged tourists coming up behind me.

When I reached what I thought was the right spot, I took a deep breath and dived. The water wasn't clear but not exactly murky, sort of a blurred translucence with a greenish cast. I didn't get very far under, and had to try again. This time I saw only a few flat, colorless fish skittering by before I had to come up for air.

Gasping for breath, treading water while I sucked air, reason began to creep in. I wasn't just cold; I was close to numb. I was alone in a very deep lake twelve miles wide, diving after what could be a bag of garbage somebody didn't want to pay to haul to the dump. I was not too sure I had enough strength to get to shore. But I dived once more, and this time something led me straight to it.

It wasn't a bundle of trash. It wasn't a doll. It was a small boy, arms entangled in what looked like a dark sweatshirt, straight dark hair floating eerily above his head. For one awful

moment I thought I was looking at a corpse, but then I saw a small sneakered foot kick weakly. By the time I got close enough to grab a handful of sweatshirt, I'd been without air for far longer than I'd ever managed to hold my breath watching underwater scenes in movies. My throat was convulsing in an effort not to suck in water instead of the air that wasn't there.

The boy turned toward me, looking at me with those wide dark eyes I hadn't imagined after all. Then they slowly closed. I started upward, dragging him with one hand, swimming with the other, kicking as hard as I could.

It was endless. My ears were ringing, my body a marionette I was directing with an inner voice: *Keep swimming, keep swimming, keep swimming.* I no longer felt cold, and my throat had stopped jerking. I began to wonder if I had drowned. But I felt a dull pain in the arm clutching the boy, and I wouldn't, I thought, feel pain if I were dead.

I kicked on, and sensed rather than saw light above: either Heaven or the surface. In a burst of motion we emerged, the boy bobbing up beside me. I gulped in so much air it hurt and shook water off my face.

The boy was limp, entangled in the sodden sweatshirt, and I couldn't tell if he was breathing. I struggled to get the sweatshirt off over his head and tried to thump his thin back. I'd taken CPR, but it was several years ago, and no one tells you how to do CPR when you're treading water in a deep, cold lake.

No response. I pulled the boy toward me, put my mouth over his and blew, turning to suck in air—once, twice, three times. Now I was feeling almost furious, at fate or irony or whatever had put me in this cold water with a thin dying child in my arms. I'd found him and damn it, he needed to start breathing.

The boy coughed, spewed forth a gush of water, then opened his eyes. "Yes!" I whispered. "yes, yes, yes!" and I think I shook him a little. I might have cried if I hadn't learned a long time ago you can't cry and swim at the same time.

Now we had to get to shore, which looked a lot farther away than I'd ever swum in a military triathlon.

I've read that drowning victims are likely to drag you under and you're supposed to to hold them with one arm around their neck so they can't grab you. But I knew I'd never make it swimming with one arm. I pushed his hands under my belt, and squeezed them into tiny fists.

"Hold on," I told him, looking into the dark eyes, and he seemed to understand.

The swim to shore wasn't dramatic, just grim. There's a formula that predicts how long you can survive in cold water before hypothermia renders your brain foggy and your arms and legs useless, and it was probably a good thing I couldn't remember it.

This is the part of *Rescue 911* you never see—the long, slow, dreary stuff. I did the crawl; he did the sidestroke. In my head I sang a slow dirge from Girl Scout camp: *Mandy had a little bay-bee. Had that baby just for me. Stroke, breathe. Mandy, oh, my Mandy oh, my Man-dee mine. Stroke, breathe. Baby made my Mandy cry. Cried so hard she soon did die. Stroke, breathe. Mandy, oh, my Mandy oh, my Man-dee mine.*

At one point the boy's hands slipped from my belt, and I spun and grabbed him as he was sliding under. He opened his eyes halfway and looked at me dully. I cradled him in my arms as the water sloshed around us. "Just a little farther, just a little farther," I pleaded, and his eyes flickered. Now maybe I was crying, but I was so wet and cold I couldn't tell.

I could see details of the shoreline, rocks and a big tree that seemed to beckon to me, and I was damned if we were going to drown this close to land. I yanked the drawstring from my windbreaker hood, pulled one of his hands underwater, and lashed it to my belt. We swam on, in awkward tandem.

