

Chapter 4

Dear Travis: Every thing is OK hear. The Twins got Fired for comin in stoned so me and them are doin stuff for Orson. NOT DEALING. Kirk is going preppie. It make you sick. He is even dating Lisa Mahoney. Hows it goin.

Joe

A short letter, but a lot to think about. Travis wished he had the twins here, so he could knock their heads together. He knew it. He knew the minute he left town, they'd turn into dopers. Here he'd gone to a lot of trouble to get them into his group, get them some friends because they were too shy to get their own, and they knew how he felt about heavy doping.

Billy and Mike weren't book smart, but in their

field, mechanics, they were damn geniuses. Travis was awed by the way they could take things apart, put things together. They had a ticket there, and they were going to blow it.

Fired. How were they going to pay their car insurance? And the three of them, Joe included, were idiots for “doin stuff” for Orson.

You’d better get paid in cash, up front, guys, he thought.

Kirk going preppy, huh? Travis, looking back, could see it coming; he had noticed last summer when Kirk gave up cutoffs and sneakers for Jams and loafers. No, that didn’t surprise him at all. He’d known all along Kirk planned on college—he’d never tried to hide his good grades, like Travis sometimes had.

Not that there was anything to hide, now.

“How’s it going?” Well, Travis thought, I’m hanging out with an uncle, a little kid, and a bunch of girls. It is just going super.

He could still hang out with the girls. He’d followed Casey down to the barn and silently taken the shovel and wheelbarrow and helped clean up the stalls.

In return she’d told people the water pump had broken.

It’d been one of the hardest things he’d ever had to do, but if he hadn’t he’d never go to the barn again, and he had to have *somewhere*.

He wasn’t sure yet how he felt about the little kid. Christopher was a big pain, just as he’d ex-

pected. But there was something kind of interesting about someone who just said and did whatever came to mind without worrying about it.

Christopher was the roundest person Travis had ever seen. His chubby face was round. His big brown eyes were round. His blond haircut was round. His chunky little legs and arms were round.

And his round mouth moved constantly.

"Well, hi." He crawled up into Travis's bed early Saturday. A lot earlier Saturday than Travis liked.

"Are you sleeping?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

" 'Cause I'm sleepy."

"Why?"

" 'Cause it's early."

"Why?"

In a very short time Travis thought he'd freak out at the sound of that word.

Christopher was exact. If you failed to say please, thank you, or you're welcome, he'd correct you. If you called something by the wrong name, he'd correct you. "It's not a cuckoo clock. It's a bird clock."

You couldn't have a sandwich or a Coke to yourself. You had to share. He was real big on sharing. And it was a little disconcerting to be around someone you didn't know too well who didn't hesitate to crawl all over you.

Christopher poked into everything, messing up his tapes, drawing on his papers. And Motorboat, who had stared down Ken's Labrador and slapped the chow's nose the first day he was out of the house, spent the weekend cowering under the bed or behind the sofa.

But Ken seemed to think everything Christopher did was cute, and took it for granted that everything revolved around him. He jumped when Christopher said, "More juice, please," scrubbed his hands before every meal, and when Christopher waddled bare assed into the den with his underwear around his ankles and announced, "I did poo, come see," Ken reacted like it was a miracle.

Hell, thought Travis, it'd be more of a miracle if he didn't do any.

He hated to admit it, but maybe he was just a little bit jealous.

He watched Ken answer the phone and try to talk with Christopher climbing up his back, hanging around his neck, yelling, "I will fall you down!" and laughing till Ken couldn't hear or make himself heard; Travis marveled at his patience. He'd have pitched the kid across the room by now. . . .

"It's for you," Ken repeated, holding out the phone, and Travis shook himself awake. Who'd be calling him?

He took the phone, grateful that Ken was hauling Chris out of the room.

"Hi, hon."

It was Mom. He remembered how he'd called her Donna the Hon, even to her face, and he was suddenly ashamed.

"Hi."

"How are you?"

"Okay."

"How's Kenny?"

"Okay."

"Everything fine?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

He couldn't bring himself to ask about Stan.

"I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Yeah." Surely she knew Ken would call her if he got run over by the school bus or something.

"Well, hon, are you getting enough to eat?"

"Sure," he lied a little; it was spooky that she'd ask that, though. . . .

"Travis, you've got a letter here from a publishing house—you haven't been buying a lot of books or joined a book club?"

"Naw." Travis thought for a minute. "No—wait! Don't open it!"

"What is it?"

"I don't know." He paced in a small circle, dragging the phone, tripping over the cord. "I don't know. Just send it to me, okay? Don't open it."

"All right, hon. I'll get it in the mail tomorrow."

"Tonight."

"What?"

"Get it in the mail tonight, okay?"

"Well, hon, by the time we get through with dinner I think the post office will be closed."

Let the big slug skip dinner for once, Travis thought, but knew that was impossible. He couldn't think. He couldn't talk.

"Hon? I've got to get off the phone now, I promised Stan I wouldn't talk too long."

"Put it in the mail right now," Travis said slowly.

"Say hi to Kenny for me. I wish I could see his little boy. Send me a picture, okay?"

"Don't open it."

"Bye, hon."

Travis had trouble getting the phone back on the cradle, weird damn phone, shaped like a doughnut.

The book! The book! He was going to hear about the book he'd written! He'd tried hard just to forget about it, knowing it'd be a long time before he heard anything, but it had nagged at him like a dull toothache.

That was probably why he hadn't been able to write lately, he thought suddenly, why he hadn't really written anything since he'd sent the manuscript off. It was like something unfinished. . . .

He expected a rejection. All writers got lots of rejections. Hemingway had gotten about a million of them. He wasn't sure how many Stephen King got.

It was okay, getting a rejection. You wanted to

write, you just had to get used to it, like if you wanted to fight you had to take getting punched. He'd just send it to another publishing house, he had the next three places picked out already. What he was hoping for, really, that whoever read it this time would tell him something, anything, it was too long or too short or too—whatever. Why they didn't want it—that was all he was hoping for, this time.

But maybe they did. Maybe they were saying, "We'll publish it and here's a million dollars!" He had a strong desire to call Mom back, have her open it and read it to him. He wasn't going to be able to stand it.

No, she didn't even know he'd written a book, much less sent it off. She knew he wrote, sure, but seemed to think it was some weird phase he was going through, though after all these years you'd think . . .

No, it was his book and his letter, no matter what it said. Nobody needed to know anything. Just him and somebody in New York. For a second he wondered who . . .

Ken was grilling hot dogs on the Jenn-Air.

"Anything up?"

"Naw." Travis wished Ken weren't such a hard ass about letting him drink anything. He sure could use a slug of bourbon. "She just wanted to make sure everything was okay. Was I eating right, you know."

"I hope you lied." Ken took the mustard knife away from Christopher, who was trying to mustard the hot dogs still on the grill.

