

Prologue

When I was seventeen, my life changed forever.

I know that there are people who wonder about me when I say this. They look at me strangely as if trying to fathom what could have happened back then, though I seldom bother to explain. Because I've lived here for most of my life, I don't feel that I have to unless it's on my terms, and that would take more time than most people are willing to give me. My story can't be summed up in two or three sentences; it can't be packaged into something neat and simple that people would immediately understand. Despite the passage of forty years, the people still living here who knew me that year accept my lack of explana-

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tion without question. My story in some ways is their story because it was something that all of us lived through.

It was I, however, who was closest to it.

I'm fifty-seven years old, but even now I can remember everything from that year, down to the smallest details. I relive that year often in my mind, bringing it back to life, and I realize that when I do, I always feel a strange combination of sadness and joy. There are moments when I wish I could roll back the clock and take all the sadness away, but I have the feeling that if I did, the joy would be gone as well. So I take the memories as they come, accepting them all, letting them guide me whenever I can. This happens more often than I let on.

It is April 12, in the last year before the millennium, and as I leave my house, I glance around. The sky is overcast and gray, but as I move down the street, I notice that the dogwoods and azaleas are blooming. I zip my jacket just a little. The temperature is cool, though I know it's only a matter of weeks before it will settle in to something comfortable and the gray skies give way to the kind of days that make North Carolina one of the most beautiful places in the world.

With a sigh, I feel it all coming back to me.



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I close my eyes and the years begin to move in reverse, slowly ticking backward, like the hands of a clock rotating in the wrong direction. As if through someone else's eyes, I watch myself grow younger; I see my hair changing from gray to brown, I feel the wrinkles around my eyes begin to smooth, my arms and legs grow sinewy. Lessons I've learned with age grow dimmer, and my innocence returns as that eventful year approaches.

Then, like me, the world begins to change: roads narrow and some become gravel, suburban sprawl has been replaced with farmland, downtown streets teem with people, looking in windows as they pass Sweeney's bakery and Palka's meat shop. Men wear hats, women wear dresses. At the courthouse up the street, the bell tower rings. . . .

I open my eyes and pause. I am standing outside the Baptist church, and when I stare at the gable, I know exactly who I am.

My name is Landon Carter, and I'm seventeen years old.

This is my story; I promise to leave nothing out.

First you will smile, and then you will cry—don't say you haven't been warned.

A Walk to Remember

Chapter 1



In 1958, Beaufort, North Carolina, which is located on the coast near Morehead City, was a place like many other small southern towns. It was the kind of place where the humidity rose so high in the summer that walking out to get the mail made a person feel as if he needed a shower, and kids walked around barefoot from April through October beneath oak trees draped in Spanish moss. People waved from their cars whenever they saw someone on the street whether they knew him or not, and the air smelled of pine, salt, and sea, a scent unique to the Carolinas. For many of the people there, fishing

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in the Pamlico Sound or crabbing in the Neuse River was a way of life, and boats were moored wherever you saw the Intracoastal Waterway. Only three channels came in on the television, though television was never important to those of us who grew up there. Instead our lives were centered around the churches, of which there were eighteen within the town limits alone. They went by names like the Fellowship Hall Christian Church, the Church of the Forgiven People, the Church of Sunday Atonement, and then, of course, there were the Baptist churches. When I was growing up, it was far and away the most popular denomination around, and there were Baptist churches on practically every corner of town, though each considered itself superior to the others. There were Baptist churches of every type—Freewill Baptists, Southern Baptists, Congregational Baptists, Missionary Baptists, Independent Baptists . . . well, you get the picture.

Back then, the big event of the year was sponsored by the Baptist church downtown—Southern, if you really want to know—in conjunction with the local high school. Every year they put on their Christmas pageant at the

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Beaufort Playhouse, which was actually a play that had been written by Hegbert Sullivan, a minister who'd been with the church since Moses parted the Red Sea. Okay, maybe he wasn't that old, but he was old enough that you could almost see through the guy's skin. It was sort of clammy all the time, and translucent—kids would swear they actually saw the blood flowing through his veins—and his hair was as white as those bunnies you see in pet stores around Easter.

