

ALL RISE
FOR THE
HONORABLE
PERRY T. COOK

ALSO BY LESLIE CONNOR

FOR MIDDLE GRADE READERS

Waiting for Normal

Crunch

FOR YOUNGER READERS

Miss Bridie Chose a Shovel

FOR TEENS

Dead on Town Line

The Things You Kiss Goodbye

LESLIE CONNOR

ALL RISE
FOR THE
HONORABLE
PERRY T. COOK



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All Rise for the Honorable Perry T. Cook

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First Edition

For my Toddy family

Even people with dark pasts
can show a softer side of their soul
in the presence of innocence.

—*Kate West*

chapter one

TEENY-TINY SURPRISE, NEBRASKA

Big Ed is about to tell it again. He greets all the new ones. He sits them down, tells them about the place, and gets to know them as quick as he can. Being a welcomer is part of his work at Blue River, which is the biggest thing you'll find in the teeny-tiny town of Surprise, Nebraska.

Big Ed asks, "Are you from around here?"

The new resident shakes his head no. He sets his dinner tray down across from us. The answer is almost always no because Surprise is a long way from most places.

"You know why they call it Surprise?" Big Ed asks. "It's because this little nowhere-Nebraska town gets an impressive amount of snow. But the snow is not the surprise. What you find after it melts—now that's the surprise. Uh-huh. Things you never knew you lost. Of course, I'm talking

mostly about folks on the outside. Here on the inside, well, most of us have nothing left to lose. Or it can feel that way.”

Big Ed laughs. He sounds like a harmonica. Then comes his coughing. He has to pull himself together before he can go on. “But spring comes and on the outside they find all sorts of things. Baseballs and dog bones. That favorite pair of garden gloves all flattened down into the mud and grass. Maybe even a set of keys. And don’t we all wish we had the keys around here. Huh, Perry?” Big Ed gives me such a nudge I almost spill my milk.

The new rez—that’s short for resident—listens nicely enough. I wonder how long he’s going to be here. Maybe not so long. Depends on what he did. Depends on what’s been decided. Sometimes I hear. Sometimes they tell me. I never ask.

Big Ed tells the new guy, “You’ll see so much snow outside these windows it’ll make you forget that grass is green.” He always pauses for several seconds right here. Then he says, “Unless, of course, you’re doing a catnap.” A *catnap* means a short stay.

Big Ed leaves a little airtime, waits to see if the new rez feels like talking. He might tell him about his sentencing. Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don’t.

This guy dips his head like he’s talking to that bowl of turkey chili on his dinner tray. “I got eight months,” he says. He doesn’t say what he’s in for. Meanwhile, he keeps eyeing me. Big Ed claps a hand on my shoulder and tells the guy,

"This here is Perry. Perry T. Cook."

I put my hand out. The guy waits. He looks to the right and left where the supervisors are standing. He's knows he's being watched, and he's trying to figure out what is allowed. There are rules about contact.

"Handshaking is okay," I tell him. "As long as it's brief."

Big Ed says, "You can listen to Perry. He knows it all."

I push my hand closer to the new rez. Last try. Finally, we shake.

"Name's Wendell," he says, and I don't know if he means that's his first name, last name, or only name. Mom's rule is, I can call the adults whatever they tell me to call them, but she wants me to add Mr., Mrs., or Miss to the front end. For Big Ed, well, I just added "Big," and I guess nobody ever corrected me. It was such a long time ago. He's the only rez at Blue River who's been here longer than Mom and me.

"What's a kid doing here outside of visiting hours?" The new guy wants to know.

"I call him my Morning Son," says Big Ed. (It's an old story.) "Perry makes sure we all wake up on time."

"The kid will be here in the morning?" Mr. Wendell looks confused. New ones always do until it dawns on them that I live at the Blue River Co-ed Correctional Facility here in teeny-tiny Surprise, Nebraska.

From behind the serving counter in the kitchen, we hear Eggy-Mon dishing up the last trays of supper for the evening. He thinks all food deserves poetry. Tonight he calls,

“Get your gobbling-good order from south of the border, with a hunk of corn bread, or white rice instead.”

Mom comes by with her tray in her hands. “Perry, down the hatch with that milk, pal.” She sounds impatient, and she has left more than half her supper. It’s strange because she doesn’t waste food, and the turkey chili is not that bad. I take my milk carton in both hands and gulp it back so fast my throat aches. Bad manners. But Mom needs me to move along tonight. Something’s up with her, and I don’t want to add to her trouble. Neither does Big Ed. He gives me a pat on the back and says, “Good man, Perry.”

Earlier today, Warden Daugherty called Mom into her office for a conversation. Whatever that was about, it put Mom on a tilt. Now it’s one of those weird days when everybody knows something’s going on. Everybody but me.

“I want to have one more look at that map of the middle school with you before lockdown,” Mom says. She glances at the gray clock on the wall, and so do I. We have to pay attention to the time at Blue River. At nine p.m. I have to be in my bedroom next to the warden’s office off the Upper East Lounge.

Mom has to be in her room down at the end of the hall on Cell Block C.

chapter two

ALL RISE

It's 6:23 a.m. I scoot forward and put my lips close to the microphone of the prison PA system. I always begin quietly. Warden Daugherty comes to wake me every day, and she is gentle about it. So I do the same for all the residents at Blue River.

"Good morning," I say in my slow, low voice. "This is Perry at sunrise. It is Tuesday, the sixth of September. If you need a reason to bother getting up today, well, it's probably not the weather. 'Tut-tut, it looks like rain.' That's the quote of the day—comes from Christopher Robin, by the way, and if you don't know who he is then maybe it's time for you to get some literature in your life. Mrs. Buckmueller and the Bucking Blue Bookmobile will be here to restock the Leisure Library from four o'clock to five o'clock, and don't forget, she takes requests."

I glance at Warden Daugherty. She smiles as she leafs

through a stack of papers. She likes it when I give literacy a plug. The clock on the wall above her desk reads 6:26. I lean toward the mic again.

“The news on the outside is, it’s the first day of school in Butler County. That means I’ll be gone all day. Don’t miss me too much. The good news for all of you is, waffles are popping out of the toasters down in the caf. Scrams are in the pan. They’re even letting some fruit cocktail out of the jar. Choice of beverage, as usual. Remember, there are no knives in the flatware trays at Blue River, so get used to that spork for however long you’ll be with us.”

I lean away from the mic and whisper to Warden Daugherty, “That last part is for the new intake, Mr. Wendell.”

She whispers back to me, “I’m sure he will feel most welcome now.” She points to the clock without looking at it. She doesn’t need to. The warden is so precise you can almost hear her ticking.

Six twenty-nine and a half a.m. Time for me to get louder. I grip the mic in my hand like I’m about to fly a plane.

“Ooo . . . kay, residents of Blue River! If you’re not up by now, time to get up!” The finish has to be big. It’s the same every day. I take a deep breath and bellow. “Al-l-l-l-l rise!”

I turn off the mic and hustle toward the door. I stick my head into the hallway and listen for morning release. Six thirty a.m. Locks disengage. Doors click and creak. Toilets flush, and the residents yawn themselves awake.

Foreman Joe is coming up the hall from Block A, which

is one of the men's wings. "Good morning, Fo-Joe." I started calling him that when I was little. (*Rs* tripped me up when I was first learning to talk. I used to call myself *Peh-wee*.) "How's things?" I ask. But I don't really want to know, not right now, and Fo-Joe knows it.

"Things?" he says slowly. "Well, let me see . . ."

I chew the inside of my lip and wait. He's being slow on purpose.

"Things are fine. But I'm wondering what they fed you all for dinner last night. Was it burritos? Because . . ." He stops, pinches his nose. Fans the air. "That morning release had some fire on it."

"Turkey chili," I tell him. "With beans." Then before he can go on and on about that, I remind him, "Hey, Fo-Joe, it's the first day of school."

"Oh yeah!" he says. "Thus the new sneakers, hey?"

I look at my feet. "Can I go?" I ask.

"To school?"

"Fo-Joe!" He knows what I want. I am already facing Block C. I'm crouched into a runner's stance. But I have to wait for permission. It's one of the rules. "Fo-Joe. Puh-leese!"

"Perry?" he says.

"Yeah?"

"Are you still here?"

I am not. I am off like a flash, sprinting toward Mom's room at the end of the hallway on Block C.

chapter three

JESSICA

Jessica Cook liked to be out of her room before Perry reached her in the morning. Maybe it was silly. Her boy knew that his mom was locked in at night. He knew that she had to wait in her room for morning release just like any other resident at Blue River.

Release. The word ricocheted between her ears. Not morning release. Get-out-of-prison-for-good release. Jessica shook her head. She tried to will herself not to think about it until there was something definite. Trouble was, she couldn't think of anything else. She'd been awake most of the night, and the thought stuck while she did her morning push-ups, crunches, and hamstring stretches on the person-size patch of floor beside her bed. Jessica had coached at least a hundred residents through the release process at Blue River. That was her work here, and it was a little bit twisted considering she had not had the pleasure herself. But that

day should be coming.

She had served nearly twelve years of a fifteen-year sentence. She could apply for parole in just a few more weeks. *Finally*. There would be a process. But up until yesterday, she'd had every reason to think—every reason to hope—that come the frosts of late October she'd be a free woman. She'd had been coaching Perry for the day they'd leave the only home he'd known.

But now, this glitch. The warden had received word that there was a wrench in the works. No details, just yet.

Do not lose hope, she thought.

She propped her door open while she brushed her teeth. Foreman Joe usually let Perry head down immediately after the all-rise. Her boy would be sprinting, and he was fast—and getting faster.