"Yeah, I did." He remembered something. "She said to say hi. She called you Kenny, made you sound like a little kid."

"She always did—called Tim, Timmy too. He swore when he had a kid, the name'd be something she couldn't put a y on."

"I thought she picked my name."

"She did, but Tim had to approve it. He was sure you were going to be a boy. . . . She got the name out of a book, didn't she? The MacDonald mystery series?"

"No, *Old Yeller*. The dog book."

"Tim used to tease her about all the books she read."

Mom reading? He hadn't seen her read anything except *Reader's Digest* and *National Enquirer* and those books that always had a picture of a pirate ripping the shirt off some girl. That wasn't *real* reading.

"Your mom was a real sweet girl. Pretty too. She thought Tim hung the moon."

Hung the moon. What a weird expression. Travis had never heard it.

"She's fat now," Travis said. He tried to think of Mom young, pretty, and reading, and couldn't do it. Young, pretty, and reading and thinking someone hung the moon. . . . Obviously she

thought a lot more of Stan than Travis could, but he wasn't any moon hanger.

"Come here," Ken said suddenly. He picked up Christopher and sat him on one of the high barstools at the center island table.

"Put your hand next to Chris's, open your fingers. See?"

Travis stared at the two hands, wondering . . . then he saw. Christopher's hand was a miniature of his own. The shape of the fingers, the set of the thumbs—Travis was startled to see even a lot of similarity in the palm prints.

"Wow."

"He's got Teresa's coloring and features, but my details: Ears, hands, feet."

"Let me see yours."

Again, an amazing resemblance. Travis thought: That's how my hand will look. But surely not that old.

"Do I remind you of my dad?"

"Just in looks. You're a lot quieter. Tim was a very . . . vivid personality."

"You guys get along?"

"Once a year."

"Why'd you let me come here?"

Ken met his eyes. Ken had light brown eyes, clear, like iced tea with the sun shining through.

"Why'd you want to come?"

And Travis knew exactly when the same thought went through both their minds: I thought you'd be Tim.

* * *

Federal Express, he thought, I should have told her to Federal-Express it. He couldn't eat, he'd hardly slept, and he couldn't expect the letter for two more days, anyway. It would have cost a lot of money, he wasn't sure how much, but he could have hocked his tape player—no, calm down, whatever the letter said it would say the same thing two days from now.

He went directly to the barn after he'd put in his time at school. The house was more peaceful, now that Christopher was gone, but Ken was in a bad mood. He was ticked off because Christopher had left saying a word he hadn't said before; Travis figured if Ken had cable TV like any normal person the kid would have said it long ago. Anyway, it was plain that returning Christopher to Teresa was what was really bothering him.

Anyway, it was fun down at the barn after the lessons, although the girls were sillier, louder, goofier, than any bunch of guys could be. And the second he walked in, they got sillier, louder, and goofier than ever. Kristen and Kelsey weren't twins, they just acted alike. Which meant they screamed a lot. Robyn had an incredible motor mouth (Travis realized that coke was at least partly to blame—she'd offered him a hit the second time he saw her), and Jennifer mostly giggled; to get her to squeal you only had to see—or pretend to see—a mouse.

Mary, the older lady, always left as soon as

she'd cooled off her horse, but unless there was a music, or ballet, or some other kind of lesson (Travis was amazed at how some days they absolutely ran from lesson to lesson), everybody hung around for a while.

Motorboat loved the barn. He'd spent a lot of his time there since the weekend—Christopher wasn't allowed in the barn. He lazed on the rafters or sat on a horse, doing happy paws—once in a while he brought out a mouse for Jennifer to squeal at.

Casey didn't seem to mind the noise, but usually she was too busy to add to it. She went straight to the little office-tack room. She kept an orderly record book—who had a lesson on what day, whose horse she was riding, vet records, horseshoe bills.

She either did that, or stopped down by the paddocks to stare at her big gray horse, the Star Runner. Everyone said the Star Runner was a mean dude—Travis hadn't seen Casey ride him, so all he could judge for himself was that the Star Runner was the only horse to have a paddock all to himself; he was the only horse who seemed to be constantly in motion, walking rapidly up and down, up and down.

Today Casey was in the office on the phone, oblivious to the noise.

"You know, you shouldn't smoke." Kristen had Charlie, her horse, untacked, ready to lead it out to the water pump for a shower. She paused be-

side Travis, then suddenly snatched his cigarette pack out of his T-shirt pocket.

"Come on, give 'em here."

"They're really bad for you." Kristen ducked to the other side of her horse, giggling.

Travis sighed. Now he'd have to go chase her around for a while, or give up his last pack. They weren't too easy to get around here.

"Give 'em here." He just straightened up off the wall, but Kristen shrieked as if he were lunging for her, and ran out of the barn with her horse trotting behind her.

"Hey, get back here," Travis shouted from the doorway. Damn dumb kid. He felt stupid having to chase her, and mad that she could make him do it.

Kristen grabbed the short mane of her horse and swung up. She used the lead rope for a bridle, dancing Charlie in a small circle. He snorted nervously.

"I'm going to throw them in the water tank and lengthen your life."

"Yeah, and you'll shorten yours. Get back here."

He took a step. Kristen screamed and kicked Charlie into a trot. It was muddy down by the water tank—all the pony kids had hosed their ponies off earlier.

She really is going to do it, the little jerk, Travis thought as he ran after her. As Kristen twisted around to throw the pack over the rail into the

water tank, the Star Runner, who had been trotting up and down at the far end of his paddock, charged the gate. He made a horrible squealing sound. With his head held low, swinging from side to side, his ears pinned flat, he seemed to Travis for a split second like some monstrous snake. . . .

Kristen's horse scrambled sideways, lost his footing in the mud, and fell with her. Then he rolled to his feet, trotted a few yards, and began to eat grass. Kristen lay still in the mud.

Well, she's dead, Travis thought, oddly detached, as he ran down the hill. She had to be, he'd seen the horse roll on her. But he ran on, hearing Jennifer scream, "Casey! Casey!"

She was alive, her eyes were open and she was moving her lips. There was something wrong, though. Even in his first quick relief he knew there was something wrong. . . .

"Don't move." Casey knelt beside her, pressing her back when she made a move to get up. How'd she get here so fast? he wondered. How . . . then he saw Kristen's leg, there was something strange about the angle of her right leg, something weird sticking through her jeans. . . .

He shivered, suddenly sick.

"What's wrong?" Kristen's voice sounded very young and breathless.

"What is it?"

"Your leg's broken," Casey said. "It's going to be okay, a broken leg heals. Travis."

He tore his eyes away from the bloody white piece of bone. He thought he was going to puke.

"Go call an ambulance. Tell Jennifer to call Kristen's mom, and tell her we're going to St. Francis Hospital. You can call nine-one-one for the ambulance. Got it?"

"Yeah." Having something to do cleared his mind.

"Casey, it hurts." Kristen sounded astonished and a little miffed.

