

After AlwaysAfter Always

Dawn E. Reno

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Dedication For Kristin Duval and Therese Weyland

Chapter One

When the cops walk in the door, I think they're coming for me. They probably know Jakey Hanson and I skipped school last week and hot-wired Anna Podarvski's mom's Lexus and rode up and down 17-92 past the strip joints till that got boring, and that we took the car back around 4:00, right before Mrs. P got out of work. But how can the cops know, and why would they care? Look, we brought the car back. Without a scratch. Still, I put my dinner knife down cause it's jiggling against my dish, and Ginny--my sister, Virginia Woolf Carpenito (one of my father's "scholarly" jokes: he named all four of us kids after famous writers. Real funny, Dad.)--gives me a suspicious look like maybe I'm nervous 'cause I did something wrong, and I want to give her a kick, warn her that if she opens her yap, she's dead. My fingernails rake my leather seat, under the table where no one can see, but I know they can't tell anything's wrong by looking at my face. It's taken me thirteen years, but I've managed to master the art of looking totally innocent in the worst of situations. I'm so good at it, I've gotten away with a lot worse than taking a Lexus for a joyride. Actually, I've probably done less than my dad did during the 70's, only difference is he got canned a couple of times, caught in the act of hot-wiring a Camaro, and picked up twice for shoplifting. Innocent stuff, he says. Typical teenage pranks. But he was caught. I never have been. Until now. Dad sits at the head of the table, forkful of salad halfway to his mouth. Ginny (next youngest to me at eleven) sits to his right, and Robert (he's nine and a major brat) is beside her. Katie (the seven-year-old baby) is stuck next to me so I can help her cut her meat. I call Dad the poster boy for GrapeNuts. He runs a music store on Park Avenue in Winter Park and has become a professional music snob, acting the cool jazz musician for his Polo-set clients. Gags me how he kisses up, wears 100% natural cotton shirts, worn-out jeans, and Birkenstocks, oval wire-rimmed

glasses perched on his nose like John Lennon going into the twenty-first century. When Ma comes in the room with two black cops--hands on their guns, too-serious-for-words looks on their faces--everyone looks up. Dad's not exactly big-bully-man Arnold Schwarzenegger, and it shows now. The color in his face drains, and he can't seem to summon enough strength to close his mouth. I want out of this chair, want to walk to the other end of the table and tap his chin back in place. "Dusty, these officers want to talk to you," Ma says, looking at Dad. Emphasis on "these officers." She's always being stopped because her car makes too much noise. Doesn't exactly have a soft spot for cops. She rubs her hands on her jeans. She wears all-cotton shirts, too, and her long, faded blond hair is usually whipped back from her face in a messy braid with snakelike curls spiraling out around her cheeks. Ma looks natural in cotton and jeans--not put--on like Dad. She looks like a hippie, but not old enough to have kids my age. The cops are watching Ma instead of Dad. I wonder whether I should tell them about Jakey and me now. Get it over with. But I can't think of exactly what to say and figure I'll buy a little time to think, let the cops talk to Dad, prepare him, and I'll put together some kind of believable speech like we had an emergency and needed the car but knew we couldn't tell anyone or we'd get our folks in trouble, and we just couldn't do that. You know how insurance rates go up, Ma and Dad, how high the car insurance would go if they knew I'd screwed around with someone else's wheels. You understand, don't you, officers? I practice my argument quickly. I'm good at that. Always have been. It's one of the traits that's gonna be useful to me when I become a lawyer. Thinking on your feet is important. When Dad and Ma leave the dining room with the cops, Ginny whispers, "You're in trouble now, R.W." I hiss at her, but secretly I want to thank her for learning not to call me by my birth name: Ralph Waldo Emerson Carpenito. God, I hate my name almost as much as I hate my siblings. Katie--Katherine Mansfield Carpenito--starts to cry. Cops remind her of that cartoon dog McGruff on the commercials, the one who tells everyone to "take a bite out of crime," and she has this sick fear of the stupid thing because she saw it when she was real little, and he scared the crap out of her. Don't ask me why. Anyway, Katie's crying, Ginny's tormenting me, and Robert Frost (the only one of us who really wants to use his real name) is taking advantage of the fact that no one's eating and piling everything in sight on his plate. Typical family dinner. Except for the cops. I hear Ma's voice from the living room getting all high-pitched and shriek-y. I'm going to get it. She's pretty good at sensing when I'm doing something wrong. Like she's got ESP or is a telepath or something. If she catches us, she doesn't always carry through with her threats, but out of all the adults I know, she's the hardest to fool. I'm going to get grounded big time. Like forever. I can feel it coming. I don't have an appetite for the chicken stir fry (one of Ma's best concoctions), but I push the meat, yellow and red peppers, and grilled onions from one side of my plate to the other, and wonder whether the cops already went to Jakey's house. When the four grownups come back into the room, I push my chair away from the table. Dad walks past me, head down. Ma's crying with her fist against her mouth. In between snorkely sobs, she keeps looking from one cop to the other, saying, "This isn't right. You've

got the wrong man. Give me the name of the girl. I know we don't know her. Tell me. I'll prove she's not one of Dusty's guitar students." My dad stops at the end of the table and leans against his chair, looks at each of us kids one at a time. Slowly. Thoughtfully. I want to scream at him, 'For God's sake, say something, damn it!' But he moves away from the table, like he's in a daze, and goes through the kitchen into the living room. Doesn't say a word to me. My mother's behind me now, so I stand up and face her. We're chin-to-chin, and she looks away from me as if she doesn't want to talk, but I can't stop being curious. "What the hell's going on?" I ask her. "They're taking ..." She swallows hard, her eyes on the swinging kitchen doors, as if she expects Dad to come back through them at any second. "They're taking your father to jail." "Dad? Why?" What the hell could my father have done to get himself arrested? Did he forget to pay his parking tickets? Rip someone off? Not pay his income tax? (He isn't the brightest bulb when it comes to balancing his checkbook.) My mother chokes on the words and peers over my shoulder at the cops as if they're members of Hitler's elite. I've never seen her so scared before. I take a step toward the cops. If Ma and Dad won't tell me ... "Where are you taking my dad, and why?" "Son, why don't you ask your mother?" The older of the two cops looks like he feels sorry for me. I hate that. "Right, like she looks capable of putting a sentence together." I direct their attention back to Ma, who's standing in the middle of the dining room, rubbing her palms together, and looking more confused than a deer surrounded by a pack of coyotes. Like she's holding onto her sanity by a long, thin thread, and she might not be able to hold on for very much longer. Dad comes back into the room. He's shaking his head slowly from side to side. Without glancing Ma's way, he shrugs into the Rollins College sweatshirt he's holding and walks toward the door. "It's all a mistake," he says to the cops. The younger one stops Dad and pulls his arms behind him, snaps on a pair of cuffs. A pair of cuffs. The sound of them closing seems as loud as the sonic boom when a shuttle lands at the Space Center. I can't stand it anymore. "Wait a freakin' second. You're not going anywhere with my father." I dive for the space between the cops and the door. I feel a bit foolish, but I have to know. "What the hell's going on?" Dad's face is tired. For the first time, I notice some grey hairs coming through in his beard. "It's okay, Ralphie. They'll find out as soon as we get to the station that they got the wrong man. Lynda, babe, I'll be home in time for dessert." He seems like he wants to reach for me, but the handcuffs hold him back. He winces and smiles, then ducks his head, and they're gone. As soon as the door closes, everyone shuts up, then we're all talking at once and finally, a light breaks in Ma's eyes and she goes into action. Her usual self. The phone is off the wall and she's dialing before I can cross the room. Now all three of the other kids are crying. I can't believe this. They've just taken my father out of the house in cuffs! I wonder, for a brief second, what tomorrow's headlines are going to be, and shudder. Ma has called her sister, my Aunt Susan, a shrink whose ex-husband is a lawyer. That's who my mother really wants and less than two minutes later, she hangs up with Aunt Susan and calls Uncle Ed. "Ed, we have a problem." Pause. "Dusty's been arrested." She nods, pen poised above a pad of paper on the counter. "They say

there's been a complaint--a couple, actually--against him for..." Her eyes scan us kids. She puts her hand over the mouthpiece. "Take them to the parlor and put on movie or something," she says to me. "Keep everyone busy for me for a little while, huh, sweetie?" "But, Ma--" "Do as I say. Now. Please." Her face has gone stone hard. You can't fool around with Ma when she gets like this. I herd the kids into the other room, but stand right by the door and listen hard. I hear her tell Uncle Ed she's sorry, but she didn't want us kids to hear and her voice breaks. "He's been arrested for molesting children, Ed. I can't believe it." Ma's voice fades. I must have heard her wrong, but when I tune in again, I hear the same thing. Pedophilia, she says. "No way," I whisper, and suddenly the wall doesn't seem strong enough to hold me anymore.

## Chapter Two

It takes about an hour for all the news guys to show up. At first there are just a couple outside in the driveway, then two more trucks show up and all hell breaks loose. Guys are hollering at each other, setting up lights, the anchor people from Channel 6 are practicing lines but I don't know what they are because I can't read lips. We kids are at the window, Ma's precious Belgian lace curtains pulled back so we can see better. This is almost as good as going to the movies. "All this for us?" Ginny asks. I want to explain to her that it's not for us, it's because of Dad, that he's done something really horrible and everyone wants to get a piece of the story, but she wouldn't understand so I don't bother. Besides, I don't know that much either. The people outside the house probably know more about what's going on than we do. At first, Ma deals with the questions like she deals with door-to-door salesmen--sweet as a Slurpee and twice as messy--she even asks one of them if they want a cup of coffee. But then someone tramples the bed of lilies by the garage and Ma goes ballistic. I can hear the questions the reporters are asking, and I can't believe they're here about my dad. How can they know about what happened less than half an hour ago? Do they have a direct line to the cops or something? One woman wearing a short skirt and black stockings with a run up the right leg steps forward, asks Ma if the "little girls" Dad teaches music to ever come over the house. Before Ma can answer, three other voices chime in, and then they're all bumping into each other, pushing their way into the hallway. I hear Ma trying to ask them nicely to come back another time, trying to tell them she really doesn't know anything, but no one listens. It's getting pretty rowdy. By the time the fifth reporter yells out a question, her hand shakes when she smooths her hair back into her braid. "Take your sisters upstairs, Ralph Waldo," she tells me, and when I don't move, she tells me again, but I'm too busy checking out the cameramen hovering like bats outside, and I'm wondering whether we're going to be on the 6 o'clock news with Marla and Ted, until my mother finally cracks her voice like a ringmaster, and I'm forced to push Katie, Robert Frost and Ginny upstairs like Lassie herds sheep. What I really should be doing is watching out for Ma, because, man, it looks like she's going to come unglued at any second. The words she whispered on the phone replay in my head like the chorus to a bad rap. I stand on the stairs and look down. All I can see are legs, but I can tell

Ma's not holding it together because she's pacing, and she never paces unless it's really bad, like when Ginny was attacked by the Chow next door. If Ma hadn't been out on the porch taking care of her stupid gardenias, she wouldn't have heard the dog going nuts and Ginny screaming her brains out. Ma can't even talk about what Ginny looked like after getting bit nineteen times--gets nauseated, she says. They both still have nightmares about the whole mess. Personally, I think they're a bit neurotic about it, but anyway, the way Ma's pacing right now is the same way she walks when things like dog attacks push her buttons. I tell the kids to go to Ginny's room for a while. Then I race down the stairs, coming up short behind Ma, who's crying now and shaking her head. I squeeze past her and yell at the group of reporters trying to get in the door. "Get out of our house, dammit!" I'm taller than some of them, but that doesn't stop them from demanding to know who I am. I don't answer, don't want to answer, just want these jerks out of my house so my mother will stop crying. None of them move. In fact, they get stuck in the doorway like circus clowns in one of those silly little cars. Ma's waving her hands in the air, begging them to leave. One of the cameras pulls at those lace curtains at the door, and Ma's voice goes up three octaves. I lose it. Pushing and screaming, I get the whole group out the door, slam it shut and throw the deadbolt. I can still hear them outside and when I peek through the drapes. They look like vultures swarming around a dead possum on the side of the road. Behind me, Ma is sitting on the bottom stair, her head on her knees, but her crying is a bit quieter. I can see she's trying to get control, pausing, taking deep breaths, and wiping her eyes. I go and sit beside her. "Everything's going to be all right," I tell her, though I'm not quite sure what that means. "I need to call your aunt Susan again," she tells me. "I need some help dealing with this." "Yeah, and call Uncle Ed, too," I say. "Maybe he can get these idiots to go away." I know from watching Grisham movies that we need an attorney. Fast. Ma's eyes are empty when she looks at me, but she nods and touches my cheek. She gets off the stairs and bumps into the wall as though she's drunk, then stumbles towards the kitchen. A few seconds later, I hear her on the phone again. I head upstairs, get the kids into bed and try to answer their questions. Then Aunt Susan shows up. The kids want to go downstairs to see her. (It's not easy to miss my aunt's voice. I swear she could speak to a room filled with a thousand people and not need a microphone.) But I tell them Ma needs to talk to Aunt Susan alone, and they really need to butt out. Taking my own advice, I stretch out on my bed and listen to Ginny and Katie and Robert Frost hassling each other. Though Ginny's only two years younger than I am, she tries to act older, and now she seems to think she has the right to be the mother. Leave her alone for too long and she starts running everything. I bang on the wall and tell them to shut up. For a few seconds, everything is quiet, then I hear them whispering again. This time I threaten them as only an older brother can--"I'm gonna open a can of whup-ass on you if you don't shut up." Instant silence. Works every time. In a few minutes, it's obvious from their loud snores that they're all asleep. Everyone but me. The mattress feels like bricks, and I can't get comfortable even though I'm exhausted and am certain I could sleep for a week if someone would let me.

Then I hear Katie still sniffing in the next room. Not that she really knows what's going on (even if she did, she wouldn't understand). She's just scared of all the commotion. It's a while longer before the kids start to snore, but I'm still awake and listening to what's going on downstairs. When the doorbell rings, I check the neon numbers on the "Deep Space 9" clock that Ma bought me for last year's birthday. 10:22. The voices rise a little, and I realize Ma and Aunt Susan must've gone into the kitchen before Uncle Ed got here and now they're all in the living room. Ma's crying again, Aunt Susan is saying, "I don't know why you married him in the first place, Lynda," and Uncle Ed is asking for specifics about the charges. "I don't know, Ed. I don't know. Do you think I ought to be there with him? Should I leave the kids with you two so I can go to the station?" Aunt Susan says something that sounds nasty, but I can't make out the words. I never really have understood what she has against Dad, but she makes no bones about not liking him. Doesn't even come over for Christmas Eve sometimes, even though Ma claims it's a "family tradition." It's not real nice of Aunt Susan to do, but sometimes I can understand where she's coming from. Dad's been known to do some real dorky stuff, plus he's about as low on the totem pole as they come, as far as Ma's family is concerned. Musicians are losers, they think. Everyone in their family has become either real rich or real famous--or both. It's real obvious Dad's not going to do either. Sometimes I wonder how Ma and Aunt Susan came from the same family. They don't look alike. Aunt Susan's hair is dark and curls like sausages when it's damp, her eyes are brown, and she's about as thin as you can get without being anorexic. She's also a workaholic, Ma says. Never seems to be satisfied with where she's at. But I like her. There's something about her toughness that's cool. And she doesn't take any crap from anyone, which is probably why Uncle Ed divorced her. Uncle Ed is answering Ma now, and he's using his patient, I-can-wait-for-the-truth lawyer voice. He's not a great lawyer, at least that's what Aunt Susan says, but he seems to make a decent living. I asked him once if he'd ever done a murder trial and he told me he tries to handle things that are 'sure money.' Whatever that means. "He'll be home soon, right?" Ma asks. She sounds as if she's at the bottom of the stairs looking up to see if we're in bed. Automatically, I close my eyes then realize that's stupid 'cause she can't see me. (How stupid can I be?) "They'll let him out, won't they, Ed? Won't they see they've made a mistake?" "What if they haven't?" Aunt Susan's comment couldn't be more clear than if she was standing right next to me. She's right. What if they haven't made a mistake? I don't want to hear anymore. Careful not to make the bed squeak, I get up and go over to my bureau, get my CD player and one of the Pink Floyd CDs I stole from Dad's collection. Back in bed, I put on the headphones, listen to "The Wall" and try to forget my father just went to jail and my mother's acting like she's going to have a breakdown any second. But I can't stop thinking about it. Could it be true? Could my father be a Chester Molestor? Has Aunt Susan been right about him all along? I roll over and the headphones pull away from my ears. I catch a couple of words from downstairs, but I don't want to make sense of them, so I plug the earphones back in and try to sleep. My head's pounding, and as much as I hate

to admit it, all I can think about is Dad sitting in some jail cell all by himself. I may get pissed off at him occasionally, and he may be a geek, but he's my dad, and I hate thinking about him all alone with the rats and the cockroaches. I tell myself it's probably not that bad. After all, he went to the Winter Park jail, and how awful can that be? I roll onto my other side, but my eyes fly open and I'm staring at the Michael Jordan poster on my wall as the CD plays over and over and over.

### Chapter Three

"Hey, R.W., what's happening, man?" Jake comes up on my right side and hits my shoulder with his, just like he does every morning. I just rounded the far curve of the road around Lake Howell and am about a hundred feet from the upper school's main office. Usually, I wait for Jake at the bus stop, but I didn't feel like it this morning. Everyone on the bus seemed to already know what was going on with Dad, but obviously, Jake hasn't seen the news. I shrug and nudge him back, just like every morning. Maybe if I pretend it is like every morning, it will be. But it's not. Dad didn't come home last night, and when I got up, Aunt Susan was at the kitchen table nursing a cup of coffee. She told me Uncle Ed and Ma had gone to the police station to post bail for Dad, that maybe they'd have to go to court, but that I shouldn't worry. Yeah, right. Jake's saying something, but all I see are his lips moving. It's like I'm still asleep and my hearing hasn't kicked in yet. "Hey, boyo, what's up? You still in dreamland?" He laughs that goofy up-the-scale giggle of his like he just walked out of "Comedy Central" and hits me on the shoulder again. "Cut it out. I'm awake. You're just not making sense." "Me? You haven't said a word and I'm not making sense. Listen, you study for the 'Romeo and Juliet' quiz this morning?" "Yeah. Watched the movie last year." Jake laughs again and I tune out. Sometimes he gets on my nerves. His father's a cardiologist, has a fancy-schmancy office in Winter Park, right down the street from where we live, a big brick and tile Spanish number with palm trees lining the walk that leads to the lake behind it. But Jake doesn't live like a king. In fact, he's pretty damn miserable most of the time. His dad's gone 300 days of the year, his mom's having an affair, his older sister is gay, and his older brother's living somewhere in China 'trying to find himself.' Jake's the youngest and has been spoiled with lots of junk he doesn't care about. I always kid him about looking for love in all the wrong places, but I feel for him. No matter how nuts my family is, they're always there. Even Dad. Thinking about him makes me pissy again, so I start walking a little faster and Jake struggles to keep up. Our school, Lake Brown Prep, is one of the oldest in Orlando, and the place where all the rich families send their kids to keep them out of trouble. I always wonder how Ma and Dad manage to send us there, but it's not something I dwell on because no matter how much I complain, it's a helluva lot better than going to public school. For one thing, the girls are really pretty, they dress sharp, and they never ask me to pay when we go to dances. And I figure it'll be real easy to get into a good college when they see where I went to high school. Ma and Dad don't know it, but I really want to be a bigshot lawyer in New York. Ma would

freak if she knew I was going to live in the Big Apple, so I just haven't told her yet. By the time I get a job there, she won't be able to say anything about it anyway. We round the corner by our homeroom and everybody sort of ignores us. The walkways are lined with upper school kids just hanging out before going to class. It's still early, so we have time to talk, but suddenly, I just want to get to homeroom and pretend I'm doing my homework so I won't have to talk to anyone. That's when I see Billi Siddons walking in front of us. Her blond hair hangs down below her waist and she has her cheerleading uniform on because it's Friday, the only day of the week we get to wear what we want. The junior varsity cheerleaders have red and white uniforms this year--a red short top that barely exposes their bellies and red and white short-shorts that really look like the bottom of a bathing suit. I heard Billi just had her thirteenth birthday a couple of weeks ago, but she's always looked older than the rest of us. When she's with the varsity cheerleaders, they all hang out with college guys. "Man, she's fine," Jake whispers. "Jakey, you say that every time we see her." "Well, she is." He lifts one of those bushy red eyebrows of his and gives me a dopey grin. He's got the hots for all the cheerleaders. Not that I blame him, but the kid definitely has a hormone problem. I wish he'd just get a girlfriend and get it over with. I really didn't want to come to school today, but Aunt Susan said she thought I should and gave me some psychological mumbo-jumbo about it being good for me. Personally, I think that's crap, and I thought about calling Jake to skip, but Lake Brown has this policy of checking up on absentee bodies, so here I am: a big wimp. A big wimp listening to a dork who's got the hots for cheerleaders. Great. Just what I need to climb the social ladder: a father in jail and a dork for a friend. I watch Billi disappear up the stairs to the second floor of the main building and have to admit Jake doesn't have bad taste. For a dork.

