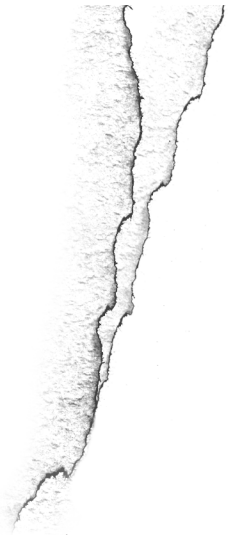

1
THE BET

WHENEVER I LOOKED BACK ON THAT SUMMER, I'D think of the bet as what set all the changes in motion. Even though the actual trigger was something that had happened long before. Before Mom left, and before I walked out the door myself—going anywhere I could to escape home.

Maybe there was some unknown event in my mother's childhood that had shaped her into the kind of person who'd make certain choices that resulted in her absence. And maybe it went even further back than that—to who her parents were, and who her parents' parents were, and all that they had passed down through the generations. Sometimes I think you can draw a line from today back to the beginning of time and see how everything that happened was made inevitable by what preceded it.

But it was that bet, on a hot summer night, that I would come back to as the starting point. Like that moment in *The*

Wizard of Oz when things go from black-and-white to Technicolor. A switch was flipped, and things began to unravel in earnest.

When it happened, I was in North Carolina, attending Camp Woodscape, an equestrian program for advanced riders, for the second summer in a row. Thirty-two of us lived in a dorm adjacent to the barn and stables of Raleigh College's south campus. Late June had seen a week of earth-scorching, record-breaking temperatures up the Eastern Seaboard, and Barrett Hall didn't have air-conditioning. The smells of shampoo and perfume barely masked the stubborn odors of hay and sweat and girls radiating warmth and sucking up all the oxygen.

But I didn't mind. I loved anything even remotely related to horses, even the smells. The mustiness of the barn, the freshly oiled saddles, the fields after a summer rain shower—those scents covered me like a blanket and made me feel utterly at home, more at home than I ever felt in New York, in my own house. In fact, the only thing at Woodscape that really got under my skin was my roommate, Beth-Ann Bracelee. Yes, of *the* Bracelees, as my aunt Gigi would, no doubt, have noted. A Bracelee Candies Bracelee. While Beth-Ann might have been heiress to a half-billion-dollar confectionery fortune, as far as I was concerned, there was nothing sweet about her.

Beth-Ann had had it out for me ever since the prior summer, when her palomino, Pacifica, got a stress fracture that made him all but unridable. Foolishly, I let her ride my horse, Orion, in a dressage competition that I hadn't qualified for myself, and then she got it into her head that Orion would be better off with her. She went as far as to have her dad fly

in from their Palm Beach home and take us to dinner at the Oakwood Café, the most expensive restaurant in town, where the cloth napkins were folded like origami swans, the butter was infused with different flavors, and the grilled-lobster salad was served with a citrus dressing that you dreamed about long after dinner was over. "Orion's the perfect age, Daddy," Beth-Ann practically cooed. "He's no longer green, and he has all his best years ahead of him." Clayton Bracelee waved his checkbook in front of me. "Name your price," he said. But I told him there'd been a misunderstanding: Orion wasn't nor would he ever be for sale.

Beth-Ann had pouted for the rest of the summer. Frankly, I didn't expect to see her back at Woodscape again, but on the first day, there she was. Already in our dorm room, having taken the brighter side by the window and moved things around so she ended up with more space. You don't get to pick your roommate at Woodscape, but I wished I'd had the forethought to write on my housing form: *anyone but Beth-Ann Bracelee.*

Beth-Ann had brought her brand-new prized Thoroughbred, Easter Sunday, that she'd purchased after—get this—the horse psychic she'd hired to tour different barns with her said that she and Easter had a special mind-body connection.

But that kind of thing wasn't out of the ordinary among equestrian circles. I was used to riders like Beth-Ann. Back home my tactic was to steer clear of them. It was just that Beth-Ann made it virtually impossible: She lived in my dorm room, and despite her apparent disdain for me, when we were outside our room, she still always seemed to be at my heels.