"Sure it hurts," Travis heard Casey reply as he started back to the barn at a run. "It's probably going to hurt worse in a minute."

He rushed past a white-faced Jennifer to call nine-one-one. He had a hard time remembering the address and the operator got a little sharp with him.

Jennifer flatly refused to call Kristen's mom, so he had to do that too. He could see why: Kristen's mom went into hysterics and it was obvious that would have sent Jennifer into them too.

He got the mom off the phone and on her way to the hospital, had Jennifer sitting quietly on a tack box whispering, "I can't handle this," told Robyn to take care of Kristen's horse, made Kelsey go home instead of hanging around getting in the way.

Then he grabbed a horse blanket to take down to Casey. He'd seen a wreck once, everybody was putting blankets on everybody.

Kristen was whimpering by now, and Travis

couldn't blame her, wanting to whimper himself every time he caught sight of her leg. Casey held her hand, talking quietly: "I know it hurts really bad, Kristen, but pretty soon you'll be at the hospital and they'll give you something: Just think, this time tomorrow it will barely hurt at all. Just hold on a little bit longer—"

It seemed more than a little bit longer to Travis by the time the ambulance arrived. Kristen screamed while they put her on the stretcher, and he thought he'd rather have the broken leg himself than be a helpless witness to it.

As the doors shut Casey said, "You know how many times I've told those kids not to fool around with the horses? I wish it'd been her goddamn neck."

Travis, almost shaking with reaction, could have slugged her. Then the lights and the siren went on, and the Star Runner, who'd been dancing up and down the far side of his paddock, took two giant strides across it and cleared the top rail. He also cleared Travis.

"Goddamn," Travis breathed. He ducked, seconds late. He watched the gray horse thunder down the pasture road, clear the gate, and disappear over the ridge.

"Goddamn."

"I knew he was going to do that," Casey said.

"Yeah? Well, thanks for the warning." Travis glanced at her. It could have been his neck—

Her head thrown back against the sky was a

thing to stop your heart. Transfixed like a saint by a vision, Casey watched the empty horizon.

Travis suddenly knew why they called it falling in love. It did feel like falling, helpless, half terror and half exhilaration. Wishing desperately to call it off, Travis, wishing it undone, calling it stupid, senseless, hopeless, everything but a mistake, knew he was in love.

“That sucker can jump, can’t he?” Casey asked. The joyful intensity of her voice made his pulse leap.

“Yeah.” He choked, kicking around in the mud for his cigarettes, not daring to look at her any longer.

He hadn’t known it was going to feel like this. It was going to take getting used to.

Chapter

5

. . . I think you have captured a certain spirit here very closely. . . .

It wasn't a rejection slip. He'd known it wasn't a rejection slip before he tore open the two envelopes. It was too long to be "We regret that your work doesn't meet our needs at present," or whatever a rejection slip said—he knew a rejection slip would be short and thin like a fortune in a cookie. This was a real letter, whatever it said; someone thought enough of the book to write him a real letter.

And flawed though it is, some of its flaws are as interesting as its virtues. I would like to speak to you personally about the possibility of publishing your work. . . .

That meant yes. They were going to publish it.

Travis still stood at the end of the driveway where the school bus had left him. He usually checked the mailbox anyway, it was a long hike down to the house and Ken had asked him to—Ken invariably forgot and had to go back for it. Travis had been surprised to find how eagerly he looked forward to the mail—even letters from Mom. But today he'd slipped his hand into the short silver tunnel gingerly, as though expecting a snake. . . .

I am going out of town for a few weeks and if possible, I'd like to visit you and discuss this with you.

My number is 212-555-4200.

Sincerely

Eleanor Carmichael

Editor-in-Chief

Travis walked up to the house, unsure of what he'd read, the words that were used, but just about positive that they meant he was going to get published. He'd sold his book. He stopped on the front step to read it again. Yeah, that's what it said. Possibility, hell, some New York bigwig wasn't going to fly out here and "discuss" with him unless they were pretty damn serious!

Fly out here. They had his old address at home, not this one. He was a lot farther away now. Maybe she couldn't make it now!

He dialed the number and got an operator tell-

ing him to dial 1 before the area code. Hell, he'd never dialed long distance before, nobody'd ever told him that.

"Eleanor Carmichael's office," a voice announced.

"I want to talk to her, Eleanor Carmichael."

"Who's calling please?"

"Travis Harris. She wrote me a letter—"

"Just a moment."

Travis danced in a small circle, suddenly wishing he'd gone to the bathroom before calling.

"This is Eleanor Carmichael."

"Yeah. This is Travis Harris. I got your letter."

"I was wondering when I'd hear from you."

"I moved, I live in Oklahoma now, I just got the letter. Can you come out here?"

"If you're between New York and L.A. I can."

"Yeah, I think we are. Uh, Mrs. Carmichael, you going to publish it?"

"Ms."

"What?"

"Ms. Carmichael. Well, Travis, I'd like to speak to you in person. There're a few things I'd like to discuss. The profanity, for one thing, will severely limit the market—but as I said, I'd rather talk to you in person."

"Sure. Okay. But tell me, like I clean up the language and stuff, you'll probably publish it, right?"

There was a short sigh. "I should have known

from your novel . . . Yes, if we can agree on some revision, we'd like to publish it."

Travis remained silent, trying to understand. This was really happening. . . .

"I want you to understand, there's usually not a lot of money involved for a first novel—don't go out and buy a Porsche. But if we can get this to the right audience, I think word of mouth might be terrific. . . . Travis, are you still there?"

"Yeah."

"Have you told anyone?"

"There's nobody here to tell."

"Oh. Well, I'll write soon and let you know when I'll be there. Can I have your new address and phone?"

After he hung up he dialed Mom. She'd be nuts. He'd like to see the look on Stan's face. There was nobody home. He called Joe. He'd be nuts. There was nobody home. He called Ken at the office and his secretary said he was in a meeting. Travis was having trouble breathing. He walked around and around in circles.

Motorboat jumped up on the sofa and Travis grabbed him and shook him. "I sold my book! I sold my book!"

Motorboat twisted loose and ran.

He might as well tell Casey—she'd be down at the barn by now. He might as well tell her, she'd find out anyway.

He had to tell somebody.

Jennifer and Kelsey were hanging on the arena rails.

"Hey," he said. "Guess . . . What's going on?"

Casey was riding the Star Runner. He had never seen her ride him before. She was cantering him around in a small circle while a lady stood on the side.

"More inside leg, Case. You need more bend."

"What's going on?" he repeated. He kept looking at the Star Runner's face. He could swear it was seething with rage.

"Oh, look at that frame!" Kelsey sighed. "He's so beautiful."

Beautiful, yes. Breathtakingly beautiful—but for a second Travis had a cold, irrational fear: This was no flesh-and-blood animal at all, but something demonic. . . .

Casey sat deep in the saddle, using her whole body, back, legs, shoulders, to maintain that hold, her will against his will.