We had been carried well past the ferry dock, and reached shore in a rocky area. I swung my feet down to feel for bottom, and there it was, sandy and shifting and at tiptoe length but there it was. I yanked my belt loose to free the boy and pulled him toward me, hoisting him to my hip. I staggered as we came out of the water, him clinging to my side like a baby orangutan, and sat down on the first big rock I came to.

We sat there for a moment in silence, sucking in air, both of us shivering. My inner voice was saying *Thankyouthankyouthankyou*, but to whom or to what, I don't know. I was strangely conscious of the hardness of the rock I sat on and the fact that I was no longer being rocked by the water.

The boy stirred, and turned toward me, his dark hair plastered around his thin face. For the first time, I heard him make a sound.

"Merci," he whispered.

HE WAS THIN AND PALE, WITH A SLIGHTLY SNUB NOSE AND huge, long-lashed dark eyes with deep hollows under them. He was small, maybe five or six years old, wearing a snug, long-sleeved striped pullover and jeans. He watched me placidly, then sighed like a tired puppy and laid his head against my chest.

I felt a rush of emotion so strong it jolted me. For one crazy moment it seemed this boy was mine, sitting here in my lap, delivered to me by the lake.

We sat there awhile, my arms around him—how long, I don't know. Water, clouds, sky, and shoreline seemed like something out of a movie, and time had a different dimension, as if it were thick and moving slowly. Suddenly I was aware of the breeze against my cold skin and wet clothes. "We'd better get moving," I said, shifting him from my lap onto his feet. The instant he stood, warmth began to dissipate where he had pressed against my body.

I squeezed water from my ponytail and wrung out my windbreaker. The boy still wore his sneakers, and I still had on my sports sandals, so light I hadn't wasted time unstrapping them when in the water. I held out my hand. "*Viens*," I said. I grasped his small cold hand, and started clambering over the rocks.

This was like a dream, a bad one. Walking felt like trying to slog through quicksand. After a few minutes the boy started to cough, then gag, and fell to his knees and threw up lake water on the scruffy grass we'd reached by then. I held him by the waist as he retched, and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of my windbreaker.

I thought of my Subaru in the parking lot, with the bag of emergency clothing and sleeping bag I've carried since a sudden snowstorm left me stranded overnight in a friend's child cabin. In the Adirondacks, people say, *If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes*. I'd moved here to cover sports for the local newspaper, and discovered that you can be at a baseball game on an April afternoon enjoying the sun on your bare arms, and by the fourth inning have snow falling on you.

By the time we reached the road, the sky had begun to darken and the mistiness had turned to a light drizzle. I pulled up my windbreaker hood and plodded on. When the footsteps beside me began to lag, I swung the boy up onto my hip. *Right foot, left foot*. A car surged past, and not until I watched it disappear did it occur to me that I could have tried to wave it down. "Gotta get to my car," I thought. "Gotta get to my car." I heard the words before I realized I was speaking aloud.

Now I could see the parking lot and my blue Subaru where I'd parked at the back so I could exit quickly. My brain cleared enough to realize the significance of the fact that nothing was going on. Like the curious incident of the dog in the night-time in the Sherlock Holmes story—curious because the dog had done nothing.

There was no hubbub at the dock. No police. No Coast Guard. No frantic parents of a small French-speaking boy who had disappeared off the side of a ferry. If it hadn't been for a small wet child clinging to my side, I could have convinced myself I'd dreamed the whole thing.

The boy began to shake, in tiny tremors.

Keys. I slapped my pocket. *Damn*. My key ring apparently was now on the bottom of Lake

Champlain. But Thomas, the guy I've been dating, had given me a hide-a-key box I'd stashed under the car, primarily because I knew he'd ask me about it. It had seemed an odd gift, one that suggested I couldn't take care of myself. And I at least halfway wished I was the sort of person who received less practical presents.

But right now I was grateful it was there. I groped under the car and found the little box far back atop the greasy undercarriage. With cold fingers I fumbled it open, then unlocked the car and pulled the bag of spare clothes from behind the front seat. I swung open the hatchback door and lifted the boy to the edge, where he sat, legs dangling, watching me.

Now I was remembering some French. I'd studied it at university, and living this close to Montreal, where people can get irate if you try to speak English to them, I practice with CDs from the library, reciting French phrases and getting odd looks from people in nearby cars.

"*Comment t'appelles-tu?*" I asked him. Something flickered in his dark eyes. Then they went empty again, unblinking and carefully blank.

"*Je n'saispas,*" he murmured, running the words together. He didn't know his name.

