

A red door with a keyhole and a handle, set against a black background. The door is the central focus of the image, with a keyhole on the left side and a handle on the right side. The text is overlaid on the door.

FREIDA McFADDEN

THE

LOCKED

DOOR

The Locked Door

a novel by

FREIDA MCFADDEN

The Locked Door

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To Libby and Melanie (as always)

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Prologue

Twenty-six years ago today, a man named Aaron Nierling was arrested in his home in Oregon.

Most people knew Nierling as an upstanding citizen. He held a steady job and was a dedicated husband and father—a family man. He had never even received a parking ticket in his lifetime. He had certainly never been in trouble with the law.

However, after an anonymous tip, the police discovered the remains of twenty-five-year-old Mandy Johansson behind the locked door of Aaron Nierling's basement workshop.

Preserved bones from seventeen other victims who had been reported missing over the last decade were also found in a trunk in the basement. Over the course of the police investigation, Nierling was implicated in at least ten other murders going back over twenty years, but no forensic evidence was found to confirm this.

Nierling plea-bargained to escape the death penalty and is currently serving eighteen consecutive life sentences in a maximum-security penitentiary. His wife was also charged with accessory to murder, but she killed herself in prison, prior to standing trial.

News articles proclaimed Aaron Nierling to be a genius, who successfully evaded the police and the FBI for over two decades before his eventual capture. He is exceptionally charismatic and charming—at least, when he wants to be. He is a narcissist and a psychopath, who likely killed at least thirty women without a trace of remorse. He is insane. He is a monster.

He is also my father.

Chapter 1

Someone is watching me.

I can feel it. It doesn't logically make sense that a person should be able to feel somebody's gaze on the back of her head, but somehow I can right now. It's a prickling sensation that starts in my scalp and crawls its way down to the base of my neck, then drips down my spine.

I came to this bar alone. I like to be alone—I always have. Whenever there's been a choice, I have always picked my own company. Even when I go to a restaurant, even when I'm surrounded by the low buzz of other people talking amongst themselves, I prefer to sit by myself.

In front of me is my favorite drink—an Old Fashioned. On the nights I don't feel like going straight home, I always come to Christopher's. It's dark and anonymous, with cigarette smoke ground into the bar countertops. It's also usually fairly empty, and the bartenders aren't too hard on the eyes. Sometimes I take a booth but tonight I sit at the bar, my eyes cast down at my drink, watching the single ice cube slowly disintegrate as that tingling in the back of my head intensifies.

I can vaguely hear the television blaring in the background. Most of the time, there's a sports game playing on the screen. But tonight, a game show is on. The host's face fills the screen as he reads a question off the card in front of him.

What friend of Charles de Gaulle was premier of France for much of the 1960s?

I whirl around, trying to catch whoever has been staring at me in the act. No such luck. There are people behind me, but nobody is looking at me. At least, nobody's looking at me *at this moment*.

It's probably something innocent. Maybe a man who is thinking about buying me a drink. Maybe somebody who recognizes me from work.

It doesn't mean it's somebody who knows who I really am. It never is. I'm probably just paranoid tonight because it's the twenty-sixth anniversary of the day my whole life changed.

The day they found out what was in our basement. "You okay, Doc?"

The bartender is leaning toward me, his muscular forearms balanced on the slightly sticky counter. He's a new bartender—I've seen him only a handful of times. He's slightly older than the last guy, maybe mid-thirties like me.

I tug at the collar of my green scrubs. He started calling me "doc" because of the scrubs. It is, in fact, an accurate guess—I'm a general surgeon. Because I'm a woman, most people see the scrubs and think I'm a nurse, but he went with doctor.

My father is probably proud if he knows about it. Whatever feelings or emotions he is capable of, pride is certainly one of them—that was clear from his trial. He always wanted to be a surgeon himself, but he didn't have the grades. Maybe if he had become a surgeon, it would've kept him from doing the things he ended up doing.

"I'm fine." I run a finger along the rim of my glass.
"Just fine."

He lifts an eyebrow. "How's the drink? How'd I do?"

"Good."

That's an understatement. He made it perfectly. I watched him place the sugar cube at the bottom of the glass—he didn't just dump a packet of sugar into the drink like some other bartenders I've seen. He put in exactly the right amount of bitters. And I didn't have to tell him not to use soda water.

"I have to tell you," he says, "I didn't expect you to order an Old Fashioned. You don't seem like the type."