"Casey's taking a riding lesson?"

"Dressage," Jennifer said. "It's a real technical form of equitation."

"Good, Casey. Very good. Downward transition to a walk." The instructor dropped her voice as Casey came up to talk.

"I just don't see how Casey can stand it. He just hates all this. He's never going to love her."

Travis was remembering some of the stories he'd been hearing around the barn, about the

Star Runner, bits and pieces he hadn't paid much attention to before.

How he'd been a lunatic horse, practically given away off the racetrack, how he'd jump out of his paddock to race alone in the pasture. Casey's biggest fear was he'd kill himself running one of these hot days—he didn't know how to stop running. The kids wouldn't go near him. Only Robyn was brave enough, or stupid enough, or stoned enough, to groom him. He'd bitten one of the handlers at the track, tearing off a chunk of flesh—Casey herself had a scar on her forehead, he'd reared up on her while she was leading him. Casey, laughing, called it the mark of the beast.

"Don't be silly, Jenna," Kelsey was saying. "Casey doesn't care if he loves her."

Casey rode next to where they were standing, her face abstracted and intent.

"Casey, you don't care if the Star Runner loves you, right?" Kelsey asked.

Travis couldn't believe she had the nerve to break in on Casey's exhilaration. He knew the feeling. Like walking to the front step after a good chapter and finding the guys blithering about getting laid, getting drunk.

Casey didn't have time to connect to what she was saying before Kelsey went on, "You just want him to love jumping, right?"

Travis said, "She wants him to do it because he *can* do it."

Casey stared at him for a second, startled.

Okay, he thought, staring back, I do know you better than anyone else does. Think that over, lady.

He turned and walked off. He didn't want to tell her about the book right now. Jennifer and Kelsey would get silly excited, but Casey, right now, would say, "Yeah? That's great," or something offhand that would make him mad. He didn't want to be mad right now. He didn't want to be mad, and didn't want to hear that a damn dumb, crazy gray horse was more important than his book.

His book. He'd sold his book. For a few minutes there he'd been sidetracked, but it came flooding back over him now, and he knew what he wanted to do. Right now. As soon as he could.

He wanted to party till he puked.

He had never hitchhiked much at home, he hadn't needed to, his hangouts were in walking distance even if he hadn't had friends with wheels. And he didn't know anywhere to go, here.

He sipped a water-glass full of whiskey while he thought it over. Crown Royal was great, he decided, pouring a Coke-bottle full to take with him. It was just going to waste here; he'd never seen Ken drink anything more than a couple of beers.

He finished his glass with a couple of quick gulps. Hell, he'd just ask his ride where to go.

It was too hot for his leather jacket but he wore it anyway. He needed a place to stash his Coke bottle. Besides . . . besides, between the jacket,

and the whiskey, and news about his book, he was starting to feel like his old self again.

He ended up on a really good street. That was the good news. There were several clubs with live music, a couple of packed restaurants, and the clientele seemed to be pretty upscale; it didn't look like he'd have to spend the evening worrying about getting jumped.

The bad news was, it looked like the only thing open to somebody his age was the Quik Trip. He had a fake ID, but it gave his age as eighteen, so it was no good here. He strolled up and down the street a few times, checking things out, making a game plan.

One club was so packed that people spilled out onto the parking lot and sidewalks, wandering around with drinks in their hands, laughing and yelling to each other. It was hard to tell exactly where the club began and ended. These people probably were twenty-one, but not much more than that; he didn't feel conspicuous at all, hanging around the edges.

He bummed a cigarette, asked about the band, kept an eye on the doorway where the IDs were being checked. It wasn't too long before he had a chance to slip in.

He played it cool, squeezing into the back of the crowd, staying away from the bartenders. He picked up an empty glass to pour his whiskey into; when one of the harried cocktail waitresses saw him, she assumed *someone* had checked his ID

when he bought a drink. It looked like he was going to get away with it. He relaxed and surveyed the scene.

It was the worst possible place for live music. The acoustics were so bad it was like being in a tin cave, and unless you were right up front you couldn't even see the band. But the music didn't seem to be important.

People stood around in small groups and yelled in each other's ears, the guys checked out the chicks, the chicks looked the guys over, sometimes the two groups ran together. They all seemed incredibly dumb to Travis. But then, when he had been ten, teenagers had seemed incredibly dumb, and by the time he was twelve he was dying to be one—maybe it was going to be like that.

Right now he couldn't imagine giving up hanging out for this kind of scene.

He bummed a Virginia Slim from a couple of girls.

"You look awfully young to be in here." The redhead, in tight jeans, high heels, and T-shirt, kept wiggling around to the music. She obviously wanted to dance.

"I just turned twenty-one today," Travis said. "I'm celebrating."

"Really? All by yourself?"

"I'm new in town—just started law school."

God, it felt good, the whiskey, the music, the telling of a story; it was like he'd been walking in

his sleep the whole time he'd been here, up till now.

"So you're a Virgo, huh?" The dark-haired girl was a little drunk.

"Do you know Jim Beals?" said the redhead. "He's in law school."

"I don't think so. I just started—you ever heard of Morris and Harris? That's my uncle's firm."

"Oh, yeah, I've heard of them."

"I wouldn't have thought you'd be a Virgo. I would have said Aquarius."

Travis almost jumped—he *was* an Aquarius. But he just shook his head.

"This is the first night I've been out since I moved to town. Any other good hangouts?"

They talked awhile longer—Travis trying to remember lawyer-type words he'd heard Ken use. The girls insisted on buying him a birthday drink—he went to the john when they called the waitress over. He'd never had a margarita before, it was pretty good stuff. They kept talking. When it was time for the next round he gave them the money for it and headed off for the john again. They probably thought he was tooting up or had the world's weakest bladder.

He got drunk enough to make a big mistake—he told them about his book. The dark-haired girl had been skeptical from the first, but he and the redhead had been having fun; now he lost them both.

"Oh, yeah, sure, you have a book coming out."

And when he kept insisting—dammit, he had to tell somebody—they started disbelieving *everything*. He knew exactly when it dawned on them he wasn't twenty-one either. He'd lapsed into talking like sixteen and couldn't stop it.

They finally said they were going to the ladies' room. Of course they had to go together. He spotted them twenty minutes later with some other guys.

So what? He found an empty chair at the back of the room, almost got into a fight over it—people were lurking like vultures to pounce on empty chairs.

He was in a crowd and still lonesome. It was as bad as school. He wished he'd told Casey after all, it would have been better than wasting it on those bimbos. He tried to picture Casey in this place. . . .

"Let's see your ID."

Travis looked up, startled. Some guy with a beard was glaring down at him.

Travis searched his pockets.

"Uh, I guess I lost it. Maybe in the john. I'll go see—"

The guy hauled him up by his jacket and shoved him toward the door.

The crowd had thinned out quite a bit, and Travis wondered what time it was.