"*Tu ne parles pas anglais?*" I asked. He shook his head. No English.

I rooted in the bag, passing over a sweatshirt similar to the one that had been wrapped around him, and pulled out a T-shirt that had shrunk too much for polite wear and an Adidas jacket with a broken zipper.

"*Lèves les bras, s'il te plaît,*" I said. He obediently raised his arms, and I peeled off his wet shirt. As the shirt came off, as if watching a miniature movie I saw myself in the lake yanking that sweatshirt over his head, and could see clearly what I'd blocked from my mind up until now: the sweatshirt sleeves, wrapped around his body and tied in a tight, dark, wet knot.

On that long swim to shore I'd imagined a set of parents for him: a well-dressed and attractive man and woman who had left him peacefully napping in the backseat of their late model car—something boxy and safe, a Volvo, perhaps—while they'd gone up to the lounge for a cup of coffee, never suspecting their child would slip out of the car and fall overboard. I'd imagined them at the dock, surrounded by police and Coast Guard and dive team, mother frantic, tears rolling down her cheeks, father gruff and angry in his grief and fear, both of them hysterically grateful for their son's safe return.

But the dock was empty. No parents, no police, no Coast Guard. And I could no longer pretend I didn't realize that someone had tied a sweatshirt around this child and thrown him in the lake to drown.

I BEGAN TO CHATTER, AS I WOULD TO A DOG THAT WAS INJURED or scared, a mix of English and French, whatever I could think of.

I pulled my old T-shirt over the boy's head and manipulated his thin, white arms into it and then into the jacket, as if I were dressing a doll.

I pried off his soggy sneakers and pulled my heavy wool socks up over his jeans to anchor them, my fingers thick with cold. I had no shorts or pants that would fit him, so I wrapped a towel around his bottom half and carried him to the passenger seat. I pulled out the fiberfill sleeping bag I've carried since the night I spent shivering in my friend's cabin, and tucked it around him. He didn't say another word. I didn't let myself think.

No one was around, but I was so cold I wouldn't have cared if the entire Saranac Lake football team had been watching. I yanked off windbreaker and T-shirt in one quick motion and pulled on the hooded sweatshirt, then stepped out of my shorts and into a pair of outdoor track suit bottoms. The dry fabric felt wonderful against my skin. I tossed our wet clothes to the back, jumped in, and started the engine. The boy seemed even smaller with my sleeping bag fluffed around him, and he just watched me. As if waiting to see what I would do next.

The car engine hummed. I cranked up the heat.

What do you say to a small boy who has just been tossed off a boat and isn't crying or telling you what happened? "*Je m'appelle Troy*," I said at last. I hadn't realized how tense he was until he made a tiny movement of relaxation, one I sensed rather than saw.

"Trrroy," he repeated softly.

It's an odd name for a girl, I know. My sisters had suitable southern belle names of Suzanne and Lynnette, but by the time my brother and I came along our mother had run out of child-naming energy. So our father named us after characters from his favorite mysteries—Simon from *The Saint* series by Leslie Charteris, and me from the Ngaio Marsh books about a policeman and his wife, Troy. I liked the character I was named after: slim, thoughtful, graceful, a talented painter and a watcher of people. Although I've always wondered if my mother would have liked me better if I had been a Christina or a Sharon or Jennifer.

Not in a million years did I believe this boy didn't know his name. He just didn't want to tell me.

"*Qu'est-ce que s'est passé sur le bateau?*" I asked.

He gave a little shrug, but didn't speak. It didn't surprise me. If he had wanted to tell me what had happened on the ferry, he would have told me by now.

"*Tes parents?*" I asked.

I don't think I'd ever seen such a completely blank expression on a child's face.

During college I'd volunteered two afternoons a week at an emergency children's home where police and social workers dropped children off, sometimes in the middle of the night. One thin blond girl named Janey had begged me to adopt her. I'd tried to explain that nineteen-year-old students couldn't adopt anyone, let alone a nine-year-old—but when you're desperate for a happy home, you keep asking. I kept having to tell her I couldn't. Each time she returned to the shelter, she was increasingly hollow-eyed, thinner, and more withdrawn.

Staffers at the center weren't allowed to tell us details of children's cases, so I could only guess at what was going on at home. And then she was gone. Maybe she went to foster care, or a group home, or her family moved away, out of the reach of Social Services. I never knew what happened to her.