Minimum security meant that she stayed in a narrow, dorm-like room, not a cell behind bars. This was not a crusted prison from a late-night movie. In fact, Blue River was a campus with natural light in some of the common areas, and not-so-horrible colors on the walls. Those were the good things she told herself about this place. She was locked up. Hard fact. But being assigned to the facility in Surprise had been a little spot of good inside a blurry nightmare of bad.

The years had been bearable because her boy had lived with her for eleven of them. Such arrangements were unheard of. So lucky. Still, she longed to get him out of here

and begin that new life on the outside, when her time, and Perry's time, would be their own.

Jessica spat toothpaste into the saucepan-size sink at the back of her toilet. She ran the faucet to wash her hands then quickly pulled her hair into a high ponytail. She checked her bed again, though she'd already tucked it tight as a springboard. A surprise room inspection could come at any time, and if there was one thing she hated, it was being reprimanded in front of Perry. Jessica toed the line.

She heard her son's sneakers slapping along the low-pile carpeting, pounding his way toward her. She broke into a grin as she jumped out into the hallway.

Perry was arriving, nostrils flaring like a racer and blue eyes wide beneath the cap of dark hair. (More and more he looked like another boy she'd once known.) He was beautiful, she thought. He was hope in a new pair of cross-trainers. Jessica opened her arms, her boy leapt, and she caught him for the swing-around, which she was pleased she could still manage. So far. Then with Perry back on his feet again, the two exchanged good mornings and started down to breakfast.

"How are you feeling about school?" she asked.

"Nervous. Excited." Perry rocked his head side to side as he spoke. Jessica tucked her fingers into his hair for just a moment.

"I'm feeling the same way for you," she said. "But some

things won't change. Miss Maya will still pick you up here. Now that you are in the middle school you'll see her during the day."

"Yup," he said, and Jessica felt her son give a little shrug beside her. They'd already gone over it. Perry was his quieter self this morning. She should let him be.

"I'm glad Zoey's on Team Three with me," Perry offered. "Same homeroom."

"I'm glad too," Jessica said, and she was. This was where Perry's not-so-ordinary upbringing had worried her. There was the stigma of the prison. But also, for a kid, he had a strangely adult social circle—the nearly impossible mix of ragtag and colorful, half-lost and fate-tossed nonviolent residents at Blue River. Meanwhile, she, his mother, had never been able to meet the one young girl he called his "best friend on the outside."

When Perry had first mentioned Zoey Samuels, Jessica had pulled Maya Rubin aside and said, "Please tell me she's not imaginary." Maya, Warden Daugherty's niece and Perry's main escort on the outside, had promised that yes, Zoey was real. She'd also remarked that Perry was as good a friend to the girl as she was to him.

Jessica felt relieved to know he had a friend. That part hadn't been easy. A lot of questions might be asked. Rumors might be whispered behind the slender back of a boy who called a correctional facility home.

Well, the day was coming—or was supposed to be coming—that she and Perry would both leave Blue River.

“Mom?”

“What?”

“Is something wrong? Something you can tell me?”

“No, no. I am just never going to be a ‘Yay, September!’ mother,” Jessica said as they passed the warden’s office. “I’m only lending you to that school because I’m nice. I’m really going to miss you today.”

“I’ve got the camera. I’ll bring you pictures.”

“Boy, that was the best gift ever,” she said, and not for the first time. The camera was a hand-me-down; the benefactress was Zoey Samuels, who had somehow ended up with two. The camera had been a boon for a locked-in mother who ached not to be locked out of those hours her son spent on the outside.

Jessica and Perry accidentally brushed hands as they walked. He looked up and gave her a comforting half smile.

Her boy had not seen her in her tiny locking room this morning. She noted it as a win. It was one of the ways Jessica preserved hope. You do a lot of that when you have fifteen years to serve—parole after twelve. *If* everything goes right.

chapter four

WELCOME

The middle school is three times the size of the elementary Zoey and I went to. Miss Maya brought me to the open house last week. The hallways were jammed with kids and their parents. But Mom pointed out that the school building is much smaller than the Blue River campus. I started finding my way around that place as soon as I could walk. I figure I won't get too lost in a school. It's a good thought to be having as Miss Maya turns into the parking lot. The schoolyard is already busy even though she has brought me here teacher-early. I see a lot of new faces.

We stand under the clock in the foyer. Miss Maya shifts her tote on her shoulder. I tuck my thumbs under the straps of my pack. "Okay, Perry. I'm off to my classroom," she says. "You have plenty of time before you have to be in yours. You remember where you're going, right?"

"Room 208. Second floor."

“Okay. I’ll see you for Language Arts in my room this afternoon and here in the lobby at the end of the day. Actually, I bet we’ll cross paths a few times. I’ll wave to you,” she says. She turns, and all her ropy rows of hair swing and follow her like a curtain.

“I’ll wave back,” I say.

I turn around and there is Zoey Samuels. Her hair is pale and her skin is tanned. She was away all summer.

“Perry!” she says. “Hey, Perry! Come on. I want to show you something.”

I follow Zoey up the wide stairs to the second floor. “Hello. Hope you had a nice summer . . .” I use an under-mumble like Bid Ed’s. It’s for when you don’t expect an answer. When we reach the landing, Zoey stops and turns. She points to a set of high windows where a whole lot of morning light is streaming in.

“Sun,” I say. “Huh. It was supposed to rain all day.” I am thinking about the report I gave during the all-rise.

“That’s why I rushed you up here. Check it out.” Zoey is pointing upward. Someone has stuck colored cellophane letters to all the windows. WELCOME. Zoey shuffles backward and presents the floor to me with both hands. “Look!”

The colors from the windows are being sun-cast on the floor at our feet. *Welcome* is spelled upside down and backward. Zoey sticks her leg out, and a purple *M* curves over her shin. “Is that cool or what?”

“It’s cool,” I say. I start to haul my pack off my shoulder.

"I should get a picture of the welcome message for my mom . . ."

The landing darkens. *Welcome* disappears. Zoey and I look up at the window. Large spatters hit the panes. "Aw, rats!" she says. "Well, maybe the weather will clear later this week. You can get the shot then." She tags my shoulder. "So listen, I found out that we don't get seated alphabetically." She says this like it's the best news in the world. "Even though you are *C* for Cook and I'm *S* for Samuels, we can sit together. But we better get in there before it fills up. Come on!"

Zoey is quick, weaving around kids in the hall. She is through the door to the classroom. I'm caught in a bottleneck, but I can see between shoulders. She lands her backpack onto the top of one desk and sits down at another right beside it. Claims two with one blow. When I finally get to her, she pulls out the chair with her foot and waves me into it.

Zoey Samuels is always on a mission.

A TALE OF SURPRISE

Zoey Samuels was mad when she moved here. Mad about her parents' divorce, and mad that her stepdad was trying too hard with her and coming off like a big fake. She was mad about the house she had to leave, and mad about having to start at a new school in the middle of the year. She was mad that it was snowing. I never would have found out all of that if it hadn't been for Big Ed.

Zoey sat by herself at lunch. That's pretty much what I did too. Not because I don't like people—I do. But a lot of things changed right around fourth grade. Kids started to talk about karate and music lessons, soccer teams, and playing for the ice hockey club in David City. Those were all things I couldn't do. Fourth grade is also when the trouble with Brian Morris began, and it was all because of the one-mile run. That's the first year they timed us in gym class. Brian didn't like the way that turned out.

He's one of those kids who other kids magically follow, so if you get in trouble with him, it sticks on you. Brian is also the boy who started calling Zoey Samuels Mad-Zoe. That stuck to her.

I watched Zoey sitting alone for a few days. Then I went over and stood beside her with my lunch tray in my hands and said, "Welcome to Butler County. I'm Perry Cook. I live in Surprise. It's a tiny place."

"Isn't everything tiny?" she said.

"Well, it's a tiny place *and* it has a funny name. I'm guessing you're not from around here."

"Not at all," she said. She rocked her head and rolled her eyes. She probably wanted me to go away.

"Do you want to know why they call it Surprise?" I asked.

Zoey Samuels looked right at me. Her mouth twisted to the side. She pointed to the seat across the table, so I sat down. "Okay, tell me. Why is it called Surprise?"

I could have told her the real story. I had written a report about it in third grade. But I liked Big Ed's story better. "It's because of the snow," I said. We both looked out the cafeteria windows at the January whiteness. "But the snow is not the surprise. It's what you find when the snow is gone. All the stuff you never even knew you lost. Like a mitten that you dropped. Or a dollar bill. Or a letter that you meant to mail. You look down on the ground and things are—"

"Flattened," Zoey said. She smacked her palms together. "Stuck to the driveway. Or frozen to a rock under a bush,"

she said. "And so . . . you should give yourself the dollar bill because you're the one who found it. And you should just open the letter and pretend it's from you to you. Because it's been there so long that you will have forgotten what you wrote, and when you read it . . ."

"Surprise!" I said.

Zoey Samuels cracked up.

She's been my best friend ever since. I've never been to her house, and she can't come home with me after school. But Zoey knows exactly where I live. She knows why too.

She's never said a bad thing about it.

chapter six

SWIPE

It is lunchtime in the new school. My meal card won't swipe. The cashier tries again and again. Her name pin says "Miss Jenrik." She's not very old. In fact she looks like she should be down the block at the high school. She has pink spiky hair and long earrings with feathers at the ends. She is wearing rings on every finger. Each time my card fails she shakes her head and something on her jingles.