My first class is English and the teacher, Ms. Smithson, is pretty cool. Besides, Jake sits beside me and even though he's bugging me this morning, I feel good having someone to fool around with. Maybe it's my imagination, but Ms. Smithson seems a bit nicer than usual this morning, and it makes me squirm. Does she know about Dad? Since every media person in the city of Orlando came knocking at our door last night, everyone's got to know. Just thinking about it makes my stomach clench and a sour taste rise in my mouth. For the first time, I realize I'm pissed at Dad and I don't even know exactly what happened. I think about all the fuss I've heard lately, all the noise that's been made about child molesters moving into Orlando neighborhoods and how everyone gets notified. Just this past summer, Jake's mother got a letter about some guy who lives down the street from them and how he'd just been released from the slammer and that everyone should watch out for him. He ended up moving. I wonder if we're going to have to move, too--especially when everyone finds out. They will. That's a given. But, so far, so good. There's some noise as Ms. Smithson hands out a quiz on the last scene of "Romeo and Juliet," then everything's quiet for a while. I have a hard time with English, so I'm really concentrating on how to put my sentences together. I need a B in this class or I

don't get into AP classes next semester. So far, I've been able to pull it off, but I didn't study last night, didn't even read the final act like I was supposed to, so none of these questions make any sense and the only multiple choice I've been able to do so far was an easy one about the relationship between Romeo and the Friar. Then the intercom buzzes and Mrs. Fullman, the guidance counselor, whines, "Ms. Smithson, can you send Ralph Carpenito to my office, please?" "He's taking a test right now." Ms. Smithson rolls her eyes. She's never happy about having kids pulled out of class. "Okay. After class, then?" "I'll tell him." Ms. Smithson glances in my direction and raises her eyebrows. Everyone else turns around, too, and Jakey snickers. I know he's thinking, what'd you do now, man? I hunch my shoulders and make a face. Forget the rest of the R&J exam. I can't concentrate anyway. Mrs. Fullman's office is in the same hallway as the principal's, Mr. Chan, and the secretaries whisper behind their hands as I walk in the door. Do they think I don't know what they're talking about? I want to bolt, but curiosity keeps me stuck to the metal chair they keep in the hallway for guys like me--waiting for execution. I'm ready to dig out the latest Stephen King book I keep in my backpack and kick back to read a few pages, but the door opens and Mrs. Fullman pops her head out. She's skinny and has short, curly brown hair, and a big smile like she's getting me ready for the guillotine and is going to enjoy the heck out of watching my head roll. "Come on in, Ralph," she says. "It's R.W.," I mutter. Like she cares. "Excuse me?" "Everyone calls me R.W." "Oh, that's right." She closes the door and moves some papers off a chair for me. "Your full name is Ralph Waldo Emerson Carpenito, right?" I've been in here at least ten times. You'd think she knew that by now. I grunt and sit down. Why do grownups always think my name's so cool? I think it stinks.

"Well, I'll come right to the point ... uh, R.W. I brought you in here this morning because I thought you'd need someone to talk to and I want to assure you that not a word we say in here will go anywhere else, okay?" She smiles again, and though I can see she's trying to be nice, I don't feel like being nice back.

I avoid her eyes and scan the kids' drawings on the wall and the poster about "women who run with the wolves" as though they're completely fascinating. "Do you want to talk about what happened with your father last night?" Whoa. Come right out with it why don't you? "No," I say, though what I really want to say is "why can't you mind your own business?" "I might be able to help ... " I stretch out my legs and drum my fingers on the arm of the chair. Even a "Romeo and Juliet" exam would be better than this. "Sometimes it's easier to share your problems with an objective listener. I'm not saying I can make anything better for you but I may be able to answer some of the questions you might have right now." She forces a smile and leans forward on her desk. "The only question I have is why this is such big news that you had to jump in on me right away. I mean, don't you think if I had a problem, I'd come knocking at your door? You didn't have to drag me out of class." I want to tell her to shut up, to leave me alone, but at the same time I want to know all she knows. I want her to tell me everything. Mrs. Fullman's not ready to give up. Crap. "Maybe we should look at this a bit differently then. I think your mother might need

support right now--" "No kidding." Tell me something I don't know, lady. "And I'm not exactly giving it to her by sitting here talking to you, am I?" I'm getting hotter and hotter and would really love to walk out and slam the door--hard--but the thought of facing everyone in the hallway keeps me rooted to my seat. "Sounds like you really think your mother does need your help--" "Whatever ...." I sink deeper into the chair and keep my head down, fiddling with the straps on my knapsack. "What about your sisters and Robert Frost?" That question makes me flashback to when I finally shut off the CD last night and could hear Ginny, Katie and Robert Frost crying themselves to sleep. This old witch should have been there. If she'd heard them, she would never ask me a question like this. "They don't understand what's going on," I admit, but what I'd really like to say is: "You don't have a clue, do you?" "Do you understand?" she asks. That stops me for a minute, but I'm quick on the pickup. No flies on ol' R.W. "Well, yeah, I mean, the cops came and arrested my dad for something he didn't do, then the newspaper and TV people came and everyone's all confused and Ma's crying." I fool around with the strap of my knapsack and avoid looking at her. "Man, I guess I don't know where it's all coming from." "And does it make you angry?" Now I stare at her, sitting primly at her desk in her flowered dress, and I want to puke. She thinks she's going to save the world one kid at a time and I'm her project for the day. Where was she when I needed help changing my schedule last semester? Nowhere to be found. But now that there's a little gossip, she's right there wanting every dirty little soundbyte. I want to tell her off, but that won't get me anywhere. "Listen, you have no idea how I feel, and I really don't want to talk about it anymore." I get up, grab my knapsack and head out the door. And I do slam it. Hard. And I don't care who sees me walk out.

#### Chapter Four

When I get home, I hear talk in the kitchen, so I dump my knapsack and head through the dining room--quietly. Maybe if they don't hear me, I can find out what's really going on. "It's not the twenty-five grand for the bail, Dusty," Aunt Susan says. "It's whether or not you're going to win this case, and I hate to say it, but with three girls pointing their fingers, it doesn't look good." "But I didn't do anything to those kids!" Dad sounds tired and his voice is raspy like he's been crying. He never cries. "When you conduct your guitar lessons, is there anyone else there?" Uncle Ed asks. Silence. I try not to breathe too loud and imagine the four adults in the kitchen: my parents, my aunt, my uncle--where they're sitting, what they're doing. They're probably sitting at the kitchen table. I can smell cigarette smoke and am surprised Ma let Uncle Ed smoke in her house. She never has before. I can practically see Uncle Ed pacing as he usually does when there's a family crisis, his tie loosened, his glasses on the middle of his nose, maybe a notebook in his hands. Aunt Susan usually leans against the counter, legs crossed, arms folded across her chest. She's always drinking something: coffee from the time she wakes up till lunchtime, Coke afterwards, and wine from dinner till she goes to bed. Sometimes I wonder why she doesn't spend most of her time in the bathroom. Ma and Dad sit at

the breakfast bar. She'll be sitting sideways on the stool, one hand resting on Dad's knee, and he'll be facing forward, resting his arms on the counter. I hear shuffling now and four voices talking all at once. Ma's voice is breaking. She's scared and that frightens me a little, too. She's probably worried about Dad going to jail. Suddenly I realize that was probably what Mrs. Fullman was trying to get from me, and yeah, I'm scared, too, but first I have to figure out what's going on and it's hard to do it with everyone yapping at the same time. I can catch a couple of phrases here and there, but nothing makes sense until Uncle Ed raises his voice and commands attention like Judge Judy on that crazy courtroom show. "The point that I'm trying to make, Dusty, is that I have to know the truth. Did you or did you not do what the State says?" There's not even a half a millimeter of a second pause and Dad's voice booms, "No, of course not!" "But all three girls are guitar students?" "Yes." "And all three have been with you alone at one point or another?" Small pause. "Yes, I believe so, but usually not for very long. My lessons are booked back-to-back, especially after school and on Saturdays." "Do you have a surveillance camera in the store?" "Yes, up front." Dad sounds a little hopeful, as if the camera is going to help somehow and Ma murmurs something I can't quite catch. "Good." Uncle Ed's heavy footsteps stomp across the room and I hear the phone beeping as he dials. "We'll get the tapes. That'll help if we can show exactly what went on during the times they say you had the girls..." He stops abruptly and begins talking on the phone. Ma and Dad are talking, too, and Aunt Susan asks if anyone wants more coffee. "Whatcha doing, R.W.? How come you're standing out here? Aren't you going into the kitchen?" I almost jump straight out of my pants. My little sister is standing behind me, wearing her school uniform: a white blouse and plaid shorts, the blouse half in-half out and stained with grape jelly. "Jeez, Katie, can't you give a guy some warning?" She scrunches up her seven-year-old cheeks and looks like she's about to cry. Gets me every time. "I just wanted some cookies..." I push open the swinging door to the kitchen and, just as I thought, all the adults turn to stare at us. Best idea is to act like we just got home from school, so I do the cool thing and slide over to the fridge, open it, drink some juice from the carton--Aunt Susan shivers like I'm going to spread TB or something--and pretend like I haven't heard a thing, haven't been standing outside the door for the past fifteen minutes, am not so curious I could just about scream what-in-hell-is-going-on-and-why-is-everyone-acting-so-weird. Ma does the usual how-was-your-day routine with Katie, checks the drawings she did in school, dishes out some milk and cookies. I wish I was Katie's age and didn't care what was happening. It'd be a lot easier. Aunt Susan gives Uncle Ed the eye and they go out to the living room, leaving Ma and Dad alone with Katie and me. "Katie, why don't you go upstairs and change? I'll be right up, sweetie." Ma looks over Katie's head at me and gives me the signal to stay. Good, I'm finally going to be briefed. About time. Katie whines a little, but they get her out of the kitchen with promises for an ice cream later. I still have the juice carton in my hand, but no one's said anything. Dad still hasn't met my eyes. "Mrs. Fullman called me to her office today," I say between mouthfuls of banana and peanut butter. I figure the more I keep in my mouth the more

Ma and Dad will have to talk since they hate it when I try to talk with food in my face. Ma puts her hand on Dad's shoulder and takes a deep breath. "Did she want to talk about what's happened?" I nod. "Well, I'm sure everyone has seen the papers or heard the news by now." Dad shakes his head and lifts his glasses off his face, wipes them with his T-shirt. "It's a bad dream. That's what it is." "So, what's the scam? What's happening?" I manage between bites of a banana I grabbed off the kitchen counter. The banana's almost gone, but my stomach's growling for more. I always eat when I'm nervous, and I'm beginning to feel like our lives are about to change. Forever. And not for good, either. "There's been a ... a problem with some of the girls your father teaches, honey. They're saying some pretty nasty things." Ma tiredly swipes her hand over her face. "I know you're going to hear it from the other kids so I think it's only fair you know what's going on." "Who?" Dad glances up. "Huh?" "Who's saying stuff? And what are they saying?" I ask again. Dad groans as if he's got the worst stomachache on record. "None of it's true, Ralphie. I swear." "R.W.," I mumble, though I don't think it matters right now and even if it did, I don't think Dad is listening to me anyway. He's wearing the same T-shirt he had on last night and it's obvious he hasn't shaved yet. He looks a whole lot older than thirty-five, and I hope no one got a picture of him like this. It's bad enough he's been arrested, but if everyone sees him looking like some homeless guy, then I'll hear it big time at school. I don't need this crap, man. Maybe I don't want all the details. Maybe I should just leave. Let them figure this whole mess out themselves. "You need to know, R.W.," Ma puts the emphasis on my name and throws Dad a glance which he doesn't catch. "The girls who filed the complaint go to school with you." I sink into the chair. No wonder Mrs. Fullman called me into her office. I'm doomed. "What'd he do?" I don't care whether Dad's in the same room or not. He's not talking, so I might as well get the info from Ma. "They say he acted improperly towards these girls." She takes a deep breath. "Sexual harassment is the charge." "Yeah, I know that. But who's saying it? And is it true, Dad?" I hold my breath, afraid of the answer. He shakes his head furiously and his glasses almost fly off. Ma crosses the kitchen and takes me by the shoulders. "Don't you even think it! Your father didn't do anything. None of this is true!" Dad's sputtering and tears are rolling down his cheeks. "Ralphie, you have to believe me. I didn't do anything. You know how long I've been teaching. You know how many students I've had. Nothing like this..." He starts blubbing like a baby. Ma's still holding me and I look into her eyes. She's crying, too, but quietly. "Who are the girls?" I need to know. But, at the same time, I don't want to. "You've got to promise me you won't say anything at school. The media doesn't know their names and no one else is supposed to either. It'll be a lot easier if you--" "Just tell me who they are!" She lets go of my shoulders and steps back, shoves her hands in the pockets of her jeans, gets a real serious look on her face. "Amy Deputo, Joy Ashbery, and Wilhelmina Siddons." "Billi? Billi Siddons? The cheerleader?" Jake's going to shit. I can't believe it. "Do you know them all?" I nod. "Yeah, I know them. There's only 112 kids in the 9th grade. We all know each other. And everyone in Orlando knows the cheerleaders. Man, couldn't you pick anyone else, Dad?" Ma's hand

comes up like she's going to slap me, and I step back real quick because she's never laid a hand on me before. "Ralph Waldo Emerson Carpenito, you get this clear right now. Your father is not guilty, and we are going to stand behind him as a family, whether you like it or not. Get it?" I check them both out. Ma, her hand still raised, her eyes wide and angry. Dad, shoulders slumped, tears still running down his face, looking at me as if he doesn't know me. "You're not the one who has to go to school with these people," I say. For the first time, I realize my hands are shaking. "You're not the one who's going to be pulled into the guidance office to be questioned by that little--that shrimpy...." When was the last time I was speechless? I can't remember ever not being able to think of something to say. I struggle and finally point a finger at Dad. "You better not have done it, that's all I can say. Because if you did, then you're the sickest person I've ever met!" Before they can say anything else, I'm out of the kitchen, through the living room past Uncle Ed and Aunt Susan, and up the stairs. When I get into my room, I close the door and lock it. No one in this house is ever going to see me cry.

#### Chapter Five

I slam things around for a few minutes. I can't believe they want me to shut up and support them when I still don't know exactly what's happening. So, Dad's been picked up for fooling around with girls my age. My age! What's that all about? And why was his bail so much money? Someone must think he's guilty or they wouldn't ask for that much, would they? I pop my Nerf basketball through the hoop over my closet door a few times. Billi Siddons. I can't believe it. Then again, yes I can. Who wouldn't want a piece of her action? Half the guys in school drool every time she walks by. I know for a fact she's passed for eighteen a couple of times to get into clubs in Orlando. I even heard last year that she'd had dinner with Mr. Fitzgerald, the History teacher who only stayed about three months before shipping out to the Peace Corps. I also know her parents don't know any of this and would flip out if they knew. The other two girls they mentioned have always seemed pretty quiet to me. It's surprising that they'd even open up their mouths to make a complaint. Amy's a computer hacker and Joy plays trumpet in the school band. A real score there, Daddy-o. Even the freshmen won't go out with those two. But Billi.... The phone rings and I jump. It's quarter to three, Jake's usual afternoon call to catch up on what happened during the day. I don't want to answer it but when Ma calls up the stairs, I figure if I don't, I'll have to explain why and there's no way I want to have to talk to my parents again. Not for at least a hundred years. "Yo, whatchawant?" "I was gonna head over to the court and shoot some hoops, wanna come?" Jake still sounds like he's oblivious to everything that's going on. For some reason, that makes me feel better. And shooting hoops would be a great way to get out of the house. "Yeah, meet me there in five." I leave by the back stairway, thankful that we have a big old house with two stairways, and sneak out the porch door into the backyard. The last thing I hear before closing the screen door is my mother and my aunt yelling at each other.

When I get back a couple of hours later, it's dark and there aren't any lights on in the kitchen. I sneak through the back door and raid the fridge. Usually, Ma would have had supper on the table and I'd get the third degree about where I've been and why I didn't let anyone know I was going out, but no one's around. The house is as quiet as a cemetery. I check the hallway phone table for notes, but there aren't any. What's happened now? Did the cops come again and take everyone this time? I hike the stairs three at a time and settle in at the computer, answer e-mail from a couple of guys I met in a chat group when Dennis Rodman was online one time, then start surfing the Net. I've been on about an hour when I get the urge to see if there's anything on the news services about my dad. I do a search using my dad's name--both his real name and his nickname--and hold my breath, waiting for the results. Zero. Nada. Nothing. Great. Maybe I should check out what this pedophilia bit is all about. I plug in a search and lean back in my chair. Downstairs a door slams and I hear voices. I should go see who's home, but I don't have the energy to move from my desk. Besides, they'll probably want to know if I've done my homework or something and there's no way any of that stuff's going to get done tonight. When the results of my search come up on the screen, I lean back and let loose with a whistle. More than 4,000 hits. Crap, is everyone into this stuff? I start scrolling through the files and can't believe my eyes. There are places for guys who like little boys, guys who like girls under the age of ten, then the entries start getting more and more specific, like naming body parts, and I'm totally grossed out. If my father's one of these dudes, then I'm packing tonight. No way I'm staying to see what's happening. And no way I'm facing everyone at school. I'm up to the 350th hit when the door opens and before I can turn around, Ma's at my shoulder, staring at the screen. "What in the world ... ?" Her voice is soft, but her fingernails are digging into my shoulder. "R.W., if I knew this is what you were going to do with your computer, I would never have bought--" "Me? ME! I'm just trying to find out what my father's doing and you're pointing the finger at me? Look at this, Ma. This is sick stuff. Makes me want to barf. Besides, if anyone should know how much of this is on the Net, it should be you. You're on the screen all day long." "I'm running a computer business, not surfing the Net." "I just wanted to find out--" "Shut it down," she says. "We need to talk." I hit the exit key and turn around. Playing basketball always chills me out, so I'm a little cooler than when I left the house this afternoon, and a lot more curious. Maybe she's ready to level with me. She moves a bunch of my laundry off the bed and drops it on the floor with a grimace of distaste. A long time ago, we agreed that my room was my room and if I want to keep it a mess, I can, but she still can't stop wrinkling her nose every time she walks in. And she never knocks. "Ralph--excuse me, R.W.--you're my oldest and I think you have a right to know the details of what's going on and what we plan on doing." She's studying her fingernails like the history of the world is imprinted on them, and she wants to make sure she knows the date of every major event ever recorded. "But I'd rather you didn't get on the Net to find out about pedophilia." She looks up and raises her eyebrows at me. She wants a promise, so I nod. "I don't want to have to put a block on the computer," she adds. "Don't worry about it."