For years, whenever I'd catch sight of a thin blond girl, I'd look to see if it was her.

Our breath was fogging the car windows. I tried to force my brain to work. The ticket seller booth was empty. The passengers were long gone; the boy's ferry was probably halfway back to Vermont. The ferries had no passenger list; you just paid your fare and drove or walked on. But the police could meet the boy's ferry when it docked and ask for descriptions of anyone who had boarded with a small boy.

My cell phone was dangling from its charging cord where I had forgotten it—which was the only reason it wasn't sitting on the bottom of the lake. It wouldn't pick up a signal here, but there was a pay phone just uphill, next to the Amtrak station. I pulled the car closer and took a fistful of change from my ashtray, gesturing toward the phone so the boy would know what I was going to do. As I leaned against the phone stand, I leafed through the pages of the phone book, my cold fingers turning more than one page at a time.

People don't want to believe bad stuff—they work hard at not believing it. They don't want to think that teachers can be demons, that priests abuse children, that the apparently pleasant boy next door could be systematically molesting all the neighborhood girls, one by one. They ignore the evidence as long as they can.

If I told authorities an adult-sized sweatshirt had been tied around this child like a straitjacket, they would smile pleasantly and tell me I must be mistaken, that the arms had simply been twisted or tied around his waist. Because that sweatshirt was now at the bottom of a four-hundred-foot-deep lake, I couldn't prove anything.

And this boy was clearly not going to tell them what had happened.

I gave up leafing through the phone book and called Information, thumbed in change, and punched in the number for the Burlington police. When a woman answered, I said distinctly, "Someone threw a small boy off the ferry from Burlington to Port Kent. Less than an hour ago. He's age five or six, dark hair, brown eyes, thin, speaks French."

Questions squawked from the receiver. I ignored them and repeated what I'd already said. I didn't have any answers, other than my name, and I wasn't about to tell them that. Next I called the police in Elizabethtown, which I knew had a police station, told them the same thing, and hung up.

I looked over at the boy, watching me through the windshield.

I got in the car. "Let's get going," I said, gesturing for him to fasten his seat belt. He freed his arms from the sleeping bag and obediently clicked the belt into place. As I pulled out of the parking lot my wheels gritted on the gravel.

A few miles down the road my phone gave that beep that says it's back in cell tower range. I glanced at the car clock. I had been on my way to Burlington to see Thomas, to go to the piano recital he'd wanted to attend, and he'd be wondering why I hadn't arrived. I picked up the phone and hit his speed dial.

"Tommy, it's Troy," I said, working hard to speak clearly through my fatigue. "Look, I'm really sorry, but something came up, and I can't make it."

A moment's silence, then he said calmly, "Okay." His careful lack of reaction annoyed me.

—it's not always easy dating someone this determinedly understanding.

“Look, I can't explain right now,” I said. “But I'll call you tonight.”

Another pause. “Are you all right?”

“Fine, I'm fine.” I tried to sound reassuring. Thomas would be sitting on the sofa in his apartment, sandy hair neatly combed, looking like a Lands' End model in his crisp khakis and button-down shirt. Diving off the railing of the Burlington ferry was not something I wanted to explain to him, not now and probably never. “Talk to you later,” I said, and clicked the phone off.

I looked at the boy. “Men!” I said. He smiled faintly, and I felt a little twist inside me.

We were approaching Keeseville, where I could turn south for Elizabethtown and the police station. I thought about it; I really did. I envisioned us traipsing inside in our motley clothes, me damp and bedraggled, me trying to explain, insisting someone had tried to drown this boy, then watching him being carted off, never knowing where he was being taken or what happened to him.

But I wasn't going to let him be sent back to whoever had tossed him off the ferry like an unwanted kitten. I wasn't nineteen anymore.

What I didn't admit to myself was that I was already beginning to think of this child as mine. I'd found him, I'd saved him. I wasn't about to hand him off to a stranger.

I passed the turn and headed for home.

I PULLED INTO MY PARKING SPOT IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE. The boy had sat quietly during the forty-mile drive, waiting when I'd gone into a small store for hot chocolate, then clasping the cup in both hands, drinking in tiny sips. Neither of us had spoken.