"Mmm." I try to keep any interest out of my voice, so he'll go away and leave me alone. I should never have sat at the bar. But to be fair, the bartenders here are rarely this chatty.

He smiles disarmingly. "I thought you'd order a

Cosmopolitan or lemonade spritzer or something like that.” I bite my cheek to keep from responding. I love drinking Old Fashioneds. That’s been my drink since I was twenty-one, and maybe even a little before, if I’m being honest. They’re dark and boozy, a little sweet and a little bitter. As I take a sip from my drink, my annoyance with the chatty bartender evaporates.

“Anyway.” The bartender gives me one last long look. “You give me a yell if you want anything else.”

I watch him walk away. For a split second, I allow myself to appreciate the lean muscles that stand out under his T-shirt. He’s attractive in a nonthreatening way, with light brown hair and mild brown eyes. The stubble on his face is not quite enough to be called a beard. He’s very nondescript—the sort of guy you couldn’t pick out of a lineup. Sort of like my father was.

I start to tick off on my fingers the number of months since I’ve had a man over at my house. Then I start counting off the years. Actually, we may be getting into the decades territory. I’ve lost track, which is disturbing in itself.

But I’m not interested in a rendezvous with the hot bartender or anyone else. A long time ago, I decided relationships wouldn’t be a part of my life anymore. There was a time when it made me sad, but now I’ve accepted that it’s better that way.

I lift my drink again and swish the liquid around. I still have that crawling sensation in the back of my neck like somebody is watching me. But maybe it’s not real. Maybe it’s all in my head.

Twenty-six years. I can’t believe it’s been that long.

The game show host on the screen interrupts my thoughts, ripping my eyes away from my drink.

What serial killer was commonly known as the Handyman?

The bartender glances at the screen and says in an offhand way, “Aaron Nierling.”

My father is a game show answer tonight. It could be because of the anniversary of his arrest, but it’s more likely a coincidence. No matter how many years go by, what he did will never be forgotten. I wonder if he’s watching. He used to like game shows. Is he allowed to watch TV in there? It’s not clear what they allow him to do in prison. I haven’t spoken to him since the police took him away.

Even though he writes me a letter every week.

I push thoughts of my father out of my head as I sip on my drink, allowing that nice warm feeling to wash over me. The bartender is wiping

down the counter on the other side of the bar, his muscles flexing under his T-shirt. He pauses briefly to look over at me—and he winks.

Hmm. Maybe my self-imposed abstinence isn't such a great idea. Would it kill me to enjoy myself one night? To wear something besides scrubs? Or let my black hair hang loose instead of pinning it into a tight bun that makes my hair follicles scream with agony.

“Dr. Davis? Is that you?”

At the sound of the voice from behind me, the good warm feeling from the whiskey instantly vanishes. I was right. Somebody *was* looking at me. I wish I could have been wrong just this one time. All I wanted was a little quiet tonight.

For a solid two seconds, I consider not turning around. Pretending I'm not really Dr. Nora Davis. That I'm some *other* lady in green scrubs who just happens to look like Dr. Davis.

But at least he didn't call me Nora Nierling. Nobody has called me that in a very, very long time. And I intend to keep it that way.

The man standing behind me is in his fifties, and short and stocky. This man is most definitely a patient. I can't recall his name, but I remember everything else about him. He came to the hospital with a fever and abdominal pain. He was diagnosed with cholecystitis—an infected gallbladder. We attempted to remove it laparoscopically with cameras, but halfway through, I had to convert it to an open surgery. That's how I know if he were to lift his shirt over his protruding gut, there would be a diagonal scar running along his right upper abdomen. Well-healed by now, I'm sure.

“Dr. Davis!” The man beams at me, showing off a row of yellow, slightly rotted teeth. “I was looking over here and I wasn't sure but... It is you. Oh man, I wouldn't have expected to find you in a place like this.”

What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this? At least he hasn't commented on my Old Fashioned.

“Yes, well,” I murmur.

I wish he would tell me his name. I feel at a distinct disadvantage. I have an excellent memory for many things—I could sketch out every blood vessel supplying the gut with my eyes closed—but people's names are not one of them. I reach into the depths of my brain, but I'm coming up blank.

“Hey, buddy!” the man calls out to the bartender. “Dr. Davis's drink is on me! This lady here saved my life!”

“That's okay,” I murmur. But it's too late. This nameless patient is already making himself comfortable in the barstool next to mine, even

though I feel like the lack of makeup and the scrubs that are just one size away from being a potato sack don't invite company.