"Did you activate this?" she asks. She gives my card a hard look.

"Yes," I say.

"Did it go through the washing machine?"

"Not yet," I tell her.

Zoey is right behind me. She laughs. Miss Jenrik laughs too as she squints at the display on the machine and wiggles all her rings at it.

"I don't know why this thing is asking me for a code,"

she mumbles. "I'm new on the job. But I haven't seen this all day . . ." She punches a few buttons. She tries the card again. The line is backing up behind us.

I tell Zoey, "You should have gone first. You could be eating by now."

Zoey leans around me to speak to the cashier. "Hey, what if we swipe my card twice? Just for today."

"It's not going to let us do that." Jingle-jingle. "Hmm . . ."

The line is pressing on Zoey now. I'm pretty sure the edge of someone's lunch tray is in her back. She plants her feet like she's holding our ground.

"What gives?" someone asks from the back of the line. I look and see a tall boy with his empty tray clamped in one hand. He points to himself with the other. "Starving here!"

"Well, look who's holding things up." I know that voice. It's Brian Morris, and he's leaning out of the line to sneer at me. "Not so fast today, *are you?*" he says. As if I ever sprint through a lunch line.

Miss Jenrik asks me, "Did you pick up this card here in the school office?"

I lean forward and tell her, "It was mailed to me. From the state."

"The state? Oh! This is an assistance card!" She seems to get louder with each word. "You're on assistance! That's why it wants a code."

Zoey lets a puff through her lips and shakes her head.

Brian Morris makes a duck-call with his hand from

behind us. "It's Perry *Crook!*" he squawks. "Escaped from Surprise!"

Miss Jenrik's head snaps up when she hears that. Her face turns five shades of red beneath her pink hair.

"I'm s-sorry," she says. She's very quiet now. "My fault. Totally my fault." She puts in a code. My card goes through.

Zoey and I sit across from each other at the very end of a long table. We both lean into the cranny where the table folds out from the wall. Zoey is giving her hot macaroni a cold stare. She's mad about the card. I'm thinking that the harder won a lunch is, the more I want to eat it. I'm also thinking that soon I won't have a card from the state. When Mom is paroled, my card will be like everyone else's.

"She didn't mean it," I tell Zoey. I pick up a forkful of noodles.

"She was loud, Perry. Megaphone loud."

"But she was just glad she figured it out. Tomorrow will be a breeze."

"She could have done better," Zoey says. "Way better."

"Hey, Zoey," I say, "where did you get that ring?"

"Trying to change the subject?" She twirls the ring as she speaks.

"Yeah," I say. I can't hide much from Zoey.

"Stepdad Tom gave it to me," she says. "He bought it in the gift shop at the bed-and-breakfast we stayed in this summer."

"Cool," I say.

"I suppose," she says. "But it's like I've told you before, he gets me things that I don't really want or need—like the camera," she says, leaning up a little.

"I'm glad he got you the camera." I say it with a shrug and a grin.

"It's not just the gifts with Tom. It's that he has to talk about why he gave them. 'This ring is to celebrate the vacation we took as a *fam-i-ly* . . .'" Zoey grumbles. She starts to imitate Tom. "'Isn't it so great how far we've come, Zoey? You and your mom and I, we have made ourselves into a *fam-i-ly* . . .' And then there he is this morning asking, 'Are you going to wear your new ring to school today, Zoey? Huh? Huh?'" I felt bad because I didn't even think about putting on the ring this morning, Perry. But I pretended that I did. Mostly to make my mom happy."

I've met Zoey's mom a couple of times, just to say hello at the window of her car in the school parking lot. But I've never met Stepdad Tom. I don't always understand exactly how Zoey feels about him. But I know that he is her biggest thing to need to talk about.

"It's been two years, Perry," Zoey goes on. "He still does it. He still talks about how great we're doing. You want to know what?" (She is going to tell me.) "The best times are when he says normal things like, 'Please pass the rice.' That's when I feel like we are a family."

I nod my head. I think I get the part about Tom trying too hard.

Zoey says, “It is a very cool ring though.” She props her elbow on the table and tilts her fist toward me. “Put your face up to the stone, Perry. Don’t put your chest into your macaroni,” she warns. “Get real close. See your reflection? It’s like a mirror in a fun house. Your nose gets really big. See?”

“Oh yeah!” I say. She is right. I am one giant nose-face with tiny eyes way up high. I crack a smile and see giant horse teeth in Zoey’s ring. It’s too funny. I drop my ridiculous face into my hands.

“Made you laugh!” Zoey is triumphant.

Zoey says that I never laugh. I say I’m just quiet about it.

Four boys come to sit at our table, including the loud, tall, hungry one. I shift over and slide my tray back in front of me like I’m making more room. But I am stuffed into the wall already. They are talking about what team everyone is on and about which school they came from. There’s some whispering, and they keep looking at me. Then up comes Brian Morris to sit with them. He knows where I live. He probably told.

“Hey,” says the tall boy, “how about tomorrow you take your assistance card to the back of the line, *Blue River Boy*.”

Yep. Brian told.

I wonder what else he said, because he makes stuff up. He told the whole fourth grade that I sleep in a cell with no mattress, that I only get white bread and water for supper.

The boys are staring. Zoey’s jaw is set off center. She

doesn't like it when people are into my business.

She looks at me. She jabs her straw onto the table and pushes the wrapper down into a tight accordion. She slides the paper across the table right in front of Brian Morris. She uses her straw to wet it with a dot of milk. It grows.

She looks up at Brian and says, "Worm?"

chapter seven

THE FIRST TIMED MILE

When we ran our first timed mile in fourth grade, the gym teacher told us it was a fitness test required by the State of Nebraska. “Don’t worry. But do your best.” That’s all he said. Right away I got it into my head that I wanted to finish first. So did Brian Morris.

It wasn’t that close; I think I bested him by ten yards. I’d done a lot of running at Blue River. Mr. Halsey had taught me to breathe, *hoo-hah, hoo-hah*, and to exhale every time my left foot landed. It worked. I was already walking off that run when Brian barrel-brushed me and almost took me down. Instead, he stumbled, and he’s the one who ate dirt.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

Brian got to his feet, still fighting for breath. He rubbed the long muddy smudges on his arms and legs. Then he let

me have it—bad language. He even spit on the ground near my feet.

“You’re fast because you run from prisoners all day,” he said.

I got one of those ice-cold rushes inside—the kind that keep spilling through you. No one had ever said anything like that to me.

“I don’t run from them. I run with them.”

Brian twisted up his face. “What?”

“With the residents. There is a track at Blue River. I run—”

“I’d rather be *dead* than live at a prison!” Brian swept past me, knocked me in the shoulder. I had to step backward to keep my feet underneath me.

Dead? Really?

That night at the Blue River supper table I told everyone within earshot that I had the fastest timed mile in the fourth grade.

“Yeah, Perry! Victory feels good!” Mr. Halsey put his long arms up in a big V.

“It felt good. But only for a few seconds,” I said. “This kid, Brian Morris, was *mad*. Like he wanted to punch me in the gut. I think I should let him win next time.”

Every single rez shouted, “No, no, no!” Mom was firmly with them.

“But if it will make him feel better?”

“No! No! No!” It was practically an uprising.

Even the warden stopped by the table to see what was up. “What has you all so excited and united?” she asked.

Eggy-Mon, who loves a rhyme, clicked his fingers from behind the serving counter, and repeated, “Excited! United!”

Mom said, “You should always do your best, Perry. Stay proud of yourself!” She gave me a nudge. “Besides, if you let Brian win, he might sense that’s what you’re doing. That won’t make him feel better.”

“Hmm. You know what else Brian said? He said he’d rather be dead than live at a prison.” Everyone fell silent. Mom hummed a sigh and clicked her tongue.

“You know, Perry, before I came here, if I thought about being incarcerated—if I tried to imagine it—my mind would shut down on me after just a few seconds. I couldn’t bear the thought. It seemed *deadly*. Maybe that’s what Brian really means.”

Last year, in fifth grade, we ran the mile again. At the starting line, Brian Morris told me he’d bury my sorry butt, and he did—by three seconds—fair and square. I’m curious as to how this year will go. I want to win.

I also want to keep Brian Morris off my back.

chapter eight

JUMPERS

I'm sitting outside my bedroom door in the Upper East Lounge right outside Warden Daugherty's office. This is the smallest lounge at Blue River. That's because Big Ed and his Special Projects crew from the woodshop walled off part of it to make my bedroom. I know the story because Big Ed likes to tell it.

"The residents were so sore about it!" He laughs. "They grumbled about losing the morning sun." (It sure does flood in on a clear day.) "Everybody said, oh, what's Blue River need with another broom closet? Or, is that warden going to hog the light to expand her own office? What's going in there?"

The story goes, the partition went up and Mom's belly grew out. Then a crib arrived. "I set that up myself," Big Ed likes to say. "Soon everyone knew that a baby was coming to Blue River. We had ourselves a little-bitty prison nursery for one."

Mom left Blue River to have me in a hospital. (She only leaves on medical passes.) She says that when she walked back through the entrance with me asleep in her arms in a blue blanket, Big Ed was beaming. He called out loud in the Blue River Common, "Oh boy, it's a boy!" He raised both his arms into the air. "Hey everybody, you can quit moaning about your morning sun." He pointed to the Upper East Lounge. "We've got us a new Morning Son!"

This lounge shrank because of me. Mom says it's the best place to hold small meetings. Fo-Joe calls Mom the Blue River U-Hauler because she likes to circle up the chairs. He can be a little bit of a jerk about it. He makes her put everything back, and he'll make her late to supper if the job isn't done.