"We're here." I gestured at the house. "*Ça, c'est ma maison.*" I'd rented a room here when I'd first arrived in Lake Placid, and when the speedskater running the place moved on, I bought the furnishings and took over. I rent out the extra bedrooms to athletes in town on a train and people who end up here because they love the lakes and the mountains and the ski trails. Some are here a few months; some a year or more. We share the living room and kitchen, and everybody does their own dishes. If not, I put them in a paper bag and set it outside their bedroom door. They catch on pretty fast.

My family would consider this place a dump, but I like it. And I have a houseful of guys willing to go biking, running, or dancing, so I have company when I want it, and escape to my rooms when I don't.

This is a part of my life Thomas finds unendearingly irregular, although he's far too polite to say so. He's too reserved to let me know that my athletic male roommates make him uneasy, and I'm too obstinate to let him know I have a hard-and-fast personal rule against house romances. Which I was tempted to break only once, but that's another story.

I walked around the car and opened the passenger door. I reached over the boy to click open his seat belt and pulled off the sleeping bag and towel to free him. He glanced at the ground and then at me, wanting to know if it was all right to walk in his sock feet. I nodded. He put his small hand in mine, and stepped carefully up the porch stairs in the big wool socks.

The front door was unlocked, as usual. I'd given up trying to get the guys to lock it. All too often one of them would forget to take a key when going out for a run or a bike ride and would end up climbing on the fuel tank and through the downstairs bedroom window. I installed individual locks on the bedrooms, but I was pretty much the only one who used them.

Two of the guys were in the front room watching TV and eating pizza from a box on the battered coffee table. The smell made my salivary glands tingle.

I leaned into the room. "Zach around?" I asked.

"Nope," said Dave, without looking up. He was a quiet guy, a kayaker working at a local sports shop. Zach, who had been here the longest of the current batch of roommates, had my spare room key. I motioned to the boy to sit on the bottom of the staircase and went up to Zach's room, where my fingers found my key on the nail in the back of his closet.

On the way downstairs, I kept my hand on the fat rounded banister to steady myself, then took the boy's hand and led him through the kitchen and up the narrow private staircase into my rooms. I use the outside room as an office, and my bedroom is at the back, with a tiny bathroom to the left. My own little suite.

The small fingers gripping mine were cold, and I was chilling fast once out of the heated car. My wet ponytail had soaked the back of my sweatshirt, and my underwear and bra had

soaked through, so I was pretty damp.

“I think a hot bath is next,” I said. I couldn’t remember the French word for *bath*, and the boy looked blank. I led him into the bathroom, turned on the faucets, and squirted shampoo to make bubbles. Without hesitation he shrugged off the baggy jacket onto the floor and held his arms up for me to pull the T-shirt off, as if this were routine, as if he were used to a parent saying *Time for your bath* every evening. We struggled to get his damp jeans off and finally he sat on the bathroom floor and pushed at them while I worked the narrow cuffs over his bare feet and pulled. I would have had him bathe in his underwear, because I wasn’t going to ask a small child I didn’t know to strip, particularly since my brain recognized the possibility that a thrown-away child could have been abused. But he matter-of-factly pulled off his briefs and reached for my hand to steady himself as he climbed into the tub, as if he had done it a thousand times.

His body was thin but unmarked. I handed him a soapy washcloth, and he started running it over his arms. I didn’t know if he could wash his own hair, but it seemed safer to do it for him, so I squirted shampoo on my palm and gently rubbed it in. He held his head back for me to rinse it, and as I poured clean water over his head, water ran down my arms, soaking the sweatshirt. Suddenly I was nearly shaking with cold.

“Will you be okay for five minutes? *Cinq minutes? Je vais aller dans l’autre salle de bains.*” I pointed downstairs and pantomimed showering, and he nodded. I ran more hot water into the tub so the water would be warm enough for him, then grabbed a towel and clean clothes, leaving the bathroom door ajar.

I stepped carefully down my stairs, which had been built by someone who didn’t comprehend rise-run ratio—they’re so steep and narrow there’s barely room for your foot. Once I’d slipped off and bounced painfully down the last few steps on my tailbone. Now I hold on.

The smell of the pizza from the living room beckoned. If ever a day called out for splurging, this was it. From the front hall I dialed Mr. Mike’s across the street, reading the number from the flyer taped to the wall. The two guys in the living room were intent on Vanna White, who was spelling out a phrase that even to my fuddled mind seemed obvious. “Dave, would you get my pizza from Mr. Mike’s in ten minutes?” I asked. “I’ll leave the money under the phone. You can have whatever I can’t eat.”