Anyway, he wrote this play called *The Christmas Angel*, because he didn't want to keep on performing that old Charles Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol*. In his mind Scrooge was a heathen, who came to his redemption only because he saw ghosts, not angels—and who was to say whether they'd been sent by God, anyway? And who was to say he wouldn't revert to his sinful ways if they hadn't been sent directly from heaven? The play didn't exactly tell you in the end—it sort of plays into faith and all—but Hegbert didn't trust ghosts if they weren't actually sent by God, which wasn't explained in plain language, and this was his big problem with it. A few years back he'd changed the end of the play—sort of followed it up with his own version, complete with old man Scrooge

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becoming a preacher and all, heading off to Jerusalem to find the place where Jesus once taught the scribes. It didn't fly too well—not even to the congregation, who sat in the audience staring wide-eyed at the spectacle—and the newspaper said things like “Though it was certainly interesting, it wasn't exactly the play we've all come to know and love. . . .”

So Hegbert decided to try his hand at writing his own play. He'd written his own sermons his whole life, and some of them, we had to admit, were actually interesting, especially when he talked about the “wrath of God coming down on the fornicators” and all that good stuff. That really got his blood boiling, I'll tell you, when he talked about the fornicators. That was his real hot spot. When we were younger, my friends and I would hide behind the trees and shout, “Hegbert is a fornicator!” when we saw him walking down the street, and we'd giggle like idiots, like we were the wittiest creatures ever to inhabit the planet.

Old Hegbert, he'd stop dead in his tracks and his ears would perk up—I swear to God, they actually moved—and he'd turn this bright shade of red, like he'd just drunk gasoline, and the big green veins in his neck would start sticking out all over, like those maps of

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the Amazon River that you see in *National Geographic*. He'd peer from side to side, his eyes narrowing into slits as he searched for us, and then, just as suddenly, he'd start to go pale again, back to that fishy skin, right before our eyes. Boy, it was something to watch, that's for sure.

So we'd be hiding behind a tree and Hegbert (what kind of parents name their kid Hegbert, anyway?) would stand there waiting for us to give ourselves up, as if he thought we'd be that stupid. We'd put our hands over our mouths to keep from laughing out loud, but somehow he'd always zero in on us. He'd be turning from side to side, and then he'd stop, those beady eyes coming right at us, right through the tree. "I know who you are, Landon Carter," he'd say, "and the Lord knows, too." He'd let that sink in for a minute or so, and then he'd finally head off again, and during the sermon that weekend he'd stare right at us and say something like "God is merciful to children, but the children must be worthy as well." And we'd sort of lower ourselves in the seats, not from embarrassment, but to hide a new round of giggles. Hegbert didn't understand us at all, which was really sort of strange, being that he had a kid and all.

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But then again, she was a girl. More on that, though, later.

Anyway, like I said, Hegbert wrote *The Christmas Angel* one year and decided to put on *that* play instead. The play itself wasn't bad, actually, which surprised everyone the first year it was performed. It's basically the story of a man who had lost his wife a few years back. This guy, Tom Thornton, used to be real religious, but he had a crisis of faith after his wife died during childbirth. He's raising this little girl all on his own, but he hasn't been the greatest father, and what the little girl really wants for Christmas is a special music box with an angel engraved on top, a picture of which she'd cut out from an old catalog. The guy searches long and hard to find the gift, but he can't find it anywhere. So it's Christmas Eve and he's still searching, and while he's out looking through the stores, he comes across a strange woman he's never seen before, and she promises to help him find the gift for his daughter. First, though, they help this homeless person (back then they were called bums, by the way), then they stop at an orphanage to see some kids, then visit a lonely old woman who just wanted some company on Christmas Eve. At this point the mysterious woman asks

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Tom Thornton what he wants for Christmas, and he says that he wants his wife back. She brings him to the city fountain and tells him to look in the water and he'll find what he's looking for. When he looks in the water, he sees the face of his little girl, and he breaks down and cries right there. While he's sobbing, the mysterious lady runs off, and Tom Thornton searches but can't find her anywhere. Eventually he heads home, the lessons from the evening playing in his mind. He walks into his little girl's room, and her sleeping figure makes him realize that she's all he has left of his wife, and he starts to cry again because he knows he hasn't been a good enough father to her. The next morning, magically, the music box is underneath the tree, and the angel that's engraved on it looks exactly like the woman he'd seen the night before.

So it wasn't that bad, really. If truth be told, people cried buckets whenever they saw it. The play sold out every year it was performed, and due to its popularity, Hegbert eventually had to move it from the church to the Beaufort Playhouse, which had a lot more seating. By the time I was a senior in high school, the performances ran twice to packed houses,

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which, considering who actually performed it, was a story in and of itself.