"She gave me this!" he announces, as he pulls up the hem of his shirt. His abdomen is covered in matted dark hair, but you can still see the faint scar from where I cut into him. Just like I remember. "Good job, right?" I smile thinly.

"You're a real hero, Dr. Davis," he says. "I mean, I was so sick—"

And then he starts proudly recounting the story for anyone in earshot. About how I saved his life. I would say that fact is debatable. Yes, I'm the one who removed his infected gallbladder. But one could argue that he might've done just as well with IV antibiotics and a drain placed by interventional radiology. I didn't necessarily save his life.

But this man is not to be dissuaded. And I did perform the surgery successfully, and he recovered completely and looks quite healthy, save for his dentition.

"Quite impressive," the bartender remarks as the mystery patient finishes the extended account of my exploits. An amused smile is playing on his lips. "You're quite the hero, Doc."

"Yes, well." I down the last dregs of my Old Fashioned. "It's my job."

I rise unsteadily on my barstool. If someone were watching me, they might wonder if I was too drunk to drive. But the reason I'm shaky has nothing to do with alcohol.

Twenty-six years today. Sometimes it feels like it was yesterday.

"I'm going to head out." I smile politely at my former patient. "Thank you for the drink."

"Oh." The man's face falls, like he hoped I would stay here another hour to talk about his infected gallbladder.

"You're really leaving?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But..." He looks over at my empty glass and drums his stubby fingers on the counter. "I thought I could buy you another drink. Maybe some dinner. You know, as a thank you."

And now another little tidbit about this man comes back to me. When he thanked me at his follow-up visit, he rested his hand on my knee. Gave it a squeeze before I shifted away. *You did a great job, Dr. Davis.* Of course, I still can't remember his damn name.

"Unnecessary," I say. "Your insurance company already paid me."

He scratches at his neck, at a little red patch that's sore from shaving. He attempts to resurrect his smile. "Come on, Dr. Davis... *Nora*. A pretty woman like you shouldn't be at a bar all alone."

The polite smile has left my lips. "I'm fine, thank you very much."

"Come on." He winks at me. I notice now that one of his rotting incisors is dark brown, nearly black. "It'll be fun. You deserve a nice evening."

"Yes, I do." I sling my purse over my shoulder. "And that's why I'm going home."

"I think you should reconsider." He tries to reach for my arm, but I shrug him away. "I can show you a great time, *Nora*."

"I seriously doubt that."

All of the affection vanishes from his face. His eyes narrow at me. "Oh, I get it. You're too good to spend five minutes having a conversation at a bar with one of your patients."

My fingers tighten around the strap of my purse. Well, this escalated quickly. I'll have to tell Harper to make sure this man is fired from the practice. Oh wait, I can't. I still don't know his name.

"Excuse me." The bartender's stern voice intercepts our conversation. "Doc, is this man giving you a hard time?"

Henry Callahan. That's his name—it comes back to me like a kick in the teeth. I let out a sigh of relief.

Callahan looks over at the bartender, noting his height as well as the muscles in his forearms and biceps. He frowns. "No, I'm just leaving."

"Good."

Callahan manages to jostle my shoulder as he stumbles out the door. I wonder how many drinks he had before he approached me. Probably one too many—who knows if he'll even remember this in the morning.

Henry Callahan. I'll tell Harper first thing tomorrow morning. He's not welcome back at my practice.

I glance back at my empty glass. Looks like ol' Henry never bought me that drink after all. I reach into my purse to pay for it myself, but the bartender shakes his head.

"On the house," he says.

I stick out my chin. "I'd like to pay."

"Well, I'd like to buy a drink for a woman who saved a guy's life."

The bartender's mild brown eyes stay trained on mine. The expression on his face is strangely familiar. Have I seen this man before?

I stare back at him, searching his generically handsome features, trying to place him. He couldn't have been a patient. He's much younger than most of the people I see, and I remember everybody I put under the knife— like Henry Callahan—even if I can't recall their names right away.

Do we know each other? The question is on the tip of my tongue, but I don't ask it. I'm probably wrong. It's been a strange night, to say the least. And I want nothing more than to go home.

"Okay," I finally say. "Thank you for the drink."

He cocks his head to the side. "You going to be all right? You want me to walk you to your car?" "I'll be fine," I say.

I glance out into the bar's parking lot. My car is parked right under a street lamp, only a stone's throw away. I watch Henry Callahan getting into his own car—a small blue Dodge with a large dent in the back fender. My shoulders relax as I watch him drive away.