Today, I am here on my own. No homework on the first day of school. I'm sitting on the floor, dangling my legs over the common. I have permission. The railings, which happen to be candy-apple red, protect me. Mom says it was all anyone could do to keep me from licking them when I was little. These days, I just rest my chin on the low rail and watch everything that goes on below.

The rezzes are coming in from the woodshop and the greenhouse. Some have been to meetings or classes. The dinner bell will ding in ninety minutes. This is free time for the rezzes. Sort of free. Some will go take showers. There is a schedule for that. Some will go to the gym or to another meeting. The men and women can socialize before dinner.

But only in the common. Mom says it's hard for anyone to have a private conversation that way. But it's the rule. There's no dating and no getting married at Blue River. You can't kiss anyone. Well, Mom can kiss me, and I can kiss her back. But anyone else will get an infraction ticket. Their pay will be docked, and they will have less to spend at the commissary. Some rezzes sneak hugs and quick kisses anyway. I see it happen. I don't tell.

At this hour there is lots of handshaking and high-fiving down in the common. That's how the workday ends for everyone at Blue River. The warden says it's how you show your gladness. Some rezzes like it. Some, not so much. There are some that stand with their backs against the wall. They cross their arms over their chests and stay stone-faced. They are the Cold Ones—I think it to myself. I see ice in their eyes, and that tells me they have the kind of hearts that don't want to care. Mom tells me, "Steer clear, Perry." And I do. But sometimes I see that even the Cold Ones go a little softer when they see me—a kid—around the halls of Blue River.

Mr. Halsey and Mr. Rojas are like family. They look for me to be up here. They know I am usually in this spot at four p.m. Sometimes I call down to catch someone's attention. But I stay quiet if I see people who look like they might be having a heavy time of it. Almost every rez at Blue River has troubles that come upon them pretty hard from time to time. I don't go jiggling people out of their deepest thoughts.

"Perry, my man!" Mr. Halsey is looking up. He's been to the commissary. He's got a plastic grocery bag tied closed at the top. He hands the bag to Mrs. DiCoco. "Protect this for me, will you, Callie?"

She will. Just about everyone likes Mr. Halsey.

Mr. Rojas plays lookout for him. He checks the common to see if Fo-Joe or any other supervisors are watching. "You're clear, man. All clear."

Mr. Halsey takes a few running steps and jumps up. He reaches high with one arm, like he's dunking a basketball. Only there is no ball and no hoop in the common. He's reaching for me. Easy-peasy. He tags my sneaker. "Check it out!" he says as he lands. "Perry's got fresh kicks! Woo-hoot!" He takes a look around to see if he is caught. He's not. He gives Mr. Rojas some skin. "Your go," he says, and then Mr. Halsey is the lookout. Mr. Rojas is lots shorter. He jumps, stretches, and just misses my foot.

"Give that man a booster seat!" Mr. Halsey teases. Mr. Rojas shakes a finger at him for the diss. Some of the younger rezzes join them taking jumps.

It's a pretty good game. They are getting away with it. Everybody at Blue River likes to see a little bit of that. Meanwhile, I like the thumps on my feet. I like it when Mr. Halsey asks about getting me and my new sneakers out onto the track for a run. I love to run with him. But we only have Saturdays now that school started.

Mom comes up behind me. "What's going on down

there, Perry? Are those fools jumping again?" She looks into the common just as Mr. Halsey leaps and smacks the bottom of my foot. He lands, spins, and looks up at Mom.

"Hey, hey, Jessica!" he says. He's smiling but he sounds a little serious when he asks, "How's it going? You doin' okay?"

I see Mom nod. But she's got that worried, not-enough-sleep look. She rests her elbow on the railing and plants her chin in her hand. She gives Mr. Halsey a thin smile. "Hey, Halsey," she says. "When are you going to play a real game in the yard?"

"I don't know," he says. "I've still got some work to do." He points to his own chest and says, "Gotta know that I can keep a cool groove."

"Play your first game with me," I say. "One on one. Whenever you're ready. We can keep it cool."

"That's a plan, Perry."

I look at Mom, but she has gone sort of blank. Maybe it's because crabby Mr. Krensky is skulking by at the top of the stairs on his way to the law library. He's a Cold One. We steer clear. But there is something else about Mom. She's not carrying the New Start file folder. This is the time of day that she usually sits in the lounge shuffling through it. She keeps lists of jobs she wants to apply for once we are out. She crosses them off if the positions get filled. "It's still early for me to be looking," she will say. "But this way I know what's out there."

The New Start file is also full of apartment listings. We'll need to rent. Someday. Those come and go too. I know her favorite: it's the whole second floor of a blue house on Button Lane in Rising City. That's the next little town, seven miles north of Surprise, where Zoey Samuels lives. The photos show a place with little rooms and long windows, wood floors, old radiators, and round knobs on all the doors. But the best thing about that one is that we could make it back on Saturdays to see Big Ed and the others. Week after week Mom checks on that blue house. "The ad is still there," she'll say. "Maybe it'll wait for us." She could be right about that. I get the feeling nobody else wants it. Mom's parole hearing is coming up. We'll be leaving soon.

Below us, Mr. Halsey takes his grocery bag back from Mrs. DiCoco. "Jess-i-ca!" he calls up to Mom. (He loves to say her name in three broken syllables.) "Think fast!" He comes rising up, the grocery bag sitting easily in his palm. He gives it a push to send it up over the railing. Mom comes to life. She reaches to catch it. She gives the bag a gentle, guessing-game squeeze. Her eyes brighten.

"Broccoli?" she says. "Did you buy me fresh broccoli?"

Mr. Halsey taps his long index finger to his lips. "Shh-shh-shh!" He looks over his shoulder then whispers up to her. "Don't get me in trouble!"

Mom covers her mouth. There's not supposed to be

giving or trading of goods from the commissary. But that's a rule that gets broken all the time.

"Thanks, Halsey," says Mom. "Lookie here, Perry." She says it with a smile. "Green gold!"

chapter nine

JESSICA

Jessica Cook had two weighty pieces of news on her mind all afternoon, and she carried them both to the dinner table. The first was the incident at Perry's school—the business of the assistance card for his lunches. The school had called to apologize for what had happened. They said she should please know that the privacy of every student was of utmost importance to them and that Perry should feel no stigma or discomfort using the card.

Jessica thought she should say, *Oh it's fine! Don't you know I'm in jail? Being outed for an assistance card is nothing to my kid.* Instead she'd squelched her sarcasm and thanked them for the call.

Perry hadn't said anything about the card. He'd been fairly quiet all evening, watching the jump game in the common and then sharing the snack of steamed broccoli with her in the Block C kitchenette. They had joked about

how they were spoiling their supper on the healthiest thing they'd eaten all day. Sad truth.

But her boy was onto her. He sat close to her at dinner, his huge blue eyes searching her face for the big tell. Perry always knew when there was a stink in the clink. He just didn't always know the details, and he knew not to ask. He'd been raised to respect everyone's privacy at Blue River, including his mother's.

The second piece of burdensome news had come from Warden Daugherty, in another private meeting in her office just hours ago—and it was far more haunting. "I'm afraid," the warden had said, "that we have finally come upon that one person who knows about my unusual arrangement as Perry's foster care giver and is unwilling to look the other way."

Jessica's breath had collapsed into her chest.

But who? After all this time? Why now? How bad is this? She was certain she had pondered the words, not spoken them. Yet it seemed the warden had heard.

"We have to stay calm. I'm on this, and I'll keep you informed. I promise you."

Sitting at dinner now with Perry and a cluster of female residents, Jessica struggled to be present. Sweeps of cold fear overtook her. She closed her eyes and let a deep breath slide over her lips.

Shake. It. Off.

Eat supper with your beautiful kid. Jessica ran her hand

along Perry's back where he sat beside her. He was wearing one of the new back-to-school shirts she'd sent Maya Rubin to buy. It'd taken the better part of two prison paychecks, but oh, nice knit, nice fit.

At least something was in place.

SITTING NEXT TO SCISSORS

“I can’t believe we can’t go,” Miss Sashonna is complaining at the dinner table. “It’s not fair. Not fair. We made all the decorations. That’s all us.” She pats her chest with the flat of her hand. Miss Sashonna has long, skinny arms and sharp elbows and she never stops moving. We leave a lot of space around her at the table. Sitting with her can be like sitting next to a pair of scissors.

Mom says Miss Sashonna is one of her biggest challenges here at Blue River. Sashonna thinks everything is “not fair.” Nothing bugs Mom more. When Sashonna first got here she mouthed off about everything from the shower schedule to the sporks in the cafeteria. “You see this, you all?” She held her spork up high. “Know what this is? I’ll tell you what. This is unnn-necessary, that’s what. They can give

me real flatware. I'm no stabber."

Mom told her, "We're all nonviolent, Sashonna. Sporks are practical. One utensil. Easy to wash." Then she added, "And isn't it your job in the kitchen to wrap napkins around sporks?"

"Two hundred of 'em a day," she answered with a waggle.

"That's a lot of sporks," said Mom. "You better find some love for those until you get promoted."

"Yeah, I find some love for my big eight dollars a week," Sashonna said. "I can't even get a little jar of that chocolate spread at the commissary. It's not fair."

One day Miss Sashonna brought up the fact that Mom got to have me with her at Blue River. "What's up with that?"

But Warden Daugherty was quick, saying, "Sashonna, if you know of a facility where you think things would be *more fair*, you let me know. I'll get you transferred." That shut her down in a blink. She's no dope. Anybody would choose Blue River in a heartbeat—anybody who has to be in a prison.

