one

I was never supposed to end up in North Carolina.

I was supposed to stay in Maine instead. I was supposed to live with my best friend, Beatrice, and her family. Go back to my old high school for junior year. Play on the softball team where Beatrice pitched and I played center field with standing orders from Coach to go after every ball hit to the outfield.

If I'd stayed in Maine, we would have gone riding on Beatrice's horse down pine trails to the bluffs overlooking the Atlantic. We would have gone sea kayaking and shared her bedroom and made fun of her little brother, Sean, who had his hair in a rat tail—a style nobody had worn since the 1980s.

We would have made fun of Coach, too, who told us he used to play for a Red Sox farm team, which we doubted. We looked him up one time on the Internet and couldn't find him on any farm team rosters.

If I'd stayed in Maine, I would have done all that, and would have gone by my old house sometimes, and the barn and Dad's vet clinic, and maybe I would have gotten a job with the new vet who took over from Dad back in the spring when his cough got so bad that he couldn't work. I would have visited the cemetery where Grandma and Grandpa were buried, and now Dad, too. I would have weeded all their plots and planted flowers.

But life doesn't turn out the way you expect. Ever. I didn't expect Dad to die, not even at his sickest, not even when he didn't know who I was anymore. Not even in those last hours at the hospital, when the *click* and *hush* of the oxygen were the only sounds in that dark, awful room, and Reverend Harding hugged me and prayed with me, and said the Twenty-third Psalm—"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

When he finished, he whispered, "Iris, I'm so, so sorry. It's time we let him go."

I hadn't expected that, either. I'd thought we were praying for God to let Dad live.

Beatrice had been my best friend since elementary school, and her parents promised Dad that they would take care of me. It was the thing he worried about most in his last weeks.

But things changed not long after he died. Beatrice's parents started arguing, usually late at night. And they kept arguing—in their bedroom, with the door shut and the sound muffled.

We could hear their voices, even if we couldn't make out what they were saying. Beatrice put on her iPod and turned up the music. I didn't have an iPod. Sometimes I left the house and rode my bike down to the batting cages. Sometimes, after Beatrice fell asleep, I sat up in my bed until the arguing stopped, as terrified then by the silence as I had been earlier by her parents' harsh voices.

Mr. Stone spoke to me first. It was a month after the funeral. "We're very sorry, Iris," he said. "Things have gotten difficult for Mrs. Stone and me. I know we promised your father, but that was before—"

He didn't finish, but he didn't have to. I knew what it meant, and it hit me like a line drive to my stomach. He tried to smile. "This doesn't mean we won't have you back for a visit," he added. "Would you like that? Would you like to come back for a visit sometime?"

He didn't look at me. He didn't look at Beatrice. Or at Mrs. Stone. My heart sank.

Mrs. Stone said she was sorry, too. "I wish we could keep you with us, Iris," she said. "There are just these things in the way. . . ."

Her voice trailed off, too. She brushed some hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ears. They were red. Her whole face was red—either from crying or because she was about to. Then she wandered off, the way she often did in the middle of conversations.

"That's OK, Mrs. Stone," I said, knowing Dad would want

me to be polite no matter what. But it wasn't OK. I should have screamed at her instead. I should have screamed at all of them.

Aunt Sue was the next of kin.

She was my mom's older sister. I had only seen her once before, but I didn't remember because it was when I was a baby. She drove up from North Carolina right after I was born. Dad told me about it. She had a son named Book, who was two then. I never heard about Book having a father. Aunt Sue didn't want to stay in our house, so the night they arrived, she and Book slept under the camper shell in the back of their truck, even though it was February. They only stayed part of the next day. Aunt Sue looked at me but wouldn't hold me, got in a fight with my mom about some things that had happened a long time ago, then climbed back in the truck with Book and drove home.

I didn't know what to expect from her now, all these years later. When I called her from Beatrice's, she was smoking the whole time. I heard her light a cigarette, and every time she spoke, I heard her exhale first. She said she was sorry about Dad but didn't sound as if she meant it. She said Book was looking forward to having me live with them, but that didn't sound sincere, either. She didn't say much else.

I asked if she ever heard from my mom, and there was a long silence.

Then she said, "No."

Then she said, "And I don't ever expect to, either."

I handed the phone off to Beatrice's dad. I hadn't really expected my mom to be an option. She left when I was five, and no one knew where she was—not even Aunt Sue, apparently. No one had heard from her in years.