You see, Hegbert wanted young people to perform the play—seniors in high school, not the theater group. I reckon he thought it would be a good learning experience before the seniors headed off to college and came face-to-face with all the fornicators. He was that kind of guy, you know, always wanting to save us from temptation. He wanted us to know that God is out there watching you, even when you're away from home, and that if you put your trust in God, you'll be all right in the end. It was a lesson that I would eventually learn in time, though it wasn't Hegbert who taught me.

As I said before, Beaufort was fairly typical as far as southern towns went, though it did have an interesting history. Blackbeard the pirate once owned a house there, and his ship, *Queen Anne's Revenge*, is supposedly buried somewhere in the sand just offshore. Recently some archaeologists or oceanographers or whoever looks for stuff like that said they found it, but no one's certain just yet, being that it sank over 250 years ago and you can't exactly reach into the glove compartment and check the

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registration. Beaufort's come a long way since the 1950s, but it's still not exactly a major metropolis or anything. Beaufort was, and always will be, on the smallish side, but when I was growing up, it barely warranted a place on the map. To put it into perspective, the congressional district that included Beaufort covered the entire eastern part of the state—some twenty thousand square miles—and there wasn't a single town with more than twenty-five thousand people. Even compared with those towns, Beaufort was regarded as being on the small side. Everything east of Raleigh and north of Wilmington, all the way to the Virginia border, was the district my father represented.

I suppose you've heard of him. He's sort of a legend, even now. His name is Worth Carter, and he was a congressman for almost thirty years. His slogan every other year during the election season was "Worth Carter represents _____," and the person was supposed to fill in the city name where he or she lived. I can remember, driving on trips when me and Mom had to make our appearances to show the people he was a true family man, that we'd see those bumper stickers, stenciled in with names like Otway and Chocawinity and Seven

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Springs. Nowadays stuff like that wouldn't fly, but back then that was fairly sophisticated publicity. I imagine if he tried to do that now, people opposing him would insert all sorts of foul language in the blank space, but we never saw it once. Okay, maybe once. A farmer from Duplin County once wrote the word *shit* in the blank space, and when my mom saw it, she covered my eyes and said a prayer asking for forgiveness for the poor ignorant bastard. She didn't say exactly those words, but I got the gist of it.

So my father, Mr. Congressman, was a big-wig, and everyone but everyone knew it, including old man Hegbert. Now, the two of them didn't get along, not at all, despite the fact that my father went to Hegbert's church whenever he was in town, which to be frank wasn't all that often. Hegbert, in addition to his belief that fornicators were destined to clean the urinals in hell, also believed that communism was "a sickness that doomed mankind to heathenhood." Even though heathenhood wasn't a word—I can't find it in any dictionary—the congregation knew what he meant. They also knew that he was directing his words specifically to my father, who would sit with his eyes closed and pretend not to lis-

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ten. My father was on one of the House committees that oversaw the “Red influence” supposedly infiltrating every aspect of the country, including national defense, higher education, and even tobacco farming. You have to remember that this was during the cold war; tensions were running high, and we North Carolinians needed something to bring it down to a more personal level. My father had consistently looked for facts, which were irrelevant to people like Hegbert.

Afterward, when my father would come home after the service, he’d say something like “Reverend Sullivan was in rare form today. I hope you heard that part about the Scripture where Jesus was talking about the poor. . . .”

Yeah, sure, Dad. . . .

My father tried to defuse situations whenever possible. I think that’s why he stayed in Congress for so long. The guy could kiss the ugliest babies known to mankind and still come up with something nice to say. “He’s such a gentle child,” he’d say when a baby had a giant head, or, “I’ll bet she’s the sweetest girl in the world,” if she had a birthmark over her entire face. One time a lady showed up with a kid in a wheelchair. My father took one look at him and said, “I’ll bet you ten to one that

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you're smartest kid in your class." And he was! Yeah, my father was great at stuff like that. He could fling it with the best of 'em, that's for sure. And he wasn't such a bad guy, not really, especially if you consider the fact that he didn't beat me or anything.

But he wasn't there for me growing up. I hate to say that because nowadays people claim that sort of stuff even if their parent *was* around and use it to excuse their behavior. *My dad . . . he didn't love me . . . that's why I became a stripper and performed on The Jerry Springer Show. . . .* I'm not using it to excuse the person I've become, I'm simply saying it as a fact. My father was gone nine months of the year, living out of town in a Washington, D.C., apartment three hundred miles away. My mother didn't go with him because both of them wanted me to grow up "the same way they had."

