

Chapter

8

“I don’t see why I can’t meet her by myself. I wrote it by myself, I figured out where to send it by myself, I mailed it by myself—”

“I’ve told you—you can have lunch with her without us. I’m just going to shake her hand, let her know you’re not rattling around the universe like a loose pea, and go.”

“Aw, she knows I got an uncle.” Travis was nervous, and as usual, nervous got him irritated. He wanted to turn around and yell, “Shut up!” at Christopher, who was playing with an airplane in his car seat, complete with airplane noises.

It was bad enough that Ken was going to deliver him to Ms. Carmichael like it was his first day of kindergarten; Christopher was going to be there too.

Ms. Carmichael, meet the nursery class, he thought bitterly.

As if he'd been reading Travis's mind, Ken said, "Have you been avoiding Christopher lately? I thought you guys got along okay."

Travis winced. He'd hoped Ken hadn't noticed. "Well, I don't want to get him mad at me, and sometimes I can't help it."

"He gets mad at me, too, and I manage to live through it."

"Yeah, but he could get me kicked out." Travis thought Ken might as well hear the truth. He'd felt bad, because Chris couldn't figure out what was going on, but that phone-throwing episode had put a serious scare into Travis.

Ken was quiet so long Travis thought the subject was closed.

"I'm not saying you can't get kicked out." His voice was startlingly loud all of a sudden. "But Christopher can't do it."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"Great." Travis was relieved. "You know, I didn't know little kids were like real people before. Like the horses, they're like real animals."

Ken said dryly, "Live and learn." And Travis didn't know if he was talking to himself or not.

"What airline?" Ken asked.

"Western. No—the dress is western. American."

"I hope you've got the flight right."

Travis hoped so too. He'd been doing so many screwy things since Ms. Carmichael's call, he couldn't swear to it.

"Daddy, you don't have a beard," Christopher said.

"No, I don't," Ken answered absently.

"David has a beard."

"Who's David?"

"Mama's friend."

Travis glanced sideways at Ken, and saw his jaw twitch. Geez, he thought, half in sympathy, half irritated, if he still cares about her, why doesn't he patch it up? It always bugged him to see adults being stupid. And they always act like they know everything. . . .

"What's Santa Fe western?" he asked suddenly.

"It's this artsy-fartsy cowboy stuff—East Coast western."

That didn't help him much. Red. Well, at least he knew what red was.

"Travis doesn't have a beard," Christopher said.

He did recognize her right away. Fairly tall, forty at least, wearing a bright red cowboyish dress, dark blue boots, carrying a dark blue briefcase-looking bag. Ms. Carmichael had long, wild, wiry black hair, pulled back at one side with a piece of turquoise, and large black eyes. She was the most glamorous person Travis had ever seen. This was style!

As she looked around the crowd he stepped out and waved at her.

"Travis?" She put out her hand, and after a second he shook it.

"Yeah," he said, then he could have bitten his tongue off. *That* word again.

"Nell Carmichael."

"This is my uncle," Travis added.

"Ken Harris." Ken shook her hand too. "And this is Christopher."

Christopher said, "I have to pee."

"Oh, dear," said Ms. Carmichael. "I do too. Let's go find a john."

Travis wished he could die, quickly and painlessly, right then and there, but Ken laughed and they walked down the hall together.

In the john he combed his hair carefully, for the hundredth time that day. Maybe he should have worn his olive-green long-john shirt. Maybe black was too . . . old? Tough?

"Do I look okay?" he asked Ken, who was trying to hold the water on, and trying to hold Christopher up to wash his hands, at the same time.

"You look fine."

Travis was dying to know what Ken thought of Ms. Carmichael, but they trooped back out to wait for her in silence.

Ken and Christopher left them at the restaurant entrance, much to the relief of Travis, who was expecting Chris to announce he wanted to do poo, too.

But after they were gone, he felt tongue-tied. He didn't know any small talk, and was scared he'd have to do some before they got to talking about the book.

"Your uncle is a very attractive man."

Travis shrugged. Ken probably did look good for as old as he was, but he didn't have any clothes style. Suits to work, jeans on weekends. Today he'd put on his corduroy blazer, and he was nothing to be ashamed of.

Travis looked at the menu, relieved to see hamburgers, wishing he could order a bourbon instead of a Coke. He'd probably end up knocking the damn Coke over. . . .

"And Christopher is a darling. Do you visit them often?"

"Naw, this is the first time." He didn't know how to explain *that*, so he shut up again. The waiter came and took their order.

"So," he said. "You gonna buy the book?"

Ms. Carmichael looked slightly startled at his directness, and he squirmed a little. There was probably some complicated bunch of rules to business lunches, and he didn't know them. But he'd stick with what he *did* know, and he wasn't going to sit here and chat about Ken, Chris, and the nice weather we're having.