Tonight, Sashonna's whine-o-meter is all cranked up because of the Dads and Daughters Dance. It's the first one ever. Warden Daugherty has decided to try it for the men at Blue River—the ones who are dads. Everyone is going to knock off work early on Friday afternoon to get ready.

"We should all get to go. They got a suit for every guy. Did you hear that? All donated. Shoot, we never get to see them looking fine like that. I'm so sick of blue shirts," she says.

"I don't care so much about them," says Mrs. DiCoco, flapping her hand. "It's the little girls I want to see. Little ones like my grandbabies. They are going to come in wearing their dresses and looking adorable. Like tiny princesses."

"Well . . .," Miss Gina says. She has dark crusty eye-lashes that look like they will break when she blinks. "I wish it could be a dance for all of us too."

"Yeah! Yeah!" Sashonna whirls her knobby fist in the air.

"That could happen someday," Mom says. "You never know. The warden is always working on new—"

"Jessica! You're just on the other side about everything around here," Sashonna says.

"Hey. No, I'm not," Mom says, shaking her head. "It's hard as heck, but I try not to think about sides in here."

"Well, that's because you're due to get out." Sashonna curls a lip at Mom. She sits back hard in her chair. Folds her arms. "It's two years since I've seen a guy all dressed up nice."

Mom makes a tiny sound in her throat like she's kind of agreeing with Sashonna on that point. "Well, I'd love to have eyes on that event too," Mom says. "But the dance is for the guys. To remind them what's waiting on the outside." She sounds drifty. "Remind them to keep on doing the right thing, keep on rising up—even on the bleak days."

"I'm glad one of you gets that." Warden Daugherty has done that thing where she rolls up out of nowhere like some life-size wind-up toy. She stands at the end of the table with

her clipboard tucked in her elbow and her pen in her hand.

Miss Sashonna straightens her spine and puts both hands up. "I get it! I get it too," she says.

Miss Gina rolls her eyes. Mrs. DiCoco lets out a laugh and pushes at her silver hair.

"That dance is going to be emotional," Warden Daugherty says. "And emotions are fine. We are human. But for this, the fathers deserve some privacy." She looks over the tops of her eyeglasses and pokes her pen at the group like she's popping a balloon. "End of discussion," she says. Then she looks at me. "So, Perry. Good day at the new school?"

"Yes," I say.

"I'm glad to hear it," she says. "If you need anything, you come see me. Any problems, just tell me." I'm guessing someone told her about my unswipeable lunch card. When something like that goes wrong for me on the outside, the warden gets it fixed in no time. But the only thing I want to know tonight is what's up with Mom. I can't ask that question right here and right now. Besides, the warden is already motoring through a turn. Then she is gone.

Miss Sashonna plunks her elbows on the table. "Okay, so we can't go to that dance." A grin creeps across her face. "But Perry can." She jabs a finger at me.

Mom says, "First of all, don't point at my kid. Second of all, he's not a dad or a daughter."

"But he's a photographer! He's got that camera." Miss Sashonna is pointing at me again. Mom gives her a wicked

look, like she'd like to grab that finger.

"Pictures would be nice," Miss Gina says, and Mrs. DiCoco likes that idea too.

"So do it, Perry!" Miss Sashonna pumps her skinny arms and dances in her seat. She sings, "Have a party! Be a dancer!"

"Perry does have a nice camera," says Mom. She makes a rectangle with her fingers and thumbs. "It's tiny, and I love how you can view the shots right on the screen. It's the most brilliant thi—"

"That's called digital," says Sashonna. She puts a long bony finger in Mom's face. "Don't you know? Digital."

Mom looks up. "Right. Cameras are one of those things that have changed a lot in twelve years," Mom reminds her.

"What do you say, Perry?" Miss Gina pretends to hold a camera to her eye. She clicks down with one finger and shuts one furry eyelash.

"Can I, Mom?"

"If the warden says you may—and if you want to do it." She always lets me decide. I am the guy with the most freedom at Blue River.

I try to deliver.

chapter eleven

DADS AND DAUGHTERS

n Friday afternoon I come in from school and find the Blue River Common transformed. Twists of pink and white crepe paper float from the railings. Paper birds made from magazine pages hang from strings. “Wow!” I wave my arms to move the air. Everything sways. The common is breathing.

I have permission to hang out in the Upper East Lounge and take pictures of the Dads and Daughters Dance. But only for the first half hour. Fo-Joe likes the idea. He thinks we should print pictures for the dads. Some of the girls who are coming are the ones that can’t always make the trip to Surprise.

When the fruit punch and trays of cookies are ready, Fo-Joe and the other supervisors clear the common. Mom and the other women will have tea and free time in their block kitchenettes this afternoon. Dinner will be an hour

later than normal. This is a rare day at Blue River.

The men come in, and I have to look twice to tell who is who. They are wearing the donated suits—some baggy, some tight, but all of them sharp. When I watch them through the viewfinder of my camera, I see the men standing tall. They are well dressed and smiling. All of Blue River is outside the frame. They are *free* this afternoon. For the first time I wonder, what about Mom? Will she look different when she's released? Will she be different when we're on the outside?

Below me Mr. Rojas laughs. He helps Mr. Palmero pin his boutonniere to his jacket. There are some upside-down carnations in the common. But everyone is having a laugh about it.

Then the daughters arrive. Just like Mrs. DiCoco said, the little ones look like princesses—or cupcakes with little heads, legs, and arms. Most tiptoe right up to their dads, glad to see them. There are a couple of criers, some sad, some not so sure about being here. Their fathers wait, talk to them sweetly. Then bend low to lift them up.

Cici and Mira Rojas know me from visiting days. They wave to me, and Mr. Rojas holds a girl on each arm. He says, "Look up! Smile for Perry!"

I frame the shot and squeeze the shutter. More dads and daughters look up to be photographed.

There is a holdout. She's a bigger girl, about my age. I don't know her dad, except that he's called Talon. (He has bird claw tattoos that come up his neck and behind his ears.)

He's a bit of a Cold One. Tonight he seems softer. But his girl looks mad as heck. She stands against the wall, one foot up behind her and arms tight across her chest. Her chin juts forward. She won't look at her father—won't look at much of anything, except to give me the stink-eye.

"There's some dumb boy up there!" She points at me. Mr. Talon goes to stand beside her. "What's that boy doing?" I turn away. I don't know what else to do.

The music is playing. The dancing begins.

Some dads and daughters kick out, jump, and shimmy. But most dads hold their daughters close, rock them, and twirl in one place. There are still some tears. The warden said emotional.

I see Talon and his girl step away from the wall. She won't take his hands, but they dance a little. I don't get their picture. Maybe they don't really want one.

I watch the clock. I don't stay long.

Later, Fo-Joe comes to my door with a cup of punch and a napkin full of shortbread cookies. "Brought you a snack, since dinner is late. The party's breaking up down below. Give it five and you're free to roam," he says. I don't usually have to stay stashed away, especially not on a Friday afternoon.

When the music dies I step out and look down. The common is empty. The paper birds hang still. I see Mr. Rojas coming up the hall from Block A on his own. He has changed out of his donated suit, back into his light-blue

shirt. He carries an apron. He's a server in the kitchen tonight. He doesn't see me. When he gets to the common he stops and looks at the decorations still hanging there. He sits back against the wall. He pulls a handful of tissues from his pocket and blows his nose three times in a row. I remember what Warden Daugherty said about privacy. I back away from the rail. I hear sobs and then a few deep breaths that let me know he is trying to stop.

I know what he did. Mr. Rojas ran a gambling ring. He said it was good quick money. He thought he could sack away everything he'd need to send his little girls to college then walk away from the illegal stuff. I heard him tell it. "I got greedy," he said. "Just a little more, just a little more . . .," he mocked himself. "Now I'm just a dumbass in the slammer who messed up on his family."

But actually, Mr. Rojas is smart. He helps the rezzes up in the law library. You have to understand your own case when you are in prison. Mr. Krensky is a good jailhouse lawyer too—maybe even better than Mr. Rojas. But Krensky isn't nice. He makes people pay for every little thing. Mr. Rojas helps for free. He's been a good friend to Mom and me. When Mrs. Rojas brings their girls to visit, I feel like more family has arrived. It's one of the hard things about Blue River. I'm glad that he has been here for us. But I know how much Mr. Rojas misses home.

I inch up to look down. I see him tying on his apron. I

hear Eggy-Mon call from the kitchen, “How do you do, my man in blue?”

“Blue is the color,” Mr. Rojas replies. “I’m getting it together. But man, we have guys weeping rivers down on Block B tonight.”

chapter twelve

MEETING WITH THE WARDEN

Warden Daugherty offers me her rolling chair. I get the feeling I will not be spinning in it today. No taking a short run to land on my knees on it and surf across the floor. I might be getting too big for that anyway. The warden pushes me forward to sit in front of Mom. She closes the office door and drops the blinds over the glass that looks into the hall, and I wonder why we need privacy. The warden stands beside her desk. Mom does the talking. Her voice is unsteady.

“Perry,” she says, “Warden Daugherty and I need to tell you something. There’s a new bump in our plan.” Mom presses her hands together. She lowers her head for a second, and when she raises it I see that her eyes are watery.

Must be a big bump. “Which plan?” I ask.

"The leaving Blue River plan." She sighs. "Things are going to go differently than expected. It's not my choice. But it may not be all bad either."