"Gary, did you let this kid in here?"

They paused by the doorman.

"Hell, no."

Gary followed them outside. Travis assumed he was kicked out and was ready to go anyway, but the guy still had a grip on his jacket.

"He didn't come up through the drainpipes. How'd you get in here?" He shook Travis like a stray cat.

"Oh, you know, I walked—"

"You didn't walk by me, man," Gary said.

"Who sold you drinks?"

This is getting real boring, Travis thought.

"Look, I'm new in town, I didn't know what your drinking age is."

"It sure as hell ain't fifteen, man."

"I could lose my license over this, dammit! You know what kind of money I put in this place? What kind of money I *borrowed* to put in this place?"

He was shouting at Gary but shaking Travis, who was having a hard time standing up anyway.

"Who sold you drinks?"

"Nobody, really man, I brought my own. . . ." He searched through his jacket, then vaguely remembered he'd left the empty Coke bottle on a table.

"Look, nothing's happened—" Gary began.

"Something's happened all right—you're fired."

He finally let go of Travis and stormed back into the club. Gary and Travis stared at each other.

"And you're dead meat," Gary said, and

slugged him. Travis went down on his butt, then flipped backward and cracked his head on the parking lot.

It had been too long since he'd been in a fight, he decided. He'd forgotten how much it hurt to get punched.

"Get me fired, will you? I needed this job—"

Travis rolled to avoid getting kicked, got to his feet, and flew into Gary with a couple of swift jabs. He had the satisfaction of seeing both surprise and blood before getting knocked on his ass again. This time he wasn't fast enough to miss getting kicked.

If I wasn't drunk I could take him, he thought. Then: God, don't let me be killed before my book's published.

The owner came back out and pulled Gary away.

Travis lay there and listened to them yelling at each other.

At least it wasn't my nose, Travis thought, curled up around his cracked ribs like a worm on a stick. He coulda really ruined my face.

It was a while before he felt like moving. For one thing, he wanted to make sure both those guys were gone. He thought they were, then heard their voices again.

"Okay, okay, you're not fired. But you know what I did, man. I put my *house* on the line for this place. My goddamn house."

"I didn't let that kid in. Mike shoulda spotted him."

"They say they never spotted him."

"It was a packed house, man."

"Yeah, we pulled in the big bucks. . . . Sherry might have seen him. She says not, though. I coulda lost my house."

Travis listened, not moving, not calling attention to himself. He decided that all those years of writing, all that last year of working on the book, clobbering Stan, it was all a predictable chain of events leading up to this guy losing his house.

This is so totally weird, man, he thought. His face felt sticky. He hoped it was blood and not motor oil.

"And did you have to beat the kid up? Look at him. What if the cops come by?"

They were closer now.

"He had it comin'!"

"Okay." The owner was squatting down beside him. "Where do you live?"

"Cleveland," Travis muttered.

"Then forget me calling a cab."

"No." Travis rolled himself into a scrunched sitting position, huddling in his jacket. "Could you call my uncle?"

"Geez, Gary, you really whopped up on him."

"He had it comin'."

"I'm okay. Could you call my uncle?"

Travis was really tired of this scene. He dreaded the coming hangover.

When the owner left to call Ken, Gary kicked him again. "You had it comin'."

Travis didn't even feel it.

I sold my book. He clutched at the thought like a drowning man at a raft. He wanted to be somewhere quiet to think about it.

It wasn't on the ride home. He had never seen Ken this mad. The only thing saving him was Christopher sleeping in his car seat—Ken had to keep it down a little. Travis had forgotten Christopher was going to be at the ranch this weekend.

Ken pulled up at the back door. He paused for the first time since Travis had staggered into the car.

"Well."

"Well what?" Travis winced as he popped the door open.

"You have anything to say?"

"Yeah, I sure am glad I didn't have to listen to all that sober."

For a second Travis felt a stab of fear at the look on Ken's face. But somehow he came up with the bravado he'd faced the cops with.

"Chill out, man," he said. "It's my life."

He and Ken stared at each other in the white glare of the car's interior light. Travis waited, shivering, though he wasn't cold. . . .

"I used to say that," Ken said. There wasn't any irony in his voice at all, only a half-laughing wonder. "I remember saying that."

Later, watching the room spin, wishing he could throw up, Travis felt strangely comforted. It was really weird, but ever since Ken yelled at him, he hadn't seemed so lonesome anymore.

Chapter 6

His head felt like it was going to pulsate wide open, like a special effect in a horror movie. It was the price you had to pay for the party, he told himself, as he had many times before. You don't get something for nothing. But since the "something" seemed to be a swollen jaw, sore ribs, and a vague memory of talking to some girls, the price seemed a little steep.

Especially since Ken was still on his back. Travis sipped his orange juice and chewed his toast in silence, listening to Ken, thinking: Just as long as he doesn't kick me out. . . .

"I've got enough worries without chasing around after some drunk kid in the middle of the night."

"Look, man, I'm sorry they woke you up, I just couldn't think of who else to call."

“They didn’t wake me up. I was already awake—wondering where the hell you were, what the hell you were doing, and asking myself why the hell had I let myself in for this.”

“Why did you?” Travis asked. He’d started out with good intentions, but he was ready to chuck them. “And no more of this irony bullshit.”

Ken looked slightly surprised that he knew the word *irony*. Then he sat down on the bar-stool across the island table. . . .

Finally he said, “The last time I saw Tim, we had a big fight. I guess you’ve figured out we didn’t see eye to eye on the war. And the last thing I said to him was ‘I hope you get blown right out of the sky, you fascist baby killer.’

“I wake up sometimes hearing those words. That’s why you’re here. And that’s probably why you can still stay.”

He picked up his coffee cup and left for the den.

Travis sat there. It was really weird, how he’d think he knew how he felt about things, then suddenly there’d be a sharp turn, and he’d end up in a place he wasn’t expecting. Like his feelings were a bumper car, he’d have a grip on the steering wheel, and it still didn’t go in the direction he’d thought it would.

It was raining. Casey wouldn’t be giving lessons today. Maybe he’d go down to the barn later.

He poured himself another cup of coffee and went to the den.

Ken had Christopher on his lap, watching He-Man cartoons.

"Hey, I know what," Travis said. "You can ground me."

Ken smiled in spite of himself. Christopher wiggled off his lap to act out the cartoon, waving an imaginary sword at the villains.

"You know," Ken said, "one of the reasons I'm glad I waited so long to have a kid is, by the time he's a teenager, hopefully, I'll be too senile to care what he's doing. And, hopefully, I'll have forgotten what it's like to be one. Its been spooky enough, hearing myself say things to Chris that my parents said to me. Now I'm hearing things from you I remember saying. 'It's my life'—God, I remember that. And it doesn't seem so long ago either."

He absentmindedly switched channels. Bugs Bunny was blowing up Daffy Duck. Chris screamed in protest. "No more He-Man," Ken said. "Too violent."