Of course, my father's father took him hunting and fishing, taught him to play ball, showed up for birthday parties, all that small stuff that adds up to quite a bit before adulthood. My father, on the other hand, was a stranger, someone I barely knew at all. For the first five years of my life I thought all fathers lived somewhere else. It wasn't until my best friend, Eric Hunter, asked me in kindergarten

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who that guy was who showed up at my house the night before that I realized something wasn't quite right about the situation.

"He's my father," I said proudly.

"Oh," Eric said as he rifled through my lunchbox, looking for my Milky Way, "I didn't know you had a father."

Talk about something whacking you straight in the face.

So, I grew up under the care of my mother. Now she was a nice lady, sweet and gentle, the kind of mother most people dream about. But she wasn't, nor could she ever be, a manly influence in my life, and that fact, coupled with my growing disillusionment with my father, made me become something of a rebel, even at a young age. Not a bad one, mind you. Me and my friends might sneak out late and soap up car windows now and then or eat boiled peanuts in the graveyard behind the church, but in the fifties that was the kind of thing that made other parents shake their heads and whisper to their children, "You don't want to be like that Carter boy. He's on the fast track to prison."

Me. A bad boy. For eating boiled peanuts in the graveyard. Go figure.

Anyway, my father and Hegbert didn't get

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along, but it wasn't only because of politics. No, it seems that my father and Hegbert knew each other from way back when. Hegbert was about twenty years older than my father, and back before he was a minister, he used to work for my father's father. My grandfather—even though he spent lots of time with my father—was a true bastard if there ever was one. He was the one, by the way, who made the family fortune, but I don't want you to imagine him as the sort of man who slaved over his business, working diligently and watching it grow, prospering slowly over time. My grandfather was much shrewder than that. The way he made his money was simple—he started as a bootlegger, accumulating wealth throughout Prohibition by running rum up from Cuba. Then he began buying land and hiring sharecroppers to work it. He took ninety percent of the money the sharecroppers made on their tobacco crop, then loaned them money whenever they needed it at ridiculous interest rates. Of course, he never intended to collect the money—instead he would foreclose on any land or equipment they happened to own. Then, in what he called “his moment of inspiration,” he started a bank called Carter Banking and Loan. The

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only other bank in a two-county radius had mysteriously burned down, and with the onset of the Depression, it never reopened. Though everyone knew what had really happened, not a word was ever spoken for fear of retribution, and their fear was well placed. The bank wasn't the only building that had mysteriously burned down.

His interest rates were outrageous, and little by little he began amassing more land and property as people defaulted on their loans. When the Depression hit hardest, he foreclosed on dozens of businesses throughout the county while retaining the original owners to continue to work on salary, paying them just enough to keep them where they were, because they had nowhere else to go. He told them that when the economy improved, he'd sell their business back to them, and people always believed him.

Never once, however, did he keep his promise. In the end he controlled a vast portion of the county's economy, and he abused his clout in every way imaginable.

I'd like to tell you he eventually went to a terrible death, but he didn't. He died at a ripe-old age while sleeping with his mistress on his yacht off the Cayman Islands. He'd

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outlived both his wives and his only son. Some end for a guy like that, huh? Life, I've learned, is never fair. If people teach anything in school, that should be it.

But back to the story. . . . Hegbert, once he realized what a bastard my grandfather really was, quit working for him and went into the ministry, then came back to Beaufort and started ministering in the same church we attended. He spent his first few years perfecting his fire-and-brimstone act with monthly sermons on the evils of the greedy, and this left him scant time for anything else. He was forty-three before he ever got married; he was fifty-five when his daughter, Jamie Sullivan, was born. His wife, a wispy little thing twenty years younger than he, went through six miscarriages before Jamie was born, and in the end she died in childbirth, making Hegbert a widower who had to raise a daughter on his own.

Hence, of course, the story behind the play.

People knew the story even before the play was first performed. It was one of those stories that made its rounds whenever Hegbert had to baptize a baby or attend a funeral. Everyone knew about it, and that's why, I think, so many people got emotional whenever they saw the Christmas play. They knew it

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was based on something that happened in real life, which gave it special meaning.

Jamie Sullivan was a senior in high school, just like me, and she'd already been chosen to play the angel, not that anyone else even had a chance. This, of course, made the play extra special that year. It was going to be a big deal, maybe the biggest ever—at least in Miss Garber's mind. She was the drama teacher, and she was already glowing about the possibilities the first time I met her in class.