“Sure,” he said, without looking up.

Male athlete roommates don’t know the meaning of the word “leftovers.” Sometimes I smell pasta in the middle of the night, and if I roll over and look through the vent in my floor, I’ll see one of the guys cooking, too hungry to wait for morning.

I shampooed vigorously to erase any lingering reminder of my lake swim, and then did it again. I yanked on my clothes, not taking the time to comb out my thick hair, and headed back upstairs.

“You okay?” I called out softly as I approached my bathroom. “*Comment ça va?*”

He was stretched out, head resting on the sloped back of the old tub, thin limbs just visible through the water. He looked as he had in the lake when I first saw him, eyes closed, motionless, dead than alive. His eyes sprang open, with a flicker of fear that receded when he saw my face. I felt a pang of something like pain.

“Guess you’re waterlogged,” I said, as matter-of-factly as I could. I pulled the plug and

wrapped him in a towel as he stood, and as I lifted him out he seemed incredibly small and frail. I began to gently towel his hair dry. Of course part of me wanted to blurt out, *Who do you think you are? Why would someone throw you off a ferry?* But I didn't think he would answer, and neither was I ready to know.

I pulled an old rugby shirt over his head to use as a nightshirt. It fell past his knees, making him look like the youngest kid from *Peter Pan*. I rolled the sleeves up and drew my comb slowly through his hair. He just watched me.

We heard Dave call my name. "Back in a minute," I told the boy, holding up one finger, and went downstairs for the pizza. I balanced a carton of milk and two plastic glasses on the steaming box and climbed back up.

"I hope you like pizza. *Tu aimes la ... pizza?*" Pizza must be a universal word, like McDonald's, because his face brightened. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I took a bite, and three slices went down fast. The boy ate delicately but quickly, and we were just starting to slow down when we heard footsteps and then a clatter on the stairs. His eyes widened and he stopped mid-chew, pizza slice gripped tightly in his small fingers.

"It's okay. *C'est mon chien.*" I barely got the words out before Tiger erupted into the room. She's half German shepherd and half golden retriever, and because having a golden retriever is sort of a status symbol in Lake Placid, I say I'm halfway there. Mostly she looks like a shepherd with a retriever-shaped head, a little rotund from being fed too many pizza crusts by too many roommates. Now she was very excited and very wet.

Zach poked his head around the railing of the stairwell. "Can I come up?"

"You're already up." My rooms are off-limits to the guys, but the rules never quite pertain to Zach. He lives in Lake Placid year-round, cross-country skiing in the winter and biking in the summer, eking out a living at odd jobs. He's tall and rangy, with a stammer he hasn't quite overcome.

"Not really," Zach said, grinning as he bounded up the last few steps. He was wearing running shorts and shoes and a T-shirt that looked like it had been used as a paint rag. "One part of the way. Say, wh-wh-who's this?"

"A friend, visiting tonight." The boy had scooted closer to me, eyes wide.

"Pl-pl-pleased to meet you." Zach stuck out his hand. The boy shyly let Zach shake his fingertips. "Hey, pizza!" Zach said, and took a slice. Without warning, the whole tableau—boy, pizza, dog, Zach, room—shifted and shimmered as if my vision were blurring or the whole scene about to disappear, like a faulty *Star Trek* holodeck program. As if this were a safe ending I'd dreamed up while in the lake struggling to hold my breath, wondering if I were alive or dead.

After what seemed a lifetime I heard Zach say something and laugh, and with an almost tangible *ching*, I shifted back into the here and now. Tiger had shaken herself and sent water droplets flying.

"So Tiger took a swim." I grabbed a towel to start rubbing her down.

"Yep, after we went around the lake. Hey, I thought you were going up to see old Thomas."

"He's not old," I said automatically. "I was, but this young man is spending the night instead."

Raised eyebrows. Zach knew something was up but didn't ask. The boy was tentative.

reaching out to touch Tiger's black fur. I was suddenly exhausted and no longer hungry. "He Zach, would you take the rest of this down to the guys?"

"Mmm," he said, gracefully gathering up the box and the milk carton, and stuffing most of another slice in his mouth as he disappeared.

"Thanks for watching Tiger," I called out. I heard a muffled reply.