I went back to the batting cages after getting off the phone, my face burning from anger and frustration, and I swung at high, hard fastballs for an hour until I was too tired to lift the bat.

Beatrice and I stayed up late the night before I left, packing and repacking my stuff. She kept wanting to add more, trying to make me take clothes that were hers: socks and T-shirts, sweaters and mittens and scarves—as if that would make up for her family abandoning me. I didn't want any of it.

"You're going to come back for Christmas, right?" she asked at one point. It was well after midnight.

"Yeah," I said, though I really wasn't sure of that, or of anything. "If I have the money."

"I'll get you the money," Beatrice said. "I bet my parents will pay for the whole thing. It's the least they can do."

"Yeah," I said again, suddenly doubting there would be any Christmas visit. "Maybe."

Beatrice's boyfriend called—his name was Collie—and they spent half an hour whispering, which gave me time to finally finish packing. I had an old hat that Dad used to wear, a green fishing cap. I ran my fingers over the frayed edges and

traced the curve of the bill. I pressed it to my face and imagined it smelled like Dad, but probably it didn't. Probably it had been too long since he'd worn it.

I put it on, thinking it would be too big, but it fit me just right.

At three in the morning, Beatrice and I climbed out her window and wandered around town one last time. Nobody was awake but us. We didn't talk; we didn't do anything. We just walked down the middle of the street, east toward the harbor. The wind had picked up, blowing in off the Atlantic; it was threatening to storm.

Our reflections, distorted in the darkened storefront windows as we walked past a row of shops, magnified what a funny-looking pair we were—Beatrice tall, with her black hair and high cheekbones and perfect smile and model's legs; me short and skinny, with a sharp face and freckles and chopped hair and middle-school boobs; both of us in practice Ts, gym shorts, floppy socks, dirty New Balances. It was about all either of us wore in the summer.

Beatrice started crying.

"I'm so sorry about my mom and dad," she said. "I wish I knew what was going on."

I waited for her to say more, to at least try to explain what had happened. Something. But she just cried. I started to comfort her, to act polite and tell her it was OK, like I had with her mom. But then it hit me again how messed up the whole thing was. Maybe her parents were splitting up, but so what? My dad had *died,* and my best friend's parents had broken their

one promise to him. And all Beatrice could do was cry about it. What about fighting for me? What about insisting that I stay with them no matter what?

But as much as I wanted to shout all that at Beatrice, I just couldn't. She and her family were still all I had, even if it was for just this one last night in Maine. So I took off running instead.

Beatrice yelled "Wait!" but I wouldn't, so she raced after me down the street, past shops, through people's yards, down alleys, down to the bay. I let her catch up with me where the land sloped down to the black water—usually calm in the harbor, but churning tonight as the wind kept blowing harder and the rough ocean waves skirted the seawall.

The storm broke over us as we stood there—a summer squall, as sudden and fierce as a nor'easter.

"Come on!" I yelled over the roar of the wind and the rain. "Let's go out on the seawall."

Beyond the dark harbor we could see whitecaps rising, smashing hard onto the rocks. The seawall jutted out a quarter of a mile, no longer so high above the tide line. A blue beacon light shone faintly above a small stone cabin at the point.

"You're crazy," Beatrice yelled back. "It's too dangerous!"

I ignored her and slid down the muddy embankment to the water's edge. The rain kept pouring as I climbed over wet rocks and finally onto the wall.

"Iris!" Beatrice yelled after me, but when I didn't stop, she followed me.

Soon we were running, stumbling, leaning into the wind and the hard, slanting rain that pelted us, sharp as needles on our arms and legs and faces—anywhere we were exposed. We struggled on, with the wind howling, the waves rising higher, crashing harder, the spray blinding us.

It took ten minutes to make it to the end, battling through the wind and that spray, until we fell inside the shack, exhausted. There was no door. Everything was slick and wet. Wood shutters strained but held in the one window on the ocean side. We huddled together at first, crouching low on the floor.

Beatrice wanted us to stay like that until the storm passed, but I had a different idea. I got up to open the shutters—they slammed against the outside wall—and then I stood there for the next half hour, facing the Atlantic. I gripped the frame tight until I couldn't feel my hands, just the blasting wind and the needles of rain and the incessant spray. The waves rose dangerously high, threatening to break over the seawall.

My face burned. I was sure I would have welts from the slicing rain. For a minute it even seemed to be raining backward, the water falling up and into my face from the ocean.

Then the wind shifted, and slowly, gradually, died. The waves receded. The storm passed.