Once I give my mother a promise, I can't back down. She's got me. But I have to admit I'm still curious. "We've been talking, and I think we pretty much have our strategy for fighting this mess all figured out. You know, of course, that your father's not guilty?" I don't answer, and this time it's me studying my fingernails. "Look at me, R.W." I do. She's all mother now. There's no sign of hippie in her eyes or in the way she's holding herself. When she wants to get something done with us kids, she's stubborn, and I know no matter what I do, I won't be able to beat her. She's too good. Maybe she should've been the lawyer instead of Uncle Ed. Her mind certainly works like one, and she's got those seeing-right-through-you eyes. "Your father and I have talked about it, and he says he didn't do a thing inappropriate to those girls. I believe him, and I want you to, too." "It's not that I don't believe him, Ma. It's just that--" "I know it's going to be hard in school, but if you don't go, it's going to make it look worse. Understand what I mean?" I nod. "What's going to happen now?" "Well, there'll be more going back and forth to court. Dad already went before the judge this morning and found out what the charges are. It's pretty serious and may mean he'll lose a lot of customers. No matter what happens, though, I want us to stick together. Your father's a good man. I know you think he's a bit goofy sometimes..." I have to smile at this. Goofy isn't the word for Dad. "...but he loves you kids, and he'd never do anything to hurt any child. Deep in your heart, you have to know that." There's an awkward silence when she finishes, and I know if I tell her what I'm really thinking, she'll blow her stack. She has no idea what Billi looks like, no idea that she's hotter than most of the babes in the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, no idea that I thought of asking Billi to the homecoming dance this year. (But I'm dreaming--there's no way she'd go with me. I can't compete with those college guys she dates.) Ma has no clue that my whole year is going to be ruined by this. Whether Dad's guilty or not. And she doesn't seem to understand that the more I find out, the more pissed off I'm getting. "You know the news people have already gotten a hold of this story," she continues. "We've already gotten a lot of calls canceling lessons, and I've been dealing with some fallout myself. One of my biggest clients called this morning with a lame excuse for not following through on our latest contract. It might mean we have to tighten our belts for a while, and until your Uncle Ed can get Dad cleared, we're probably going to be dealing with a lot of snide remarks." "Are you sure no one's going to find out who the girls are?" "They're minors, hon. Their names aren't supposed to be in the paper." "But I've heard about other stories like this and the kids' names have been reported." "Well, if they were, it's because someone let loose with information that wasn't supposed to be public." "Crap, Ma ... Dad isn't going to be able to handle this. He'll probably make it even worse for himself." She stood and stalked over to me. For a minute, I thought she was going to raise her hand to me again, and that would have made the second time in my whole life, but she simply stopped and stared me down. "Ralph Waldo Emerson Carpenito, I'm counting on you. You're thirteen years old and you're not stupid. In fact, you act a lot older than your age, and your maturity is what I love about you. Now I'm going to rely on you to take on some more responsibilities. Your brother and sisters are going to be

looking up to you, and I need your help to take care of them. We need your help. Your father and I are going to have a lot to deal with, and we're not going to be able to do it alone. Are you going to be able to keep it all together?" Her voice has softened and her blue eyes aren't all business anymore. "Yeah, I guess so." She hugs me and walks out the door, but as she leaves, I'm not sure I told her the truth.

## Chapter Six

"Ma, I really don't feel good. Honest." It's the truth. When I woke up, my stomach was churning and making noises like it was going to explode. My body feels like I weigh three thousand pounds and feel like Jabba the Hutt. The breakfast on the table in front of me smells about as appealing as last week's garbage. "I don't feel good neither," Katie says. She puts a hand to her forehead and musters up her widest-eyed look--the little actress--but keeps spooning the cereal she's been eating into her mouth. Ma puts out both hands: one on Katie's forehead, the other on mine. To Katie, she says, "You're fine, honey. You go to school. Don't you have show-and-tell today?" Katie nods, chewing, milk dripping down the sides of her chin. "Take the letter you got from Lu FeiXia and show the kids what a Chinese stamp looks like, okay?" Katie's eyes light up and she slides off the chair. She runs out the door, yelling. "Can I read it to them, Mom?" "Sure." Ma looks at me. "And your forehead really is hot. Maybe it'd be a good idea for you to stay in bed. But no miraculous recoveries by the time Jakey gets home though, okay?" I don't think I'm going to recover by the turn of the century, but I agree anyway. The thought of doing anything other than sleeping doesn't appeal to me at all. She forces me to eat some dry toast, shuffles me off to bed, and for a while, all I can hear is Ginny, Katie, and Robert Frost arguing about where their books are and who's going to sit in the front seat on the way to school. Then all is quiet and I fall asleep, dreaming of meeting the Bulls during a playoff game and being invited to play on the team. Michael Jordan is taller than I thought and we're having a great discussion about who's better at free throws when I'm rudely awakened by shouts from downstairs. Ma and Dad are having a huge blowout. They must have forgotten I was home. "What do you mean there's no money in the savings account?" Ma always slams doors when she's mad and one bangs like it's punctuating her sentence on cue. "You knew I had to get some stock for the store!" Dad sounds like he's near the front door. Maybe he's thinking of leaving. I wouldn't blame him if he did. Ma's scary when she starts charging around like this. Usually they stage their fights when we're not around--probably because they know Katie would start crying, but every once in a while, I've gotten caught in the middle and it ain't a pretty sight. "What else did you need?" Ma's voice is sarcastic. Another door slams. She must be going in and out of the closets or something. There aren't that many doors downstairs. "What's that supposed to mean?" Silence. "We need money for Ed to start proceedings. He's not going to work for free, even if we're ex-family." Ma's voice is calmer but still strained. "Maybe we should've gotten someone else." "Right. Get someone else. Who the hell in Winter Park is going to defend you when they know you've been accused of molesting children?"

Especially if they know the girls! Don't you realize what we're facing? No one's going to talk to us anymore. We're going to be labeled white trash and thrown out of every club we fought to join. Your business will go down the tubes, and we'll be lucky if mine will even cover the mortgage payment. No, we have Ed's help, and Ed is the one you're going to have to count on." There's a thud and a muffled sound. She must be cleaning as she talks. She always does that when she gets mad, too. "I can't believe this," she says. "This is the kind of stuff that happens on the news." "I'm sorry, honey." Dad's voice is quieter and I can hear the creak of the sofa.

"Why? Why are you sorry? Did you do it?" "How can you even ask me that question?" "I have to know, Dusty. Tell me the truth. There's no one here but you and me." I want to yell downstairs that they forgot about me, and that I really don't want to be listening in on this conversation, that they can bring it outside or something if they want to keep on talking about it. Like what do they think they're doing, anyway? They're supposed to be getting it all together and taking care of us kids, instead they act like kids themselves half the time. I want to tell them that. I want to yell at both of them that if they expect me to keep up my end of the bargain and pretend like nothing's going on, then they have to, too. But at the same time, I want to ask the same question Ma just did. Did you do it, Dad? Did you? "I've already answered that question," Dad says. His voice is farther away. He must've gotten up from the couch. "Answer it again." "No, I didn't. I didn't do anything they said, and I can't believe no one believes me! Not even you! I thought you'd be behind me, that you would stick up for me, but can't I count on you?" He's crying again. My stomach clenches and I ball up the pillow, stuff it against my abdomen. My mother's sigh is so loud and long I can hear it all the way upstairs. "I believe you, Dusty. I do." I'm about to put the pillow over my head and try to get back to my Michael Jordan dream--I've had enough of this--when the doorbell rings. "God, who could that be?" Ma mutters tiredly. "Dusty, go look through the window and see." "Some black guy in a suit," Dad answers. A black guy in a suit? "He looks like he's checking out a tape recorder or something." "Not another reporter." Ma sounds like she's had enough reporters to last her the rest of her life. "Looks that way." "Tell him we're not interested." "Do you think it's wise I answer the door?" Dad's got a point. If it is a reporter, the first person he's going to want to see is Dad. Besides, the mood he's in, Dad's liable to tell him to take a flying leap and that wouldn't look very good on the 6 o'clock news. "I'll do it then." Ma opens the door and I hear some quiet talking. Reasonable-sounding voices. Hers and a deeper one. The reporter's. Finally, the door shuts. "Maybe we should think about talking to him some other time, Dusty," she says to my father. "Why?" "Because I have a funny feeling this is all going to get blown out of proportion if people don't find out your side of the story." Dad coughs. "Maybe we should talk to Ed first." "You're right." "Listen, honey, I don't want to fight." Dad sounds stronger now. He's probably hugging Ma now. They do a lot of that. Especially after a fight. "Neither do I," Ma answers, then their voices drift off toward the kitchen, but I'm wide awake now and my stomach's

hurting worse than it did before. No matter how I feel tomorrow, I'm going to school. It'll be easier to deal with my friends than to hear my parents trying to patch up the messiest situation I've ever seen.

## Chapter Seven

"I really think the Magic's going to win this time." Jake is sitting on one of the benches outside the cafeteria, eating his usual PB&J sandwich and going on and on about his predictions for the basketball season. Even though the Magic has had its problems since Shaquille O'Neal left, Jake is the most loyal fan they have. "Personally, I don't think they have a chance against the Lakers," I add. This is the most normal conversation I've had with anyone in the past five days. The sun feels good, everyone's playing Frisbee or eating, and I've got easy classes for the rest of the day. Things are almost normal. "C'mon, Anfernee Hardaway is back in shape, and he can kick butt with the rest of them." I laugh. "At least he can shoot free throws better than Shaq ever did." "He was the pits, wasn't he?" Jake laughs so hard I can see the wad of brown and purple and white in his mouth, and that makes me laugh even harder. It's almost as if I'm hysterical, like a person having a nervous breakdown, but I don't feel like I'm losing control. I feel good. And it feels good to feel good. My house has been quiet during the past couple of days, and I've felt like I have to tiptoe around Ma and Dad. Uncle Ed got an injunction or something like that to keep the media people away, which is kind of cool since they were ringing the bell and calling the house every two seconds at first. Now, the phone number's been changed and no one can come near the house. It seems to be making Ma feel better, but she's still withdrawn and busy taking care of legal things. Supper, which used to be spent at the table, has been "fend for yourself," as Ma calls it. She's usually on the phone, and Dad's been spending a lot of time at the music store, though from what he says, he's alone a lot. No one at school has said anything to my face, which has been a relief because I really don't want to talk, and I've gotten used to the stares. I know they're all talking behind my back. I've come up on groups and overheard some of their conversations, and Ginny, Robert Frost, and Katie have either lost friends or been teased by the rest of the kids in their classes. But I really haven't been. Maybe because someone's warned them to stay away from me. Maybe because they know I'm about to go off at any second. Maybe it's my attitude that keeps me a little safer than my sisters and brother. Whatever the case, I've been able to relax a little. Jake and I are still laughing when I hear crying that sounds familiar. I groan as Katie comes running toward me, her face dirty and streaked with tears. One of the straps of her uniform jumper is flapping off her shoulder and both her sneakers are untied. Naturally, I open my arms and she dives into them, making me "oof" when she hits my chest like a fullback. "What's wrong, Katie?" Jake has stopped laughing and obviously swallowed his wad of sandwich. "Hey, kiddo, did you fall down?" I bend and look directly into her eyes, but it isn't pain I see. She looks scared. "They won't ...they won't..." She's sobbing and can't catch her breath. There've been times when Katie gets to crying so hard, she actually loses it and passes out. Poor kid's got asthma and does a

lot of wheezing. "They won't what, honey? And who are you talking about? C'mon, slow down. Take a nice deep breath. That's it. Don't get yourself sick now. It isn't worth it. No matter who's bothering you. Now, you just tell me what happened and I'll take care of it, okay?" As I talk to her, I fix the strap of her jumper. "They ... won't ... leave ... m-m-me ... alone. They keep s-s-aying mean things about D-d-daddy." Her little shoulders are shaking and she's fighting for breath. I take a quick survey of the schoolyard, as if I'm going to be able to spot the kids who've made my baby sister cry, but all I see are groups who are paying attention to themselves rather than to us. It all looks pretty normal, even though I feel like I definitely understand why people go on rampages with guns. Isn't enough enough? Can't people see we're having a tough time with all of this, especially Katie? Do they have to make her feel guilty for something our father has been accused of? I want to rant and rave and swing my arms over my head, scream at the whole schoolyard that we're not freaks, tell everyone to just leave us alone! I remind myself Katie came to me for help and that I've got to be the adult here and focus on her. "Kids can be pretty mean, Katie-did." Boy, I haven't called her that in eons. "When I was your age, they used to make fun of me because Ma always dressed in jeans and flip-flops, but I never paid attention to them because I knew that they'd be paying attention to someone else the next day. You've got to remember that, too." "But they talk mean about Daddy," she insists. "Why are they doing that, R.W.? What do they mean when they call him 'Chester the Molester'?" Man, now my blood's really pumping, but what can I do about third-graders? It's not like I can beat them up or anything. I hug Katie again and say the things Ma would probably say if she were here. And for the thousandth time, I want to grab my father and slap him silly. "You just ignore them, okay?" I say when the bell rings. With a grubby hand, she wipes her eyes and I smooth her curly dark blonde hair--so like Dad's--back into place. She waits patiently while I tie her sneakers for her, then I give her a kiss--something I never do--and send her back to class. She walks away, dragging each foot as if it's made of lead. "Maybe you should go see her teacher," Jake says as we hike our backpacks on our shoulders and head for Algebra. I glance over at Katie, now getting in line to go back to her room, and say, "Nah, she'll be all right." And I don't believe a word I've said.

By the end of the week, things have gotten worse. Both Ginny and Robert Frost are being teased at school on a daily basis and the teachers call home every afternoon, Ma and Dad are constantly fighting, Aunt Susan and Uncle Ed are over the house every night huddled at the table with my parents, talking about what strategy to use, and Billi Siddons has decided to make snide comments every time she walks by me. Friday afternoon, I've had it. I want to take a train or plane and just escape, go somewhere no one knows me, where I don't have to take care of my little brother and sisters, where I can shoot some hoops without feeling like I've got to work off all this anger building up inside of me. I want to be far away from my parents--especially Dad, who seems like he can't get out of the wimpy state he's been in since this whole mess started. Inside, I feel like I'm

being ripped apart. Though I can't believe he did it, a small voice is constantly saying, "what if he did?" I can't take it anymore. When I get home from school, the house is quiet like a mausoleum. I holler, just to check, then sprint up the stairs and go into action. I load my duffel bag with some jeans and tees, empty my piggybank and total it up. Fifteen bucks and thirty-one cents. Not enough to get me out of Orlando. For a minute, I feel like I'm defeated, then I remember Ma always keeps some extra cash hidden from Dad in her underwear drawer. The reason I know is I walked in one day when she was getting out some money for Katie's birthday. She asked me not to say anything and I promised her I wouldn't. But she never asked me not to take any of it. Besides, I'll pay her back. Eventually. She'll understand. Checking in the hallway for sounds of people at home, I don't hear any and sneak into my parents' bedroom. Lately, Dad's been taking a lot of naps, so I don't push the door all the way open until I'm sure there's no one in the room. The four-poster bed is made up with that quilt Ma inherited from her great-grandmother and the shades are drawn, so everything's kind of dark. Ma always insists everything fades in the summer if we leave the window shades up and she's right. My Magic sweatshirt landed in a ball on my windowsill last year and a month later, the blue colors had faded almost to white. Now I close my shades, too, but I tell Ma it's because I'm keeping my room cool for the computer. She just smiles. She knows I can never admit she's right. The room smells like Ma does right after she gets out of the shower--kind of like peaches. For a second, I pause and sniff it in, thinking I'm going to miss her, but then I go into action. There's a pile of clean laundry on her bureau, so I hold it with one hand so it doesn't topple over while I open the top drawer. I can't really see much, but I can feel satins and lace as I fumble around for the envelope where I know Ma keeps the money. Bingo! It's in the back of the drawer, but it feels pretty thin. When I open it, my heart sinks. Only \$25? Man, I know she had more than this! But it's better than nothing. I take it and stuff it in my pocket. Should I leave a note? No. I'll just pay her back later. When I get a job. I shove the empty envelope back where I found it and my fingertips brush up against something else. Something leather and hard. I pull it out, figuring maybe she's hidden some money in this thing too. It's a book. I flip the pages and realize it's a journal, but I can't read much in this low light. Curiosity gets the best of me, so I take it over to the window and open the blinds enough to see my mother's neat, round handwriting. And the first thing I see is my name. The entry is dated September 15. Last week. A day or two after "it" happened. R.W. is going to have it the toughest of the kids. He's the one who's going to have to go to school day after day and see the girls who've accused Dusty. I don't know what to say to him, don't know what to do. God, that night it happened, when the front door closed behind Dusty and the cops, it seemed like it slammed with the finality of a tomb. I saw the kids look at me and I didn't know what to do. Still I think the cops have to be wrong. Someone is horribly wrong. Police departments make mistakes, don't they? People lie. Sometimes someone is in the wrong place at the wrong time, and maybe they're wearing the wrong hat or something stupid like that, and they get accused of a crime they didn't commit, put into jail, spend years away

from their family, and they're not even guilty. I'm holding that denim Orlando Magic baseball cap of Dusty's in my hands as I write this. It's been through the wash so much that it's bleached and the crown is fraying, little bits of white threads sticking up like hair on an old man's head. All of Dusty's baseball caps are this worn out. He never throws anything away, even his belief in people, and he still believes R.W. will come around, still believes his kids can't possibly think he would do something as awful as he's being accused of--

I can hear the front door open and my heart begins to pound. As fast as I can, I cross the room and shove the journal back in the drawer, then book it back to my own room, lie down on my stomach on my bed and take out my Algebra book. That's where Ma finds me when she opens the door, and I'm so glad she can't see my face because I'm sure it's as white as the sheet I'm laying on. "Where are the rest of the kids?" she says. "Don't know." "Is today Wednesday?" "Yup." "Ginny must be at basketball practice then, and Robert Frost is gone to after-school sports. Did Katie say Mrs. Memora was going to pick her up this afternoon?" "Think so." I keep my nose in my book and move the pencil like I'm doing something. If I look at her, she'll know. She always knows. The door closes and I let out a whoosh. Guess I won't be taking off today, but how am I going to get the money back into the envelope before Ma finds out?

## Chapter Eight

"So, Ralph, what's going on for Homecoming?" It's the first normal family dinner we've had in a while. Ginny and I have even been arguing, kicking each other under the table like we have since we were in grammar school, and Ma's question takes me totally by surprise. I'd hoped she'd forgotten about Homecoming. "Not much," I answer and grin at Ginny as I ready my spoon, full of mashed potatoes and raise my eyebrows at her as if I'm going to launch the white slop at any second (Ma has never mastered the art of making mashed potatoes like Grandma used to). "Put down the spoon, R.W. Have you asked anyone to go?" Even Dad's getting in on this conversation. "Nope. Don't want to." "It's because he's too ugly to get a date," Ginny adds in that sing-songy whine she has. Then she smiles sweetly at the rest of the family and continues eating her meatloaf as if everyone should agree with her. "That's mean, Virginia. Would you like it if he said something like that about you?" Ma says. "He wouldn't, because I'm much prettier than he is." In spite of trying to keep a straight face, Dad laughs. It's the first time I've heard that sound in a couple of weeks. "Seriously, R.W." Ma shoots Dad a warning look. "You're in high school now and your first homecoming dance is always the most fun. If you're worried about the money, I have a little saved..." Yeah, I think. Twenty-five dollars isn't going to get me very far. "...and you can wear that nice black suit and the white button collar shirt you wore to cousin Carol's wedding." The suit is pretty cool, but I'm really not interested in going to a dance where everyone's going to be paying attention to what I'm saying or doing. Ginny pipes up, "I heard the theme this year is going to be Mardi Gras, so everyone's making these really neat masks. Marlene

Louis's brother made a plaster cast of someone else's face and is decorating it with feathers and beads and sparkles and holograms." Masks? That's the first I've heard about that. Guess I haven't been paying too much attention. I start thinking about what I could get away with behind a mask, what I could hear, who I could talk to, and the thought becomes pretty appealing. "We went to Mardi Gras one year, remember Dusty?" Ma beams across the table at Dad and he smiles back as if they share some wonderful secret memory. I want to barf. He probably did something romantic. Ma's always telling us about how Dad made her fall in love with him because he was so sensitive and understanding. Gag me. "What was it like?" Robert Frost asks, his mouthful of mashed potatoes. "Like a huge Halloween party with everyone running around in costumes, lots of music, parades with floats and guys throwing out necklaces of colored beads into the crowds, dancing in the streets. Lots of fun." Dad sits back in his chair, staring at the wall, a little smile on his face. He's wearing an old "Star Trek" T-shirt and jeans, his hair is combed and his glasses clean and straight on his nose. He certainly doesn't look like a child molester. He looks like exactly what he is: an old rock 'n roll musician. I can remember a time when all my friends thought he was cool. So did I. A sudden lump forms in the base of my throat and I'm surprised at myself. Everyone's talking at once now. Katie wants to see pictures of how Ma and Dad dressed that night, Ginny wants to design a costume for herself and sneak into the dance, Robert Frost wants to know why they celebrate Mardi Gras--he's always asking intelligent questions. What a nerd. Ma reaches over and touches my arm. "Why don't you go?" she says. "Huh?" "To the dance. Go. Have a good time. You'll regret it if you don't." "Maybe I will," I say, but my reasons for wanting to go are totally different than what she thinks.

