

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 locket.

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 locket, her precious locket, the locket 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.

chapter two

WANTING TO MELT into the tile floor, I slink past the mural of a gigantic red bird and the words GO CARDINALS painted on the cafeteria wall. How many years has it been here? Did Dad walk past it when he ate in this same lunchroom? Where did he sit? Did he have friends? Or, like me, did he have to scan the entire room for an empty table where he could hide?

At least in Phoenix we could eat outside. I found my own shaded palm tree after I quit going to church last year. I just couldn't face my religious friends with all their hopeful comments about my dead father. "It's not too late, Kate. You can still pray for the salvation of his soul. We have missionaries in Heaven who are trying to convert people in the spirit world every day." Hiding here will be much harder. I feel everyone's eyes on me. They seem to be whispering, "Oh, it's the new girl. She has no one to sit with." Is there some universal high-school code that says you're supposed to stare at and ignore the new kid? Even

though I had sworn off prayer months ago, I find myself desperately begging any mystical force in the universe to deliver me from this misery, drop me into a dark hole or help me vanish.

And then I notice them. The girls in their long blue, black, and brown skirts walking straight in front of me like nuns on their way to Mass.

Modesty is a young woman's virtue. All skirts should be midcalf in length and of dark, subdued colors. It is our soul that should shine, not our outer clothing.

And sure enough the skirts all hit the girls at midcalf—school skirts. I don't breathe. Don't notice me, my head chants. Don't notice me. And they don't. They march to their table, right past me, just like I'm any generic person from the outside world! Despite the embarrassment of standing here alone, I can't help but smile. I look normal! I blend in!

It's not that I'm wearing anything that could even remotely be considered the height of style, even though I did see two other girls wearing Adidas running shorts just like mine. But unlike me, both girls had the waistband of their shorts rolled over so just the tiniest bit of their tan bellies was exposed, too little to get them kicked out of school, but enough to show off their flat stomachs. In place of a 10K T-shirt, they each wore matching Adidas tank tops, and platform flip-flops instead of serious running shoes. But still.

Against my will, my eyes stay glued to the church girls' table. One girl wears a *Keep the Faith* T-shirt. From here I can't read the tiny words underneath. But I know them by heart. *Be happy, be Christian*. I cringe. I have an identical yellow shirt, stuffed away with all my other church clothes in a box at the back of my closet. The Church of the Holy Divine seems to be plugging the same ideas here that it did back in Arizona. I got my shirt almost two years ago on my fourteenth birthday, like everyone at church does at that age. With it comes a special challenge to share the love of Jesus Christ with at least fourteen people throughout the year. They believe everyone in the world would be better off if they were members of the Church of the Holy Divine, because it is the only *true* church on the face of the earth. And to think I believed it, too. I make a vow to dig my T-shirt out of the bottom of my box and burn it.

Next I notice the six identical smiles and six sets of shining eyes. I always used to think people from our church were different because the spirit of Christ shone through us. But whatever is shining in their eyes feels more like something from a horror movie now. Did my eyes look like that? How far would I have followed our High Priest, Mom, and other church leaders if Dad hadn't died? If those girls knew who I was, they'd be all over me. They'd put *fellowship Kate* on their list of spiritual things to do. And then they could really beam, because they'd be fulfilling

their true reason for being at Rocky Point High. Up until high school, kids who belong to the Church of the Holy Divine are homeschooled, but once you're fourteen, you're considered ready to go out into the world and bring others *the truth*. Yeah, right. Maybe the real reason they let us come to public high schools is that no stay-at-home moms know how to teach chemistry or calculus.

As they all bow their heads, I start to gag. Praying. In the school cafeteria. I did that, too. I turn away, not knowing how long I've been standing in this spot. I sigh and start searching for a place to sit again.

"Nice shirt."

A girl with short, curly dark hair grins up at me. I'm only five foot two and not used to looking down to talk to people, but she's at least two or three inches shorter than me. Her wrists and feet are so small they look elfish, but she's really stacked on top, even in her baggy T-shirt. "So I take it you run?" she asks, adjusting her backpack and armload of posters.

I nod.

"Didn't I see you stop in front of the cross-country table this morning?"

I nod again.

"But you didn't sign up for the team?"

"N-n-o," I stutter. I wanted to, I wanted to so badly, but I felt so scared, so shy.

“Why not?”

I shrug, too embarrassed to explain, and at the same time wonder if it’s hard to run fast with big breasts. I’ll never know. I’m almost flat.

“Well, come tell me about it at our table.” She motions her shoulder toward a group of students near the far end of the cafeteria. “If I stand one more second, I’ll drop something.”

“Here, let me help.” My voice suddenly comes to life as I take several of the posters out of her hands.

“Thanks. I’m Jamie, by the way.”

“I’m Kate,” I say, and follow her in a daze. Did some Heavenly being actually hear my prayer? Or do I just look that pathetic and alone?

“If you’ve run a 10K before, we could use you,” Jamie says, turning her head back to me as she darts through clusters of students.

At the table, she drops posters, backpack, and several books as she introduces me to “the rest of the senior geeks.” She points last to a tall guy who has cropped red hair, the thick kind that would be in tight curls if it grew an inch. “This is Douglas Riggs. We’ve been friends since preschool. We used to play on the teeter-totter together.”

“Hey,” they all seem to say in unison as I sit across from Douglas in a vacant spot. He’s wearing this ugly tan sweater even though it’s still warm out, a sweater you just know his mom picked out for him. He’s twitching his leg so hard under the table that it vibrates.

Totally ignoring me, he stares at Jamie and asks, “So, what did you get on the review test today in calculus?”

Jamie takes the posters I’m holding and combines them with hers and tucks them all under the table. Her shirt says *Vegetarians have more fun*. She sits and pulls a banana out of her backpack before answering. “One hundred and four.”

Douglas grins. “Me, too.”

Jamie and Douglas high-five each other.

“You both got the bonus question, right?” one of the other girls asks.

Jamie shrugs as she peels the banana. “I got lucky and guessed the right formula to solve the extra-credit problem. How about you, Douglas?”

Douglas starts explaining the interval at which the tangent X approaches the limit of the function and the rest of the table have their eyes glued to him like he’s revealing the secret answer to winning a million-dollar lottery ticket. They really are geeks.

I bite into my twelve-grain bagel and only half listen as Jamie chimes in with more about the derivatives. Okay, so they aren’t exactly the cool group, but still . . . I shiver as I glance over at the table of long-skirted girls. Things could be worse.

“Now, Douglas, quit bugging me about calculus. I have work to do.” She smiles and turns toward me. Between bites of her banana she says, “Kate, can I beg you to join the cross-country team?”