There were stars out. I shivered violently from the cold, then turned and helped Beatrice off the floor. We stood there for a couple of minutes more, leaning on each other, then staggered together back home—back to *her* home. We didn't speak. I used to always know what Beatrice was thinking, but now, and

for most of the past month, I didn't have a clue. Maybe she kept quiet because she was mad at me for dragging her out onto the seawall, or maybe she just didn't know what to say anymore.

I didn't know what was left to say, either, and didn't have the words to explain to Beatrice—or to anyone else—how good it had felt to be out there on the seawall in the middle of the storm. How it was so much better than lying awake at night, worrying about moving to North Carolina, thinking about my dad, thinking about all the things I forgot to tell him, all the ways I hadn't been a good enough daughter, how much I missed him and how awful and deep this black hole of grief was that threatened to pull me all the way in and turn me into something the opposite of myself.

two

I stepped outside the next morning to a world lashed clean by the storm. The sun was blinding, the sky blue and cloudless. Beatrice and I struggled to fit my suitcases into the trunk of her dad's car but kept getting in each other's way. Everything seemed off—the house, the yard, the street, *us*—as if it had all been erased, then redrawn: close to the original, but not quite the same. Angles a little different, sight lines no longer clear. I put on sunglasses, but it was still too bright out. I couldn't see the ocean.

Once we were done, Beatrice and I both climbed into the backseat. Mr. Stone got in behind the steering wheel and looked blankly at the empty passenger seat for a minute.

Finally he shrugged. "Off we go, then." Mrs. Stone waved from the front door, sagging against the frame as if she needed the support to help her stand.

We'd only gotten a few hours of sleep, but I was still surprised that Beatrice passed out ten minutes later, not long after we pulled onto the Portland highway. Mr. Stone and I didn't talk. He fiddled with the radio until he found the oldies station that my dad and I always used to listen to, but the ones playing today seemed to have been selected just to make me feel awful: "So Far Away," "Operator," "Wish You Were Here."

I pulled my hoodie up over my ears to try to block out the sound, and spent the rest of the trip looking out the window at the blur of pine stands and strip malls and little towns and glimpses of the coast, trying to memorize everything as if seeing it for the last time, which maybe I was.

Once we got on the interstate, the real Maine vanished, though, and it seemed as if we could have been almost anywhere in America—not that I'd been very many places before: Portland a dozen times, Boston twice for softball tournaments, Nova Scotia once on the ferry. I'd never been on an airplane, but I couldn't get excited about it, knowing what I was leaving and where I was going.

There was a lobster-roll stand where we got off the interstate, and I asked Mr. Stone if he would stop.

"You're hungry?" he asked, looking at the clock on the dashboard. It was ten in the morning.

I shook my head. "I just wanted to get some Whoopie Pies for my aunt and my cousin. I don't think they have them in North Carolina. I thought I should probably bring them something."

Beatrice stayed asleep when I got out of the car and didn't wake up two minutes later when I climbed back in. I had to elbow her awake when we finally reached the airport. She was slumped against my shoulder and left a string of drool when she sat up.

"Sorry," she croaked.

"For what?" I asked. "Falling asleep or getting drool on my hoodie?"

She blinked and wiped her chin. "What?"

I shook my head. "Never mind."

Mr. Stone looked over the backseat. "Almost there," he said. "All ready for your big adventure, Iris?"

Beatrice sniffed. "God, Dad. She's not going to Disneyland."

"I'm aware of that, Beatrice," Mr. Stone said, his voice sharp. He reached back without looking and gestured at me with an envelope. "This is some spending money for your trip, Iris, and any expenses that might come up when you get to your aunt's."

Beatrice grabbed the envelope and counted the money: two hundred dollars in a stack of crisp twenties. Her face was red when she handed it back over, and I shoved the money into my jeans pocket and mumbled thanks.

Beatrice's cell phone rang as we pulled up to the terminal, and I knew from the ringtone that it was Collie. They barely had time to launch into one of their whispery conversations, though, when Mr. Stone stopped at the Departures curb.

"Gotta go," Beatrice said into her phone. "Love you, too."

Mr. Stone said he would wait in the cell-phone lot for Beatrice to go in with me, and she started chattering the minute he drove off, I guess trying to make up for all the things she hadn't been awake long enough to say in the car. "Call me when you get there, OK? And e-mail me as soon as you get to a computer. Tell me everything. See if you can take pictures and send them to me. And find out when you can come back to visit."

Her phone rang again. "It's Collie," she said. "He must have forgotten to tell me something."

