



So there I was, at the very end of the earth.

Well, maybe not the *very* end. Alaska was closer to the top of the planet than I'd ever been, but it wasn't exactly the North Pole. And Nome was more isolated than any place I'd ever lived, but it was still a city.

"This place stinks!" my little brother, Jack, was yelling. "We might as well be on the moon!"

"I'd love to live on the moon," I told him. "Nice and quiet, plenty of open space, no neighbors, and a great view of the earth. Sounds perfect to me."

"Yeah," Jack retorted, jabbing a finger in my direction accusingly. "Because you are a NUT JOB!"

At the age of eight, Jack considered himself an expert in what was crazy and what was not. He made no secret of his belief that I was so far from normal I might as well have come from . . . well, the moon. And I didn't mind. There

were a lot of things I'd like to be in life. But normal had never been one of them.

“Dad sent me in here to make sure you were getting unpacked,” I said.

Jack grabbed a beat-up-looking suitcase near his feet, unzipped it, and hoisted it in the air. The contents spilled out all over the floor of his new bedroom in our dad's cabin.

“Done,” he said.

“If you say so,” I said, backing out the door.

In my own room, everything was already neatly put away. We were only supposed to be here for two weeks, but I'd brought a good selection of books, and all my warmest hiking clothes. The cabin our dad had rented was just outside of Nome. The view from my window showed an unending sea of wavy hills, with not another house in sight. I thought the place was great. Jack, on the other hand, believed we had been cruelly plopped into the center of a vast and uncivilized wilderness.

Jack and I had a week off for spring break, but we were missing an extra week of school too, since our mother was in Japan handling some corporate merger thing. The four of us couldn't go as a family to Japan and to Nome at the same time, so Jack and I had ended up with Dad, and Mom went to Japan on her own. We'd all be back together in upstate

New York soon. In the meantime, Jack liked the idea of missing an extra week of school and doing his classwork via computer. But that was the only thing he was happy about. He'd been expressing his outrage pretty much nonstop since our arrival the day before. I was supposed to be keeping an eye on him.

But I was also itching to go out and explore those hills.

“What do you say, Henry — are you up for a walk?”

My beagle was asleep at the foot of my bed. He opened his eyes at the sound of my voice and gave me a weary look, heaving a big sigh at the word *walk*. Henry's world revolved around three things: food, affection, and sleep. But once he got outside, he loved to roam as much as I did.

I made a quick trip down the hall to let my dad know I was heading out.

My father was in the tiny third room that was doubling as his bedroom and office. He was typing on his laptop when I walked in, his shaggy black and gray hair standing every which way on his head. He looked up and smiled over the top of his reading glasses when I came in. I made a mental note that he was looking a bit on the thin side — when he started writing a new book, he often forgot to eat. I'd get some kind of stew going for dinner, preferably full of sausage and vegetables. Mom had given me a longer-than-usual lecture

on the phone, about how I was the one who had to take care of Dad and Jack, because they'd never do it themselves.

"How's it going, Sweet Tee?" my dad asked.

Everybody called me Tee, because I hated my full name, which is Anita. My father used variations from Sweet Tee to Hot Tee to Iced Tee, depending on my mood. Or his.

"I'm good," I said. "The prisoner in cell block J may be plotting some kind of rebellion, though."

"I consider myself warned," my father said. "I was afraid Jack wouldn't like it here. I just didn't feel like I had a choice — I can't write this book without being here to research and interview people, really live it for a while. And the firm made it pretty clear they needed your mom to be in Japan. You know. It was either Alaska, Japan, or sticking you with your grandparents."

"Believe me, you made the right choice," I said. "Jack will live. And I love it already. I was going to take Henry out for a walk, if that's okay."

"Great idea," Dad replied. "Just don't go too far. The realtor said it's easy to get turned around out there. If you get lost, you can't exactly pull over and ask for directions."

"I'll be careful," I promised. "Don't worry. And I'll be back in time to get something going for dinner."

My father smacked his head with his hand.