"So, what part of it is bad?" I ask. "If there is some delay, we'll just wait . . ." I feel bad for saying it. Mom deserves to be out. She shouldn't have to wait another second. It's time.

She clears her throat. Fixes serious green eyes on me. "You know that it's always been a little unusual that you live at Blue River." Mom glances at the warden before she goes on. "We've been so lucky for that, Perry. But now . . . there's someone making trouble over it."

"Why? Who would care?"

"Well . . . one can only wonder about that." Mom huffs, as if there might be more to that story. But I won't be hearing it right now.

"Um-hmm," the warden says. "The scrutiny is really on me, Perry. My practices and procedures here at Blue River—the way I do things."

"Are you saying you are in trouble?" I look up at the warden. The tiny nod of her head tells me I'm right.

"Wow," I say. I feel like I'm being slowly hit by a bolt of lightning. "And trouble for you means trouble for me?"

"It means change," says Mom. "For you and me." She grabs both my hands in hers. I can feel her shaking right up into the rolled cuffs of her Blue River chambray shirt.

"Mom?"

"Perry, I always planned for the two of us to leave here

together. And I'm staying on track. I will apply and reapply for parole. Oh boy, will I ever . . ." She gets a little quieter. "But you, Perry, you're going to live on the outside."

I jump to my feet. The chair rolls backward and hits something behind me with a thud. "What? When?"

"I'm sorry," Mom whispers. "You have to go now."

chapter thirteen

LEAVING BLUE RIVER

Late in the afternoon on Sunday I watch the gray clock in the common. It's ticking away the minutes. Last minutes. Mom wants me to be strong. She said, "We aren't going to like this. But we will be fine. We are a family. We are a team. We are together even when we cannot see each other." I'm hanging onto her words. I want her to believe that I am okay. I've been to the bathroom two times in seven minutes.

None of this seems real. Something will happen. A call will come. An order will arrive. An indestructible dome will drop over the Blue River campus to keep me in and keep the thing that is coming to get me out.

The dark-gray SUV pulls up in the front circle drive. My insides lurch.

I stand with Mom, Warden Daugherty, Foreman Joe, and Big Ed. Someone could think that we are setting up to have our photo taken, all of us looking out the large front

window together like this. But none of us are smiling. At my feet is a rolling suitcase that belongs to the warden. It is filled with almost everything I own. My school stuff is in my backpack. So is my camera. We have filled it with pictures of pictures—all the shots Warden Daugherty and the other residents have taken of me over the years. Mom keeps the prints on her wall. I photographed them all so I'll have the same set to flick through when I need them.

When Mom told me that I'd be living on the outside without her, I saw myself wandering around inside the rooms of the house she wants to rent on Button Lane. Alone. That was ridiculous. Now I can't picture anything. I can't see myself living outside of Blue River at all.

My pits are sweating. My head feels airy and floaty and cold on top. I take a few breaths to try to send some oxygen up there.

A man gets out of the SUV and takes quick, lively steps to the back of the car. He opens the gate. I suppose he'll put my bags back there. I see him brush the arm of his coat with the back of his hand. He pats back his brown hair with his palms.

"So that's him?" I ask. I cannot feel my lips.

"Must be," says Mom.

"It is," says Warden Daugherty. I guess she has met him before.

The man's name is Thomas VanLeer. I know that he has a wife and a daughter. I also know that he is the whole reason

that I am leaving Blue River. I know that I'm going to live at his home. Big Ed calls that "pouring salt in the wound."

Mom is twisting beside me. Big Ed's lower jaw is pushed forward. Fo-Joe is drawing his teeth over his lip. Everyone keeps eyes on Thomas VanLeer.

Nobody likes this, I think to myself, nobody except smiling, waving Mr. Thomas VanLeer, who is striding toward the door of the Blue River Co-ed Correctional Facility. He's a big deal in Butler County. He has some important job.

Thomas VanLeer reaches for the door handle and goes to give it a good yank. Blue River is locked up tight. He nearly bangs his own head into the glass.

"Yeah, heh . . . there's a beautiful thing . . .," Big Ed says in his under-mumble.

Slowly, the warden points to the left to indicate that there's a security call button at the side of the door. VanLeer needs to punch it. He looks around, confused. When he catches on he nods in a goofy sort of way. He gives the button a press. Then he waits. We all wait. Things are awfully silent. I begin to wonder which guard is monitoring the front cam.

"Warden Daugherty? Do you need me to run up to security and tell them to unlock?" I ask.

The warden speaks slowly, as if her batteries are dying. "That's all right, Perry. I'm sure the guard will open the door. Eventually."

I look back over my shoulder at the golden walls, the

wide halls, the stairs and red railings. No more running the Block C corridor. No more hugging the railing above the common. No all-rise announcements in the mornings. A weight falls through my stomach. I lean into Mom. She pulls me close.

VanLeer is still waiting, shuffling his feet. What if we just never let him in? I think this to myself, and I feel brilliant. I hear the lock bolt disengage. It seems louder than it ever has before. Mr. VanLeer is inside. My ribs make a tight cage around my chest.

"Hello, all. Phew! September cold snap out there." He claps his gloves together. He directs his attention to me. "You must be Perry."

"Genius," says Big Ed in that low rumble.

"Yes. I'm Perry." I say it slowly. I know that I have never sounded more miserable in all my life. I don't offer to shake hands with him.

Big Ed speaks close to the back of my head. "No reason to be friendly if it's not what you're feeling." I'm not.

VanLeer looks at Mom. "And are you Jessica?" he asks.

"Yes. Perry's mother," she tells him.

"Well, I'm Thomas VanLeer," he says. He introduces himself all around. He gets gloomy responses, but he smiles the whole time. "Pleasure to meet you all."

"Hardly," says Big Ed.

"You may know, I'm the Butler County district attorney," Mr. VanLeer says.

"Funny thing about that," Big Ed says. "I always thought the DA was supposed to work for the people. And here it seems to me that you're working against these people." He fans his hand toward Mom and me.

"Well, I believe I'm righting a wrong in this case," Mr. VanLeer says. He is still smiling and nodding. "Which brings me to my business. We all know why I'm here."

"Here to take away our Morning Son," Big Ed says.

The warden says, "Mr. VanLeer. You have papers for me." She holds out her hand. VanLeer pulls an envelope from the inside pocket of his coat. The warden takes her time unfolding the papers and even more time looking them over.

Mom is so silent, she is hardly breathing. Warden Daugherty keeps reading. VanLeer leans toward her impatiently. "Look, it's all in order, Gayle," he says.

"Unfortunate," says Big Ed.

"I'm meticulous with paperwork." VanLeer reaches for the rolling suitcase with my things in it. "I think it best we not prolong."

"Hmm. Sounds like you want to get away from us," Big Ed says.

The warden fastens the papers to her clipboard. She looks at Mom and nods. "It's time," she says, and I feel doomed.

Mom speaks. "Mr. VanLeer." She waits until he is looking right at her. "I hope you'll be as good at providing this interim home for my son as you seem to think."

VanLeer smiles broadly. "He's in terrific hands."

"He has always been in terrific hands," the warden says.

Thomas VanLeer tells Mom, "Perhaps it's best for you to keep an open mind." He claps a hand on my shoulder, and I feel my eyes bug out. "Perry deserves better than he has had."

"Says you." Big Ed coughs.

"This will be good for him."

I can't stand it anymore. I slip out from under VanLeer's clamp to give Mom an enormous hug. Then I reach for Big Ed and the warden, who takes her time and hums while she holds me. I give Fo-Joe a high five. He pulls me in for a short, rough hug. Then I hug Mom again. Longer. She is shaking, but she won't cry. This is my team, I think to myself.

"I'll see you all on Saturday," I say. "Six days away." I force my shoulders to shrug. "We can handle that."

Mom lets out a tiny laugh and that stops her shaking at least for a second or two. Big Ed puts his arm around her. She rests her ear against him. Fo-Joe and the warden ignore the extended contact. This is a special circumstance.

VanLeer pulls up the handle of the rolling suitcase. I pick up my loaded backpack.

Mom says, "I love you."

"Love you too," I say. "Six days. Don't miss me too much." I push my mouth into a wide smile. I hope that every tooth is gleaming.

Then I go.

chapter fourteen

A NEW STINK

When I step out of the Blue River Co-ed Correctional Facility, all I feel is wrong and dizzier than before.

I make my way onto the backseat of Thomas VanLeer's SUV, which has a new-car smell that crawls straight up my nostrils. "Got your seat belt on, Perry? Need any help with that?"

"No. Thank you." I could remind him that I am eleven, and that I ride in a car to school every day, that I know how to buckle up. But I do not feel talkative. I see him looking at me in his rearview mirror.

"So, Perry, this is a new chapter for you." He cranks the steering wheel as we begin to roll. I look back and see Mom and Big Ed and Fo-Joe and the warden all standing at the glass, each with one arm raised. I'm not sure they'll see me, but I press my palm against the glass inside the SUV.

"You'll love the house," VanLeer is saying. "You'll feel

right at home. You'll have a nice bedroom. A real bedroom. And you can make it your own. We can paint. Put up posters. Whatever you want."

I know he's still checking the mirror. I won't look up there. I'm watching Blue River.

"I understand that you'll miss your mom—and that's normal. I don't want you to worry. You'll still see her. We'll follow the schedule. Meanwhile, you'll get to know our routines . . ."

He is talking too much. That new smell of the SUV is too much. My head feels some kind of horrible.