She scooted off to talk while I got my ticket and checked my bags.

I wanted to reach over and snap her cell phone closed, but instead I just stood there seething. Beatrice had changed in the past month. The worse things were between her parents, and the closer I got to leaving, the more obsessed she'd become with boys.

She finally got off her phone, came back over, and threw her arms around me. It seemed to finally be hitting her that I was really leaving. I hugged her tight and started to speak, but before I could figure out what I was going to say, her cell phone went off again.

The ringtone wasn't Collie's, but she pulled away quickly. "Oh, hey," she chirped. By the time she finished the new conversation, I was in the security line, and all she could do was call my name and wave.

• • •

I kept my eyes tightly shut during takeoff—not because I was afraid of flying but from the effort of holding it together. The minute they turned off the FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT sign, I squeezed past two passengers in my row and made my unsteady way to the lavatory, where I finally crumbled into tears. I'd been holding them in for weeks, since Mr. Stone first told me I couldn't stay with them, that I would have to live with Aunt Sue in North Carolina. But now it was actually happening. I was leaving Maine, leaving everything I'd ever known, leaving my whole life behind. I sat trembling on the toilet seat in that tiny airplane bathroom, knees drawn up to my chin, face buried in my hands. I might have stayed there sobbing for the entire flight, but people kept knocking on the door and I finally had to force myself to stop. I washed my face, pressed my hands over my puffy eyes, took a deep breath, and went back to my seat.

As we cruised over Massachusetts, I sipped a ginger ale and stared out the window. My thoughts kept circling back to Beatrice, to the bribe money Mr. Stone had given me, to the last glimpse of Maine coast through the salt-streaked car window. Finally I dug through my bag and pulled out a pen and my notebook.

Dear Dad,

You won't believe where I am right now. I've got my face pressed against an airplane window and I'm looking down on

Boston. I think I can see Fenway Park, but it might just be one of those Super Walmarts. . . .

I kept writing. I told Dad I loved flying, which might have actually been true if I hadn't been so distracted. I told him about sneaking out of Beatrice's house the night before, and about the storm, but not about the seawall. I knew he would have thought it was a foolish thing to do, even if he'd have understood why I did it. I didn't tell him about how angry I was at Beatrice and her parents, or about how much I dreaded moving to North Carolina. I kept my letter upbeat and positive; I didn't want to upset him.

I'd written Dad other letters like this since he died. They weren't journal entries, or diary entries, or anything where I poured out my heart and soul. Just letters. Just the Iris news. I wrote them at times like this, when I got hit by one of these tsunamis of grief and needed something, anything, to keep me from drowning.

It had started with one of the last conversations we had. Dad had gotten confused. He thought I was going on a trip. He kept talking about my trip, and he wanted me to promise to write to him.

I tried to make him understand. "I'm not going anywhere, Dad," I said. "I'm staying right here with you. There's no trip. I'm staying right here."

"It's OK," he said, his eyes squeezed shut, his hand locked

tight around mine. "Just promise you'll write me a letter when you get there."

So I wrote him these letters, not that there was any place to send them. Usually I tore the letters into strips once I finished, and then tore the strips into scraps, and then threw the scraps away. I kept this one, though. I didn't have much left of Dad, and I didn't want to leave it on the plane.

Aunt Sue was waiting for me at the Raleigh airport, and she looked just like her voice: raspy and hard, though she was kind of pretty, too, in a fading, crow's-feet, farmer's-tan way. I could see my mom in her a little, though my mom had been younger and thinner than Aunt Sue the last time I saw her. Aunt Sue had on an orange baseball cap with a sweat stain in the front, jammed tight over her short gray-brown hair. Her charcoal Harley-Davidson T-shirt was tight, too, and showed off her figure. She wore old jeans, and socks and sandals, the same as me—I wasn't sure what to make of that—and she held a sign with my name on it in all capital letters, spelled wrong: IRIS WHITE.

Book wasn't with her.

I walked all the way up to her before she actually looked at me. "Aunt Sue?" I said.

Our faces were about level, though when she shrugged and straightened up I could see she was a couple of inches taller.

"You Iris?" she said.

"Yes. It's Wight, though. *W-I-G-H-T.*"

She shrugged again. "That all you got?" She nodded at my shoulder bag. I also had the sack of Whoopie Pies.

I held them out to her. "These are from Maine. They make them up there. I just got them this morning."

She nodded again and nearly smiled. "Yeah, I had one of them once. They're right tasty. Thanks."