The boy's eyelids were drooping. "Are you sleepy?" I asked. "*Tu veux dormir?*" I led him to the bedroom, and convinced him to set the half-eaten slice of pizza on the bedside table. I pulled down the covers on my bed, and he crawled in, Tiger jumping up after him. Some people think it's barbaric to let your dog sleep with you, but I like that warm body snuggled in the curve of my knees. My dog, my house, my rules. One of the many reasons I'm single.

In the bathroom I spread the contents of my wallet out to dry on a towel, tossing out the wet business cards. Now I remembered I had to call Thomas.

Sometimes I wonder what Thomas sees in me. I'd met him late last summer when he was in Lake Placid for a running race, and he pretended not to care that I wouldn't commit to dating just him. Not that guys were lining up to take me out, but you never know. He's a history professor at the University of Vermont, and the most methodical and organized person I've ever met. He would never do anything on a whim, like diving into Lake Champlain. Nor would he understand what had compelled me to do so.

So I didn't tell him. I said an emergency had come up and I had had to turn back to babysitting someone's son. Which was true, sort of. Anyone else might have asked for details, but not Thomas.

The conversation ended awkwardly, as it always does. I know Thomas wants to say "I love you," but the natural response would be "I love you, too." And I don't, which I'm sure he knows. I can't lie about it, and he knows that, too.

Something's missing, and I don't know if it's him or me. He's smart enough that I don't have to limit my vocabulary around him. We both like to run and bike and cross-country ski and, well, all his parts are in good working order. At times I think I should end the relationship so he doesn't keep hoping it'll turn into more. But I would miss him, I think. So I do nothing. And feel more than a bit like a cheat at times like these.

I went down my creaky stairs to shut the door that closes off my stairwell. As I clicked the deadbolt, my brain went into replay, seeing the boy falling, me diving in, the long swim, the dreary walk, as if on a tiny screen inside my head.

If you threw a child in the lake, would you stay to watch him drown? Could anyone have seen me rescuing him? Like an icicle moving down my spine, the next thought arrived: *If you threw a child in a lake and knew he survived, would you come looking for him?* I tried to reason through. But because I couldn't imagine tossing a kid off a boat in the first place, trying to work out the subsequent thought process was futile.

The boy was curled up in the bed where I'd left him, facing the wall, with Tiger next to him. The bedroom window was open a few inches, as always during the months with no snow on the ground. But if someone banged a ladder against the side of the house to try to get in, I'd hear it. Or Tiger would.

As I brushed my teeth I scowled at my reflection in the wavery mirror. My face was haggard, with dark shadows under the eyes. I don't know when I'd last needed sleep that badly. I had to concentrate to keep the toothbrush moving.

I tiptoed into the bedroom and eased into the bed. I pulled the covers up and settled down on my side, back to the boy, Tiger between us. I closed my eyes and was just about immediately halfway to Never Never Land.

“Trrroy,” came a quiet murmur beside me.

“Mmm,” I said, too tired to turn over.

“*Je m’appelle Paul.*”

I lay in silence for a moment, hearing the small sounds of his breathing. “Okay, Paul,” said at last. “Sweet dreams. *Fais de beaux rêves.*”

I WOKE ABRUPTLY, IN THE SAME POSITION I'D FALLEN ASLEEP. Sunlight was streaming in the window, and the dust in the air seemed to dance on the windowsill. Tiger was standing beside the bed, giving me that look that said I was sadly neglecting her. I peered at my bedside clock: 8:47. I never sleep this late. I'm a roll-out-of-bed-at-7 kind of girl. Or earlier.

For a moment I wondered if I had dreamed it all: the drive, the ferry, the child, the swim. Maybe I'd never left the house to go visit Thomas. I pushed myself up on my elbows and turned and saw the small body, facing me, sleeping hard, curled into a tight ball.

Troy, what have you done? I could almost hear the words, an inner Jiminy Cricket. What the voice should have been saying was *Troy, who are you?* I'd woken up yesterday as one person and today as a different one. This person had dived from a ferry and rescued a child and brought him home with her. Troy Chance didn't do things like that.

But I had.

It seemed to make sense at the time. I could hear someone saying this in earnest explanation: a driver who convinced herself that she hadn't really hit someone, that it was just a bump on the road or a wild animal, and it wasn't safe to stop. Or a woman who took home a baby she found in a pram outside a store, because clearly she could take better care of it than the person who left it alone.