"You'll have a first family supper with us this evening," he says. He laughs and adds, "They know you're coming! They're setting a place for you at the table. Are you hungry now, Perry? Home is not far away, but we could stop. Ever been to the drive-through? Do you like milk shakes? French fries?" His tone changes. "Normally I wouldn't suggest snack food before supper. But this is no ordinary day . . ."

My horrible floating head bobs. Once. Twice. I'm in a predicament. There is a floor mat at my feet. I lean up. The seat belt stops me. I'm trapped. I turn my face to the side and lose my lunch all down the inside of Mr. VanLeer's car door.

chapter fifteen

NOT RIGHT AT HOME

Mr. VanLeer pushes the door to his home open for me. I step inside. The walls feel close. The ceilings are low. The air is warm and smells sweet and spicy. Better than new-car smell. And throw-up.

“Ah! I think that’s Thai food,” says VanLeer. “Don’t I smell coconut?” He cocks his head at me. He should know to stop talking about food by now. Maybe he thinks I am empty. “My wife took a wonderful series of cooking lessons in foreign cuisine,” he tells me. Then he calls out, “Hello! Robyn? We’re here!”

I wait for Mr. VanLeer’s family, even though I’m dreading it. I’m sure my face is gray. They are going to find out that I threw up in their car. A woman comes around the corner from what must be the kitchen. Her face is turned downward for a moment. Her head is all long light curls just

like Zoey Samuels's mom. Another look and I realize she *is* Mrs. Samuels.

"Wha—" I don't get any words out. Something else catches my eye, and that something is Zoey. She leans around the corner.

"Z-Zoey?"

"Yeah." She gives a little shrug. "Hi, Perry." She winds her finger into her hair then makes a fist. I know Zoey. She does that when she's nervous.

"Tom!" I say it louder than I mean to. Everything is silent for a few seconds. I look at Zoey and say, "Thomas VanLeer is Tom."

I watch her eyebrows arch up. "Yeah," she says. "My stepdad. Tom."

Mr. Thomas-Tom VanLeer has been very busy this whole time with his head inside the closet, pushing his coat onto a hanger. I'm not sure he has heard me. But Zoey's mom has. I'm not sure whether to call her Mrs. VanLeer or Mrs. Samuels, but she is giving me a kind smile. I think my mouth is hanging open.

"We're glad to have you here, Perry," she says. Her head tilts in that friendly way. "Can I get you anythi—"

"Water," Mr. VanLeer says, springing back out of the coat closet. "He needs a drink of water."

He herds me into the kitchen, almost stepping on the backs of my sneakers as we go. He drags the warden's suitcase in behind us and sets it down. He pulls a glass from the

kitchen cupboard and accidentally clanks it against the faucet as he fills it. Everything about him has sped up since my great moment inside the SUV. Throw-up has a way of making people hurry. He hands me the glass, and I take a tiny sip.

“And let’s run a load of wash,” he says, nodding at Zoey’s mother. “Perry’s jacket is a bit . . . soiled.” He tries to talk plainly, like nothing is wrong with puking in a car or down your own sleeve.

“So, would you mind, Robyn?”

“Not at all.”

“Good. Now, I’ve got to go back down to the car—just for a minute.” He quickly grabs paper towels and spray cleaner from under the VanLeer kitchen sink. I should offer to clean that car door. But Thomas VanLeer is halfway down the hall. He calls over his shoulder. “And hey, Zoey, sweetheart, you can go ahead and show Perry to his room. And the bathroom, so he can wash up. Show him the whole house.” He disappears with his cleaning supplies.

The room takes a breath. In the silence, I’m still holding the glass of water, which I do not want. I’m thinking about rules and wondering if it is okay to just set this glass down on the counter. Or do I put it in the sink, or inside the dishwasher? Mrs. Samuels or VanLeer reaches to take it from my hand.

“Looks like you are done with this,” she says softly. Then she helps me out of the jacket so easily that I feel bad about what’s all over it.

Zoey watches. I still cannot believe that I'm in her house on this horrible day.

"Hey, Mom," she says, "my jacket could go in too."

"Good idea," says her mom.

Maybe not, I think. But I can't seem to say the words.

Zoey's mom carries my jacket. Zoey grabs my backpack. I pull up the handle on Warden Daugherty's rolling suitcase and follow them down the hall.

chapter sixteen

THE ROOM I WILL (BARELY) SLEEP IN

Zoey and I stand in the bedroom in the VanLeer house. I am supposed to sleep here. I'm in a fight with myself; I don't want to look around the space, but I have to. It is very square and the walls are the color of Mom's morning coffee. That's with two big splashes of milk. The bed is a mound of brown and white pillows and covers and it looks like a giant dessert. All the furniture is dark wood. Lamps with big flared heads stand all around the room. Then there is Zoey, who is shifting in place.

"There isn't that much to show you," she says. She points around the room saying, "Bed. Nightstand. Dresser. Window. Curtain. And the closet is here." She pushes on a narrow door. I see a tiny empty room. "We can move your furniture around if you want."

"I don't have any furniture," I say.

"Well. The stuff in this room," she says. "You know what I mean."

A few seconds grind by. I think of the gray clocks at home. I scan the coffee-colored walls and don't find a clock here. I have to have a clock . . .

"Perry," Zoey whispers. "Are you all right?"

"When did you know?" I ask. I'm giving her a stone face. I can't help it.

Her shoulders slump. "They told me on Friday at supper. Perry, I'm sorry. There was no way for me to tell you. I know this is your worst-case scenario. I knew it the minute I heard. But I was hoping—"

"What? Hoping that I'd like being yanked out of Blue River as long as it was to come live with you?" My face turns hot. Zoey looks stunned.

"No. But Tom might have been thinking that. Maybe it's better than . . . well, I don't know . . . At least I'm not Brian Morris, or . . ." She sighs and does not finish that sentence. Zoey Samuels is having trouble talking to me. That never happens. After a few seconds she asks, "Do you want to put your stuff in the dresser?"

"No."

Later, I stare at the swirls of plaster on the ceiling. I am used to seeing square tiles. But it is just one of the hundred or so things that are not right. This bed does not feel like mine. I am lying down but off-balance, too high from the

floor. There is something wrong with the little bit of supper in my belly. I'm not sick from it. It actually tasted good. But I ate it with the wrong people. Right about now, I'd be happy to hear Miss Sashonna say, "It's not fair!"

Lights from somewhere outside cast weird shadows on the walls, and I have a strange sense of how far down the hall the bathroom is. I didn't think to ask if I could just go ahead and use it in the night. The shower in there is messed up. The water comes out of the little spout at the bottom—like for filling the tub—but nothing comes out of the showerhead at the top. I crouched under the low spout and splashed water onto me to clean up. Maybe only the bathtub part works. I'm not used to that. There are no tubs at Blue River, except for the little plastic one that I outgrew a long, long time ago.

I hope I won't need to get up in the night. I'm afraid I'll knock over one of the lamps in this room where I am *not* sleeping. Meanwhile, I forgot to ask what I'm supposed to do in the morning, which is slowly, slowly getting closer.

I will have to wait for six days just to tell Mom how I got sick, how VanLeer has turned out to be Zoey's stepdad, how the shower doesn't work right, and how every single thing is different here. I lie in the strange bed, aching to talk to Mom. Suddenly I know that this is what new residents feel like on their first night at Blue River.

I am a new intake at the VanLeer house.

chapter seventeen

MORNING IN A NEW PLACE

It turns out that the way you wake up here is: Mr. Thomas VanLeer stands in the doorway and hollers you right out of bed. I am feet on the floor before I have a single thought. It's not mad hollering. He's clapping too. Maybe he thinks he is cheering me out of bed.

"How did you sleep, pal?" *Clap!* Mr. VanLeer bangs his hands together again. "That's a heck of a soft bed, isn't it?"

I look at the bed and blink a few times. I don't know how I got down from there so fast. Did I really sleep? How many minutes? I saw the sunrise . . .

"Mrs. Samuels finds the nicest things for our home—"

Oh, it is Samuels! I think. She probably kept that name so people wouldn't be confused about her being Zoey's mom.

"That bed came from an old farmstead up near Lincoln . . ."

Mrs. Samuels arrives at the door. She touches her husband's arm and looks in at me. "Good morning, Perry," she says. She is sweet and quiet. "Breakfast will be ready in just a little bit. We'll let you get dressed now. Come to the kitchen when you're ready." She loops her hand into the crook of Mr. VanLeer's elbow. She smiles and closes the door.

I look for a clock again, then remember that there isn't one. Before I dress, I stand by the window and look out across the flat yard where the tall trees stand. By the look of the sun outside, I can guess that it's time for morning release at Blue River. I curl my hand around nothing but air and lean toward my thumb. Low and slow, I whisper.

"Good morning. This is Perry at sunrise. It is Monday, September twelfth. If you want to know how I slept, well, I didn't." I stop to breathe and a huge sigh comes out of me. "I don't know what you're having for breakfast. I'm not sure what I'm having for breakfast." I stop and imagine the click of the locks, and that one enormous yawn that all of Blue River makes every day. I wonder how Mom is waking. My eyes begin to burn. The sand in them loosens. I wonder if she and Big Ed sat in the common long after I left. It might have been allowed. Special circumstances. I wonder if she ate dinner and if she tossed and turned all night. It catches me—a cold stone in my throat. I want Mom so much. I want to go home.

I should be crouching into runner's stance facing Block C right about now. But this morning there's nothing to run toward.

chapter eighteen

SLEEPWALKING

Zoey's mom is driving us to school. I sit in the VanLeer SUV with my nose tucked inside my fleece. It wears a whole new smell: VanLeer laundry soap. Zoey keeps looking at me. I stay tucked.

