

chapter one

“KATE?”

From where she stands on the back porch, Mom’s voice is quieter than the early-morning sounds of chirping birds and scampering squirrels. Still, it pierces through me.

Listen children small and tall. Obey your parents. Heed their call. The words of the Sunday school hymn march uninvited through my head. I wish I could just wash my mind, scrub it clean, of all the rules, all the scriptures, and start over.

Instead of answering, I creep farther into the morning shadows, wheeling my bike toward the woods, where the scent of wild roses beckons. At the edge of Aunt Katherine’s property, I heft the frame over a fallen tree, hoping for an escape route. But the sight ahead—a maze of sapling pines, thick ferns, and more fallen logs—is discouraging. It would take forever to plow my way through to the highway.

“Kate, is that you?” Mom calls again.

"No. It's a lunatic rapist, lurking in the woods, ready to attack a lone woman," I mutter as I drag my tires back over the tree and make my way toward the inn. When I'm within hearing distance, I use a low voice to keep from waking the guests. "I'm biking to school today."

"Your first day? It's seven miles and still dark out. Why aren't you taking the bus?" Mom whispers. She leans against the porch railing of the inn and reaches under her shoulder-length auburn hair to fasten her locker.

Above me, wisps of pink clouds like cotton candy are beginning to streak through the gray sky. After a week in Puffin Cove, I'm still in awe of the ever-changing Maine sky. If only I could evaporate and mix myself with the colorful clouds and reappear at school. That would freak Mom out. Even though our—her—church talks about visions and angels, I'm sure she's never actually seen anything mystic happen. But sadly, every particle of me is present and accounted for as I stand beside our guests' cars: a BMW convertible, a Ford Explorer, and a bright red Jeep Cherokee. And my personal interrogator, with hands on her hips, eyes zooming into me like telescopic lenses, won't be leaving me alone until I give her an answer.

"I taped a note on the fridge. All the clubs have sign-up tables before school today. I thought I might join cross-country."

"Cross-country? Why, that's wonderful. But I haven't made your lunch yet. If only you had told me yesterday, I

could have arranged for Aunt Katherine to cover for me." She turns toward the cottage on the other side of the drive, but the blinds of my great-aunt's windows are still shut and everything is dark. "Do you even know the way?"

"Yes. I remember from when we went to register."

"Oh, Kate." Mom sighs. "Why don't you ask for my help instead of trying to do everything yourself?"

I squint at the locker, her precious locker, the locker I have grown to hate. My grip on the handlebars tightens. Does she really want to know why? Hasn't she figured it out during this endless year since Dad died? I glance at my watch. "I've got to go, Mom. I already packed myself a lunch."

"I hope it's got something healthy in it. And please tell me you're changing out of those running shorts and into one of your school skirts when you get there."

My shoulder muscles tense at the mention of school skirts. Like I'd be caught wearing one of those ever again.

When I don't answer, Mom says, "Do you think cross-country practice will start today?"

"Yes. That's what the papers we got at the school said."

"Well, don't be too late," her voice pleads, suddenly soft and kind. "Remember the dinner at church? I was thinking you could come with me."

I don't answer. I never do. Not anymore. Not about church.

Mom's eyes shift focus when a light appears in one of

the guest bedrooms. Shadows stir behind the lace curtains. She smooths her hair, pats at her skirt, and pastes on her charming innkeeper smile.

"All right, Kate. I can't do anything about driving you to school right now, but please be careful. The woods and back roads can be dangerous. That's where perverts hide, looking for prey."

"Right, like all the perverts in Maine are up at six a.m. just to catch me," I answer under my breath.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Bye, Mom."

"Good-bye, Kate. I'll be praying for you. Good luck with your first day at Rocky Point High. Remember, you are a witness for Christ."

Won't she ever get it? A witness for Christ? Me?

Despite her cheerful face, I notice her shoulders slump as she turns away. Her step is heavier than usual as she climbs the back-porch steps. Since we arrived last week, I've realized her life isn't easy. Mom has almost totally taken over running Aunt Katherine's bed-and-breakfast inn. She cooks, cleans, and shops for the guests every day and still manages to make me lunch and dinner. By nine p.m. she's yawning. Twice this past week she even fell asleep at the kitchen table, resting her head on top of menus and shopping lists. And she has no support group here, no one but Dad's aunt Katherine and me, her wayward daughter, her only child, who's headed

for Hell. She left all her church friends, all her church committees, and her sister behind in Phoenix to run this inn. If my stomach wasn't spinning at the thought of starting at a brand-new high school—and if I didn't think about Dad—I could almost pity her.

But I do think about Dad.