## Chapter Nine

"Ralph Emerson, sit up straight and brush that hair out of your eyes." Mr. Baker's voice slices into my daydream and brings me back into my nightmare--my life. I sit up straight in the chair, knocking my knees against the desktop, and everyone in the room snickers. We're in my Biology class and the smell of ether penetrates every inch of the room. When I leave there after fifth period to head for lunch, I always feel like I should strip my clothes off and whip them around my head for a while to get the pukey smell out of them. I wonder if Mr. Baker smells like that every night when he goes home. "Can you tell us the properties of iron?" he asks me, arms folded across his bulging chest. Someone once told me he used to play football for Harvard, but now he's just a fat, stinking man who seems to be on my case more than usual. I can't tell him the properties of anything right now. I haven't picked up a school book for more than a week. I shrug. Some of the girls in back giggle. I think I hear Sam Easterbrook and Pattie Veron. They hang around with Billi, but she's not in this class. I slink down in the seat. Baker glares at me for a minute, then walks away like he couldn't be bothered even trying to get an answer out of me. Any other time, he'd be on the desk, in my face until he got some kind of rise out of me. It's weird. Since Dad's arrest, people are either ignoring me or

they're grilling me with more questions than they have a right to. Sometimes it's easier when they just leave me alone. Thankfully, the bell rings and I'm let loose. We don't have any more classes today because it's Homecoming, and though I have plenty of company, I'm probably the happiest camper on school grounds. Everyone's racing to their locker to dump their stuff so we can get onto the football field for the beginning of the games. I don't know who started this but Homecoming's a big deal here. Each grade makes a float for the parade that is held right before the game (I have no idea what ours looks like this year--usually I get into it and go help build it. People think I'm pretty artistic. But this year, well, I just don't feel much like being around anyone) and the whole school gets into a talent contest which they put on in the auditorium right before they introduce the Homecoming king and queen and their court. The day is pretty busy: games on the football field first, then the talent show and the Homecoming court, then everyone goes to the game, then the parade, and finally, the big dance. Jake and I decided to get some of our friends together and go stag. Some of the girls are going as a group, too, so we figure if we want to dance, we'll be able to. I don't really care one way or the other. I just want to corner Billi somehow and find out what's really going on with Dad. Last night I stayed awake for a long time and thought about this whole mess, and I figure either my father's a real pervert--in which case, I'm out of here pretty soon--or Billi's lying. Naturally, I'm not going to find out by asking either one of them point blank, but if Billi doesn't know who I am, I might just be able to get at something. And wearing a mask for the Mardi Gras dance is the perfect cover. It's pretty warm out, so I take my time ambling across the field to where the ninth grade class is setting up for some kind of obstacle race. Naturally, the cheerleaders and jocks have taken over and are trying to get everyone into it. They don't need to do much. Just being let out of school in the middle of the day is enough to get these idiots excited. Everyone takes off running, but I'm not in the mood so I stand against the fence and watch the other ninth graders play some of the stupid games the teachers invented just to celebrate homecoming. It's hot out, and I'm sweating like a pig through my heavy jeans. At least we can wear T-shirts during homecoming week--school T-shirts that I wouldn't wear anywhere else, but they're better than shirts and ties. Each of the high school classes are in different places on the field, arranged in lines, and they're passing boiled eggs under their chins to the next person in line. The first group to pass the egg down the whole line without dropping it wins. Naturally, the girls are squealing, everyone's laughing, and the people who aren't playing are rooting for their team. My eyes are on Billi. She's in the shortest shorts she could find and has rolled up her T-shirt so her belly's showing. (Definitely not school policy, but no one seems to be paying attention.) Her blonde hair is flying all over the place as she jumps up and down, hopping around like one of those crazy dogs the stores always sell at Christmas but never seem to have at any other time. Her boobs are bouncing like water balloons. Up and down. Back and forth. I don't know whether I'm madly in love or whether she makes me sick, but I can't take my eyes off her. I wonder if she did this for Dad. I don't want to think about it. The juniors win the game and the groups break

up. I lose sight of Billi and start walking across the field, figuring I'll find Jake and be his partner for the three-legged race. What the hell. We talked about it this morning and figured out a strategy. Even practiced a little on the way to school, though I got to admit I felt like a real goober with our legs twisted around each other, our backpacks slapping against our backs. The reason he got me to agree is the prize is a gift certificate at Mac's Records for two new CDs. I've been wanting the new one by Brushfire, so it might be worth acting like a fool to get it. I'm halfway across the field when this tall black guy grabs my arm. He's older, and I don't know him. Though he's dressed like the teachers in beige slacks and a polo shirt, I know he's not one. This school is small enough that everyone knows everyone--that's one of the reasons I'd rather not be here. "You're Ralph Carpenito, right?" he asks and flashes me this I-know-you're-a-kid-but-I'm-cool-you-can-talk-to-me grin. He's tall and thin with long fingers, but his forearms and the muscles in his thighs are big like he works out. Makes him appear more impressive than I thought at first glance and now his fingers are really digging into my arm. I pull away. "Yeah, I'm R.W." I look past him for Jake. Who is this guy anyway and what does he want from me? Strangers aren't supposed to be on school grounds. It's amazing he got past Griffith, the school security guard, who usually has antennae for people who aren't where they belong (like kids skipping class). "So, do you think Lake Brown's going to win tonight?" the guy asks and glances toward the field casually. I grunt, wondering who he is and how he knows me, whether I should wave at one of the teachers, but my curiosity gets the best of me and I stay right where I am. "You're probably wondering about me, huh?" He smiles at me, and I notice a space between his two front teeth. I realize I've been staring and turn away. Jake's coming toward us from across the field, but it'll take a couple of minutes for him to get to us. "Yeah, I was. How do you know me?" "Your picture's been in the newspaper a lot lately." He narrows his eyes, then slips on a pair of wire-rimmed sunglasses. "I'm Steve Benedict. I write for The Sentinel." Of course, I think. Another nosy reporter. But I don't say anything, just walk towards Jake. Fast. Steve Benedict follows me. "You've had a little trouble in your family, huh? I thought you'd like to tell me your side of it." "No, I don't," I say. "I don't want to talk about it at all! In fact, why don't you and all the other damn reporters just leave me and my family alone?" My throat closes up, and I can feel my nails digging into my palms. Jake's about ten feet away now, and I can tell by his face that he knows something's going on. He does an about-face and slams into Mrs. Fullman, the guidance counselor. I can see them talking, then she looks over Jake's head at me, pushes Jake out of the way, and stalks over like she's the cavalry come to rescue me. "Excuse me, sir, who are you and what do you want?" she says in that no-nonsense voice of hers. For the first time, I'm glad to hear that tone--especially since it's directed toward someone else instead of me. Steve Benedict takes a couple of steps back, introduces himself, and mumbles an apology. He knows he's done wrong, and in a flash, he's gone before Mrs. Fullman can wave down Griffith. She watches him go and I can almost see the steam coming out of her ears. "What did he want, R.W.?" "Asked me a few questions about my family." I scuff the toe of

my sneaker in the dirt. Suddenly, the three-legged race is the most important thing in my life. I'm desperate to grab Jake and get on the field. "Thanks, Mrs. Fullman. Gotta go." But her arm goes over my shoulders. I stand there like a flamingo, one leg off the ground. "Just because your father did wrong doesn't mean you have to suffer, honey." "What?" "Children shouldn't be punished for their parents' actions." She's staring at the gate where Benedict went. I blink quickly, step back, and can't even think of what to say. In that split second, I'm more pissed off at Dad than I've ever been in my whole life. If it wasn't for him, none of this crap would be going on. Katie wouldn't be getting teased, Ginny wouldn't be crying herself to sleep at night, Robert Frost wouldn't be crawling into my bed, and I wouldn't have to put up with snoops like Steve Benedict. "Why don't you come into my office and we'll talk about this?" "I really don't want to..." "I know how much you have on your mind, R.W., and it might help to talk." She begins walking toward the office, her arm still heavy on my shoulders. "Listen, doesn't he have to go to court before you decide he's guilty?" I ask, surprised that the words have come out of my mouth. She stops. "Yes, yes, of course. I'm ... I'm sorry, hon. Innocent until proven guilty. You're absolutely right. But..." Her arm has fallen from my shoulder, and I take off toward Jake before she says anything else. "What was that all about?" he says as we run to where they're starting the three-legged race. "Nothing," I answer. But I don't believe that at all.

## Chapter Ten

"So, you gonna talk to me about it or what?" Jake is scuffing the sand with his toes as we walk along the edge of the lake toward home. We missed the bus because we were too busy screwing around with the leftover hardboiled eggs from the games. Hit a few houses, bombed a few cars, nothing serious, but we almost got caught so we hid out behind the gym for a while, just kind of laughing and goofing off. Now we have to walk the mile and a half home so our parents don't get all aggravated. And tonight's not the time we want to be late. In about two hours, we're supposed to be all decked out and ready to climb into the limo Jake's dad rented for the four of us guys. The Outsiders, we're calling ourselves. The Bombadiers, going to bomb the party just like we bombed the street with the eggs. "Talk about what?" I say and look over at Jake. His cheeks are red because somewhere along the line he lost his baseball hat. Or else Griffith took it from him. I swear the guy has a collection of at least a hundred hats in his office. That's one rule he gets off on enforcing. No hats. No low-slung pants. No name brand clothes. Man. "All this crap happening with your dad. Like, are you ever gonna talk about it or do I just get the news from the paper?" "Why don't you ask the guy who came for a visit today?" I say--the emphasis on "visit." "I don't want to talk to him. I want to talk to you." "Now you sound like my mother. 'I don't want to talk to him, Ralphie. I'm talking to you.'" I make my voice all high and sing-songy and look sideways at Jake, but he isn't laughing. "I thought we were like skin," he says, and I swear there's a pout on his face. "We are. We're close. Best friends." "Then why don't you let me in on what's going on." I punch him in the arm. "Quit it. Nothing's

going on that you don't know about." "Sure, I know you're planning something. I know you're pissed at the world lately. I know you can't stand being home. But you don't say nothing to me." "Anything, Jake." "Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zippo. Zero. You don't say nothing to me." "So, what am I, your wife?" He starts walking faster and little clouds of sand fly around his Nikes. The hum of cars going by on I-4 drowns out whatever he's saying, but I can tell by the way he's strutting that nothing I say now is going to make him chill. Whenever he gets this mad, it takes him a couple of days to come back to earth. I hang back a little. I don't need this right now. Crap. When will he stop acting like a middle-schooler? Then I think about tonight and how much I need Jake if I'm going to pull anything off and about this afternoon and how he made sure I didn't get needled by that newspaper guy and I realize I need Jake, no matter how goofy he is. He's my friend. The only friend I've got right now. "Wait up!" I yell, but he doesn't slow down. "Jakey, for God's sake, wait up!" He stops and turns around. His face is as red as the sun on a summer's night. "You don't know how much I stick up for you," he says, his finger pointing at me like some teacher. "I don't even know what's going on, and I'm sticking up for you. The kids are all making comments about your father and how he's diddling girls our age and how you're probably doing the same thing...." I catch him by his T-shirt and grab him close. "Who? Who's saying that? I'll beat the ever-living crap out of them!" "Already done," he says, real quiet. I back off and we stand about two feet apart. For the first time since I met him almost seven years ago, I feel like we don't know each other. He's not smiling at me. There's a shadow over his eyes. I don't know what to do. "What if he goes to jail, Jake? My mother will freak. We won't have a house. Ginny and Katie won't be able to go to school here." I throw my arms up and kind of stumble to the benches under the trees where the old ladies sit and feed the swans. I plop down onto one of the granite seats and stare out at the traffic on the other side of the lake. Without a word, Jake comes and sits next to me. For a long time, we don't say anything, then he turns to me and starts talking really slow and serious. "If he did it, maybe he needs to go to jail, R.W. If he didn't, there's got to be a way your Uncle Ed can get him out of it. In the meantime, you're losing it and that's not making anything better. You got to talk to me, man. Maybe I can't do anything about it, but if you don't talk about it to me, who can you talk to? You're about ready to just ... just burst into smithereens. I'm afraid I'm going to say something the wrong way and you'll just kind of go up in a puff of smoke like some genie or something." The picture is weird and I giggle a little, then he starts laughing a little, too, but it's not a big laugh, it's just kind of nervous. Then we both quiet down. "I don't know what to think anymore," I say. "I'm all confused. My dad's, well, you know how he is. He's weird sometimes. He makes comments he thinks are funny, but they're really kinda sick, and then I see him with my mom and I think there's no way he could do something like that, but then there are all these people around saying he did, and I just don't know anymore. I just don't know." "Well, we got to find out, right? We got to find out the truth." I nod. That's exactly what I want to do tonight. So, while we're sitting on that bench in the middle of Orlando watching stupid swans like

dumb old ladies, I tell him I need his help, and like the good friend he is, he sits and listens and agrees.

Jake and I don't talk much more about our friendship on the way home. Thank God. Instead, we talk about the costumes we picked up for the Mardi Gras homecoming dance. I got the idea from going to Universal Studios last year for their Mardi Gras Days and Nights. All I had to do was mention it to Ma, and out came the sewing machine, papier-mâché, my old dress suit, and voilà, I become a tuxedoed lion and Jake was my tiger friend. "You sure no one's going to know who we are?" Jake is leaning against the mailbox in front of his house. "How the hell will anyone recognize us with lion and tiger heads on? Damn, they can't even see our hands since Ma made us those mitts with the claws." "What about our voices?" "We'll disguise them. How hard can it be? Just talk like this." I lower my voice to almost a growl and do a John Wayne imitation. Jake rolls his eyes. "I just don't want to get caught." "Stop obsessing, Jakey. It'll be fine." As I finish walking the rest of the way home alone, I wonder if I'm right. I hope I'm right. My house is really quiet, no kids outside, except Ginny's pink and white Barbie bike is laying upside down in the grass as if someone's been fixing it, so I know they're around somewhere. Knowing Ginny and Katie, they're rummaging through Dad's toolbox because they've decided to adjust the pedals or change the gears or something brilliant like that. The last time they tried to "fix" something, I ended up with a hairdryer that started a mini-fire in the bathroom. Determined to get in the house without anyone seeing me, I slush through the grass that's almost up to my knees and kick Robert Frost's Big Wheels Truck out of the way so I can get through the front door. From the living room, I can hear Jerry Springer on the television and for just a second, I wonder who's on the show fighting today--maybe the family of a pedophile? I'm tempted to go in and see, but hear Dad's voice and a woman's. I peek around the corner. It's Aunt Susan. They haven't seen or heard me, so I watch them for a minute, their heads close together, Aunt Susan's hand on Dad's shoulder, her long pink fingernails tapping him lightly. She tilts her face and looks into his, smiles, then seems to sense me. Both of them glance my way. Aunt Susan jumps up from the couch. "Hey, my man!" Dad adjusts his wire-rimmed glasses and leans his chin against the back of the couch. He's trying too hard to be cheery. They must have been talking about his case again. Why is he always trying to pretend nothing happened? "Hey, sweetie pie." Aunt Susan comes toward me. She's dressed like she just came from work: red suit, white blouse, heels. Nothing like what Ma usually wears. I don't remember the last time I saw my mother in heels. I don't even know if she owns any. "Isn't tonight the big dance?" I nod and head towards the staircase. It's not something I want to discuss with Susan. "Whoa, whoa, wait a minute there, handsome." She catches my arm and her nails slightly dig into my skin. I come down the stairs a step and we're even, height-wise. "Your mom showed me your costume. I think it's really cool." "Thanks." "Listen, I want to give you some money for your date, okay? Buy a soda or something." "I don't have a date." She halts, just for a brief second, as she lets me go and heads for her purse. "No

date? Well, that's okay. I'll give you a couple of bucks anyway. Just for you." "You don't have to do that, Susan," Dad calls from the couch. "I know you guys don't have much coming in, and the boy needs to have a good time. Can't have a good time without a little pocket change." Her voice is muffled as she rummages through her bag. Dad gets up slowly. He's got on the same Grateful Dead T-shirt and torn jeans that he's worn for the past couple of days. I want to tell him to take a bath, but I'm afraid if I did, he'd cry or something stupid. He hasn't exactly been holding it together lately. If he goes into court looking like he does now, we'll lose for sure. Doesn't he know that? Doesn't he care? My aunt glances at my father, just a flicker of eyelashes and a small smile, as though she's suddenly shy. They look odd standing next to each other--her so professional and pulled--together; him, so sloppy and rumpled. I used to think Aunt Susan rolled out of bed looking like that, all crisp and processed, smelling like what I always imagined Cindy Crawford would. I used to love to run into my aunt's arms whenever she came over, traipsed behind her to the circus, the zoo, Disney World, but now I'm noticing little things about her, like the way she treats Ma like a second-class citizen, and the slight wrinkle she does with her nose if Ginny or Katie come in from playing, all dirty and sweaty, then run to her and hug her. She never pushes them away, but I think she might want to. You'd think that if two little girls could make Aunt Susan wrinkle her nose up, that Dad would really gross her out. But she keeps on smiling. Adults are weird. She reaches over to me and shoves a ten dollar bill in my shirt pocket. I thank her and sprint up the stairs. Dad's heavy footsteps follow me, and I hear Aunt Susan call out to the girls as she leaves. I think that maybe I can get into my room and close the door before Dad catches up to me, but he's quicker than I thought and makes it to the door shoulder-by-shoulder with me. "Don't worry. I won't tell you to clean your room the minute you open the door," Dad says. "I'm not your mother." I know that and I want to tell him I know that, but I don't say a word as I open the door, walk in, and throw my knapsack on the chair next to my computer. Dad stands in the doorway for a minute, as if trying to figure out what the best route into the room will be, and I pay no attention to him. Finally, he says, "Wow, how can you find anything?" and picks his way across the floor to my bed. But he doesn't touch anything, doesn't pick anything up and toss it into the laundry basket, like Ma would. I relax a little. He flips through the box of CDs on my bookshelf/headboard. "Hey, isn't this mine?" He shows me the Beatles' "Abbey Road" CD. My favorite. I nod. "I borrowed it. I'll give it back." "No, that's cool. I kinda like it that we have the same taste in music." He laces his fingers behind his head and leans back on the bed. "So tonight's the big dance. Everyone going?" Boy, I'm sick of hearing about this stupid dance, especially from adults. "Everyone who's a carbon-based life form." "Huh?" "Everyone who's alive and kicking, Dad. You know? Carbon-based life form?" He points at me and laughs. "That's a good one! What time's the limo picking you up?" "About an hour." "You've got just enough time to get dressed. Your mother's out getting film for the camera so she can add this glorious moment to the family photo albums." He laughs, but not in a mean way. He always comments on how cute he thinks Ma is when

she gets behind her Nikon. Says she always reminds him of Linda McCartney when she does that. And Ma always answers that if she was, she'd be married to her all-time heartthrob, Paul McCartney, then I chime in with, "Wow, then I'd be related to the Beatles!" It's an old family joke. Whoa. Hold on a minute! Pictures. I didn't think about pictures. I don't want anyone connecting me with this outfit or this night or anything. "Ma's got to promise she won't send these in to my teachers like she did last year with the Grand Canyon pictures." "What's the matter, Ralphie? Got a girlfriend you want to sneak up on?" Dad teases. Boy, if he knew how close he is! I've even got special shoes that will make me taller than I am. No one's going to know who Jake and I are tonight except us. I ignore him and rumble around in the closet for the box I put the lion costume in. It's big enough that I should find it right away, but when Ma finished making it, I shoved it away so the kids wouldn't get it. They were already crying that first night, saying they just wanted to try it on, that they'd take it right off, nothing would get torn or stained. Like I'd believe them. Right. I drag the cardboard box out, and open it. I hold up the lion's head by its mane, showing Dad, feeling an intense pride in my mother for creating this full-headed mask, painted in reds and browns and yellows and blacks, studded with rhinestones, a fake black mane trailing down the back. It is incredibly cool, better than "The Lion King" himself. Dad stares at it for a minute, murmuring, "Wow! Look at that. You're gonna win the prize for best costume tonight." Then he swings his legs off the bed and squats on the floor next to me. He smells a bit musty. Not a bad smell, just more noticeable, more pungent than his normal odor. While he examines the mask more closely, I stare at him. His blue eyes are a bit too bright, his hair's tangled and oily, a mousy brown color rather than the beige-ish it usually is. He looks tired and old. All of a sudden, I get this urge to hug him. Instead, I say, "Do you love Ma?" The lion's head drops out of his hands and almost hits the floor, but I grab it, hug it to my chest. "Of course, I do. What makes you say that?" "Just wondering." "Why?" He's staring right into my eyes, and I know he knows why, but he just wants to make me say it. "Nothing. Drop it. Forget I ever asked." "Ralphie, you know I love your mother, don't you?" He puts an awkward arm over my shoulder. The lion's head gets in the way and I have this fear that he's going to knock off all the spangles and tear the mane and I won't be able to wear it and maybe that's what he wants because he truly knows why I wanted this costume and what I'm going to do and.... "Yes, I know." I pull away. "But don't call me Ralphie, okay? I hate that name." "Your mother and I named you after a great writer, one of the best, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Don't you ever be ashamed of your name." I put a hand up. I've heard the story a million times. "R.W. is my name, too. Just a little different take on the original, but it's still my name. Okay?" He takes a deep breath and sits back on his haunches. "Okay, okay, okay. Listen...." He runs his hand through his hair and stares at the floor. "You can't understand how it feels to want to stay with someone for the rest of your life because you're not there yet, but I want to tell you. There's something that happens when you make a promise to be with someone forever, when you give someone all your life, all your hopes and dreams. You promise to stay with

that person until after always, and when I made that promise to your mother, I meant it." He raises his eyes, and I see dark circles underneath. "Understand?" I feel bad now that I didn't hug him back. Change of subject time. "So, didn't you meet Ma at one of these homecoming dances?" As always, that makes him smile. "I crashed the dance," he says, and I bet I could follow along with this story word for word, I've heard it so many times. So, I don't listen, I just kind of watch his face and get together the rest of the pieces of the costume while he talks. " ... and she would have much rather had one of the football players, I'm sure." He laughs and leans his head back, eyes closed. "She always thought I wanted one of the cheerleaders, too." I freeze. Billi's a cheerleader. Did you finally get yourself a cheerleader, Dad, just like Ma had always thought? He lowers his head and thoughtfully gazes my way. "You ever think about dating a cheerleader ... R.W.?" It's just a question, I tell myself. Something any dad--any other guy--would say, just in the course of conversation. But that's just not the way I feel. A while ago, that comment might have broken the ice between the two of us. Now, it's just created an iceberg.