I had dinner plans that last night with Isabella Reyes, a raven-

haired, olive-skinned rider from Spain who'd had two of her Arabian horses, Razia and Sultan, flown across the ocean to Woodscape. But Isabella was down-to-earth, or as much as a descendant of the Spanish royal family could be.

Unsurprisingly, Beth-Ann had invited herself along to dinner with Isabella and me, and then she insisted we stop at the CVS on the way, so she could junk up our shared sink with more random drugstore purchases. While Beth-Ann was in line to pay for an armload of nail polish and eye shadow, I wandered over to the ATM to get some cash, forty dollars, and I was denied "due to insufficient funds."

I'd purposely waited for the first day of July to make a withdrawal. Years earlier, my mother had set up a trust fund for my sister, Susannah, and me, right before ditching us to move abroad with her British boyfriend, Nigel. My aunt was named our guardian and the trust's flaky executor. By the end of each month, we were usually living off fumes, waiting for the next stipend to be transferred into our checking account. But today was payday, and—I looked down at my watch—certainly by ten after seven the transfer should have been made.

So money, and the lack thereof, was on my mind as the host at the Oakwood Café, where we'd fast become regulars, led us through the throng of other patrons, men in summer sport jackets and women in pearls, to our table. I'd long ago perfected the art of keeping my face straight and impassive so no one would catch on to the meltdown I was having inside, and besides, Beth-Ann was too involved with her own battles to notice even if I hadn't. She flagged down our waiter to demand olive oil for the bread, then flagged him down again when it

didn't come fast enough. "This is why waiters are waiters and not brain surgeons," she stated in her slow Southern drawl before he was safely out of earshot. "Because they can't even remember a simple request."

"Quiet," I said under my breath. When I turned, our waiter was looking right at us, and I was certain he'd heard every word. I ducked my head, mortified.

Beth-Ann barely lowered her voice and went on: "Daddy says it takes all kinds of people for the world to function. Some people need to be the ambitious ones and become doctors and lawyers."

"And candy-shop owners," Isabella said with a smile. Her accent made the word *candy* sound foreign and fancy.

"Candy-*empire* owners," Beth-Ann corrected, her face as deadpan as her voice. Humor and nuance were lost on her. "And some people need to be the ones to serve those people and do all the things we don't want to do."

"That guy's handling, like, a dozen tables," I said. "It's not his fault he wasn't born a candy empress."

"That's not the point," Beth-Ann said. "It's simply not my destiny to serve anyone. But clearly I've offended you and your future plans to be in the food-service industry."

Heat rose to my cheeks, and my underarms were suddenly dripping with sweat. Even the restaurant's full-blast air conditioner was no match for the kind of hot it was outside; besides which, feeling self-conscious always made my body temperature rise a few notches.

"I've been thinking, you need a new passion project anyway," Beth-Ann told me.

I fought to keep my voice steady. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You and Orion haven't exactly been in sync lately."

Orion had eaten a piece of moldy hay, and it had taken me longer than it should have to figure out the problem. But he'd been better for a week, and Beth-Ann knew it. "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," I said.

"I don't have a problem with Easter. No one knows him like I do—and vice versa. He knows I can be a bitch, he knows when I'm sad, and he even knows when he's crossed me."

"Sounds like your horse is the psychic," I said. "And yet the two of you haven't been able to communicate when it comes to clearing the two-foot oxer." Every time Beth-Ann had approached the double-railed jump on the North Course, Easter had slowed, and she'd had to turn away.

"Are you saying Easter's not much of a jumper?"

Isabella's gaze shifted back and forth between Beth-Ann and me, as if she was watching a tennis match. "Come on, you guys," she said.

But I paid her no mind. "I'm saying, I bet you twenty bucks," I said.

And there it was.

At that moment, I was just another entitled teen having dinner at a restaurant that most people went to only for a special occasion. My horse was stabled at an exclusive riding program, and in two months he and I would return to Hillyer Academy, the boarding school I'd attended since the ninth grade. Back home in Idlewild, the small town on the eastern end of Long Island where I technically lived, everything was in ruins, thanks

to Aunt Gigi. But I'd used my trust fund to get away and keep up appearances—I'll be the first to admit, they were extraordinarily extravagant appearances—and it had worked: Here, all the other girls thought I was one of them.