I could wake this child now and walk him to the police station a block away and explain that I hadn't been thinking clearly yesterday—that the coldness of the water, the length of the swim, the shock of finding a child thrown away, all had robbed me of the ability to think rationally. They'd believe me. This was a small town: people knew me and liked me. I'd been the sports editor of the daily newspaper; I'd covered their kids' baseball and hockey games, soccer tournaments, and track meets, put their photos in the paper, spelled their names right. I'd be a hero for rescuing a child, and not reporting it right away would be swept under the rug.

But I had known what I was doing.

I had saved a boy someone else had thrown away, and had made the decision not to turn him over to authorities, not to risk him being sent to a bad foster home or returned to the person who had tried to drown him. I'd found him and he trusted me, and I'd made the decision that he needed to be with me. For now.

Sitting there propped up in bed, I watched the boy sleeping, his body moving slightly with each breath.

It wouldn't sound rational to anyone. I knew that. But neither had it been rational to have been on deck on a gray misty day—or to have believed what I saw was a child, or that I could find him in the murky water. Or that we could survive that long cold swim to shore.

But we had. And maybe I wasn't meant to blithely pass him on to someone else.

I eased myself out of bed and bit my lip not to groan. I wouldn't have thought swimming could cause such pain; I felt a million years old. The boy didn't stir. I hobbled out to my office and clicked my computer on before heading down to let Tiger out. As she gratefully relieved herself on the grass, my brain inched into gear. *Maybe the boy's parents hadn't been*

the ferry. Maybe someone had snatched him—like the young Las Vegas boy I'd read about who had been abducted by drug dealers and abandoned—and then dumped him into the lake.

But what if his parents or guardian or stepparent had done it, but claimed someone else had? Susan Smith had claimed that a carjacker had taken her car with her two small sons, but she had been the one who had driven them into a lake to drown. If I saw a tearful news clip, would I be able to tell if that person was telling the truth?

I didn't know.

I shook some food into Tiger's bowl and climbed back upstairs. The boy was still sleeping. I sat at my computer and opened my browser.

If this child had been snatched by someone and dumped, the story would be all over the news, and it would be safe to let him go home. I should have checked last night, but my brain simply hadn't been working. I'd be guilty of letting his parents endure a sleepless night, but I could trot out the *too tired, too cold, too confused* excuse. Which would be true.

Tiger climbed the stairs and wandered into the bedroom, and the bed creaked as she jumped on it. She was staying close to the boy.

I pulled up Google and searched *missing boy Vermont* and *kidnapped boy Paul*, then a variety of combinations. I found a depressing 2006 story of a mother who had drowned her eight-year-old son in Lake Champlain near the Canadian border, but that was all. The Burlington newspaper had nothing, but I emailed the news desk asking if they'd had any report of a missing French-speaking boy, using my anonymous eBay email address. Montreal was less than a hundred miles from Burlington, so I checked the newspaper there. Nothing. If frantic parents were pleading for the return of a beloved child, I couldn't find them.

I Googled *missing children*, then searched MissingKids.com. I found the missing children website for the RCMP, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and entered Paul's name, gender, and eye and hair color. *Records found: 0*. I searched again, using no parameters other than gender, and came up only with two brothers, neither of whom resembled Paul in the slightest.

Then I looked up the Lake Champlain ferry website, and from the schedule saw that Paul's ferry should have passed mine roughly midway in the lake, not a mile or two from shore. Maybe mine had been late or his early, or both—but otherwise, I never would have seen his fall. Five minutes earlier or later, and one small boy would have drowned.

I'd been hearing small noises from my bedroom, as if the boy was moving around. I went to the doorway, and it took a moment to register that the bed was empty. No boy, no dog. For a moment I couldn't breathe. I saw the window was open a few inches, just as I'd left it. For a split second I wondered if they could have crept past me while I had been engrossed in my research, but even I'm not that oblivious. Boy and dog had to be somewhere in the room, and there were only two options: under the bed or in the closet. My eyes went to the bedside table where we'd left the half-eaten piece of pizza. Okay, missing boy, missing dog, missing half slice of pizza.

"Paul," I called out softly. "Paul, where are you? *Où es-tu?*"

A whine from Tiger. I eased back the hanging sheet that served as a closet door, and there was Paul crouched in the corner, one arm around Tiger, his other hand gripping the gnawed pizza slice—looking as if it were perfectly normal to hide in a closet with a dog and a piece of pizza. I knelt, a careful distance away. "Good morning, Paul," I said, keeping my voice

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