Inside the school, I stand beside Zoey but I am searching the lobby for Miss Maya Rubin. When I see her, I know that she has been watching for me too. We put our hands up to wave at the same time. I go right to her. "Miss Maya, have you heard from the warden this morning? I'm just wondering if my mom is all right."

"I'm sure Jessica is fine," Miss Maya tells me. But Miss Maya is not a resident of Blue River, so she doesn't know for sure. "She'll be wondering the same about you, Perry. This whole thing is . . . well . . ." She shakes her head.

I think she's hesitating because Zoey has followed me.

"It's unexpected," Miss Maya says. She leans around me just a little to say a cheerful good morning to Zoey. Zoey nods. The hallway is beginning to buzz like a hive. I step closer to Miss Maya.

"Can you call Blue River today?" I ask. I'm low-talking. I'm not so sure I want Zoey to hear me. She knows it. She looks off to one side and pretends not to listen.

"I know of no rule that says I may not," says Miss Maya. Her eyes open wide and she flashes a grin.

"I just want to know how everything is."

"Sure. I'll try to call during my lunch break," she promises. "I should at least be able to reach my aunt. I'll give them the message that I've seen you today. That will comfort everyone." She smiles and turns to go.

In the middle school we change rooms for different subjects. I'm dragging myself from class to class. Twice, I walk right up the back of somebody in the hall and have to say I'm sorry. One of those times it is Zoey, and I accidentally pull her shoe off her heel. She hops out of line and backs against the rain forest bulletin board. I step out with her.

"You gave me a flat, Perry."

"Sorry," I say.

Zoey sighs and hooks her finger into her shoe to fix it. We go on in to science class, where I get a jaw-killing case of the yawns. I'm wishing for lunchtime to come. I'm not hungry. All I want to do is check back in with Miss Maya.

Standing in the lunch line, Zoey says, "Okay, so just tell me. Are you going to stop talking to me permanently because of all this?"

"No," I say. "I'm just tired." It's the truth. I'm sleepwalking. I mean to tell Zoey this, but then someone tall elbows past us. I mistake him for a teacher and step out of his way. Then I realize that he's one of the kids who was with Brian Morris that first day of school. He's the one who complained when my unswipeable card held up the lunch line.

"Hey!" Zoey says to him. "Check it out." She points to herself and to me. "Other hungry people. In line."

"I'm not waiting while someone takes forever to get his special card swiped," the boy says, and he looks straight down from the top of his tall self, right at me.

"Shut your trapola about that," says Zoey. "It's been fixed."

Another boy slides in front of us. Then another. Then Brian Morris, who also mumbles, "Move over, Mad-Zoe."

"Hey! Neanderthals! What gives?" She's getting loud.

"Shh . . . Zoey . . .," I say. But that's all I've got. I'm too tired.

Miss Jenrik's jewelry jingles when she swipes my card. She punches the right code in on the first try. While she is swiping Zoey's card she asks, "Did somebody cut that line today?"

"Yes!" Zoey tells her.

"Thought so." Miss Jenrik tucks a tail of her flamingo-pink hair back. She glances past us to the table where the boys have gone to sit.

"It doesn't matter," I say.

"It does matter," she corrects. "People have to wait their turn. So, listen . . . I have another code for you," she says. "It's baloney."

"Baloney?" Zoey is very interested.

"Yep. You know why? Because we never serve baloney here. So if I hear someone say the word *baloney*, these multiple-pierced ears of mine will perk right up." Miss Jenrik flicks at her hoops and feathers. "I'll deal with that baloney because there is no place for it in this cafeteria. Promise you."

"All right," says Zoey Samuels, and she stands tall.

I give Miss Jenrik a weak smile and move on.

We have to squeeze by those boys to make it to the place we like to sit. Today, I would've settled for any other spot in the cafeteria, but Zoey is leading. The boys grumble. They make room for us as if we were a pair of cactus plants.

We sit. I lean on my elbows, cheeks in my hands, and look down at the food in the compartments of my lunch tray. The largest one holds three breaded chicken fingers. Another is filled with a scoop of hash browns, another with three baby carrots, two cherry tomatoes, and a piece of broccoli all tucked together. There is an oatmeal cookie in the last small square.

“Perry? Are you going to eat?” Zoey asks.

It could be that a little while has gone by.

“Yeah,” I say. But then I just sit there some more. I’m thinking about the vegetables. There are never enough vegetables for the residents at Blue River. Not the fresh kind. Same for fruit. If I get an apple on my lunch tray I sneak it back to Blue River and split it with Mom.

I think of home and how much I want to go to sleep in my own bed again. I’d like to do that right now. I can see Mr. Halsey jumping in the common with the bag of broccoli. Wait. Impossible. My face is still in my hands. The skin on my cheeks is stretched. My elbows slide. My tray moves forward toward Zoey’s tray then stops. My head is nodding. Something isn’t right. Halsey is jumping with bags and bags of broccoli . . . throwing them over the red railing . . . again and again. But there was only one head of broccoli . . . broccoli . . . My head is broccoli . . . and it’s going to fall off my shoulders. Then . . . it does. BAM!

“Perry!” Zoey is suddenly on her feet. “Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! Perry!”

There is food all over the table. Zoey is screeching.

“Perry, you’re bleeding!”

My nose feels runny. I blink and put the back of my hand up there and it comes away bloody. Brian Morris and his new friends are sliding away, leaving the table, and taking their lunch trays with them. I hear gasps and groans.

“Blech! Sick!” and “Nasty!”

It takes a few seconds for me to realize that my nose is killing me. Zoey is leaning toward me, offering her napkin. But it's as if she can't reach me across that mess of tumbled lunch.

I feel far away from everything today.

chapter nineteen

ZOEY EXPLAINS

Zoey and a school custodian walk me to the nurse's office. All the way there, the custodian holds her big ring of keys against the back of my neck just under my shirt collar. "Magic trick," she says. "It helps stop a nosebleed. I don't know why it works, but it works."

I pinch my nostrils near the top. Zoey hops along beside us saying, "It's okay, Perry. It's already stopping. You're going to be all right."

I squeeze my eyes shut several times as we walk. Something huge is rising up inside of me. I want my mom. So much. I want her to know what has happened. I can't believe that I am not living at Blue River. I can't get to her. It chokes me.

In her office, the nurse checks me over. She holds my head with her strong fingers and thumbs, she tips it and tilts it. She looks up my nose then feels my nose bones.

"Perry, that must have hurt!" she says. "But it's not

broken." She positions my fingers back on my nose. "Pinch. Perfect. Now, you might have guessed it, but I can't tape a bloody nose shut with Band-Aids. But if you pinch a little while longer, we'll have a full recovery. A wet cloth will take care of the evidence. It's a miracle you missed the shirt," she adds.

The shirt! It is new, and new shirts are expensive. Mom works hard at Blue River to earn a small pay. I always try to tell her that Goodwill shirts are fine. But she likes me to have a couple of new ones each season. Thinking about it makes me feel like crying. I gulp. I have to get myself together.

The nurse sits me in a little room inside her office. She lets Zoey come in with me. She puts a baggie of ice on my neck in place of the custodian's keys. I lean forward and continue to pinch. My hand is sticky with my own blood.

"How do you feel?" Zoey wants to know.

"Gross," I manage to say. I sound like a duck. My eyes burn, and I blink.

"Perry, did you fall asleep sitting up?"

"I think so," I say. I remember the broccoli dream. But I don't tell it.

"Didn't you sleep last night?"

I shake my head no, which is tricky when you are keeping your nose pinched.

"You hate it at my house, don't you?"

I don't answer.

"You know, Perry . . . if you are mad, I get it," Zoey says.

She looks at me and bites her bottom lip. Her knees begin to bounce up and down. “I feel terrible. Like, really, really terrible.” Her voice turns raspy. “This whole thing happened because of me.”

She sits forward, and I know that she’s going to tell me why.

“A couple of weeks ago we were all sitting at the dinner table. Tom was looking over some papers. He works basically all the time. Mom and I were talking about school starting again. I asked her if we could invite you to come for supper this fall, now that we’d be in middle school. I said it was about time. We thought maybe your mom and Blue River would agree to let you come.” Zoey takes a breath.

“Tom was being quiet, working and eating, and listening to Mom and me with one ear. Then I see him set down his fork. He leans up and interrupts our conversation.” Zoey puts on her Stepdad Tom voice.

“‘Wait, wait. Are you telling me that your school friend—this boy Perry—lives at Blue River? There is a child? Living at the prison?’ His eyes were popping straight out of his head, Perry. Mom was trying to explain that you grew up there. Then he’s all, ‘Grew up there? How did I not know this?’ Perry, I swear, I clammed up. I told Tom I wasn’t going to tell him anything. I said I wasn’t even talking to him in the first place. That got me sent to my room for the evening. Happens every time I speak rudely to Tom.” Zoey shakes her head.

“Anyway, it seemed like he just dropped it. Nothing happened. School started, and I thought it had all blown over.” She waves a hand in the air. “Then last Friday night comes, and—”

“Perry!” Maya Rubin pops into the little room inside the nurse’s office. “I just heard what happened.” She stoops down in front of me, lifts my bangs, and takes a look—more into my eyes than at my nose, it seems. “Are you all right?”

I nod. “Hey . . . um . . . Miss Maya,” I say. I quack at her because I’m still pinching my nose. “Did you get a chance to make that call?”

“I did.” She smiles. “Everything and everyone is fine at Blue River. But you are sorely missed.”

“Thanks,” I say.

Somehow, I feel glad about that.