## Chapter Eleven

I'm already hot when I get to the Radisson where the dance is held, but I haven't taken off the mask since Ma helped me put it on. She stood back, snapped a couple of shots, laughing and making comments like, "All the girls are going to be after you because you look just like the guy from 'Beauty and the Beast'" and "R.W., are you sure you're going to be able to see to walk?" Stumbling out of the limo, I grab Jake's arm. He's just as bad as I am with the tiger head he has on, but his eyeholes seem to be in the right place. Mine are spread a little too far apart so I can only see bits and pieces of things--like half a scene instead of the whole thing. I feel like a 90-year-old guy with glaucoma and a bad back. A clumsy 90-year-old guy. I can't take two graceful steps in these stack-heeled shoes. "Who the hell had this crazy idea?" I say to Jake as we walk into the hotel's lobby. Through my "eyes" (which are actually like net bubbles, making me feel like a fly behind a screen), I can see that everyone else has great costumes, too, but no one is completely anonymous like Jake and me. Cool. We can tell who they are, but they can't tell who we are. Perfect. The hotel lobby is lit by two giant chandeliers, and just for a moment, I fantasize swinging on them, then wonder what would happen if they fell. There are hundreds of people walking around. Some of them would get crushed, the blood soaking into their fancy clothes, then everyone else would run away screaming. "R.W., I need to take a leak." Jake's whispering in my ear and I wonder what we look like standing next to each other: the tiger with the wild orange stripes and matching high-top sneakers and the lion with the purple velvet cape over a black tux. Pretty wild. "So, go ahead. What do you want me to do: hold it for you?" "Well, kinda..." "Huh?" "I can't take this head off without help." "So, don't take it off. You don't need to take it off to take a leak, do you?" "Well, yeah..." "Oh, sheesh, I don't believe this." We walk towards the men's room together and bump into half a dozen people along the way. Maybe this isn't going to work after all. Maybe this was an absolutely horrible idea. Maybe I

should have stayed home. "You said we shouldn't let anyone else know who we are," Jake whispers. Two seniors turn around and stare at us, nodding. They think we're cool. I wish I could get a full view of what we look like, but from the stares we're getting, it must be good. "Okay, I know, but we can't hang with each other all night. Sooner or later, someone will figure it out." I'm hissing and hoping that no one can hear me. I can't see who might be beside or behind me and my cardboard head is bumping against Jake's. If I didn't have such big plans, this would be really funny, but I'm hot as hell and just want to get this show on the road. We're in the bathroom and no one else is around, so I help Jake take off his head. His hair is plastered to his forehead and his ears are sticking out. "Man, I don't know if I can do this all night. How do the guys at Disney walk around all day in those Mickey and Goofy costumes? Whatever they get paid isn't enough." Jake's face is redder than his hair. "Listen, all we need to do is find the girls, dance with them a little, talk to them and see if they'll say anything about my dad. That's not that difficult, is it? Doesn't take a rocket scientist to get a girl to say something about what's been all over the news." "Are you sure you want to do this, R.W.? What if Billi or Amy says something really nasty?" He doesn't say the rest, but I know what he's thinking. What if Dad really did do those girls? What if it's all true? "Well, if it's true, I really want to know. I'm sure as hell not finding out anything at home." "If you're sure..." Jake's putting the head back on as someone opens the door. He shoots me one last look. "I'm sure," I say, and I hold onto his tail as we both go out the door.

By the time they put the roast beef dinner on the tables in the main ballroom, everyone in the world has commented on our costumes. The thing I didn't think about when I put together this whole scheme was that I wouldn't be able to take the damn head off to eat. Jake looks at me and reaches for a fork with his tiger paw, but that isn't going to work. I hear him groan and feel like doing the same thing. So far, we're batting zero, I'm sweating bullets, my stomach's growling, and I'm ready to go home. The table where we're sitting is full of juniors who are watching the seniors and wishing they were seniors, too. No one has recognized us, but that isn't surprising. I don't know any of them either. Billi and a couple of the other cheerleaders are sitting at the table next to us. All of them have dates, but everyone's been talking really loud and I've heard them saying they're going to dance with anyone who asks, that they're here to party. Good. That way I have no jealous boyfriends to deal with when I ask her to dance. I just hope I can do it without knocking her down. I need to remind Ma that my eyes aren't a foot apart the next time I ask her to make a costume for me. Most of the girls have spangled masks on. Some are decorated with feathers, some with lace, but all of them match their dresses as if they all went to the same place to get them. Billi's in all purple and red. The dress she's wearing has skinny straps and is made of a shiny material that seems to change colors when she moves. Her mask is a real Mardi Gras special, the kind you hold on a stick so that you can pull it away from your face every once in a while. It's a good thing she didn't go all out the way Jake and I did or I never

would have been able to find her. Everyone's throwing beads at each other, and the ballroom is full of people wearing huge papier-mâché heads, wild dresses, high, feathered hats, and glimmery dresses. One guy is even bopping around on stilts--he's a basketball player who everyone knows, so there's no mystery there. It's pretty easy to figure out who almost everyone is. There are a couple of really great costumes, but the biggest buzz in the place is about who we are. Maybe we should have toned it down a bit. Nah. I shove some of the roast beef into one of the rolls and stick it in my pocket, then hit Jake in the arm. "You're on your own, buddy boy," I say as I head for the downstairs men's room to take a couple of bits of the squished sandwich in my pocket. On the way back up the stairs, I see a small group of girls coming down, but I can't see all of them at once. I angle my head a couple of different ways because their voices sound familiar, but I still can't see them until I'm on top of them. It's Billi and her friends. "Wow, that outfit is sooo cool," Jen Simone says. "Where did you get it?" Okay, I tell myself, it's showtime. I cough a little and lower my voice, "But, my dear, it's not a costume," bend forward in a bow and grab her hand in my paw. I bring it to the mask, pretend to kiss it, then straighten up. They're all giggling and trying to see into the eyes of the mask, but I keep my head bent so they can't see inside. The worst part is that all I can see is their feet. They giggle a lot then continue down the stairs. I can hear one of them saying, "Did you ever watch the reruns of that TV show? The Beast was so sexy--much better than the Disney version." Score one for R.W. I want to tell Jake about what just happened, but when I get back to the ballroom, the music has started playing. I find a piece of wall I can lean up against and wait there for Billi to come back. As soon as she does, I'm going to dance with her. For a second, I freeze and realize this will be my very first time dancing with a girl I'm not related to. I've danced with my sisters and Ma, of course, and some cousins at weddings, but I've never danced at a dance. Gone to them, yes. Danced, no. What do I do if she says no? Something deep inside my head tells me not to worry. She won't say no. All of the people at her table already said they were going to dance with anybody and everybody. Besides, who wouldn't want to dance with the sexy, irresistible Beast? I sound a lot more confident in my head than I feel. I probably smell like I just played a two hour game of one-on-one. I argue with myself: why did I come to this thing dressed this way if I wasn't going to go through with my plan? Okay, I tell myself. Here I go, and I start walking across the floor. If anyone gets in my way, I growl and pull myself up tall and miraculously, they move. I'm feeling cool. Way cool. When I get in front of Billi, it wouldn't have mattered if she was Cindy Crawford. I'd ask anyone to dance. And the best part is it's a slow song. When she steps into my arms and says something cute about always loving the story of "Beauty and the Beast," but never believing she'd actually meet him, I get all tongue-tied and stupid. Good thing I can just nod my head, because for a long time, that's all I do. Then someone taps her on the shoulder and she moves away with one of the football players who's dressed as an evil-looking clown. It's one of the Spice Girls' latest, so they're dancing fast. I practically crawl away and find the place against the wall where I was leaning before. My face is dripping inside the

mask, and I'm just about ready to make for the men's room so I can air out for a minute, when Jake slides in next to me and whispers in my ear, "Amy wants my e-mail address." "Did she say anything about what's been going on?" "No, but I could tell she wanted to. We got started talking about how everyone's all dressed up and she started saying she wished she could wear a mask all the time. I asked her why and she said 'so no one would know who I am.' I pushed a little harder and she was starting to talk about her parents being upset about what was going on but then the song ended.... So, what do you think I should do?" "Give it to her, Jakey. This is the break I wanted. Maybe she'll tell us something!" I can see right into his mask. For some strange reason, he looks scared. "You okay?" I ask. He nods, but I know he's not, and suddenly all the people in all the masks and costumes look like something out of a horror movie.

## Chapter Twelve

I've never done anything more difficult than to try and pretend I'm not me. Standing in front of Billi, I see her out of one small section of the mask's net eyes. It feels like I'm spying on her from around the corner and down the street. She's got her head tilted like she thinks she knows who I am but she's not sure. My armpits get as slick as they do in the middle of July when Ma's got me out in the backyard pulling weeds. What in hell ever made me think I could pull this off? Billi knows who I am. I know it, and she's going to say something really loud, like why do I have to hide like this, and then everyone's going to turn around, she'll start laughing and calling me Ralph the Dork or something else that's equally as stupid, and then everyone will know. And no one will ever let me forget how idiotic I was to think I could actually hide from being me. Billi moves closer and a long whitish-yellow strand of hair falls over her shoulder. I stare at it, praying with every red blood corpuscle in my body that whatever she says, she'll say quietly. "I love this song!" She's practically kneeling, staring up into my mask. "Let's dance, Mr. Lion King." She grabs both of my paws in her hands, and we stumble into the crowd already on the dance floor. Thank God the music's loud and we don't have to talk. If I have to say a word right now, my voice will probably squeak like the door on the '65 Dodge Dart that Dad kept saying he was going to restore. Thinking of Dad makes me remember why I'm going through all this crap to begin with and when the song ends, I bow. Silently. Quite eloquently, I would say. Sort of like Zorro. "Drink?" She has to scream in my earhole because the music starts right up again. An oldie by "Nine Inch Nails." I nod and follow her to the nearest bar. She orders Cokes, turns, then giggles and goes right back to the bar. When she turns around again, there's a huge straw sticking out of the Coke she hands to me--a straw twice as long as the norm. It just fits through the mouth hole in the middle of my mane, and I suck that cold soda in like I'll die if I don't slurp up every last drop with that first swallow. We stand there, against the side wall of the hall near the double-door entrance, watching the jumble of dancers color the middle of the banquet hall like a living kaleidoscope. Most of the lights around the tables are off. It seems everyone but us is dancing. Billi nudges my arm, and I turn my head as though I'm paying attention--being careful not to let her

look into my eyes. "So, aren't you going to tell me who you are?" I bow deeply again, swinging my arm forward and swishing my cape, then cough so my voice will go deep. "Never!" I say, coming off like a cross between Darth Vader and a Klingon. "Give me a clue." She whines and squinches up her blue eyes and gives me one of those extra-wide, extra-bright cheerleader smiles. Man, I want to tell her everything at that moment. She barely notices me in school--or any of the other guys for that matter--and I've never seen her like this. She looks like one of the surfers on "Bay Watch" and I'm drooling big time. I'll confess to starting the Serbian War--to changing everyone's lab grade on the school computer--to planning the cover-up for the JFK assassination. Anything. Everything! But, I can't. That face is the one my Dad kissed. The thought makes me take a step backward, and I find myself mumbling about having to go to work tomorrow. "Ohhh ... you work?" Whoops, that wasn't such a good idea ... "So, you must be a junior or senior, right?" I hesitate only a little before I nod. What the hell. Might as well go all the way. If she doesn't know me, she might as well make up her own little story about me. That way I'll be totally innocent of lying--and I won't have to deny it all later. Her face brightens. I've scored a point with her. One for my side. "Early morning tomorrow," I mumble. "Gotta go. Maybe I'll talk to you again sometime." I turn and start to walk away, hoping I'm right that her curiosity got her going. She catches the sleeve of my velvet jacket and strokes it just enough to give me gooseflesh. "You've got to give me your phone number or your e-mail or something," she says. Jackpot! I can't believe it. I'm shaking so hard, I'm sure she can hear my bones rattling. From somewhere, she produces a pen and a piece of paper. I start to take off my right paw to take the pen, then think against it. In my deepest voice, I dictate my e-mail address. It's all numbers, so no one ever remembers it--and it's really anonymous. Perfect for this kind of "espionage." She finishes writing her own down for me (a big smiley face over the "i's" in Billi, then I float out of that banquet hall as if I'm taking angel lessons--and while I'm walking downstairs, I check my watch and wonder what I'm going to do with myself for the next hour while I wait for Jakey and the limo that will take us home.

\* \* \* I'm still floating an hour and a half later when I walk into the house and no lights. I breathe a sigh of relief about not having to tell Ma about the whole night, though I'm sure she's going to demand it sooner or later, but then Ma's voice calls from the top of the stairs. I can see her standing there in her old sweats, shadowed from the light coming from her room. Now I can hear the TV and know that she and Dad just went upstairs to "wind down" as they always say. I think it's to hide from us kids, personally. "Come up and tell us how it was," she says, and I'm really tempted to say that I don't feel like being anywhere near Dad after the fight we had before the dance, that he makes me sick and that I'd like to divorce him right now, but I know how upset she's been and I can't do it. She must have sensed me hesitating, because she comes down a couple of stairs. I can see her face. Her long blonde hair falls forward as she looks at me. I don't remember another time in my life when I've loved her more than right now. I want desperately to put my arms around her neck and cry

into her Ivory Soap smelling shoulder. "You probably need some help getting out of that getup, anyway," she says. "I was thinking about you all night and wondering whether you'd give up eventually and take the head off. Did you?" She's turned around now and I follow her bare feet up the stairs. "Nope. No one even guessed who I was." She laughs. "That's so cool. I've always wanted to slip into a place and slink around all night in a disguise. Must've been fun." The light from her bedroom widens as she opens the door. Dad is sprawled across the bed, his feet at the pillow end, his elbows on the end, remote in his right hand, his left hand in his mess of hair, looking like he does every other night of the week. How does he do that? How can he lie there watching Leno like nothing is wrong with the world? "Here, turn around and I'll unhook the head from the cape so we can get it off. I'm surprised you were able to make it all the way upstairs without tripping." "Got used to it after a while," I mumble, head down while she disconnects the mask. She helps me take off the cape, then folds it and puts it on the bed, chattering all the while. It seems like she's trying to pretend there's nothing wrong, too. Don't do it just for me, Ma, I want to say. I want to tell her I'm on the case, I'm going to find out exactly what went down, but if I do, I'm sure she'll try to talk me out of it or warn me that it's not cool for "our side" to fraternize with the "other side." I know enough about law to know what I'm doing isn't right, but I don't want to stop. I don't know if it's because I really want to find out or because I want to know if I can get Billi to pay attention to me. Or do I really want to know about Dad--whether he's lying to me or not? Ma spins me around to face her and gives me a big hug. It feels good and I let her get as mushy as she wants. I want to turn and say to Dad, "If you hurt her, I'll get you. I promise I will." But I'm a geek. Instead, I yawn and back out of the room. "I'll tell you everything tomorrow, okay, Ma? I'm whipped. Been a long day." She smiles, one of those wistful "my-kid-is-growing-up" smiles, and I want to give her another hug, to tell her I love her, but again, I chicken out and within a few seconds, I'm in my own room, leaning against the closed door. The first thing I do is get on the computer and surf a little, trying to get up the guts to e-mail Billi. Is it too soon after the dance? Will I seem like a real dork? I don't want to turn her off right away. I want her to see me as I was tonight--a junior or senior, not a geeky freshman. If I get on now, I'll probably blow out by seeming too anxious. Yeah, that's right. I'll wait a day or so before sending her an e-mail. Much cooler that way. But the computer's in front of me and I can't resist getting into some games for a while. When I finally can't keep my eyes open anymore, I shut it down (Ma's a real believer in not keeping computers on when we have such unpredictable weather. She's lost four or five hard drives from lightning and power surges.) and realize the house is quiet. The only person up is me. I shut off my light and in the blackness, feel around for the cutoffs I usually wear to bed. Where the hell are they? I sweep around stupidly, poking into places on the bureau I'm sure I haven't been in months. Why don't I just put the light on, I think, and my hand hits some paper. I pull it out from under the pile of clothes where I've been searching and turn on the light. It's money I'm holding. The money I took from Ma's room a couple of weeks ago. Crap! I've been meaning to put

it back, but there's never been a chance. Except now. Everyone's asleep. It'd be super easy to go into Ma's room right now and slip the money back where it belongs. Ma and Dad could sleep through a parade--they have good practice with the four of us kids every Saturday morning. When I open my door, I stand in the hallway for a few seconds. Listening. Nothing. Great. I feel like a cat burglar sneaking across the hall and hold my breath as I turn their doorknob. The lights are out and someone's snoring softly. If I just take five quiet steps and slide the drawer open, I'm home free. The only thing between me and the bureau is the open closet door. Piece of cake. I'm halfway across the room when Ma stirs and mumbles something. I hear rustling sheets and freeze. She turns over toward Dad. I duck into the closet and pull the door toward me. She mumbles something else and I try not to breathe so I can hear what she's saying. The sheets move again. "Dusty, honey?" she whispers. "Hey, babe, how's about a midnight ramble?" What's a midnight ramble? Could she have said something else? Did I hear right? She's probably dreaming. The sheets rustle again. "C'mon, sweetie. We haven't made love in weeks. Don't you want to?" Ma's voice is clearer now. More awake. "I can't." Dad answers as distinctly as if he'd been thinking about it for a while. Now I realize what they're talking about and almost slap myself in the head. Man, I don't want to be in the closet with my folks fooling around. "You've got to try," Ma says to Dad. "I don't want to. You have to understand, Lynda." Dad never calls Ma "Lynda" unless he's pissed at her. What's this all about? Ma huffs really loud and rolls over so hard the bed squeaks. For a long time, I can hear muffled crying. My throat closes up. I want to scream out, "What's wrong with you, Dad? When did you get so sick? And why do you have to take it out on Ma?" But if Ma finds out I took that money from her bureau, I'm toast. Ma cries for a long, long time, and I sit in the closet, frozen, trying not to move so she won't hear me. When her breathing finally gets kind of regular and I hear Dad snoring, I start unwinding my legs and arms from the uncomfortable position I've been in. I take one step at a time, listening for any changes in their breathing patterns, and finally inch the drawer open and slide in the money. For a second, I catch a glimpse of Ma's sleeping face in the moonlight coming in the top of the window. She looks more sad than I've ever seen her. I promise myself right then and there that I'll find out everything before anyone else does, before she finds out about all of it in the paper. We're in this together, my mother and I, I think. And I have to help her be strong.