They couldn't have imagined how different it really was for me if they'd tried.

"You're on," Beth-Ann said.

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning, before rounds."

"Fine."

"Fine."

It was my turn to treat. As dinner wound down, so did my adrenaline rush from battling Beth-Ann, and I was a little nervous as I handed my Amex over to the waiter. With the "lack of sufficient funds," chances were Aunt Gigi was late on paying our bills again. But, I reminded myself, she did always pay them eventually. The credit card companies knew it and extended our credit anyhow. They were probably happy about how Gigi conducted things; my family was good for the money, and they got what we owed them, along with all those extra interest charges and late fees.

I planned to add an extra-big tip to our bill, to compensate for what the waiter had, no doubt, heard Beth-Ann say, but just as I'd dreaded, my Amex was denied. And then my backup Visa. Before I could ask the waiter to try splitting the bill across both cards, Isabella leaned over and handed him *her* Amex. My cheeks burned as I made a mental note to call home first thing in the morning, apologized to Isabella, and loudly promised that the next dinner was on me.

But there would be no next dinner. By morning, everything had changed.

We were on the North Course, Orion and I, and Isabella and Sultan, and of course Beth-Ann and Easter Sunday. My dark hair itched under my helmet. I could feel the tendrils that had escaped from my ponytail curling at the base of my neck. But if the heat was getting to Beth-Ann, you couldn't tell. She looped around, showing off. Easter was in good form, as if horse and rider really had been communicating telepathically. The bet was on, and Beth-Ann pressed the horse forward, gathering speed. I knew at least five paces in that they'd do it, effortlessly sailing over, clearing the two feet and then some.

"Guess you owe me twenty, Hollander," Beth-Ann crowed as she reined in Easter.

"Lorrie Hollander!"

I turned to see Woodscape's director, Pamela Bunn, waving madly from the end of the fence. She'd walked a long way from the administrative offices, and by the time she reached me, the underarms of her blue oxford were half-mooned with sweat, and her usually pale face had a baked-cherry redness.

"Lorrie, can you hand Orion off and come back with me to Whelan Hall?"

"Okay."

Beth-Ann and Isabella watched as I led Orion to one of the stable hands. I met up with Pamela on the other side of the building, and we cut across the flat pasture to the winding pathway behind the tack room. Pamela was breathing heavily. She couldn't muster the strength for small talk to fill the space between us, and that was fine; I couldn't, either. Something was

wrong. I knew it. What had happened at the ATM had just been the first sign, the harbinger of doom.

We finally made it to Pamela's office, and I took the folding chair opposite her large, battered desk. "Lorrie," she began, leaning forward on her arms. As if the weight of what she needed to say demanded the support. "I hate to say this, but it looks as if we're going to have to send you home."

"What? Why?"

"Your aunt has not paid your tuition, and you cannot stay here for free."

"She can get a check to you by the end of this week," I insisted. "She's really bad at managing the money, but the funds are there. I swear."

"I believe you, Lorrie. And if you could get her to transfer the money today, I'd overlook it. But she hasn't responded to any of our calls or e-mails. Today was as far as we were willing to extend the deadline."

"Listen, I know Gigi is . . . erratic," I said. "But she always—"

"Lorrie, please don't make this harder on me. This is a terribly regrettable situation for us, too. We decided to overlook the initial delays because you were here last year and because you're a talented rider. But now we're weeks into the program. It's not feasible for us to provide you room and board free of charge. Not to mention the fact that it's simply unfair to the other girls, whose families *have* paid."

A large drowsy fly had begun to bat the mesh window-screen behind Pamela. I felt the same way. Tired but looking anywhere for a way out.

Pamela Bunn wasn't a cruel woman. I knew that. We were

both a bit like the fly. Trapped in this room, itching to escape. "Surely you've seen these invoices?" she went on, not unkindly. "In your in-box?"

