



Chapter One

Somewhere, things must be beautiful and vivid. Somewhere else, life has to be beautiful and vivid and rich. Not like this muted palette — a pale blue bedroom, washed out sunny sky, dull green yellow brown of the fields. Here, I know every twist of every road, every blade of grass, every face in this town, and I am suffocating.

So, I stay in. I don't have to leave the house to trace the picture of this town. I know it all by heart. I can map all of these houses that look so similar, practically identical to my own, with their dusty aluminum siding, sagging porches, and buckled sidewalks; the curves and lines of town and county roads curling between homes and farmsteads; the straight-as-an-arrow line of the highway heading straight out of town; Union Street with its bank and bakery and video store, weathered wood slats and dark windows. I can also see the slippery bank of the creek, the water lower than usual; the wide gray rocks populated by turtles and singing frogs; the gnarled old weeping willow tree, her branches yellow and soft, skimming the surface of the stream.

All of these things that I have seen countless times in my life will be there. All of it known and certain.

I sit in my bedroom, on the pale blue-and-white braided carpet, and sigh. If a sigh had a shape, a taste, a color, it would be a salty yellow triangle. And sitting here, in the triangle patch of weak sunlight falling through the window onto my rug, is summery enough for me. I could leave the house, go to the tennis camp at the middle school around the block, but I don't. Because I know that if I go, tennis racket in my hand, the ordinary *thwack* of racket on ball, the *screakk* of sneakers scratching across courts would quickly grind to a halt. Silence. And a dozen pairs of eyes would focus on me, follow every swing and every serve, every missed volley. Stares would hold me captive, paralyzing me. Pitying me. No thanks, I do not want that.

I could put on my swimsuit, bike to the town swimming pool, and carefully spread out my towel on the poolside grass. I might ready myself to dive off the board into the cool, blue ten feet of chlorine-and-pee filled water, submerging myself, becoming a blurred streak, watching dozens of legs kicking above me. The thought of all those goggled eyes watching me with their hard, plastic stares makes my head swim, my legs feel leaden, and my fingers too tired to open the door. And I'm sitting here in the air-conditioning.

I could step out, but I don't.

I do have a window onto escape, though. Onto that somewhere else, where colors and smells and winds are fresh and delicate, vibrant and new.

A free map of the world arrived in an envelope of junk mail at the start of summer, and I rescued it from the trash and pinned it up on the wall over my desk. I look at that map every day, as if my life depends on it. It very well might.

I like places with lots of vowels in their names, like Ulaanbaatar. The Isle of Man sounds like an important place, a place for adults. And the “stan” countries are fascinating — Kyrgyzstan, with all its consonants, is smaller than South Dakota, but contains the largest walnut forest in the world. A walnut forest must be a very romantic kind of forest.

Basically, what all of this map studying amounts to is a belief . . . no, a certainty that the world — well, the world outside of Lincoln Grove — is an exotic and alluring place. And it beckons to me. So, for the eighty-one days of summer vacation, during which I’ve stayed at home, stayed indoors, I pore over this map and push little green bubble-topped pins into the country and city names that catch my eye, catch my fancy. I know there is no chance my father, who once would have had a small coronary at the sight of all these pins stuck in the wall — “Do you know how much it will cost to fix that wall!” he would have barked — will ever even open the door to my bedroom, let alone set foot in it now. I’m safe.

For each bubble-marked spot, I imagine a whole vista, letting the sounds of the names and the topographies suggest a scene. I like to go online and look at the Web sites for different countries or cities. It's amazing how even the most remote countries have their own Web sites. But thanks to the World Wide Web, I learned that *Bhutan* means Land of the Thunder Dragon, and the Himalayas intersect with the northern portion of the country, and from this I can imagine a picture of a cold snowy land of fierce mountains and dusty rock, ancient temples with curving horns perched on the steepest ledges. Perhaps a sleeping dragon lies in the most remote of craggy caves.

Now enter my pad and pencils. I draw pretty well, I think. As I take careful crosshatch strokes, brushing the lead over the brown paper, following the silhouette of borders and natural boundaries, cityscapes and mountainscapes and roiling seas, within and without the lines of each map, slowly emerge. A cobblestone alleyway slick with rain, lined by sidewalk cafés and shops, a flower seller, the flutter of a red scarf on a beautiful lady, and a bustling newsstand caught up in the unfurling snail's shell shape of the city — this is Paris. I can practically smell the bread baking, the rich scent of coffee. I want to be there so badly.

Day after day, while the heat and all that is known festers outside, threatening to choke me, I make my escape into the unknown as I draw my maps of the world.



But time is fleeting. Time is fleeing. School begins in just four days.