### Chapter Thirteen

I lie in bed for a long time, just thinking. When I was nine, we went to Pennsylvania, drove up in a rented station wagon Dad thought was "the bomb." The only radio station that we could get in the middle of the Poconos was one that played country love songs. Dad was driving, his hand draped over the wheel, just kind of guiding the car along. Every once in a while, he'd look at Ma, reach over and play with a piece of her hair, exchange a sly smile I didn't understand. I remember feeling at that very moment that I wanted to find a girl as special as Ma, someone who would make me feel like Dad looked right then, right there.

I open my eyes wide and stare at the ceiling. I see Billi's hair falling over her shoulder; then in another flash, I see Ma bending over the stairs tonight, her hair falling over her shoulder, almost the same exact color as Billi's and the thought that Dad touched both of their hair makes me so pissed off, I hit the bed with my fist. Over and over and over. Until I feel okay again. But I'll never be okay again. Never. \* \* \* "Talk a little louder, Jakey. They can't hear you on Mars." The cafeteria's packed because it's raining outside, so Jake and I are squished against one of the windows at a table with the junior high kids. We're trying to have a private conversations about the girls, but it's impossible to have anything be private in this noise. That's why Jake is yelling, but it's not the yelling that bothers me. It's what he just said. "I said, I think Amy's trying to tell me something about what happened with your dad." Jake takes a huge mouthful of the sandwich he's made of baked macaroni wrapped in white bread. Sometimes he's really weird. "That's what I want." "But I dummo ... oof I want to he-it." He's talking between bites and if I wasn't concentrating on him so hard, I wouldn't understand a word he's saying. "Like you have virgin ears." I laugh, but I don't know if I want to hear what my father's done either. He makes me want to barf. Time to change the subject. "Has she asked who you are?" Jake swallows half his carton of milk before he answers. "Yup. Every time she sends me an e-mail, she tells me I'm her mystery man." He grins. Part of his sandwich is caught in his teeth. I decide not to tell him. "Last night, she asked me what my favorite music was, and we both agreed to write our lists offline and to post them at exactly the same time to see whether they matched. It was so cool! We hit on about five different groups. Man, she even likes Jimi Hendrix! I thought you and me were the only people at school who know about him. Never thought Amy would!" He looks out over the crowded tables as if trying to see where she's sitting. I know exactly where she and Billi are. They're near the middle aisle, sitting with a bunch of kids from Biology. The bell rings, and I throw all my stuff on my tray, but before we leave, I grab Jakey's arm. "Just be cool, Jakey, okay? Don't let on too much. Remember, she's not supposed to know what this is all about." "Don't worry, man, don't worry." \* \* \* I've been on the computer for about five hours. Every few minutes, my horn beeps to tell me I have new mail. I haven't gotten this much e-mail since I was in that chat room talking about meteors after that movie "Armageddon" came out. Every time Billi e-mails me, I e-mail Jakey, and every time Amy e-mails him, he e-mails me. It's nonstop. Super cool. Billi's convinced I'm a football player she's had a crush on, and Amy just wants to tell Jakey all about her family problems. Neither one of the girls has mentioned my father or the court case, though both of them have said things about how stressed out they've been lately. Most everybody at school complains that at this time of year with mid-terms and all you have no time for anything, so it's nothing new, but I'm keeping my ears open so that I can chase down every little clue. I've been reading up on Sherlock Holmes since he was the greatest detective that ever lived (in someone's imagination). I want to be able to pick up on little signals like he does, put everything together and be able to point my finger at the guilty party, at the best moment, the time when everyone's paying attention so they

can all be shocked and surprised and think I must be a genius to have figured it all out. Unfortunately, I keep getting the feeling there's not much to figure out. My father's guilty of liking little girls and that's it. He's going to go to jail, we're going to go on welfare, Ma's going to get depressed and never be the same again, and Aunt Susan will probably move in and take over. But I don't want that! I really don't. I want everything back the way it used to be. That's not going to happen, though, so I've made up my mind that the only thing I want is the truth. All the details. No matter how dirty and disgusting they might be. I need to know so that I can get on with everything. My life. Ha. If I have one! So, Jakey finally gives up on the e-mail and calls me on the phone when his sister wants to use the computer. "Meet me at the lake. I can't say this stuff over the phone. Besides, my mother thinks it's weird we haven't been going out." Ten minutes later, we're sitting on the grass, watching some water skier who can't stay up on the skis long enough to go around the whole lake. "So, yesterday, when Amy said that stuff about her father being on her case all the time?" Jake pokes me. I nod. "Well, she kept on going on and on about what a jerk he was, so I asked some questions. Made myself sound really old, you know? Even looked up some words in the dictionary. And she came back with that there was trouble she couldn't talk about." He sits back, real proud of himself, raises his eyebrows like I should be proud of him, too. "So, what did she say?" "Nothing, yet, but she's gonna, don't you think?" "As long as you don't come out and say something stupid like, hey did you fool around with my friend's father." I'm trying not to get too excited about what Amy's said because Billi hasn't let on anything, really, and I'm kind of jealous that Jakey's doing a better job at this detective stuff than I am, and he hasn't even studied Sherlock Holmes. "You know, R.W., sometimes you really piss me off. Here I am trying to help you and you're dissing me." "I'm not dissing you. I just want you to make sure you watch what you say. Just be cool. Don't let it all out in one e-mail. Get her to tell you, not you tell her. We won't be able to use that kind of evidence in court." He laughs so hard, his face is almost purple and his freckles seem to bounce off his skin. When he's finished, I sit there and wait for him. It doesn't make any sense to be pissed off at Jake. If I can't talk to him, there's no one else. As we walk home, he rattles on and on about how he thinks Amy and he could really be okay together if she didn't think he was someone else, says he wasn't making up all the stuff he told her about himself and she still seems to like him. "When are we going to tell them who we really are? She's asking me all kinds of questions and threatening not to e-mail anymore. I gotta know, R.W. I really like her, you know?" "Figures you'd get hung up on the suspect," I say. He laughs again. "You've been watching too many legal beagle shows. Chill a little." "I can't." Jakey stops and stares at me. "You're not any fun anymore." I nod and keep walking. "You really need to chill!" He yells from behind. I hear him scuffling but he's not rushing to catch up. I slow down. He comes up alongside me. My eyes forward, I say, "Help me out on this one for a little longer, then you can say whatever you want, okay?" "How long?" I think a minute. "Until the hearing." "When's that?" "A week from tomorrow." We walk in silence for a couple of minutes, then Jake says, "Okay."

## Chapter Fourteen

I'm typing as fast as I can with two fingers. Jake just e-mailed me a note where he almost says something about the case. I'm reminding him that the girls' names haven't been made public, so he can't let on he knows anything. Everyone knows about me and Dad, but no one knows about who the girls are except my family. Shut up, man. What are you doing? Don't be stupid. We've been doing great for the past couple of days, don't blow it now! A couple of minutes later, he e-mails me back. What do you think I am? Stoopid??? She just told me things with your father aren't what they look like. Don't you think that was worth taking a chance? I sit and stare at the screen. What next? Okay, just remember to let her take the lead. Let her tell YOU! He writes back: Trust me, okay? That's hard to do right now. I wait. And wait. Billi's not online, so I play "Dragonslayer" for a while, then, finally, the beep that I have new mail. Jake's note is simple: Who's Sherlock Homes now? I shake my head. The least thing you could do is spell the guy's name right, Jakey. He's forwarded an attachment to me. I open it and realize it's Amy's letter to him. Most of it is girl stuff about school and what she's going to wear to the Christmas dance that's a month and a half away, then I notice something in bold. I get more interested. ... it's too bad L that things aren't going great around here. Most of it's all about stuff I can't say, but you'd better know this--things with R.W. Carpenito's dad aren't all they seem ... Whoa! Okay, Jakey boy, get the info! My two fingers fly over the keyboard, passing my message on to him. Fifteen minutes later, I have the answer, but it's a frustrating one. She freaked, Jake writes. Didn't want to say anything about anything. I finally figured it would probably be a good idea not to push her. So I started talking about other crap, then she says she has to go off line. Sorry, R.W. Doesn't make sense to sit here anymore, so I tell Jake to meet me at the court in half an hour. I have a project due for History, and Ma checks my homework--I have no excuse to not work on it for a little while. But what I really want to do is go downstairs and ask Dad why he hasn't opened the music store for almost a week. And to scream at him for lying to Ma and me and everyone else he's dragged into this mess. \* \* \* It's raining. Has been for three days. I've been online non-stop, and Ma's getting on my case about it, tells me I should be paying the phone bill, not her. Finally, I guess the rain got to her, too, because she took the girls and went to see a movie. Dad's downstairs, lying on the couch, as usual, watching old videos. He's grown a beard now and never gets out of his sweats. Ma says he's depressed. Personally, I think we're seeing his true colors. Whatever. Billi's been e-mailing me for the past couple of days. I never realized how smart she is, and I don't think she's putting it on because she thinks I'm older. She really knows her stuff, gets great grades, and has been all over the world. Some of the places she's been to I can't even find on the map! Her father's a vice president of Smithson Corp. They make some kind of chemicals. And her mom's a partner with Kraus, Holt and Lang in Orlando. She had a murder trial last year. I've been finding out a lot about it through Billi. Really cool stuff. I have a picture of her that I cut out of last year's yearbook on the corner of my computer. The more I look at

her, the more I realize she really is naturally pretty. I don't see a snout that I don't want to talk to anymore. I don't see a girl who looks down her nose at me. I see someone who has a really straight-forward attitude about life. She lays her cards on the table with me. We've even had a few disagreements, but she doesn't hold them against me. Truth is, beyond lying a bit about my age and who I am and where I've been in the world, I haven't made up too much about myself. She knows I love basketball, who my favorite players are, that I play all the time, that my favorite groups are older than my parents, that I want to live in New York, go to school at Harvard (fat chance!), and be a hotshot lawyer like her mother. And I know Billi loves to play the guitar, definitely doesn't want to cheerlead for the rest of her life, wants to go to UCLA and study marine biology and spend the rest of her life watching whales. I think that's pretty neat, and I know that sooner or later I'm going to have to tell her who I am. That thought brings me down big time. A beep brings me back to the screen and Billi's latest message. If I don't get out of this house soon, I'm gonna scream! Why don't you meet me at the mall and we can check out the new stuff at Jimmy Buffett's store? Ugh. First of all, I hate shopping. Secondly, I can't meet her. I cook up some crap about having homework I need to attack, but she's having none of it. Keeps telling me if I can stay online, then I've already finished my homework or I'm not going to anyway, so why not come? What's the matter that you have to get out so bad? The screen blinks. I wait. Her reply comes back in seconds. My parents want to discuss the case with me. Don't wanna go there. Good thing she can't see my face. What case? I'm not supposed to talk about it. I take a deep breath, then write, come on, what's going on, how come you can't talk about it, what's this all about, you can talk to me, it's okay, whatever we've said between us stays between us. And I wait. Sweat rolling from my hairline to my chin. The stuff about Mr. Carpenito. You know--the music teacher? My hands start shaking. Do I really want this? Here it is, dumped in my lap. Do I really want to know the details? I talk to myself, tell myself maybe it's not necessary, maybe it'll all blow over, and maybe someday I can walk right up to Billi, tell her who I really am, but that lasts about two seconds. I have no choice. I have to go all the way. I type: Yeah, I know about Mr. Carpenito, but how are you involved with that? The pause is a long one. I think she's probably gone, she's probably not going to answer, and am ready to shut down my computer, give up, when her message appears. I was one of the girls who accused him, and now I'm afraid I might have done the wrong thing.

## Chapter Fifteen

I sit and stare at the computer screen for a little while. Downstairs, the door slams, and it's obvious Ma and the brats are home. She'll be cooking supper soon. A perfect excuse for me to get off. But do I want to? Tentatively, I type in what I think is something a senior would say. Don't worry about it. It's done now. Besides, what could you have possibly done to the guy? People like that shouldn't get away with abuse. Ma's coming upstairs. I don't wait for Billi's reply, but quickly switch to the Net and click on the sports section of my home page. I'm innocently pretending to check out basketball scores when Ma

knocks, then opens the door and pokes her head in. "Still on the computer?" She's smiling, almost relaxed looking. "Yeah, I'll be off in a minute." "Supper's going to be pizza tonight. I just called. Pepperoni, okay?" She sits on the edge of the bed and starts gathering clothes for the laundry. "Sure. Pepperoni's fine." I want her out of my room so I can get back to Billi before it's too late. "Is this dirty?" She holds up a pair of gym shorts I thought I'd forgotten in my locker. "Yup." I turn back to the computer. Maybe she'll get the hint. "I'll call you when the pizza comes." "Okay." I still don't hear her leave. I turn around. She's standing in the middle of the room, staring at me. "What?" "Are you okay, R.W.?" "Sure, I'm fine." "You never come out of your room anymore." I shrug. What's the sense of coming out of my room and into a war zone? "Your father and I would like to see your smiling face occasionally." I cross my eyes and stick my tongue out. She laughs. "You really want to see me?" "Of course we do. I know it's been really hard lately, but we're still a family..." I want to tell her I don't want to be related to Dad, that I've written him off my list of family members, that I'd rather talk to Billi online and play basketball with Jake than to do ANYTHING with my family, but I don't. Instead, I shrug again. I'm getting good at keeping my mouth shut. "You know, I really worry about your being on the computer so much. When you get to be my age, you're going to have repetitive strain injuries." She picks up a couple more T-shirts and edges toward the door. "I'll be off in a minute, don't worry." She smiles at me, and if I were a couple of years younger, I would run over to her and grab her around the waist and hug her as hard as I possibly could. She blows me a kiss, I smack my cheek (just like I always do), and she heads out the door. Quickly, I get back into my e-mail and, sure enough, there's another message from Billi waiting. It wasn't him. He didn't really do anything. WHAT? It wasn't Dad? Who was it then? What happened? My face feels all tingly. I get up and walk from one side of the room to the other, wondering what the hell do I do now? The only thing I can think of saying is: What do you mean? While I'm waiting for the answer, the doorbell rings, and Katie calls out, "Pizza guy is here!" She loves paying the guy. Any minute Ma's going to call me downstairs. Not now. Not NOW. Billi answers: I mean I hate seeing someone get blamed for something he didn't do, and I don't know what to do about it. My parents are really going bananas over this whole thing. It's all over the news and everyone at school is giving R.W. a hard time. I'm sure his family is miserable, and so am I. I don't know what to DO! My parents don't even know this. If they found out, they'd have a bird. What am I gonna DO??? "Ralph! Supper!" It's not Ma but Dad who calls up the stairs. "Shut the computer down and wash up." notnownotnownotnownotnow .... Wow, Billi, I don't know what to tell you. Seems like you're stuck in a tough situation. Why did you accuse the guy if he didn't do anything? My shrink talked me into it. She convinced me what Mr. Carpenito was doing was wrong. But all he did was hold my fingers in the right position on the guitar strings. He never touched me or anything like that. He's a good guy, and he's going to go to jail because of me. Sheesh, now I'm crying like crazy. Maybe I shouldn't have told you all this. You won't tell anyone else will you? No. Don't worry. I won't tell anyone. Listen, I have to go, but I'll

be back on around 8. Let's talk more then, okay? Sure. We'll talk then. Sorry I bothered you. You didn't bother me. I just have to go now. 8 o'clock, okay? Sure. I have all I can do during supper not to jump up on the table and pound on it to get everyone's attention. I want to scream "what in the world is going on and why are we in the middle of it?" But I just shove the pizza in my face as fast as I can so I can get back to the computer by 8. And I can't even look at Dad. Man, I'm so confused! The one thing that's crystal clear in my head is that, no matter what happens, I need to know the truth, I need to know what to expect, and I need to protect Ma.

## Chapter Sixteen

I'm about to head back upstairs when Aunt Susan comes bombing into the house. Our back door is always open, so she just comes in and makes herself at home, anytime. Though I usually like to see her, since all this crap has happened with Dad, seeing her just reminds me that she's here to talk about "our problem," as she calls it. And that's not something I want to do right now. She plunks herself down at the table, helps herself to a piece of pizza, and undoes the first couple of buttons on her blouse. "What a day," she says, to no one in particular. Ma smiles, asks for details, listens while pouring some Coke in a glass and setting it in front of Aunt Susan. I don't really listen, because I'm more interested in getting back upstairs, but I sit and munch more pizza. If I go right back up, Ma will make some sort of comment about being on the computer again, and I don't want to deal with that. Katie, Robert, and Ginny have finished their pizza and are starting to poke each other in the ribs when the doorbell rings. Since Dad's arrest, Ma won't let us answer the door anymore, so we all wait while Ma dries her hands, all the while listening to Aunt Susan ramble, and eventually makes it to the front door. I watch her peek out the lace curtains before opening it and giving Uncle Ed a hug. Now I really don't want to be around. If both Aunt Susan and Uncle Ed are here, it means there's going to be a "meeting of the minds" about "the case," and I have more important things to do. Wait until Uncle Ed finds out that I've got a line on who really did it. Just goes to show you don't have to be over forty with a potbelly to be good at legal stuff. Uncle Ed disrupts everything when he comes into a room. The kids go nuts because they know he's going to start pulling dollar bills out for each of them so they can, "Go buy an ice cream or a comic book or something." "We don't read comic books," Katie says, holding out her pizza-messed hand. "Katie, you can't read anything. You're the dumbest seven year old in Miss Flingit's class." Ginny rolls her eyes, then focuses on Uncle Ed. "I want a sundae. They cost more than a dollar." "Ginny!" Ma slaps the table with her dishtowel. "That's rude." Ginny shrugs and looks at me as if I'm supposed to stick up for her because we're the oldest. "Ed, I want everyone here. Don't go giving the kids money now. Wait till later." Aunt Susan dabs at the corners of her mouth with a napkin and gives her ex-husband the eye. Inwardly, I groan. What now? I check my watch. It's 7:30. Okay, I have a little time, but I seriously wasn't thinking of spending it with my aunt and uncle and the rest of the family. "I really don't want the kids in on whatever we're going to discuss. They have

enough problems with everyone at school--" Ma says, a frantic glance at Dad. He seems totally out of it, unable to say one thing or another. There are dark bags under his eyes and white strands sprinkled through his hair. It's the first time I've really looked at him in days, and I have to admit I'm a little shocked that he seems a lot older than he actually is. Even though he's always been a slob, like I am, he usually talked at dinner and fooled around with all of us, telling his silly jokes and teasing Ma. He hasn't said anything since he called me to dinner. "Dusty?" Ma widens her eyes, expecting him to back her up. "What are we talking about?" he says. "Ed and Susan probably want to talk about your case." She emphasizes the word, though I'm pretty sure everyone in the room knows exactly what she means. Sheesh, everyone in Winter Park knows that Dusty Carpenito was arrested on charges of child molesting. Probably everyone in Central Florida! Aunt Susan pushes her chair back. "I need you all here. What I have to say is for all of you." She's got everyone's attention now. And she knows it. I can tell by the tilt of her head and the straight line of her lips. She's got an expression like Old Lady Sadler, my fifth grade Science teacher. She'd been teaching since my parents were little and they said she was even old then. "Ed and I have been talking, and since the trial won't happen for a while yet, we think we should do some preparation. First thing on my list is to get you all into therapy. You should start going to see someone separately and as a family. I know all of you have been affected by what's going on, and each of you react differently. Lynda," she nods at my mother, "you have been a clean- and workaholic since Dusty's arrest, and we all know that's what you do when you're upset." Ma stands in the middle of the kitchen floor, listening, hands in the back pockets of her jeans, feet spread apart about shoulder's width, her blond hair mussed and her eyes curious. She doesn't say a word. "Dusty, you've gone into a major depression, sweetheart. This doesn't do you or anyone else any good. You need to talk to someone. Believe me, it'll make you feel better." "Besides," Uncle Ed reaches for the last piece of pizza everyone else has ignored, "the judge is going to want to see some proof that you all have tried to work this out. I don't know whether a shrink's word will strengthen our case or weaken it, but I sure as hell want that shrink to be someone I know and respect rather than to have the State suggest one of their people. This way we have control of everything. And that's definitely what you want, Dusty." He stuffs the pizza in his mouth and wiggles his eyebrows at Dad. "Are you saying we should act like Dusty's guilty?" Ma's voice quivers. "No, not at all. I'm just saying that with all the media attention and the problems the kids are having in school and the way you two are dealing with it, that it would be easier if you all had someone to talk to. Plus, like Ed says, it's better that we help you choose who to see rather than have the State take over. Believe me, it'll be better for everyone." Ma and Dad stare at each other over everyone else's heads. Sometimes I think they can read each other's minds. Together, they say, "We should." "I, for one, don't want to see no shrink," I say. "Why doesn't anyone ask us what we think? Don't we count? Man, why don't you adults just decide everything we do forever and ever? Why did you have us sit here and listen to this if we weren't going to be part of the vote? What is this, a monarchy? Ma