After a moment she said, "Travis, who do you think would like to read your book?"

"Teenagers. Kids like me." He was sure they would because *he'd* read it and loved it.

"I agree. We have an extensive young-adult line, books we market directly to young people."

"Yeah, I know." Travis paused while the waiter set his hamburger in front of him. "That's why I sent it to you guys."

"Oh, so you're aware of marketing?"

Travis wasn't sure what that meant, so he didn't say anything. He'd just thought if you had a book about teenagers, you'd try a publisher who did books about teenagers. They sat in silence a minute while she poked at her salad and he put ketchup on his burger.

"Do you hang out in bookstores a lot? Do your friends?"

"Well, I do, but most of my friends don't."

"How do they get introduced to books?"

"I don't know—school, I guess. We have to do book reports. The library. Sometimes if we see a movie and there's a book . . . You ever see *Rambo*?"

"Travis, you mentioned schools. Schools are a very large part of the young-adult market. Teachers and librarians are some of our best salespeople. I think word of mouth will be fantastic on your book, but we'll have to get it to the kids initially."

Travis could barely sit still, he was getting so excited. She was talking about *his* book, like it really was a book, a book out there, *selling*!

"Yeah," he said.

"Well, frankly, no teacher or librarian wants to

lose his job. And recommending your book, as it is now, could cost someone his job."

It dawned on Travis what she was getting around to: "You want me to clean up the language? Hell, I'll clean up the language. No sweat."

"You don't have a problem with that?"

She was so relieved, Travis realized she didn't know he would have promised anything to get her to publish it. Almost.

"Naw, I can fix it. Everybody's going to know what they're saying, anyway."

"That point aside, we still have a few problems—no major girl characters, for instance, and the majority of book buyers your age are girls."

Travis's eyebrows met over his nose. "I'll clean up the language some, but I ain't going to turn it into a romance. Let the guys read it—there's nothing for guys to read anyway, if you're not into sci-fi."

She might as well get clear on this now. "I don't know what girls do, so I don't write about them. And that junk they like to read makes me barf."

"What do you like to read?"

"Some nonfiction, like biographies. Stephen King. Hemingway. I think I'm going to like Fitzgerald sometime, but not now."

"Not now?"

"Well, I tried to read one of his books once, the one where everybody is hanging out on the beach sippin' sherry, but I didn't get it. I figured if I read

it now I wouldn't like it, so I'll give it another try when I get older."

"What makes you think you'll like it at all?"

Travis stopped, trying to define it. "I like the way his sentences feel," he said finally. "Smooth and cool like Laddie pencils."

"Are you a mystery fan?"

"No," Travis said flatly. "I hate it when the only reason to read something is to know what happens next."

"But that *is* a good reason to read something."

"Yeah. But it shouldn't be the only one."

It was amazing, to be talking about reading. He never talked about reading with anyone. And it was such a major part of his life. Sometime, he thought, someday, he'd get Ms. Carmichael to split a bottle of bourbon with him and they'd sit up all night and talk about books. . . .

She was talking about *his* book right now, and he focused back on the conversation.

". . . more style than you know what to do with. It's so full of energy, so sincere, you'll be able to get away with the melodramatics. But not twice, Travis. The critics won't be indulgent twice. You'll have to use some discipline on the next one."

Critics. Markets. Styles. This was really book talk! He tried to stay intent on her every word, but his mind was racing so fast it was hard to hear.

Grammar. His grammar could really stand some improvement, although stylistically it was

right for the dialogue. His spelling was, well, imaginative. But the narrative flowed, there was a strong sense of place, and his characters—well, his characters were wonderfully realized human beings, everyone would come away from this book convinced that these people really existed. He'd have to cut some description, he really didn't have to describe everyone again in each chapter—

"Are any of these characters based on real people?"

"No," Travis said slowly. "Not exactly . . . but like, they're real to me. You know Dusty?"

"The one that gets killed in the car crash."

"Yeah. Well, he's made up, totally, but sometimes I think about him, sometimes he even shows up in my dreams, like a real person. It's weird. I just forget he's not real."

"Shouldn't there be at least one sympathetic adult, though? Surely you know *some* sympathetic adults. . . ." She paused. "Or any adults, for that matter."

"Yeah." He shrugged. "But this is about kids. What have adults got to do with it?"

Finally, the waiter brought the check. Travis felt a little funny about letting her buy lunch, but Ken, who knew about business lunches, said she should. To cover his awkwardness he spoke up. "So. You can fix up the spelling, huh?"

She smiled up at him and slipped her credit card back into her billfold. "You know, when we

first met, I couldn't believe you had written that book. Your speaking style is so different from the way you write."

"I got two languages." He realized he meant "vocabularies." "One in my head and one in my mouth."