The creeping sensation in the back of my neck is gone, but it's replaced with a slightly sick feeling. I do my best to push it away. I'm not worried about Henry Callahan. After the things I've seen in my life, there isn't much that can shake me.

But I still hang around the bar for another few minutes, to make sure he's gone.

Chapter 2

I drive a dark green Toyota Camry. It's a fine, sensible car in a sensible color without a nick or a dent on it. My partner at work, Dr. Philip Corey, purchased a red Tesla last year. When I nicknamed it his "midlife crisis car," Philip just winked at me. He loves to take that Tesla on the freeway and let 'er rip. When you get into a car with Philip, you're taking your life into your hands.

I'm not having a midlife crisis. I just needed a safe vehicle to get from point A to point B with as little fanfare as possible.

The parking lot of Christopher's is nearly silent as I slide into the driver's seat of my Camry. I start the engine and classical music fills the car. Chopin's *Nocturne in C*. I used to play the piano, and I learned this piece for a concert in high school. That feels like an eternity ago. I haven't touched piano keys in at least a decade.

I get back on the road. It's quiet like it always is on weeknights. I ease my foot onto the gas, taking the back roads like I usually do to get home.

After about two minutes of driving, I notice the pair of headlights behind me.

It doesn't necessarily mean anything. So there's a car driving behind me. So what? But at the same time, I'm usually the only one driving on these back roads at this hour. Usually, it's just me and the stars. And maybe the moon, depending on the time of the month.

Also, the car is following me very closely. I'm going at least ten miles above the speed limit for this small road, and the headlights are probably less than two car lengths behind me. If I stopped short, they would almost certainly rear-end me.

I suspect this car might be intentionally following me. But there's only one way to know for sure.

I approach a fork in the road. I signal left. As I come to the fork, I start to veer left. But at the last second, I swerve right.

I have my eyes pinned on the rearview mirror the entire time. I watch the headlights behind me as they start to move left, then start to veer to the left of the fork as I sail to the right. And then, the car skids to a halt. The car backs up, then turns right at the fork.

I inhale sharply, my hands squeezing the steering wheel. The other car is definitely following me. That bastard is following me.

As I contemplate my next move, a thought flits through my head. One that I have not infrequently when I'm in difficult situations:

What would my father do?

I always have that thought, as much as I try not to. I don't want to know what my father would do. And I

certainly don't want to do the same thing he would do. After all, he's the one spending eighteen life sentences in prison right now. Not exactly something I want to strive for.

I have my phone in my pocket, hooked up to my Bluetooth. I could call the police. I could tell them my location and that there's a car following me. But I don't do that either.

At the next corner, I usually turn right to go home. But instead, I turn left. The car behind me turns with me. The headlights flood my car as the other vehicle creeps closer to mine. They're not even trying to hide the fact that they're following me. Two car-lengths have now become one car-length. They're riding my rear bumper.

Then I see my destination up ahead. The local police department.

I pull into the parking lot at the police department. I keep my eyes on the rearview mirror, waiting to see if the driver will have the gall to follow me into the police station parking lot. But instead, the headlights disappear from my rearview mirror, just as I suspected they would. As I pull into a parking spot, I see the car that had been following me drive past.

It's a blue Dodge with a dent in the rear fender.

I sit in the parking lot of the police department for the next ten minutes, watching the road, making sure the car that had been following me is long gone. This is not my favorite place to be. I remember the first time I ever visited the police department. I was ten years old. My father had just been arrested. The police had so many questions for me.

Nora, how long did your father keep a workshop in the basement?

Nora, did your mother ever go down there?

Nora, are there any other secret hiding places in your house?

Another woman might have marched into the police station. Asked for an escort home. Reported Henry Callahan for following me. But it won't do me any good. And the thought of entering a police station makes me physically ill. After what I went through all those years ago, I never want to go into a police station ever again.

After all, a simple background check will reveal exactly who I am. I don't need that.

After ten minutes, I feel satisfied that Callahan is finally gone. Sure enough, when I get back on the road, it's as quiet and empty as it usually is. It takes me another fifteen minutes to arrive at my cozy two-story house in Mountain View. The realtor said the house was perfect for a small family, but it's just me. There was a time when I thought it might not always just be me, but in retrospect, that was misguided.