The commercial seemed to appease Christopher immediately. "I want one of those," he said.

"In fact," Ken said to Travis, "I remember what it was like so vividly I feel like Achilles, in the *Iliad*, coming back from the land of the dead, like I've come back to tell you what it's like in the land of grown-ups."

"Not the *Iliad*," Travis said absently. The coffee was chewing a hole in his stomach. "The next

one, where what's-his-name is trying to get home."

"My God," Ken said, slightly thunderstruck, "you're literate!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm real literate." Travis finally remembered what it was that had caused this whole thing. "That's why I had to celebrate last night. I sold my book."

"What book?"

"I wrote this book and sent it to a publisher and it's going to get published. So I was trying to celebrate."

Ken looked skeptical. "Sorry, kid, I haven't gotten the impression you could write a compound sentence. You wrote a book?"

"Yeah, I write all the time. I'm really good at it too. Want to see the letter they sent me?"

He pulled the crushed envelope from his back pocket. A little mashed since he'd slept in his clothes, but still in one piece.

"You wrote a book all by yourself?" Ken scanned the letter quickly.

"Yeah, and I talked to Mrs.—Ms. Carmichael yesterday and she's coming here to talk about it."

"Why didn't you call me? I'd have joined you in a light beer or something. This is great!"

Finally there was someone to get excited with him. "I tried to, but you were in a meeting or something. And Mom wasn't home. Nobody was here. I just wanted to move for a while."

"You could have left a message—you haven't signed anything yet?"

Travis shook his head as he lit up a cigarette.

"Don't sign anything until I read it."

"Okay. But I want to talk to the publisher by myself, when she gets here." Travis looked for an ashtray for his match and ended up stuffing it in his pocket.

"Sure. Sure. I can't believe this! I wonder if it's some kind of record, at your age? Call your mom."

Ken paused, then said, "You know, you could be dead from those things by the time you're fifty."

"Hopefully," Travis said, in a very good imitation, "I'll be too senile to care."

"Flirting with death," Ken said. "I remember doing that." But he didn't sound mad.

Travis remembered, on his way to the kitchen phone, that he'd meant to let Ken know he was sorry about last night—he was, too, because in a funny kind of way he cared about his uncle now, more than just as someone who was keeping him out of a juvenile home. Somehow, he thought he had, though nothing had been said.

He called Mom and listened impatiently to her dazed exclamations, and spent more time than he should have on a call to Joe, who mainly wanted to know how much money he would get, would he sell it to the movies, would Travis get to be in *People* magazine?

Although Travis had asked himself the same questions, he hung up peeved and restless. Nobody, absolutely nobody, seemed to grasp what this meant. It meant he really was a *writer*.

Well, hell, he thought, *he'd* known that since second grade.

He got cleaned up and went down to the barn—he was anxious to see Casey (he still half thought, maybe half hoped, he wasn't in love with her)—and he was anxious to get away from Christopher, who was nagging him to play trucks. Ten minutes of playing trucks was all Travis could stand.

He wasn't surprised to see that the Star Runner was still in his paddock, in spite of the rain—in his stall he kicked the walls until the rest of the horses were nervous wrecks. Casey kept putting him in the stall to eat, she said he had to be stalled at the shows so he had to get used to it, but it had to be pretty bad weather for her to bring him in for a long time.

God, he's big, Travis thought, hurrying by him. The Star Runner stood staring over the top of the gate. You didn't notice how big he was until you stood next to him, because of his proportions. Nothing gangly, or too heavy—a perfectly streamlined horse. Only big.

He finally noticed Travis, whirled, and flashed across the paddock, splattering mud.

"Thanks a lot," Travis muttered, brushing off his jacket, then wiping his hands on his jeans. He

jogged into the barn and almost bumped into the white pony.

"Hey, Silver Hawk, what are you doin', wandering around loose?" He looked around, grabbed a halter off a stall door, and fastened it around the pony's head. Silver Hawk, who had the disposition of a cocker spaniel, stood docilely, snuffling Travis's pockets for carrots.

"Hey, Casey?" he yelled. One of the stall doors was open, the wheelbarrow parked outside. Travis knew by now that if you had to clean a stall with the horse still in it, you used the wheelbarrow to block the door. Something is really weird here, he thought. "Casey?"

Robyn stepped out of the stall. She wasn't wearing a shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra.

"Casey went to the feed store."

Travis said, "Oh."

He hadn't noticed the Jeep was gone. He remembered one time Kirk yanking him out of the street, saving him from a passing truck, laughing. "You'll walk into a burning building, someday. . . ."

He remembered that, listened to the rain, felt the pony's nose nudging him, and all the while he never took his eyes off Robyn.

"I got hot," she said. "I've been strip-searched for drugs four times. I've got to where I'm good at taking my clothes off."

Travis knew she was stoned. He'd never liked

Robyn, never understood why Casey had hired her.

Well, hell, he thought, looking around for a place to tie the pony, what's "like" got to do with it?

"Robyn"—Casey's voice behind him made him jump—"you're fired."

She didn't sound mad, but she did sound final.

"Okay." Robyn dropped her shovel, picked up her shirt, and walked out of the barn. Travis felt his face flaming. He hadn't even thought of Casey coming in.

Casey took the pony's lead rope and put him back in the stall.

"I should have done that a long time ago."

"Listen," said Travis, "I didn't have anything to do with that."

"Good. No tellin' what you would have caught."

"Why'd you ever hire her, anyway?"

"She used to be a really good rider," Casey said. "She was one of the best."

Travis had heard before that Robyn rode, but one of the best?

"We both started training with Jessie Quincy when we were twelve. Robyn was a natural. As good as I was, believe it or not. You want a job?"

"Me? Doin' what?"

"Stable hand, groom—I'm not proposing. And if I ask you to water the horses, you don't hose them down."

Travis saw she wasn't trying to bug him, and grinned wryly. "Yeah, I'd like a job."

"Think you can learn to tell a pelham from a snaffle?"

"Sure. Those different kinds of horses?"

Casey sighed. "Different kinds of bits."

"That's the part that goes in their mouth, right?"

Casey rolled her eyes.

"Look," Travis said, "I can learn that stuff. I used to work for a vet, I'm good with animals."

"Okay. There's the shovel, there's the stalls." Casey turned to go into the tack room.

"Hey, Casey."

She stopped.

"Whatever happened to her, Robyn?"

"Everything wonderful. She was winning like crazy, her dad was buying her thirty-thousand-dollar horses, flying her to Dallas every weekend to ride with a big trainer, putting her on the Arizona circuit, aiming her toward the Olympics . . ."

Travis waited for the tragedy. Maybe the dad died. Maybe a crippling fall. . . .

"The catch was, Robyn didn't want all that. She wanted to ride for fun, not ride for her dad's ego trip. It was like her riding wasn't *hers* anymore. You've got to have talent to do this, but you've got to have will too. It was like the only way out of it for her was to get fat and fried. Well, I had to get

rid of her. It could have been one of the pony moms walking in just now.”