"You're welcome," I said, happy about that. Aunt Sue turned to leave, expecting me to follow, but I had to stop her.

"There is some more stuff," I said. "I have two suitcases I need to pick up at the baggage claim."

That erased any trace of a smile.

"I got a truck parked in the parking deck, and we're gonna have to pay for having it there," Aunt Sue said. "They give you any money for your trip here?"

Her question caught me off guard, and it took me a minute to understand that she expected me to pay for the parking. I pulled out one of Mr. Stone's twenty-dollar bills and handed it to her.

"All right, then," she said, and headed for the escalator with the sack of Whoopie Pies dangling at her side.

She ate one while we waited for my bags to show up on the carousel, then said, "What I wouldn't give for a cup of coffee right about now."

"There's a Starbucks back upstairs at the Arrivals," I said.

Aunt Sue snorted. "I'll wait for a 7-Eleven."

I didn't say anything else. Neither of us did. Despite our one strained phone conversation, I'd thought Aunt Sue would

be warmer, happier to see me. At least curious about this niece she'd never known. At least sympathetic.

The bags were slow, so after ten minutes, she went outside to smoke. I went up to the Starbucks. Dad never liked me drinking coffee but knew I was going to anyway, so we always compromised and drank half-decaf and half-regular when we made it at home. This time I got all regular.

I still had my cup when Aunt Sue came back inside, reeking of cigarettes. She sniffed when she saw it and said, "I guess you must be made of money."

My face flushed, but I didn't say anything. I couldn't tell if I'd done something wrong or if she was just this way with everybody. I crumpled the cup and tossed it in the trash just as the carousel jerked into motion and suitcases tumbled out of the chute—mine first of all, which seemed like a miracle. Aunt Sue watched as I dragged them off the conveyor belt; she didn't offer to help as I struggled behind her with them on the long walk to the parking garage. Once we got there, she had me throw everything in the back of her truck, an old Ford with a rusted-out bed, and when I said it looked like rain, she dragged a moldy tarp out from behind the driver's seat and told me to tuck that around my stuff if I was worried.

We stopped once on the two-hour drive to Craven County—at a 7-Eleven. Aunt Sue finally got her coffee; I paid for the gas. It was mostly flat and mostly country there in eastern

North Carolina—peanut fields, tobacco fields, pine forests—and I fell asleep an hour in. I hadn't expected to doze off, but I guess I was exhausted from not sleeping at all the night before.

Rain whipping through my open window woke me. I rolled it up, but the truck didn't have air conditioning and soon it got too hot, so I ended up cracking the window even though the spray came through. Aunt Sue lit a cigarette, and I cracked it open some more. I imagined everything in the back, which was everything I owned in the world, getting soaked under the leaky tarp.

It was dark when we finally reached the farm. A dog started barking when Aunt Sue stopped the truck, and that made me happy. I'd have at least one friend in North Carolina, anyway. Aunt Sue yelled at him to shut up, and he did. Right away.

"His name's Gnarly," Aunt Sue said. "And he isn't worth a damn."

Gnarly's leash was clipped to a long, drooping clothesline in the yard. He ran back and forth a couple of times but then settled down. I knelt in the dry grass—the rain hadn't reached Craven County—and let him lick my hand, which calmed us both down a little. He was some sort of mongrel hound with a lot of slobber, and I liked him right away.

I smelled pine trees and something funky and familiar: manure and damp straw. There was a field, a fence, and a

barn, so they must have had other animals, not that Aunt Sue had mentioned any.

My bags were soaked, just as I had feared. I grabbed a dripping suitcase and followed Aunt Sue up the steps and onto the back porch, and then into the kitchen. Book was there, a hulking guy with a shaved head and a gray, grass-stained T-shirt that said *Property of Craven County H.S. Athletics.* He sat hunched over a giant sandwich at the kitchen table. It was the kind of sandwich Dad used to call a Dagwood, because it had so much stuff piled so high in it, the way Dagwood made his in that Sunday comic strip *Blondie*: a mountain of baloney and cheese and lettuce and what looked like crushed potato chips and pickles and extra bread slices in the middle. Book's chin was yellow with mustard.

The first thing Aunt Sue said to him was "I guess you're eating tomorrow's lunch the same time as your dinner."

Book had too much food in his mouth to answer, but his eyes got wide with what looked like genuine panic. He flinched when Aunt Sue came up behind him, though he was twice her size.