Now, I hadn't really planned on taking drama that year. I really hadn't, but it was either that or chemistry II. The thing was, I thought it would be a blow-off class, especially when compared with my other option. No papers, no tests, no tables where I'd have to memorize protons and neutrons and combine elements in their proper formulas . . . what could possibly be better for a high school senior? It seemed like a sure thing, and when I signed up for it, I thought I'd just be able to sleep through most every class, which, considering my late night peanut eating, was fairly important at the time.

On the first day of class I was one of the last to arrive, coming in just a few seconds before the bell rang, and I took a seat in the back of

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the room. Miss Garber had her back turned to the class, and she was busy writing her name in big cursive letters, as if we didn't know who she was. Everyone knew her—it was impossible not to. She was big, at least six feet two, with flaming red hair and pale skin that showed her freckles well into her forties. She was also overweight—I'd say honestly she pushed two fifty—and she had a fondness for wearing flower-patterned muumuus. She had thick, dark, horn-rimmed glasses, and she greeted every one with, “Helloooooo,” sort of singing the last syllable. Miss Garber was one of a kind, that's for sure, and she was single, which made it even worse. A guy, no matter how old, couldn't help but feel sorry for a gal like her.

Beneath her name she wrote the goals she wanted to accomplish that year. “Self-confidence” was number one, followed by “Self-awareness” and, third, “Self-fulfillment.” Miss Garber was big into the “self” stuff, which put her really ahead of the curve as far as psychotherapy is concerned, though she probably didn't realize it at the time. Miss Garber was a pioneer in that field. Maybe it had something to do with the way she looked;

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maybe she was just trying to feel better about herself.

But I digress.

It wasn't until the class started that I noticed something unusual. Though Beaufort High School wasn't large, I knew for a fact that it was pretty much split fifty-fifty between males and females, which was why I was surprised when I saw that this class was at least ninety percent female. There was only one other male in the class, which to my thinking was a good thing, and for a moment I felt flush with a "look out world, here I come" kind of feeling. Girls, girls, girls . . . I couldn't help but think. Girls and girls and no tests in sight.

Okay, so I wasn't the most forward-thinking guy on the block.

So Miss Garber brings up the Christmas play and tells everyone that Jamie Sullivan is going to be the angel that year. Miss Garber started clapping right away—she was a member of the church, too—and there were a lot of people who thought she was gunning for Hegbert in a romantic sort of way. The first time I heard it, I remember thinking that it was a good thing they were too old to have children, if they ever did get together. Imag-

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ine—translucent with freckles? The very thought gave everyone shudders, but of course, no one ever said anything about it, at least within hearing distance of Miss Garber and Hegbert. Gossip is one thing, hurtful gossip is completely another, and even in high school we weren't *that* mean.

Miss Garber kept on clapping, all alone for a while, until all of us finally joined in, because it was obvious that was what she wanted. "Stand up, Jamie," she said. So Jamie stood up and turned around, and Miss Garber started clapping even faster, as if she were standing in the presence of a bona fide movie star.

Now Jamie Sullivan was a nice girl. She really was. Beaufort was small enough that it had only one elementary school, so we'd been in the same classes our entire lives, and I'd be lying if I said I never talked to her. Once, in second grade, she'd sat in the seat right next to me for the whole year, and we'd even had a few conversations, but it didn't mean that I spent a lot of time hanging out with her in my spare time, even back then. Who I saw in school was one thing; who I saw *after* school was something completely different, and Jamie had never been on my social calendar.

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It's not that Jamie was unattractive—don't get me wrong. She wasn't hideous or anything like that. Fortunately she'd taken after her mother, who, based on the pictures I'd seen, wasn't half-bad, especially considering who she ended up marrying. But Jamie wasn't exactly what I considered attractive, either. Despite the fact that she was thin, with honey blond hair and soft blue eyes, most of the time she looked sort of . . . *plain*, and that was when you noticed her at all. Jamie didn't care much about outward appearances, because she was always looking for things like "inner beauty," and I suppose that's part of the reason she looked the way she did. For as long as I'd known her—and this was going way back, remember—she'd always worn her hair in a tight bun, almost like a spinster, without a stitch of makeup on her face. Coupled with her usual brown cardigan and plaid skirt, she always looked as though she were on her way to interview for a job at the library. We used to think it was just a phase and that she'd eventually grow out of it, but she never had. Even through our first three years of high school, she hadn't changed at all. The only thing that had changed was the size of her clothes.