I nodded. And I'd also received a voice mail and had a pointed conversation with Pamela's assistant, John, last week: "We're gonna really be needing that payment soon, okay, Lorrie? If you could call your aunt? Lorrie?"

I *had* called Aunt Gigi, a few times, even before John had tracked me down, to tell her to please make the transfer or send the check or do whatever she had to do to pay up. She'd said she would take care of it.

She always said she'd take care of things.

"My aunt isn't the most together person," I said.

Pamela Bunn stopped me with a raised hand. "You need to speak with her today. Either she arranges for the transfer of funds, or she arranges for your travel home. There's a flight today out of Raleigh at six that would get into New York by half past seven," she said.

Oh God. This was really happening.

"I can recommend a service to transport Orion, which shouldn't be more than a few hundred dollars," Pamela continued. "He could be home with you in two days—three, max, if it comes to that. I think this is the best plan."

All I could do was nod. It was too shocking for us both, in a way. I was going to be kicked out of Woodscape, and Pamela had to do the kicking. We stared at each other, almost unable to breathe through our intense mutual discomfort. But now it was done. There was nothing to say.

I said something anyway. "You're making a big mistake," I told her as I scraped back my chair and stood.

"I am terribly sorry, Lorrie," she answered. "I feel awful about this, truly."

But did she, really? Mostly, she looked relieved as she sat back and folded her arms across her chest.

I left Whelan Hall and headed straight to the dorms. Back in my room I made one last-ditch call to Aunt Gigi, which, of course, went unanswered. And so I began to stuff clothes into my suitcase: underwear, socks, shirts, jodhpurs. I pulled my jeans out of the bottom drawer and dug through the pockets for spare bills. I also had a few dollars on my dresser, and I was pretty sure I'd stuck the change from lunch on Monday in the pocket of my barn jacket.

As soon as I finished packing, I'd call Lennox. My best friend would put my flight on her parents' credit card and pick me up from the airport. And she wouldn't even ask why, because she'd already know.

My final financial tally was twenty-eight dollars, in fives and ones. At that moment, it was all the money I had access to in the world. I folded eight ones into my wallet. The rest I slipped into an envelope and left on Beth-Ann's bed.

Woodscape could go ahead and toss me, but I was still a girl who honored her bets. Even if I was no longer a girl who could afford to place them.

2
ONE FALSE MOVE

LENNOX PICKED ME UP HERSELF IN A CAR I'D HEARD about but never seen, a silver Audi with a tan interior that still had the new-car smell to it. It had been an early summer birthday present from her moms.

Lennox's moms, Allyson and Meeghan, were partners in life and in business, they always said. They'd founded an architecture firm together after graduate school and set up a home office on the Idlewild estate that had been in Allyson's family for two generations. When they decided to start a family, Lennox and her sister, Harper, were carried by Meeghan, using sperm from Allyson's brother, Craig. "My uncle who is also my dad," Lennox sometimes joked. "Just your average American family." Lennox had Meeghan's brown skin, stirred a shade lighter, with Allyson's (and Craig's) angular face and catlike eyes.

Lennox and I had met the first day of Pony Club at Ocean-

front Equestrian Center. We were six years old, and neither one of us had ever been on a horse. But somehow Lennox already had the whole place figured out, and she grabbed my hand to show me the peephole in the tack room. In exchange, I gave her a plastic Pegasus key chain. That same summer, we tied for the Marmalade Junior Cup. We'd been best friends ever since, and as we exited the Long Island Expressway, I could feel her restlessness with everything she wanted to ask me. She paused longer than she needed to at the first stop sign, turning to give me a look.

"You're not ready to talk," she said. An observation. Not an inquiry.

"Not yet."

The morning's memories were too fresh—Pamela's sad eyes, the walk to John's truck, head-down like a criminal being led to her cell, the judging stares of the other girls as I'd climbed into the van to the airport.

"That's all right," Lennox told me. "In the meantime . . . maybe you'll come out to Oceanfront tomorrow? Claire has jumps school, and I told her I'd watch for moral support."

"I don't know if I'm ready to see Claire just yet," I said.