There are two bedrooms upstairs, and I use the second bedroom for my home office slash guest room. The washer and dryer are in the basement. When Philip came to visit soon after I bought the place, he wrinkled his nose and remarked that I could afford better. Yes, I could, but I'm happy here. What on earth would I do rattling around a five-bedroom house all by myself? It's not like I'll ever have children to fill up those rooms.

I come in through the garage entrance. The door echoes as it slams shut, and after the sound dies off, the house becomes deathly silent. I stand there
for a moment, clutching my keys in my right hand.

"Honey, I'm home!" I call out.

It's funny because, you know, I live alone.

I stand there for a moment, listening to the echo of my words throughout the room. I worry sometimes about living alone. If somebody came into my house and were waiting for me here, who would know?

But it's a safe neighborhood. I don't usually worry about stuff like that.

I'm starving. If I hadn't had to deal with Henry Callahan trying to scare me, I would've swung by In-N-Out Burger on the way home—part of my campaign to drop dead of a heart attack before I'm fifty. But I missed my chance, so I go to the kitchen to see what's in the freezer. I need some food to soak up the whiskey. And then maybe another whiskey to soak up the food.

No, I really shouldn't. It's getting late and I have to be up at the crack of dawn to operate in the morning. I don't need much sleep as a rule, but my eyelids are starting to feel heavy.

As I open the cupboard in the kitchen, I hear a thump.

Then a second thump.

Somebody's trying to get in the back door.

Thump.

I was waiting at the police station for at least ten minutes. Henry Callahan was gone. He didn't follow me home—I'm sure of it. I was watching in my rearview mirror the whole time and I didn't see any cars behind me. I would have noticed, even if their lights were off. I'm very observant.

I look out the window, but I see only blackness. There's no one there.

Like I said, I live in a very safe neighborhood. All my neighbors are up-and-coming professionals, most of them with young families. Although I don't know for certain, because I haven't taken the opportunity to meet any of them. I can't name one person living within a one-mile radius of me, although I suppose I would recognize a few of them on sight.

I imagine what they would say if something ever happened to me. *She seemed nice. Quiet. Always kept to herself.* That's what they always say.

Thump.

I return to the cupboard over the sink. I yank it open and retrieve the object I'm looking for before returning to the back door. I take one last look out the window to confirm nobody is there. Then I twist the lock to the back door and throw open the door.

Instantly, the meowing starts up. There's a black cat at my feet, who nuzzles at my pants leg with her little furry head. Then she looks up at me hopefully.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I say.

I crack open the can of cat food I got from my cupboard and empty it into the little bowl I put out behind my back door. This cat is *not* my cat. It is a stray cat. I should probably call an animal shelter or something, but instead, I bought a crate of cat food. And now, apparently, I'm feeding the cat.

I watch the cat lap up sixty cents worth of mashed-up chicken. She's so ridiculously grateful whenever I feed her. Maybe even more grateful than Callahan was for having saved his life.

My father would not have done this. He wouldn't have fed a stray cat. He never saved anyone's life.

I watch the cat eat for another few seconds, then I shut the back door. And I lock it.

Ten minutes later, I settle down at my kitchen table with a TV dinner and my laptop. I log into our practice's electronic medical records system. I sift through some labs, but then I find myself searching for the medical record of Henry Callahan.

It's just as I remember. Cholecystitis. Required removal of the gallbladder. Laparoscopic surgery converted to open cholecystectomy. No post-op complications, routine recovery.

Then I click on the tab for demographics. It lists Callahan's medical insurance. His primary contact is his brother, which means he's not married. He probably lives alone. And right below all the phone numbers is his home address.

He lives in San Jose in a sketchy sort of neighborhood. Looks to be a house. Not far from here at all.

I could be there in twenty minutes.

Hmm.

I shake my head and close the laptop with a snap. I grab my water and take a long drink. I wish I had another Old Fashioned, but the water will have to do.

The pile of mail I retrieved from the front door is now stacked neatly in the middle of the table. I push my laptop to the side and start sorting through the letters. The first two are bills—I find it baffling that they still come, even though I pay all my bills online. The next one is soliciting a

political donation. Yeah right. Then a catalog from a bakery, offering a variety of baked goods.

And the last letter is from my father.

I suck in a breath as I stare at the smooth black lettering on the back of the envelope. He always had very nice handwriting. Tight and compact, every letter the exact same height like he measured it with a ruler, the pen marks digging into the paper so that an indentation would always be left behind on the sheet below. I wonder if the postman noticed the name on the return address. If he did, he probably thought it was a joke. At least the letter is made out to Nora Davis. I haven't been Nora Nierling in nearly twenty-six years.