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But it wasn't just the way Jamie looked that made her different; it was also the way she acted. Jamie didn't spend any time hanging out at Cecil's Diner or going to slumber parties with other girls, and I knew for a fact that she'd never had a boyfriend her entire life. Old Hegbert would probably have had a heart attack if she had. But even if by some odd turn of events Hegbert had allowed it, it still wouldn't have mattered. Jamie carried her Bible wherever she went, and if her looks and Hegbert didn't keep the boys away, the Bible sure as heck did. Now, I liked the Bible as much as the next teenage boy, but Jamie seemed to enjoy it in a way that was completely foreign to me. Not only did she go to vacation Bible school every August, but she would read the Bible during lunch break at school. In my mind that just wasn't normal, even if she was the minister's daughter. No matter how you sliced it, reading Paul's letters to the Ephesians wasn't nearly as much fun as flirting, if you know what I mean.

But Jamie didn't stop there. Because of all her Bible reading, or maybe because of Hegbert's influence, Jamie believed it was important to help others, and helping others is exactly what she did. I knew she volunteered

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at the orphanage in Morehead City, but for her that simply wasn't enough. She was always in charge of one fund-raiser or another, helping everyone from the Boy Scouts to the Indian Princesses, and I know that when she was fourteen, she spent part of her summer painting the outside of an elderly neighbor's house. Jamie was the kind of girl who would pull weeds in someone's garden without being asked or stop traffic to help little kids cross the road. She'd save her allowance to buy a new basketball for the orphans, or she'd turn around and drop the money into the church basket on Sunday. She was, in other words, the kind of girl who made the rest of us look bad, and whenever she glanced my way, I couldn't help but feel guilty, even though I hadn't done anything wrong.

Nor did Jamie limit her good deeds to people. If she ever came across a wounded animal, for instance, she'd try to help it, too. Opossums, squirrels, dogs, cats, frogs . . . it didn't matter to her. Dr. Rawlings, the vet, knew her by sight, and he'd shake his head whenever he saw her walking up to the door carrying a cardboard box with yet another critter inside. He'd take off his eyeglasses and wipe them with his handkerchief while Jamie

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explained how she'd found the poor creature and what had happened to it. "He was hit by a car, Dr. Rawlings. I think it was in the Lord's plan to have me find him and try to save him. You'll help me, won't you?"

With Jamie, everything was in the Lord's plan. That was another thing. She always mentioned the Lord's plan whenever you talked to her, no matter what the subject. The baseball game's rained out? Must be the Lord's plan to prevent something worse from happening. A surprise trigonometry quiz that everyone in class fails? Must be in the Lord's plan to give us challenges. Anyway, you get the picture.

Then, of course, there was the whole Hegbert situation, and this didn't help her at all. Being the minister's daughter couldn't have been easy, but she made it seem as if it were the most natural thing in the world and that she was lucky to have been blessed in that way. That's how she used to say it, too. "I've been so blessed to have a father like mine." Whenever she said it, all we could do was shake our heads and wonder what planet she actually came from.

Despite all these other strikes, though, the one thing that *really* drove me crazy about her

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was the fact that she was always so damn cheerful, no matter what was happening around her. I swear, that girl never said a bad thing about anything or anyone, even to those of us who weren't that nice to her. She would hum to herself as she walked down the street, she would wave to strangers driving by in their cars. Sometimes ladies would come running out of their house if they saw her walking by, offering her pumpkin bread if they'd been baking all day or lemonade if the sun was high in the sky. It seemed as if every adult in town adored her. "She's such a nice young lady," they'd say whenever Jamie's name came up. "The world would be a better place if there were more people like her."

But my friends and I didn't quite see it that way. In our minds, one Jamie Sullivan was plenty.

I was thinking about all this while Jamie stood in front of us on the first day of drama class, and I admit that I wasn't much interested in seeing her. But strangely, when Jamie turned to face us, I kind of got a shock, like I was sitting on a loose wire or something. She wore a plaid skirt with a white blouse under the same brown cardigan sweater I'd seen a million times, but there were two new bumps

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on her chest that the sweater couldn't hide that I swore hadn't been there just three months earlier. She'd never worn makeup and she still didn't, but she had a tan, probably from Bible school, and for the first time she looked—well, almost pretty. Of course, I dismissed that thought right away, but as she looked around the room, she stopped and smiled right at me, obviously glad to see that I was in the class. It wasn't until later that I would learn the reason why.