Claire Glidewell had started out in Pony Club with Lennox and me, and she never missed an opportunity to ask me about the state of my house. "How did you let it get so dirty?" or, "Why don't you clean it up yourself?" Meanwhile, I was certain that Claire Glidewell herself had never so much as made her own bed. Lennox always said she didn't think Claire meant any harm by her questions. But if you asked me, Claire had a little bit of the Beth-Ann Bracelee Superiority Complex in her.

"Sorry," I told Lennox.

"That's okay," she said. "What if we meet for lunch after? Just you and me. With ice cream."

With ice cream meant: long talk. Lennox and I had had a lot of those over the years. Her goal was to be a political journalist and expose all, but when it came to my life, she guarded my secrets like Fort Knox.

"Mmm," I said. "With ice cream."

"Okay, cool," she said. "In the meantime, want a Twizzler or five?" She produced a fresh pack from her purse. Lennox was the kind of person who always had snacks on her. If ever I were asked to make a list of my favorite things about her, it would be quite long, and that trait would be right at the top.

I took the pack from her and ripped it open. Lennox pressed the gas and a few minutes later made a left off Route 77 onto Richmond Hill Road. Now we were officially in Idlewild.

In the old days Idlewild had been a farming and whaling community, with wide open fields and sunsets over the ocean in all shades of pink. But then a group of investors "discovered" the area and bought out miles of beachfront property. A central village popped up between the bay and the ocean. As the town grew, more well-known (and expensive) retailers moved in. There's an ordinance in place to keep up appearances that Idlewild is still just a small beach town—storefronts have to be red brick with celadon shutters, and no retail building can be over three stories, so as to preserve the views. But the shops on Main Street are all high-end boutiques. We have a Tiffany & Co., a Chanel, and an Armani. You have to turn onto the side streets to find anything practical, like a supermarket or a

drugstore. And then you'll never bump into an actual Idlewild resident in them; Idlewilders send their housekeepers and personal assistants out to buy things like orange juice and tampons.

If you walk west of town, you'll hit the bay, and if you walk east, you'll hit the ocean. Everyone who's anyone belongs to the Crescent Beach Club on the ocean side. There are massive homes sporting their own golf courses and helicopter pads and pathways to private beaches. It's not exactly a lemonade-stand and trick-or-treating kind of community. More a community of breathtaking ocean views and bragging rights.

Lennox made another left onto Break Run Road, the most exclusive address in Idlewild and the gateway to my own family's saga.

My grandfather had made his fortune building suburban communities. The kind where all the houses look the same, save for the color of the front door and the shutters. But my grandfather couldn't abide living in one of those cookie-cutter homes. So he designed a one-of-a-kind waterfront estate for his family. Edgewater was set on five acres, with stone walls imported from Italy and a rose garden befitting a castle, which overlooked the Atlantic. When my grandparents died a couple decades ago, the house was left to their two daughters—my mother and Aunt Gigi. Today it remained an impressive property.

From a distance, that is.

"Can we stop at the Point?" I asked Lennox.

The Point is what we called the outcrop of cliff that made a lookout over the ocean, lapping fiercely at the jagged rocks a hundred feet below. If you were intrepid enough to climb over

the guardrail, there was just about enough room for two lean picnickers sharing a blanket and a basket.

Lennox obliged and pulled over. As I looked toward the horizon, the water was like a pane of glass, clear and still. But that wasn't the view I was interested in; it was the view of Edgewater I wanted.

I'm sure there are people who like to look at their homes up close, where they can see the things that make them theirs: a last name stenciled on a mailbox, a welcome mat at the front door, pansies in the window boxes. But the Point was the only place from which I liked to look at my home: from a distance, where things were blurry and not at all shameful. I stared out at it now—gray clapboard stretching three stories high. It was wider than it was tall, part of the row of mansions that ran along Break Run. One was owned by Franklin Copeland, the legendary senior senator from New York, another by the actress Miranda Landis, who'd just nabbed her second Academy Award. And then there were those homes that belonged to your run-of-the-mill hedge-fund billionaires. Families who had it all. Families to be envied.

Once upon a time the Hollander family had been one of those families. Now I would trade mine in for any of the others, and the knowledge of that caught in my throat.