Travis picked up the shovel, writing up Robyn’s story in his head. He’d give the dad a mustache, and a silver Rolls. . . .

He opened the stall door, and wished, again, that he didn’t have a hangover.

The barn was quiet, except for the rain drumming lightly on the roof. Casey never had the radio on when she was here alone. He could hear her on the phone with a pony parent. It amazed him how patient she was with the parents. Anxious parents, pushy parents, parents who seemed to think buying lessons meant buying the trainer—some were okay, and tried to be helpful, but once, after listening to a mother raving about a ribbonless show—was it the pony’s fault, did she need a new pony? And, it was implied, a new trainer?—Travis said, “Why do you put up with that stuff?”

Casey replied, “It’s my paycheck. I need to earn a living. It comes with the territory. If it was just training horses, it wouldn’t be work.”

Now he listened to her explaining why a class of five couldn’t be rescheduled around one grandparent’s visit and thought: Whatever they’re paying her, it’s not enough.

He’d also been listening to a dog barking outside, Ken’s old Labrador by the sound of it, and it seemed to be getting more and more excited.

Travis decided to go take a look. Maybe Motorboat had caught a rabbit, which seemed to be one of his great goals in life lately.

It was the biggest snake he'd ever seen, coiled and lunging at the dog, who jumped and kept barking.

Biggest, hell. As far as he knew it was the only snake he'd ever seen, and he couldn't account for the revulsion and almost mindless terror that he felt.

And then he saw Motorboat, flattened into a stalking position, eyes glittering, creeping up by fractions of inches, getting ready to go in for the kill.

He had the shovel in his hands, swinging the edge at the snake, yelling at the dog to get back, knowing he was going to trip over the damn mutt and fall right on top of the snake. He got the head pinned as Motorboat leapt on the thrashing body, grasping with his teeth, thumping hard with his hind claws. The head was severed with a sickening crunch before Travis realized he was using all his strength on the shovel handle.

The headless body still twisted, Motorboat still fought it, and Travis ran back into the barn to get Casey. He slid to a stop, thinking: If the body was still moving, the head . . .

He turned back. The Lab was barking at Motorboat now, who seemed to be torn between batting the snake's body and clawing the dog.

The snake's head lay in the wet grass, and

Travis poked at it with the shovel, intending to scoop it up and put it in the trash barrel. Suddenly it seemed to disappear. Travis lifted the shovel, searching the ground. Then he saw that the severed head had bitten onto the edge of the shovel, and hung there, staring at him.

"Goddamn." He half sobbed, shuddering, sickened, amazed. He didn't throw the shovel, screaming, although the thought flashed across his mind. He carried the head to the trash burner and shook it off.

Casey was standing in the doorway.

"That was a water moccasin. They're poisonous, did you know that?"

"I knew it was a snake." Travis shrugged off the creeps. She was looking at him like he was a person, not a nephew, a hired hand.

"Pretty brave," she said.

The excitement of the fight was ebbing, leaving him chilled and nauseated. But he went back into the barn to finish the stalls.

Brave. It wasn't a word Casey used lightly.

He was on his way through the house to the shower when the phone rang. He picked it up on the third ring, not sure if Ken was home or not, and was surprised to hear Mom's voice. He'd just talked to her, and Stan was a real miser about long-distance calls.

"Honey," she said finally, after all the how-are-

yous and how's-everyones, "Stan wants to read your book."

"I'll send him a copy." Travis grinned, picturing the way he'd autograph it.

"No, I mean, he wants to read it now, before it's published." Her voice faded and picked up. "He wants to make sure there's nothing in it about him."

For a moment Travis froze. Then he said quite calmly, "Well, he can't. I don't need his okay on my book. It's got nothing to do with him."

"Travis, hon, don't be upset, but you know you can't sign a contract until you're eighteen, I'll have to sign for you—"

"And you won't until Stan reads it, right?"

The phone hammered against his head and Travis had to grip it with both hands. "Well, he won't read it! I'll burn it first! I should have killed him when I had the chance!"

He could still hear Mom nattering away but couldn't make out a single word.

His fingers itched for the fire poker. "Goddamn it! Goddamn it!"

He yanked the phone off the wall and slammed it across the room.

It barely missed Teresa, who seemed to have materialized out of nowhere.

It barely missed Christopher.

Chapter

7

He couldn't stop pacing around in his room, because when he did he could feel his heart pounding so violently it scared him. He'd heard of kids his age having heart attacks. . . .

He didn't want to die now, not until he had one more crack at Stan—goddamn him! Motorboat had picked up on the vibes and was racing around the room too. Travis envied the way he could climb the curtains, jump up the walls, rip the stuffing out of the chair when he paused to sharpen his claws—Travis would have liked to be doing those same things.

Travis could hear, distantly, Teresa and Ken arguing. At one time he would have given anything to get an earful of a fight between those two to see what the deal really was: but now—

"You're not leaving him here with *him*, you're leaving him here with *me*," Ken said.

Travis heard that one, along with Christopher's crying. The whole damn house was a storm center, just because of that beer-bellied jerk hundreds of miles from here. He'd get even. You bet he'd get even. If he had to hitchhike back, steal a gun, buy an axe—

After what could have been minutes, or hours, Travis came out. It had been quiet awhile, Teresa was gone. He wanted to tell Ken what Stan was pulling. Maybe there was something legal he could do about it. Boy, he bet Ken would be mad—

And Ken did listen to him with that preoccupied silence that was a sure sign of fury. He listened to Travis's railings against Stan, his outrage at Mom's betrayal, his threats. They were dealing with somebody dangerous, now, man. He had nothing to lose! He'd burn that book if he had to, burn it page by page before he asked Stan's approval. Ken would talk to Mom, right? Ken would help him—

"I'll help you pack and drive you to the airport, that's what's going to happen."

Travis had a sudden flash: Ken's anger didn't have much to do with Stan. He sat down and stared across the coffee table at his uncle.

"Do you think I'll let you stay here and mess up my chances with Christopher? Teresa's going to fight me for custody and she'll use the fact that

I'm obviously living with a dangerous delinquent. Except after today I'm not going to be. Get packed."

Travis felt sick. There was nowhere for him. Mom would choose Stan, Ken would choose Christopher, anytime he started feeling safe, someone would jerk the ground out from under him. To his own horror and surprise he burst into tears.

"I thought you liked me." He sobbed, knowing he sounded like a baby, a girl, a moron, and tried to straighten up, get it together, but he was just too goddamn tired.

He'd thought he had been pretty brave through all this mess, had half hoped someone was going to pin a medal on him; but the truth was, everyone was too busy elsewhere.

"Oh, geez," he heard Ken mutter.

Travis got to his feet and managed to say, "I'll get ready."