and Dad are the king and queen and the rest of us are the subjects?" My hands are shaking so I sit on them. I haven't been this pissed off since Jakey broke my favorite baseball bat. "If this is going to help, R.W., then we need to do it." Ma's voice no longer quivers. It's strong. She's made up her mind and there's no way I'm going to undo it. And I know she won't answer my questions when she gets like this. It's almost like she's trying to plan on what to do if the worst happens. If Dad goes away to jail. I want to tell her that I know something, but I don't even know what it is exactly that I know except that Billi is lying. And how am I going to tell anyone that? I can't say anything yet. I have to find out more. "I have to admit I go along with R.W. in a way," Dad says slowly, his head down. "I haven't done anything wrong and still I'm expected to jump through hoops." He brings his head up. There are tears in his eyes. "Why should my family suffer for something that didn't even happen?" "Dusty, if we're going to get anywhere with this, you need to tell the truth." Aunt Susan's statement is made in a calm, understanding way, but after she says it, I think my father seriously wants to kill her. It's the first time in weeks I've seen his eyes come alive. "That's the problem, Susan. I have told the truth and no one seems to be listening!" "I understand, believe me. I just want to see you get the best that you deserve." She gets up and goes to Dad, leans over and hugs him. He clenches his fists. "Whenever something happens, you think the way to fix it is to go sit down with some shrink! Whatever happened to detectives and people who find out the truth so that people like us don't have to suffer for something we didn't do!" He's out of his chair now. Aunt Susan steps back. "I'm so sick and tired of people looking at me as if I'm a criminal. I'm not, dammit!" Uncle Ed goes over to Aunt Susan and puts a hand on her shoulder. "Susan, maybe we need to leave them alone to talk it over." "There's nothing to talk over! I'm not going and that's that!" Dad slides his chair into the table with so much force that the Coke bottle is knocked over. Ginny catches it, but it spurts all over her shirt. "C'mon everyone. Let's not fight about it." Ma steps in, always the peacemaker, and grabs the Coke bottle, wipes it off and dabs at Ginny's shirt. "I need to take a walk," Dad says and heads for the door. When it slams, we all have open mouths and no one says anything for a couple of minutes, then all three adults start arguing at once. "Excuse me. Excuse me." Finally, I yell: "Will someone listen to me?" "What, R.W.?" Ma asks. "I don't think us kids need to be here for this, do we?" "No, take everyone upstairs. Go in my bedroom and put a video on." "No!" Aunt Susan's face is inches from my mother's. "You really need to include them. This is their life, too. They mean more than anything in the world to you, don't they?" Ma nods. "Well, then they need to be taken care of and they need to know why. Look at Katie, she's biting her nails. Robert's wetting the bed, and Ginny's flunking two subjects." She paused and looked at me. "And R.W.'s hooked on computer games--" "That's enough, Susan," Uncle Ed says. "They have problems they need to address!" She stamps her foot like a kid. "Not now. Maybe later," Ma keeps talking as she shoos all of us away from the table. "But not now, Susan." I'm the last one out the kitchen door and can't resist turning around to say one last thing. "If we're so important, Aunt Susan, then why don't you get the hint and leave us alone?" Before anyone can

reply, I shoot out of the room and up the stairs after my brother and sisters. For the rest of the night, the voices from downstairs nearly drown out the "Star Wars" trilogy, no matter how high I turn the volume.

## Chapter Seventeen

The next morning, I'm the first one out the door and I pick up the newspaper, figuring I'll toss it in to my mother who's sitting at the kitchen table, staring down into a cup of coffee, looking like she hasn't been to bed all night. But something about the picture on the front page catches my attention and I look down at my own father's smiling face. The headline says: Preliminary Hearing Friday on Sex-Related Charges. Crap. Last night, I had no time to go in to the computer, so I don't know anything more about Billi. I was too busy taking care of Robert and Katie who tried to outdo each other being little turds. They would've killed each other if I hadn't stayed in the room with them and forced them to watch video after video. We didn't get to sleep until after 2:00, and Ma and Dad still hadn't come upstairs. "R.W., did the paper come?" Ma's moving around in the kitchen. She can't see me, so I do the only thing I can think of. "No, it's not here. Maybe it's in the bushes. Gotta go!" I run down the walk and along the sidewalk to the corner. When I see Jake coming the other way, I stuff the newspaper in my knapsack to read later. I have no idea why I'm hiding it from Jake. He already knows everything. I guess I want to read the article before someone else starts talking to me about it. \* \* \* "Do you think they'll go for it?" Jake and I are walking home from school. It's been a cruddy day. I got called down to Mrs. Fullman's office first thing in the morning so she could talk to me about "those dreadful headlines." I think she wanted to know more about what's going on in my house to satisfy her own curiosity than to help me. I just sat there, really quiet and let her go at it. Now, Jake and I are trying to figure out how to handle Amy and Billi. I've told him about what Billi said, and he's getting signals from Amy that she's not too sure about what she's done, too, so we're on to something. But how do we get to the truth? I've decided the best way to do it is to come right out and talk about the headlines, then just sit back and listen. "If they say anything at all, we've got to save it and print it. Your e-mail puts a time on each message, right?" I shove my knapsack over to the other shoulder. It's almost empty because I decided to go on strike doing homework. I have more important things to do. "Of course, what do you think I have: a shit piece of software? You know my dad--he always gets the best stuff on the market." He pauses for a moment, and I know it's because he feels bad that his dad is normal and mine is in the newspapers for fooling around with girls our age. "Okay, listen, this is what I think we should do. You tell Amy you heard about the pretrial hearing and ask her if she knows anything about it. I'll try to get Billi to spill the beans about what's going on and if the other girls are in on it, too. Make sure you don't give Amy a single clue that you know me, you hear?" Jake rolls his eyes. A low-rider goes by, the car windows open, its bass booming. The guys inside check us out, give us the finger. I glance sideways at Jake. He's ignoring them, staring forward. The guys are a lot older than we are, and I don't need any more crap right now, so I follow

Jake's lead. The car continues down the street. "All we need right now is to get jumped by some dudes out for a joyride," Jake mumbles. His tone makes me study him. I didn't think about it until now, but I've really put my best friend in a squeeze. All this time, I've thought of it as kind of fun--even though it started out serious. I never thought either one of us would get into trouble, but we could. I have a reason for doing this. Jake's only reason is that he's my friend. "Do you really like her, Jakey?" "Who?" "Amy." "Well, yeah, she's kinda nice..." We go over a curb and past some shops. "I kinda like Billi, too." Jake cackles. "Who wouldn't? She's hot!" "No, I mean I like her as a person." "Whoa, R.W.! What's this? The Stone Man cracks over a chick?" "Give me a break." "No wonder you haven't been calling me to play basketball. I thought it was just the detective stuff, but it's more than that, isn't it?" I don't say anything. I don't think I even realized how much I like Billi until now. This wasn't supposed to happen. We're on our street before I start talking again. "I can't understand what's going on. And it seems like no one else can either." Deep breath, blow it out. "Last night, my Aunt Susan was over and said the whole family should go to therapy." "Aw, that stuff sucks." "Yeah, but I have a feeling my mother's going to listen to her. And my dad won't have a choice." "Do you really think your dad did it?" Jake whispers, as if someone will hear us, but there's no one else on the street but us. There aren't even any cars. "I don't know, Jakey. I'm starting to wonder..."

Sure enough, Ma's waiting in the living room and Dad's pacing in the kitchen, muttering to himself. Katie's in the recliner, pushing it back and forth, Robert's lying on his stomach on the floor, the remote in his hand, doing his channel-flipping thing, and Ginny's standing behind the couch, arms folded across her chest, yelling at both Katie and Robert to stop what they're doing. Obviously, they're all waiting for me. I don't even want to be part of this family anymore. I dump my knapsack on the stairs, then stand next to Ginny. My mother looks up at me and motions me to sit down. "Dusty, come in here so we can all talk," she yells to my father. Ma leans forward, elbows on her knees, hands wound together, eyes on the floor. "I've made a decision," she says. "We've all got an appointment with a family therapist tomorrow morning. The pretrial hearing is Friday. That's only three days away, and I want to make sure we have at least one meeting with Dr. Sheridan before that." She pauses, takes a deep breath. Dad shifts in the wingback chair, makes a face like one of us kids. Ginny, Katie and Robert keep doing what they were doing when I first walked in. "You kids need to know how important this is," she continues. "I know you've all had some trouble at school with the other kids and this will be the place where you can talk about everything that's happened. You can say anything you want to. Complain. Argue. Yell. Cry. No one will tell you you're wrong. No one's going to scold you or punish you. Do you understand?" "What's a family therapist?" Robert asks and actually puts down the remote. "Someone who can help us with our problems." Dad's sarcasm emphasizes the word problems--as if he believes we really don't have any. "Dusty." Ma stares him down until he looks away. "Robert, you know those kids who were saying mean things about

Dad and how you came home crying?" "Hmhmhm ... "That's the kind of stuff we'll be talking about." "I don't want to go," Ginny says. "Why can't just you and Dad go?" "Because it affects all of us, honey." Ma reaches back and pats Ginny's hand. "I don't like this, Lynda. I don't think we should have to suffer because someone's spreading lies about me." Dad stands and starts pacing again. I watch him carefully. If I'm going to be as good a lawyer as F. Lee Bailey or Johnny Corcoran, I've got to be able to tell when someone's lying. Dad's chin is up, his fists are clenched, his steps short and jerky. Why would he be so mad if he was lying? Why wasn't he like this when it first happened? How come he was so depressed? And why would he be refusing to go to a therapist if he's innocent? "The only way we're going to prove they're lying is by doing everything we should do. And going to see a therapist is a good beginning. We need to go, Dusty. The kids need it. I need it. Damn, I've needed someone to talk to since that first night." "You've got your sister. She's a shrink. Isn't she good enough?" "She's too close to this. Besides, I don't want to talk to her about it. You know how opinionated she gets." We all know how opinionated Aunt Susan gets. There have been many times I've seen her argue with my mother and father at the dinner table about one thing or another. It's always seemed like she was angry with my mother about something. My father, on the other hand, has always gotten along with her. I remember what they were like the other day and know there's been other times Aunt Susan has been at the house when my mother isn't home. It's almost like Aunt Susan really would rather be around Dad. Strange. "There was a reporter at school again today," I say. I didn't even know I was going to say it, but now that I have, maybe it was a good idea. It looks like things could have gotten a bit heated. At least now Ma and Dad are paying attention to me instead of sending eye-daggers at each other. "I don't know what to say to them anymore." "Just tell them you don't want to talk to them. They have no right coming on to school property anyway! I'm going to call the principal and ask him what's going on." Dad marches into the kitchen and picks up the phone. Ma, right behind him, snatches it out of his hand, and says she'll make the call. Robert and Katie take this as a signal that our meeting has broken up and scatter. Ginny and I are the only ones left in the living room. She nudges me with her sharp elbow and whispers in my ear, "I'm going to run away, honest I am." "Good, I'll help you pack." "I'm serious." "Yeah, right. You'd get about as far as the corner and come running back." "You're a jerk." She squints her beady eyes at me and heads for the stairs. Am I supposed to stay here and listen to Ma on the phone with my principal or can I leave, too? I decide to stay, but not because I'm supposed to. Because I'm curious about what Ma's going to say--and about what the principal will tell her about what I've been doing in school. No use going upstairs since I'll have to come right back down again. The next couple of days should be very interesting.

## Chapter Eighteen

It's 10:42 p.m. and I've been online with Billi for hours. We've talked about books (she's into the Earthsea trilogy by Ursula leGuin and loves fantasy; I'm

reading a biography of Michael Jordan) and movies (She's seen "Titanic" twenty times! My favorites are all the old James Bond flicks.). She keeps asking me when we'll be able to see each other, has offered to meet me at lunchtime and can't understand why I won't see her at school. I've been dancing around the subject for a while and have just about run out of excuses. But I haven't had the guts to ask her whether she's going to be in court for the pretrial hearing two days from now. Finally, I e-mail Jake and tell him to ask Amy out on a date tomorrow night. He argues with me, tells me he can't do that, that the girls will find out who we are, but I write back and tell him he's not really going to go. It's just that I have to find out what's going on and I can't think of any other way to get them to talk about it. I promise I'm going to ask Billi out, too. And I do. And am amazed that she writes back that she'd love to see me but can't because she'll be with her parents all day. What about school? Aren't you going? I write and hold my breath waiting for the answer. We've got to go to court on Friday, so we have to meet with the lawyer tomorrow. For what? For that case with Mr. Carpenito. How come you have to go? Long pause. I've pushed it too far this time, I know it. I should have beaten around the bush a little more, but she comes back with: My lawyer wants me to be there in case the judge has any questions about my side of the story. But how am I going to tell them, Robert? (that's what I told her my name was) I need to tell someone the truth. It's killing me! You can tell me. Do you promise you won't tell anyone? How can I promise that? How can I be doing this to begin with? The room is suddenly hot and my armpits are sticky. I want Billi to like me. I want her to go out with me. Fat chance, once she finds out who I really am. And she will. I know she will. I'll have to tell her. But, first, I need to know. Of course I won't tell anyone, I write back. It all started about two years ago, she writes. My parents thought I was getting a little wild because they found out I was going out with one of the football players--I won't tell you who he is because you might know him. Anyway, they figured I might need therapy and sent me to this shrink in Winter Park. We talked about everything ... boys, school, my parents, cheerleading, music. Everything. She specializes in kids, I guess. And she was really cool. Everything was great for a while. My parents got off my back, school got better, I got on the varsity cheerleading squad, my guitar playing improved--everything! Then the shrink started asking questions about Mr. Carpenito. It seems like she was kind of stuck on talking about him. Pretty soon we didn't talk about anything else. She started asking me to show her how he taught me to play. Then she started telling me that he shouldn't be holding my fingers on the strings or touching me in any way. She called my parents in and asked them if they noticed any weird behavior. And once they got into it, it was like I didn't exist anymore. Before I knew it, she was putting words in my mouth. She was kind of switching things around, putting words in my mouth, y'know? Like I would say something about the songs I was learning, and she would be asking me if he touched my breast. Then before I could answer, she'd say, "You know he shouldn't be doing that. He shouldn't be touching you at all." Then she'd call my parents in again, and before I knew it, they were talking to a lawyer, and the lawyer told them to stop letting me

go to Mr. Carpenito for lessons. Then everything blew up! The newspapers wrote about it and everyone at school knew about it and my parents and my shrink and my lawyer kept telling me I couldn't say anything to anyone. But, Robert, I want to say something! I want to apologize to Mr. Carpenito. He never did anything wrong! I don't think he's the slightest bit interested in my body. Sheesh, he's got kids himself. One of them is in some of my classes. (Do you know him? R.W. Carpenito?) Anyway, now all of this is out of control and I've got to go to court and so do a bunch of other girls and I think they all went to the same shrink. What am I going to do? No one will believe me if I tell them the truth! I believe you, I say. And I do. But how am I going to let anyone else know what I know now? And are the other girls lying, too? Maybe if they're going to the same therapist, they all have the same story. Then that would prove that Dad is innocent, just like he's been saying all along! Whoa, mama! I'm so glad I have you to talk to, Robert, Billi continues. I've had to stay home a lot lately because my parents don't want the other lawyer to think I'm a tramp. The only thing they'll let me do is go to school and cheerleading practice. Even at the Homecoming Dance, they came to pick me up at 11, right after you left. I'm sick of being in the house! I want everything to be normal again, but the lawyer says this could be going on for a l-o-n-g time and if the newspapers find out who I am, they'll be following me all over the place. I've seen some reporters at school bugging R.W., and I feel so bad for him. He always looks so sad these days. I didn't think it showed on my face, but I guess when people stare at me, I tend to look at the ground, so she's thinking I'm sad. Maybe if she knew who I really am, she wouldn't feel bad for me. After all, she knows all about me. But I can't tell her. Not yet. Not yet. I write back: Why do you suppose the shrink is trying to convince you that you've been abused? I don't have a clue. Maybe she's been watching too much TV. I know a lot of people were really blown away by what happened with President Clinton. Maybe. Or maybe she just has a really good imagination. She should write books. Does she have a name that'd look good on the bestseller list? Maybe she wants to write about this, get her name in the papers? Her name is Dr. Edelstein. Susan Edelstein. I think she'd have to change her name to make it more memorable, don't you? Billi keeps on going on but I can't take my eyes off the name. Susan Edelstein. My aunt. Shit. Why would she do this to my father? What the hell is going on? I leave Billi's note on the screen and start printing all the messages we've sent to one another from the very beginning. Then I save them all to disk. When that's done, I write back to her, tell her I have to go out, that I wish her good luck tomorrow, and that I might write back to her tonight. Then I call Jake--no screwing around with e-mail--and tell him I need to see him right away. "Meet me at the basketball court in five minutes." "Why?" "Don't ask why. Just do it." "But my parents will flip if I go out now. It's almost eleven!" "Sneak out the window if you have to, but come!" "Okay, okay, okay. I'll be right there. But if I get into trouble for this, R.W., I'll punch you out." "If you get into trouble, I'll let you break my nose, how's that?" "Wow. Must be important." "Get your ass over there. NOW!" I've never run so fast in my entire life.

"I can't believe it. Man, that's like impossible!" Jakey is pacing the basketball court, making better moves without a ball than he does when we're playing. I just finished telling him about what I found out about my aunt. "Possible, Jakey. Very possible. I found her and my dad together one afternoon when I came home from school." "How can you be sure, though?" "Jeez, what do you mean how can I be sure? Do you think Billi would lie?" "She did once already." I'm in Jake's face in a millisecond, then we're both down on the ground. He's yelling for me to stop it, but I can't stop. I'm pummeling his body with my fists, calling him a liar, telling him I hate his ever-loving guts, that he's not my best friend, and that he should go straight to hell. It's his crying that makes me stop. We're both covered in gravel, and as I help him to his feet, I hear windows opening and voices. "I can't deal with this anymore," he says, wiping the tears away from his face. "You're loony. I can't be around you. I'm going home. Don't call me, R.W. Okay? Don't ever call me again." With that, he's gone, and I'm left in the middle of the dark basketball court. Completely and totally alone. I walk slowly home wondering what to do now. Do I tell my mother? I promised to protect her. If I tell her this, will it make her feel worse? Do I keep everything secret and hope Billi's conscience makes her say something? What good would that do? I don't know what to do, man. I don't know what to do.