He's been writing me these letters every week since the day of his arrest. I didn't know about them for a long time. My grandmother used to throw them out. But then after I left for college, the letters came directly to me.

What does he have to say to me? What could he possibly have to say? I wonder if he thinks about me. Worries about me. My mother used to worry about me when I was a kid, but she's long gone. Nobody thinks about me or worries about me anymore. Not really. Philip might worry a little bit, because if something happened to me, who would cover his patients when he went on vacation? But he doesn't worry in any sort of real way.

I stare at that letter for a very long time. Like I do every week.

And like I do every week, I rip it in half, and rip it in half again, and toss the pieces in the garbage can.

Happy anniversary, Dad.

Chapter 3

26 Years Earlier

The cake smells really good coming out of the oven. It's vanilla—my favorite. And my mom made it from scratch, using flour, sugar, baking powder, vanilla, and eggs. She showed me how to mix the wet ingredients and the dry ingredients separately, and then we combined them. I helped her, because she asked me to, but I don't like baking with my mom. I would've been okay using the vanilla cake from the box. Or just something she bought from the grocery store bakery aisle.

Mom lowers the cake tin down onto the kitchen counter and pulls off her pink oven mitts. There are two cake tins, because she's going to make a layer cake. That's what I asked for. A vanilla cake with layers and cream cheese frosting.

"Can we put the frosting on now?" I ask.

Mom places one hand on each hip. She is such a *mom*. Like if you were reading a book about a mom, she'd probably be like my mom. Every night, she cooks dinner for us, makes sure I do all my homework, and cleans the house herself, top to bottom. (I'm *technically* responsible for my own bedroom, but if I get lazy and don't do it, she mostly just does it for me.) When our neighbors are sick, she goes to check on them and brings a tub of chicken noodle soup or maybe a casserole.

"Nora," she says. "You know we have to let the cake cool before we put the frosting on it. Otherwise, it will just melt."

"Well," I say thoughtfully, "then we can put on a *second* layer."

Mom smiles at that. She smiles a lot. When she smiles, she has dimples and it makes her double chin look bigger. When she and my dad got married, she was skinny—almost bony—but she's not now. I like her better this way. Who wants to hug a bunch of bones? But my dad keeps telling her she should try to lose some weight. He says it a lot.

"You have to be patient," she says.

Usually, I'm pretty patient. Even when the other kids are fooling around in class, I always sit quietly and do what the teacher says. But today is my birthday, and the cake smells really good. So I rip the lid off the plastic tub of cream cheese frosting and rake one finger through the creamy white

goodness. Mom gives me a look, but she doesn't stop me. After all, we're the only ones who are going to be eating the frosting.

Mmm. Cream cheese frosting.

"Are you sure you don't want to invite any of your friends over tonight?" Mom asks me. "It's not too late."

"No, that's okay."

"But it's your *birthday*, honey."

She doesn't have to remind me that it's my birthday. I *know* it's my birthday. Today, I am eleven years old. Next year I'll be in middle school. I can't wait.

Mom's eyebrows knit together. "You have friends, don't you, Nora?"

"Yes."

It's not a lie. I do have friends. There are girls I play with at recess every day. But I've never had a very close friend. Some of the girls call each other on the phone every night and talk until midnight. I don't have any friends like that. And I don't have any friends I want to invite to my eleventh birthday party.

What's so wrong with that?

I take another scoop of frosting with my finger, and my mom gives me a look. I knew it was only a matter of time before she was going to tell me to quit it. "Go upstairs and change," she tells me. "By the time you get back down, the cakes will be cool."

I groan. "Why do I have to change? It's just us."

"It's your birthday. It's a special occasion. Don't you want to look nice?"

I lift a shoulder. "When is Dad getting home?"

"He'll be home in an hour. He's picking up a present for you on the way back."

I keep my fingers and toes crossed it's another hamster, but it probably won't be, because Mom says we have bad luck with hamsters. But I know it's going to be something good. My dad gives the best presents.

Mom folds her arms across her chest. "*Go*, Nora. We're not frosting the cake until you're ready."

Fine. I drop the tub of frosting on the kitchen counter, so I can go upstairs and change. On the way to the stairwell, I pass the door to the basement. Some of my friends at school have basements that are finished, where they play video games or have parties, but our basement is my dad's workshop.