He didn't know where Ken had put his suitcase, so he just started piling stuff on his bed. He wondered if he could live at home for a little while, at least till he bashed Stan again, before he was sent to the reformatory. But maybe Stan would get him first this time.

He couldn't stop crying. All the crying he hadn't done before was stored up, waiting for a chance like this, he hadn't even known he was carrying it around. But he knew it now.

I sold my book.

That wasn't any comfort now. It'd never get published, not till years from now when he was eighteen. Or maybe—he could admit it now—there was a possibility he'd break down, let Stan read it, get his goddamn approval. . . . Travis thought of trying to go on living after a humiliation like that. His spirit broken, not special anymore, nothing of his own. . . .

I'll rot in jail first, he thought. I'll kill myself, and I won't burn it. It'll get published.

Then he thought of what it was going to be like, never seeing Casey again. And Ken. He really *had* thought Ken liked him. . . .

"Look." Ken had opened the door, or maybe Travis had forgotten to shut it. "At least tell me why you threw the phone at Christopher."

Travis wiped his face with his old Led Zeppelin T-shirt. It was too small for him now, anyway.

"I didn't. I didn't see them. I was just so mad . . . I wasn't aiming at Christopher."

"Teresa said they'd been standing there a few minutes, you were ranting and raving over the phone, then you threw it at them. You mean you didn't see them all that time?"

"No, I was talking to Mom."

Ken stood there quietly. Travis hated the sound of his own snuffles, and blew his nose into the shirt. "Why would I throw a phone at Christopher, anyway?" He gulped.

"Well, Teresa thinks you're on drugs."

"I'm not on drugs. I don't even *like* drugs."

Which was basically true, although the one time he'd tried cocaine, he'd liked it so much it scared him. He'd seen people get to where all they thought about was that stuff and how to get it. Picturing himself throwing everything away like that scared him enough to never do it again.

"And you swear you didn't see them?"

"I was talking."

"Some people might find it hard to believe you can't talk and see at the same time," Ken said.

Travis held his breath. Maybe . . . maybe . . .

"But I've been around you long enough to believe it. You just look so normal it's easier to believe you're drugged instead of eccentric."

Eccentric. Travis connected that word with little old ladies living with hundreds of uncaged birds, or some professor with his lunch money pinned to his suit. . . .

"I'll talk to Teresa. Maybe we can give it another try. You just don't know how dirty a fight can get when it's about your kid."

That's right, Travis thought bitterly, I wouldn't know.

But he said, "Thanks."

Ken said, "Listen, one more thing. You do like drinking."

"Well, yeah, but I can usually hold it pretty good. I can usually put everybody under the table."

"That's one of the earliest signs of alcoholism. I don't know if anyone's told you," Ken said slowly, "but you're genetically programmed to be an alcoholic. Our dad—your grandfather—died in a veterans' hospital of cirrhosis. And now you've joined a profession that seems to encourage it, if I remember my English lit courses. I'd watch it if I were you."

So. His grandfather had been an alcoholic, huh? Ken was right, all the big-name writers seemed to be boozers. . . .

"How about my dad?"

"No, Tim was—actually Tim was capable of knocking back a few, in the right mood, who knows what . . . You know that saying Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse? Cirrhosis is not all that fast, and what you leave's not pretty."

Great. Just when you were onto a good story, it turns into a lecture.

"Achilles says: What sometimes sounds like a lecture, is sometimes just the truth."

Travis jumped with surprise.

"I'm telling you, kid, it doesn't seem like that long ago, I was there."

Ken paused. "I'll talk to Teresa," he repeated.

The tears still wouldn't quit coming, although he wasn't sobbing anymore. Travis wadded the shirt around for a clean spot. "Tell her I'll piss in a bottle for her anytime."

He hadn't meant to be funny, but Ken took it that way, and chuckled all the way down the hall.

Travis started sticking his stuff back in the drawers. He finally paused with his T-shirt, deciding between the trash can and the dirty-clothes hamper. He finally put it in with the dirty clothes. He'd hang on to it a little bit longer. He could still stay, and this time it didn't have anything to do with Tim.

It was the hangover, he decided later. And the damn snake. He'd stayed in the shower so long the hot water ran out, and felt a little better. He wouldn't have been such a big baby if he hadn't been so hung over and tired. He hurt, too, with his sore ribs, and a backache from shoveling, you had to consider that.

He lay flat on his back. Motorboat lay on his chest, his paws tucked under him, staring at Travis with half-shut eyes, rumbling with a loud purr. Cats had such weird eyes. . . .

Ken knocked on the door, then said, "Telephone."

Travis had heard the phone, but figured it was probably Teresa making sure Ken hadn't been murdered by the frenzied drug fiend.

"I don't want to talk," Travis yelled.

Ken opened the door. "What?"

"Tell her Stan's not reading the book. Tell her—"

"It's Ms. Carmichael, you dope."

"Oh." He scrambled up, dumping Motorboat to the floor.

"Travis?" He recognized the voice on the phone.

"Yeah."

"I'm going to be in Denver next week for a convention, and I'd like to stop by on the way back. I'm really on a tight schedule, this is a hectic time of year for us, but could you meet me at the airport for lunch next Sunday? I'll have a few hours between planes."

"Yeah, I think." He looked at Ken. "Could you drive me to the airport Sunday?"

Ken nodded and Travis said, "Yeah, I can make it."

"Splendid. My flight is American 203 from Denver, and it's scheduled to arrive at one o'clock, so perhaps it will. Can you meet me at the gate?"

"Yeah." Travis wrote the flight down on the memo pad.

"What will you be wearing?"

"What?"

"How will I know you?"

"Uh, black T-shirt, brown leather jacket."

"You must dress like your characters."

She had it backward, his characters dressed like he did, but he said, "Yeah."

"Well, I won't be wearing a red rose, but I will be wearing a bright red dress. Very Santa Fe western, you won't be able to miss me. And, Travis,

you might bring along a copy of your manuscript.”

Red Santa Fe dress but no rose, Travis thought frantically. Maybe Ken would know what she was talking about.

“I don’t have one”—he’d just realized what she’d said.

There was a pause. “Who does?”

“You do.”

“We have the only copy?”

“Yeah.”

“You sent the original through the mail without making a copy?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” There was another pause. “Well, I’ll have the office make us a few copies. See you next week. Bye, now.”

“Yeah.”

He hung up the phone, dazed. She was the first person he’d ever heard use the word *splendid*. He wondered what she was going to look like. He had absolutely no idea what a publisher was supposed to look like. His characters. She knew how his characters dressed. . . . He was going to meet a publisher!

“Kid,” Ken said, “you have the most incredible way with words, on the phone.”

Travis realized now that his every other word had been *yeah*.

His face burned. Then he shrugged.

“Well, she’s not publishing my phone conversa-

tions." He tried to seem careless, but it was hard not to jump up and down and turn somersaults.

"Can't blame her for that," Ken said. "You hungry? Let's go get pizza."

"I'm starvin', man," Travis said.