"Check that out." Lennox had pushed her sunglasses up into her mass of dark curls, and she peered forward, squinting over the wheel. "Someone's out there, climbing up the rocks."

"Whoa." I eyed the jagged shore break below and shivered. "One false move and he's shark-bait."

We waited until he had gained solid footing, whoever he

was—it was too hard to tell from that distance. He stood there, still dangerously close to the edge of the cliff, facing the ocean as his T-shirt whipped against his body in the sea breeze.

"Ready to go?" Lennox asked.

"Yeah," I said. I turned to keep watching as Lennox pulled away, and kept my eyes on the boy until the moment the road curved and he disappeared out of sight. "I wonder who that was."

"I can't think of any freaks offhand except Brian."

The mention of Susannah's boyfriend made my skin crawl. A user and a loser who, nonetheless, had my sister enthralled. His dad was a local fisherman who supplemented his income working shifts at the Route 8 junction Exxon–Dunkin' Donuts kiosk. But as far as I could tell, Brian himself didn't do anything besides figure out where to cadge a few bucks so he could score his next dime bag. Sometime last year he'd moved out of his parents' apartment by the railroad tracks and become a de facto boarder at our house. I'm sure he thought he'd moved up in the world, flawed as our home may have been.

But Brian was tall, his limbs connecting at awkward angles, like a crane. This guy, whoever he was, looked strong and firm. "No, it's definitely not Brian," I said. "I don't think it's anyone we know."

Lennox wound the car around with the road, and we lapsed into silence. I had that sense of dread I experienced whenever I drew closer to my family's property. We twisted up the driveway, and the knot in my stomach became a fist. I always, always wanted it to be different. And it never, ever was.

Up close, Edgewater was a shocking vision of neglect. A wreck of its former greatness. It didn't help that it was sand-

wiched between two perfectly manicured estates. On the left, the Gould family's "Cloud House" was a modern structure, all sharp angles and glass, with a sprawling, military-cut lawn. On the right stood the Deightons' stately mansion, "the Ramble," one of the very first homes built in Idlewild. Over the years, Richard Deighton had made regular calls to Idlewild's chief of police, Tim Blum, to report the "nuisance" of Edgewater. But, thankfully for us, being an eyesore did not rise to the kind of thing the police department could do anything about. Finally, two years ago, Richard Deighton had solved the problem himself by having a hedgerow planted. Now it was nearly two feet taller than when it'd been put in. Tall enough to block us out. I couldn't say I blamed him.

Lennox steered the Audi up the final stretch to the house. We were close enough to see that it wasn't actually meant to be gray. It had once been white, but its paint was now soiled and falling off in strips, as if Edgewater was being peeled like a banana. I made myself look up, past the row of broken dormer windows on the third floor, to the heather-colored sky above. The sunset was breathtaking, per usual. You could always count on nature.

Lennox cut the engine. "I'm going to run in and get your money first," I told her. "Wait here, okay?"

"Of course," she said. "I know the drill."

She knew the drill, that I didn't let anyone—not even her—into my house. I opened the car door, and the ubiquitous roar of the ocean sounded off in the distance. Being in Idlewild was like having a conch shell permanently pressed against your ear. It practically made me seasick.

I ran up the porch steps and took one last deep breath of outside air. Then I pushed open the front door. The foyer was dark—darker than it was outside. The bulbs in the chandelier had long ago burned out, so now the fixture hung down uselessly from two stories above, with dust dangling from the prisms like tinsel. In the center of the room was a fountain, dried up for years, and, beyond that, a winding staircase once famous for its mahogany banister and custom-carved pineapple newels. Back in the day, it had actually been pictured in *Architectural Digest*.

Trying to keep the house clean on my own was a losing battle. We had more creatures living in Edgewater than I could possibly keep count of. Despite Claire Glidewell's suggestion to just clean it myself, there was simply no way for one person to keep up with such a massive estate. I'd called in a housekeeper once, but as soon as she stepped inside, one of the cats dropped a decapitated mouse at her feet. She screamed and ran straight back out. That was five years ago. Now the house was even more far gone.