Aunt Sue tilted her head at me. "This is your cousin, Iris. Put down your big sandwich and take her stuff upstairs to the little room."

Book swallowed. He looked me up and down, and then grinned. "Hey, Iris," he said. "Nice to meet you."

I pulled the zipper up higher on my hoodie. "Yeah. You, too."

He followed me out to the truck and grabbed my other soggy

bag. "There's a clothesline," he said. "You can unclip Gnarly tomorrow and hang all your stuff out to dry or whatever. We don't have a dryer. Got a washing machine, though."

That surprised me. Dad and I used a clothesline during most of the year, but we still had a dryer. I wasn't sure I'd ever known anyone who didn't own one.

Aunt Sue wasn't kidding about it being a little room. It had a twin bed, and that was all: no closet, no other furniture, nothing else except a small window. I shivered with claustrophobia. Book dumped my wet bags on the bare wood floor, grunted, looked at me up and down again, then said, "Jeez, nice manners. You're welcome."

I said, "Oh, sorry. Thanks," and he mimicked me: "Oh, sorry. You're welcome again." I think he was trying to be funny. He tromped back down the stairs to his sandwich. I stayed behind and sat on the bed, expecting it to give a little, only it didn't. I might have been sitting on a rock. I checked and there was a big sheet of plywood between the box spring and the mattress.

I heard Aunt Sue and Book downstairs talking about the Whoopie Pies, then I heard a great rustling of the bag and figured it was Book, moving on to dessert. Every breath I took in my closet of a room tasted stale, so I pried open the window and gulped in the cooler night air. Then I dumped everything out of my suitcases—wet clothes in one pile, dry clothes in the other. When I finished, there was no room left to stand, so I lay back on the hard bed and clenched my eyes shut, and

stayed like that, trying and failing to pretend that I was somewhere else, until Aunt Sue yelled to me up the stairs.

"You can come down anytime. It's sandwiches for dinner, so you can help yourself."

The last thing I felt like doing was eating, especially if Aunt Sue and Book were still shoveling Whoopie Pies into their mouths. I stepped out of the little room and went down to the kitchen. Aunt Sue and Book both looked up, but without much interest.

"I don't feel very well," I said. "Thanks for coming to get me at the airport and all. I think I'll skip dinner and go straight to bed if that's all right."

Aunt Sue shrugged. "Fine. Whatever. You'll go to school with Book in the morning. You already missed the first three days."

I nodded and went back upstairs. I left my stuff lying on the floor—there was nowhere to put it, anyway—and, after one last look around, pulled the string to shut off the faint overhead light, a naked twenty-watt bulb.

Later, as I lay on that hard bed, the heat and the sadness both pressing down on me, I heard the door slam shut downstairs, then somebody trying to start the truck—once, twice, a third time before it caught. Gnarly launched into a barking fit after the truck pulled out of the yard. I waited for him to stop. After half an hour I started to doubt that he ever would, so I pulled my jeans back on and went downstairs. All the lights were out, but I could see Gnarly in the moonlight, running

back and forth again under the clothesline, barking at something in the trees, probably squirrels.

I went outside and squatted in the grass near the clothesline. Gnarly came over and sniffed me, and I let him. After a while he started licking me, which made me smile for the first time since I'd been in Craven County. I lay back in the grass and looked up at the North Carolina stars.

In the silence, I could hear the distinct sound of goats *maa*ing in the barn. Lying there listening to them made me smile, too. I'd always loved goats—every one of them different from every other one, and all of them goofy and playful. Dad said they bleated in a higher pitch than sheep did—that's how you could tell the difference—and the sound I heard was definitely a herd of goats. I thought about going in to see them, but the barn was dark and I didn't know if I'd be able to find a light. Plus I liked what I was doing—petting this new dog, the way I'd done with hundreds of animals over the years in Dad's vet office. I figured I would save the goats for tomorrow.

Book was snoring loudly from a downstairs bedroom when the mosquitoes finally chased me inside. Even though Gnarly had been peaceful when I left him, he started barking again not long after I crawled back into bed, and he kept me awake for another hour, though I was bone tired and desperate for sleep.

I even tried praying to God that Gnarly would stop, though I wasn't surprised when that didn't work. It hadn't worked when I'd prayed to God to save my dad, either. I wasn't even sure I

believed in God anymore. I had confessed that to Reverend Harding the day he came to the hospital and wanted me to pray with him over Dad. He said everybody had their doubts, but it was all right to pray anyway, because you never knew who might be listening, and you also never knew when you might start to believe.