## Chapter Nineteen

School goes by in a blur on Thursday. Jake isn't talking to me, so I eat lunch alone, and during Biology, I avoid looking at where Billi would have sat if she'd been in school. Nothing seems right. It's raining slow, big drops as I walk home, but I don't rush. What's the use? But it doesn't matter how much I take my time because I'm home before I'm ready to be there. All the lights downstairs are on, and I stand on the sidewalk looking in, feeling like a stranger, like that house and the rest of my life aren't mine at all. I'm beginning to shiver and the lights are starting to look more welcoming when a car comes down the street. It slows and though I don't turn around, I hear the window go down. "Ralph Carpenito?" a man calls. I glance over my shoulder. It's the black reporter from The Orlando Sentinel. Doesn't he ever give up? "Yeah?" "How you doing, kid? Ready for tomorrow?" I want to tell him to take a flying leap, but something makes me go over to his car and say, "Listen, you don't know the whole story, okay? No one does." His eyebrows go up and he takes his glasses off. Doesn't say a word. "Are you going to be there tomorrow?" I ask. "Yes, I'll be in court. Why?" "Maybe you should interview those girls instead of bothering my family." "I can't Ralph--" "It's R.W." "Okay, R.W. I can't say anything to the girls. I don't even know who they are. Besides, the court protects them." "What about my dad? What about us? Who's going to protect us?" For just a flicker of a second, his eyes slide to the side, won't meet mine. "I'm sorry, kid. That's the way this stuff works." "Well, it sucks dead canaries," I say and I walk away, amazed that I am so calm. I have no choice but to go into the house. Ma's sitting on the couch and Dad's in the recliner. Rosie O'Donnell's on TV laughing about something she obviously finds hysterical, but neither Ma nor Dad is laughing with her. I have to do something about this. But what? Talk

to them? They look like zombies. Ma reaches for a cup on the coffee table and smiles at me as if she's trying to remember who I am. Then I hear voices coming from the kitchen. Aunt Susan and Uncle Ed. The house smells like spaghetti sauce, but since Ma's here, I realize it's Aunt Susan who's cooking supper, and I want to be back out on the street. Anywhere but here. I clear my throat. "I have a lot of homework, so I'll see you later." And I head for the stairs, but not fast enough. "Hey, you!" It's Aunt Susan with Uncle Ed close behind. "I'm cooking your favorite tonight: ravioli and meatballs." She reaches for me, but I pull away. It's hard not to spill the beans, but instead I give her my longest, coolest glare and hope she gets the point. She doesn't seem to notice, turns and puts her hand on my mother's shoulder. Ma reaches up and absentmindedly pats it but doesn't say anything. Uncle Ed walks by and punches me in the arm playfully. "Got some warm chocolate cookies in the kitchen. Want one?" I see I'm not going to get out of this, so I dump my knapsack on the stairs and follow him into the kitchen. He slouches and shuffles like someone ashamed to be as big as he is and just for a laugh, I imitate him. Aunt Susan giggles behind me and I shoot her another look. This one shuts her up. When the kitchen door closes, Uncle Ed starts talking about how it's good we all decided to go into therapy, that it'll help when we go to court tomorrow, and that he's pretty sure the other side doesn't have enough evidence to nail my dad. But his voice doesn't sound all that sure and he keeps his back turned away from me. Finally, I can't take it anymore. I ask, "Does Aunt Susan hate my dad?" Uncle Ed stops shuffling and turns to face me. He's across the kitchen table, a cookie in his left hand, a cup of coffee in his right. Normally, he's all dressed up in shirt and tie, but his tie's undone and his shirt has stains on it. I hope he doesn't go like this to court tomorrow. "What makes you ask that?" he says, stuffing the cookie in his mouth. "It just seems like she's pretty sure he's guilty." "No, I don't think she feels that way at all." "Well, does she hate him?" "That's a big negatory there, kiddo. If your mother hadn't married your dad, Susan would've tried to. She had the biggest crush on him when they were in high school. Didn't you know that? She used to write his name all over her books and everything. In fact, she was mighty upset when your mother first started dating Dusty. Didn't get over it for a long time." I've crushed the cookie inside my fist and the crumbs are dropping all over the floor. "Hey, kiddo, you all right?" Uncle Ed leans over the table and looks down at my hand. Some lawyer I'd make. I can't even keep my own feelings to myself. "Yeah, I'm all right," I say. "Just ... just got a lot of homework to do. See you later." And I take off out the kitchen door and up the stairs to my bedroom before he starts asking me anymore questions.

## Chapter Twenty

It's driving me nuts to keep everything bottled up inside, so I shoot the Nerf ball into the basket a few times, trying to figure out what to do. The whole world is one big mess, and it's all Aunt Susan's fault. The computer beeps telling me I have e-mail. It's Billi. Now, it's clear. I have to talk to her. I have no choice. I send her a note to meet me on AOL Messenger, then go in and wait for her. Hi Billi--Howyadoin? It's been a rotten day, she answers. And tomorrow's going

to be even worse. If I had enough money, I'd just take off. This is a nightmare-worse than any Freddie Kruger story I've seen. The idea of Dad being like the scariest movie of the past twenty years is kind of funny, but I'm not laughing. Maybe you need to tell the truth, Billi. I count the seconds until she answers and imagine her sitting at her desk, her beautiful hair over her shoulders, her face scrunched up while she thinks about how to answer me. Who's going to believe me? I do. I believe you. Just think about what's happening with the Carpenito family. They must be miserable and it's all that psychiatrist's fault. You don't want to ruin their lives, do you? No, of course not. But if I tell the truth and the other girls stick to their stories, it's going to look like I'm lying. You've got to try, Billi. I don't know, Robert. I don't think I have the guts. Of course you do! You have to!!! I can't. I have to go now. Are we still going to get together? Maybe after the court case is over. Right now, I'm not sure. Is it because I won't say anything? This time I let her wait. I'm just about to answer when there's a knock at my door. "R.W.? It's Dad. Can I come in?" I type a quick goodbye to Billi and get off the screen. "Yeah, come in." Dad comes in and kicks my basketball out of the way, then sits on the bed. "You know we're going to court tomorrow?" I nod and wonder why he's chosen to come in and talk to me now. This is the worst possible time. He reaches into a pile of my laundry and begins taking each piece out and starts folding them, one by one. "I need to ask you a really important favor." "What?" He clears his throat and keeps on folding. "If they keep me tomorrow ... if I end up going ... away, I need to ask you a favor." "You already said that, Dad. What do you want?" I feel like the adult in this conversation, and I really want to tell him everything's going to be okay, but I don't know whether it will or not. "You've got to kind of take over for me if I go, know what I mean? I know it sounds funny, but you're the oldest and your mother's going to need a lot of help." I could have predicted this conversation, but not the way I feel while he's putting his words together. My chest is all tight and my eyes start burning. "Ma's going to be fine, no matter what, and so will we. Don't worry, Dad." For the first time, he raises his head and I see his eyes are wet. "I don't want to go to prison," he says and his voice catches. "I'm not going to spend time--not one day, not one hour, not even a minute of my life being punished for something I didn't do. I want you to know that, Ralph. I want you to know I've done nothing wrong. Do you believe me?" I want to scream that not only do I believe him, but I know who's at fault, but I can't get the words out. All I can do is nod like some dummy. "That's all I care about," he says, his voice quivering. "All I care about is whether or not you believe me." "I believe you, Dad." I get up from my chair and push my way through the junk on the floor to get to him. "I know you're telling the truth." I'm so close, I can smell the cigarette he must have had before he came up here. He gave up smoking a long time ago, but lately I've noticed a pack of cigarettes next to his chair in the parlor. "Ralphie, if I'd known ... if I'd thought what I was doing was wrong, I never would've...." He laughs a little, like a crazy man. "Who would have thought that just touching a girl's hand to show her how to hold her fingers on the neck of a guitar would be enough to cause all this trouble? I never would've done it, if I'd known...."

His shoulders bend in towards his chest and start to shake. He bows his head and the sobs come out like he's choking. Without thinking, I sit down next to him, really close, our legs touching, and put my arm over his shoulders. I want him to stop crying. It's embarrassing. Maybe he's been goofy, maybe he hasn't always been the strong, basketball-playing father I've always wanted, but I love him, and he's getting a bum rap. "I love you, Dad. And I believe you. Don't worry. Everything will be all right. I promise." "Oh, God, Ralph. I hope you're right." For a long time, we sit on the bed, holding on to each other really tight, and I know if I do nothing else in my life, I have to come through somehow for him. I'm the only chance he has. But how?

#### Chapter Twenty-one

I expect to see reporters and television cameras when we walk into the courtroom, but except for the black guy from The Sentinel, the place is pretty empty. There must be something bigger than my father's pretrial hearing happening today. In a way, I'm disappointed. Then I see Billi and Amy and the other girls and their parents standing down the hall, and my heart starts beating so hard I begin wondering if 13-year-olds ever have heart attacks. The courthouse in Orlando is pretty new, but the halls echo just like an old building would. Voices float in our direction from everywhere and it's tough to figure out who's talking. Little groups of people clutter the hallways. Lawyers with their clients. Families hanging onto each other the way they do in hospitals when someone's dying. The way my mother looks, you'd think she was dying. Her hair's pulled back in a bun and her skin has this pasty white color, and her lips are tight. I don't think she's smiled in the past couple of weeks. Aunt Susan stayed over last night, and I heard the two of them in the bedroom talking this morning. Aunt Susan urging Ma to put some makeup on. Ma's low voice coming from the bathroom. Dad and Uncle Ed in the kitchen downstairs, laughing at something. Their laughter seemed fake, as if they were pushing it out like spit. Ma walks ahead of me, holding Dad's hand so tight her fingertips are white. Aunt Susan is right next to Ma, leaning in close to whisper in her ear (I want to jump on her and beat her silly), and Uncle Ed's a couple of steps ahead of us, whistling like he's going to the circus rather than to court. After Dad and I talked last night, I told him I wanted to be in court and used the excuse that it's good practice for when I become a lawyer. I don't think he bought it, but I'm here anyway. Katie wanted to come, too, but they wouldn't let her. Robert and Ginny are both at school, and Mrs. Memora is at the house just in case we don't get out of here by the time the kids get home. It takes about fifteen minutes for everyone to get settled, the judge--a woman with short white hair--to come in, and the court to come to order. I'm watching every move that judge makes because I want to know what we're up against. But I can't tell. I just know I wouldn't want to have her for a teacher. She looks like she won't take any crap from anyone. When Uncle Ed turns around to wink at me, I take the opportunity to pass him the note I wrote before we left the house. It reads: I know something, Uncle Ed. Let me talk. His forehead wrinkles up as he reads it and he shakes his head, but I mouth please, and I see him glance over at Billi and Amy and

the others sitting on the opposite side of the courtroom. He's putting two and two together and probably thinking I overheard something at school. We'll see, he mouths back and turns around to face the judge. The judge drones on about the "rules" for the day, makes sure everyone knows we're here to decide whether there's enough evidence to continue legal proceedings. She sounds bored and as though she won't have any sympathy whatsoever for an accused pedophile. Not a good sign. The attorney for the state stands up. He's taller than Larry Bird and really skinny, with a pink, bald head, and wears a jacket that doesn't quite make it to his wrists--must be to match the pants that don't quite make it to his ankles. If we weren't in a courtroom, I'd be making up all kinds of names for him, but right now, he's the enemy. "Your Honor, the charges against Mr. Carpenito are many and heinous. Complaints have been filed by these underage girls--" (Is it my imagination or did he say that really slowly so that everyone would understand?)--"that state Mr. Carpenito sexually abused them in a liberal and unlawful manner." He goes on to list all the charges in the complaint, and I find myself glancing at Billi, trying to catch her eye so I can smile at her, but she's staring straight ahead as if she was the one on trial and the charge was murder. I should have told her who I was last night, but would it have made a difference? Then Uncle Ed stands up and says the court doesn't have enough evidence to proceed, that there were no witnesses, no signs of a struggle, no blood samples, nothing that could incriminate my dad, and before I realize it, I'm standing, too. "I have some information," I say, pulling out the copies of the e-mails I stuck under my shirt before I left the house. "Your Honor, I know what really happened--" The old crone leans back and points at Uncle Ed. "Is this your client, Mr. Edelstein?" "It's my client's son, Your Honor." "Do you expect me to listen to him?" Uncle Ed shuffles some papers. "I believe he has some evidence, Your Honor." "Do you expect me to let him jump up and talk like this is Romper Room?" "No, Your Honor." Uncle Ed turns around and points for me to sit down. I shake my head. "You have to listen to me, Your Honor. I have proof my father didn't do it. One of the girls told me her psychologist, Susan Edelstein talked her into saying that stuff about my dad. I have copies of it all right here." I hold the e-mails above my head and look at Billi across the room. Her mouth is hanging open. Everyone else in the courtroom starts buzzing like angry wasps. The judge hits her gavel on the bench and calls for quiet in the courtroom. "We'll take a ten minute recess," she says. "And I want you in my chambers, Attorney Edelstein."

#### Chapter Twenty-two

Uncle Ed grabs the papers out of my hand and starts reading them as he walks towards the judge's bench. The attorney for the state follows him. Everyone is talking loudly as soon as they leave and openly staring at me. Billi and Amy, their families and lawyers hustle out of the courtroom as if I have a disease that's going to spread to them if they breathe the same air I do. When Ma and Dad move to sit beside me, I'm sure they're going to rip into me, but Aunt Susan gets to me first. "What the hell are you doing, Ralph?" she demands, her long fingernails digging into my arm. "Telling the truth," I say, staring her

down. I hate her now. I don't want her anywhere near me, and I can tell she feels the same. Probably has always felt the same. "You could ruin my career." "Like you ruined my dad's?" "I didn't do anything to your father." Ma and Dad are trying to get into the aisle with us, but Aunt Susan is sticking out her leg, blocking their way. Finally, Ma pulls Aunt Susan's jacket and forces her to stand. "What's going on?" Ma says, her face finally flushed with color. For the first time in days, she looks alive. Dad reaches for me. "What's on those sheets of paper, Ralph? What do you know?" "They're copies of e-mails from Billi. I pretended I was someone else at the Homecoming Dance and..." "This is bull!" Aunt Susan steps backward. "I don't know what you're trying to do Ralph Waldo Emerson Carpenito, but you're not getting away with it. Tell him, Lynda! Tell him he just can't jump up in court and start telling lies to get his father off. What Dusty did is despicable!" A spittle of liquid flies from her lips. She looks like someone they just let out of the asylum. Dad's sitting next to me now. "Tell me what you know, R.W." It's the first time he's ever called me R.W. without me telling him to. Quickly and quietly, I fill him in on all the late night chats Billi and I had, about what she told me about feeling guilty, how she revealed what Aunt Susan had convinced her to do--and especially that Billi had no clue she was talking to me. Ma and Aunt Susan are struggling behind us, and though I don't listen to their words, I can tell they're arguing. When I finish, he's sitting up straight and starting to smile. "You know, Susan, this doesn't surprise me," he says, turning to my aunt and my mother. "You've always been kind of sneaky. And this would explain why you've managed to be around so much when Lynda isn't." "No ... it's not possible," my mother says, but I can tell by her eyes that she's starting to believe it. At that moment, everyone starts filing back into court. My father grabs my shoulders and looks me straight in the eye. "I don't know what's going to happen, R.W., but I have a feeling this is all going to be up to you." "I don't have to stay and go through this." Aunt Susan grabs her purse and heads for the door, but Uncle Ed comes up behind her and takes hold of her arm. "Lynda, you have to believe me. I didn't have anything to do with this. You know Dusty's always been a little unsettled ... he's always been ... well, you know..." She shrugs and reaches for Ma. "Lynda, if you weren't my sister, I'd bash you one, right in the middle of this courtroom," Ma whispers into Aunt Susan's face. Her lips are as tight as when she caught me and Jakey driving Dad's car when we were only eleven. I don't think I've ever seen Ma so mad. And I know right then and there that she believes me. And that makes me feel good--though I know she must be pretty miserable to know her sister has been going after my father. "You're not going anywhere, I'm afraid," Uncle Ed says to Aunt Susan, and he actually looks sad. Could he still be in love with her? Aunt Susan sinks back into the bench and refuses to look at any of us. The judge gets back behind the bench and clears her throat. "This is an unusual turn of events, so I'm going to do something I don't normally do. I want to see all the girls and young Mr. Carpenito in chambers. Lawyers may be present, but they should be silent. Families and the defendant will remain in the courtroom." "Your Honor, what about me?" Aunt Susan calls out. "You are not legally part of these proceedings, Ms. Edelstein. Yet," the

judge says, peering over the top of her half-glasses. "But I wouldn't leave the court if I were you." I get up on shaky legs and follow my uncle past the judge's bench and through a door on the opposite side. I feel like I could puke. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the girls look about the same as I feel. Billi is leading, Amy follows with her head down, and in that instant, I realize it would be much easier to prove all of this if Jakey was here with copies of the e-mails Amy sent to him, but he's not speaking to me. A wave of sadness rolls over me like a steamroller and I wish he was here. I wish I'd never said what I did to him. I wish none of this had happened. "First of all, young man," the judge says as she lowers herself into the huge leather chair behind her desk, "I want you to know I'm not in the habit of stopping court proceedings on the basis of a few printed pages of what could possibly be lies. This is not the way I run my courtroom, understand?" I nod, sure I've screwed things up even worse and that she's going to throw me into the slammer. "However, this evidence reeks of coercion, and before we go any further, I need to see how substantial it is." She turns to the girls. "What do you young ladies have to say about this matter?" "You don't have to say anything at all," says one of the lawyers. "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your mouth shut and let the ladies answer my questions, Counselor," the judge snaps. "If Mr. Carpenito has been unjustly accused, I want to know so now, not later. There's no need of wasting the court's time if this has all been a plot wrought by a psychologist involved with all of these girls." She waves her hand to include everyone. "Now, girls, tell me: have you all seen Ms. Edelstein at one time or another?" Billi, Amy, and Joy all nod without looking at each other. Billi glances at me, but Amy's got her head down and she's picking at her nails, and Joy's staring wide-eyed at the judge. "I have in my hands approximately a week's worth of e-mail messages from you, Wilhelmina, to this young man right here. Did you send them?" Billi's lawyer reaches for her, but the judge warns him with another of her sinister stares. He backs off. Billi gulps and I suddenly feel sorry for her. She's been through as much as I have and it won't let up, even if she tells the truth. In fact, it's probably going to be worse. "Billi, please," I say. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you who I was, but you've got to understand I wanted to know the truth. I never expected--" "Young man, please sit quietly and let me handle the questions." Surprisingly, the judge's voice is nicer. "Now, Wilhelmina, tell me the truth. Did you send these messages to Mr. Carpenito?" "Yes." Billi's voice is so soft that I barely hear her. "Is what you wrote here the truth?" "Yes." This time her voice is stronger. "I'm sorry, Amy. Joy. I can't lie about this anymore. I just can't." She starts crying. The judge leans back, lets a whoosh of air out and stares at the ceiling. "What about you other girls? Did Ms. Edelstein tell you that Mr. Carpenito was abusing you?" Amy and Joy look at each other and reach for each other's hands. "Yes, she did." My stomach feels like I should reach down and pick it up from the floor. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you how serious this is," the judge says to everyone in the room. "A man has been unjustly accused and the person who has orchestrated this event should be punished. Lord knows everyone in this room has suffered enough." She stands and I realize with a start she's a lot shorter than I had thought. "You are all dismissed. I'll be out with my

decision in a moment.” As we all file back into the courtroom, Billi's in front of me, her long blond-as-corn hair swaying against her back. I want to talk to her, to tell her I'm sorry, but I know now that she probably won't ever speak to me again. In a way, that's okay, but in another way, it's not. When we were back in the judge's room, I realized that I'd fallen really hard for Billi, and I'm probably never going to feel that way about another girl again. It seems to take a long time for the judge to come back into the courtroom. I sit with Ma on one side and Dad on the other, all three of us holding hands and not speaking. Aunt Susan sits a couple of rows behind and the courtroom's quiet except for her sniffing and mumbling. Judge Hodges returns and hands a piece of paper to the bailiff, then calls the court to order. Everyone seems to be sitting on the edge of their seats as she clears her throat and adjusts her robe, takes her time to speak. ”There's been a terrible injustice in this courtroom today, and I have been trying to decide how to handle it. On the one hand, I feel that I have legal precedence to dismiss all the charges against Mr. Carpenito and start another case against Ms. Edelstein. On the other hand, I feel there's a definite need to continue this case until all evidence, formal and informal, is brought to light.” She pauses and looks out over the courtroom, as if thinking really hard. ”After much consideration, I believe that all concerned are victims in this case. Mr. Carpenito, the courts and the state of Florida apologize for the agony this must have put your family through. Nothing I say or do will stop the irreparable damage these accusations have done to your lives. I also must apologize to these girls and their families, for they have also been through a trying period. Nothing is more difficult than to admit one has been wrong or has lied. I commend you young ladies for having the courage to admit you were compelled by someone you trust, by a mental health professional, to believe you'd undergone a sexual molestation. As for you, Ms. Edelstein, I'm advising the girls' families, as well as the Carpenitos, that I believe charges should be brought against you. Whether they choose to or not is, ultimately, up to them. But I do believe you are the guiltiest person to ever sit in my courtroom.” She leans forward on the bench, folds her hands in front of her, and fixes me with a stare that scares me to my bones. ”As for you Ralph Carpenito, normally I would have had you thrown out of my courtroom for what you've done. I hope you realize that interrupting legal proceedings is not acceptable and that you will, from now on, understand that all you see on television and in the movies is not true. I should be punishing you as well for your impertinence. However, I understand your need to protect your family and for that reason only, I am just going to warn you not to try that stunt in any other courtroom as long as you live. Do I have your word that you'll not do so?” On shaky legs, I stand and face her, but it takes more courage than anything I've ever done in my life. ”I promise, Your Honor.” And I mean it with all of my heart. She smiles and I sit, then feel my mother and father's arms around me, their voices in my ears, and the noise of a courtroom erupting into applause behind us. I bury my head into my father's chest. ”I'm sorry, Dad. Really.” ”Don't, R.W. It's okay. It's all over now,” he says and kisses me on top of my head. We're both crying now and it feels good. Then Ma reaches around my back and I see her lace her fingers

through Dad's and they smile at each other. And I realize that no matter what I know now, it isn't everything. But that's okay.