I switched on a floor lamp and crossed the room to the squat Victorian dresser at the base of the stairs. Susannah and I always called the top drawer the Money Drawer, because it was where Gigi stashed the cash she withdrew from the bank. At times the drawer was practically bursting with twenties and fifties and sometimes hundreds. Other times the offerings were a bit leaner. Still, you could count on there being *something*—a couple hundred bucks at least—and Susannah and I were allowed to dip in, no questions asked. Usually I took only what I needed, but this time, I decided, I'd take whatever was in there—all of

it. I'd give Lennox the cash for the plane ticket, and if I had enough left over, I'd pay my way back into Woodscape. I could spend the summer there with Orion, after all, and I'd play off my abrupt departure to the other girls as if it had all been a misunderstanding—*Can you believe it? Pamela Bunn is lucky I don't get her fired*.

I yanked open the Money Drawer and rooted around. But all I found was . . . nothing. Not so much as a lone dollar bill. My throat burned with the need to gulp fresh air. I ran back outside and hurried across to Lennox, careful to avoid the plank on the porch that had partially rotted through. I held my hands up to her to signify that they were empty. "I'm sorry," I told her through the car window. "I can't believe this."

"It's all right. Really."

"I can't believe I'm back here," I said.

"I know," she said. "But I have an idea."

"What's that?"

"So you're home, and you don't want to be home, and that blows. But what if you just think of it as starting senior year early? We have a couple extra months together that we didn't think we'd have. We'll make it really good, starting now."

We had talked about that—making senior year the best ever, packing in as many memories as we possibly could before we were off, most likely to separate colleges.

"We can head to town and grab a bite," she went on. "How about a lobster roll on the boardwalk? There are a lot of cute guys in town this summer."

"You know I have no interest in meeting anyone," I said.

"I'm talking people-watching," she said. "Not that there's anything wrong with meeting anyone."

"I don't want a boyfriend." With my house, with my family, it would be too complicated.

"You will," she assured me with the wisdom of an older person who has seen much more. "When you meet the right person."

"You don't have a boyfriend," I reminded her.

"That's because Nathan and I just broke up," she said.

"Well, apparently there are a lot of cute guys in town this summer," I told her.

"All right, point taken. So how about just us and no ulterior motives? It's not like Twizzlers are enough of a dinner. We'll get lobster rolls and waffle fries, and we'll split the brownie sundae. What do you say?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, not tonight," I said. "I have to get this over with. Can you pop the trunk?"

"Done."

"Thanks, Len. I mean, for everything."

"I'm here whenever, Lorrie. A phone call away."

"I know," I told her. "We'll start senior year tomorrow. I promise."

I waited until Lennox's car was out of sight before I forced myself to face the house, to really look at it. In just three weeks it seemed to have fallen into even greater disrepair. Storm-fallen branches crisscrossed the porch, just as they had the driveway, like the start of a game of pick-up sticks. The porch swing hung at an angle, the rope so frayed, it had finally snapped on one

side. I dragged my duffel up the steps. It was no use holding my breath this time, and as I pushed the door open, I was met by the trademark smell of Edgewater, something between cat urine and sour milk. It was almost a physical thing that moved through the rooms, up your nose, and into the little crevices of your closed mouth.

I headed back to the dresser by the stairs and rummaged through the rest of the drawers, just to make sure I hadn't missed anything. An enormous Maine coon cat—either Abeline or Carolina; I didn't know and didn't care—squatted on the second step of the staircase to relieve herself. Oh, good: This pee stain would match all the other pee stains on the carpet runner. And if you looked carefully where the carpet had worn thin, you could spy vegetation growing through the floorboards—mushrooms or mold. In middle-school science class, we'd read about how long it would take nature to invade the spaces we'd worked so hard to keep clean, should humans ever cease to exist. Our house could be a case study in that concept. Not exactly *Architectural Digest* material any longer.

From around the corner came a noise I couldn't quite make out, but someone was in there, in the kitchen. Once, I'd heard a kitchen described as the heartbeat of a house, the place where everyone gathered for sustenance and restoration. Ours was more where things went to die.

It was time to find my aunt, and that's where I'd start.