"Interesting. Save it for interviews. Think you'll be able to do interviews?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll figure it out."

"You should photograph beautifully—"

"Ms. Carmichael?"

"Yes."

"Will my mom have to sign the contract, since I'm not eighteen?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"No. No problem."

They paused in the airport hallway to shake hands again; she was going to her next flight, he was going to meet Ken at the baggage claim.

"Are you working on anything now?"

Travis shook his head.

"Start something new, right now, get it going before this one comes out. First-novel block is a very real phenomenon. You know," she said carefully, "this is going to change your life."

Travis shrugged. "It was changing anyway."

Chapter

9

Casey was getting ready for the last big show of the season. She was out on the Star Runner when Travis caught the bus in the morning for school, and usually rode him again following the afternoon lessons. Travis worried about her, at school. If something happened, out there alone during the day, it'd be hours before anyone found her.

Once, on the weekend, when Ken had drifted down to watch, they nearly witnessed a major crash when the Star Runner threw a bucking fit in the corner and Casey put him over a four-foot fence anyway; she'd lost both her stirrups and nearly went over his head as he landed.

"I don't see why she does damn stupid stuff like that," he'd said. Ken answered, "It's her life, isn't it?" Travis wanted to slug him. But when Casey rode up laughing, they laughed too.

If only the Star Runner were just, just, well, normal. A normal horse. Jennifer's horse, Sandman, was high-strung, apt to spook at things and occasionally run out at a jump; Travis learned to watch it when he haltered him because he would bite.

But that was normal. Travis had always liked animals, had no trouble liking most of the horses. He'd been embarrassed once while brushing a pony, to realize he was listening for a purr. The signals the horses used weren't as blatant as cats' or dogs', but they were there.

The Star Runner . . . Travis and Jennifer were watching him trot up and down in the paddock, and Jennifer shivered.

"He's so creepy," she said. "You ever noticed his eyes? There's white showing all the way around. That's supposed to mean he's crazy."

"I can believe it." Travis had an idea for a story—an outer-space alien stuck on earth, but nobody'd know it since it looked like a horse.

"I don't see why Casey loves him so much."

"Love?" Travis couldn't believe she still didn't know better. "Let's ask her. Hey, Case."

Casey had just turned out the ponies in the next paddock. Now she joined them, hanging over the railing.

"Jennifer," Travis said, in a breathless Jennifer-voice, "doesn't know why you love the Star Runner so much."

He really liked Jennifer, but sometimes she was so sweet it irritated him.

"Love?" Casey unknowingly echoed Travis. "Hell, the day he stops jumping I'll shoot him."

"Oh, Casey!" Jennifer was horrified.

"She'd do it," Travis agreed. Then, because he was sorry he'd mocked her, he started tickling her, and ended up chasing her back to the barn.

When he looked back, Casey was still watching the Star Runner. Waiting.

The Thursday night before the show, Travis worked late in the barn. He had to pack tack, make sure the big eight-horse trailer was clean, leg-wrap some of the horses. He'd learned how to pull manes, so that they were short and easy to braid, but the braiding itself, weaving a small strand and knotting it, was beyond him. Christopher could have done a better job.

Kelsey stayed for an extra hour and got four horses braided. They looked classy with the little row of knots down their necks. Travis assumed braiding was just to make them look better, but Kelsey said braiding had been started to keep manes from getting tangled in brush on the hunt field.

Casey was working on post entries. Some people had made up their minds about what classes to enter, or to go at all, at the last second. He remembered a dream he had the night before, involving Casey and her long legs. . . .

"Through?" Her voice made him jump.

"Just about." He turned away, afraid she'd see him reddening.

"Put the light blanket on Silver Hawk, would you? He's fairly clean right now, but those white ponies can get filthy overnight."

"Okay." Travis paused to study her handwriting. She printed, in strong clean lines, like a child.

When he went back to the house and saw Teresa's car but not Ken's, he almost turned around and went back. Being alone with Teresa was not something he looked forward to.

Well, hell, he thought, at least this time he knew she was in the house. Maybe if he made a good impression on her, she wouldn't give Ken such a hard time about splitting custody. He slammed the door so he wouldn't be surprising her.

"Ken?"

Travis went on into the living room. "Naw, it's me."

Teresa glanced up from the photo album she'd been looking through and took another sip of red wine.

"Oh. Hi. I brought Chris early, I've got to leave town again, tomorrow. It looks like Ken's going to be late."

Travis thought: Leaving with David? but didn't say anything. It obviously wasn't her first glass of wine.

"Been working in the barn?"

"Yeah." Travis hoped she could tell by the way he was dressed, not by the way he smelled.

"Ken said you'd been helping Casey. I wish that girl would wear some sun block."

Travis couldn't make that connection, but said, "Yeah. Hey," he added, "I'm sorry about the other night. I didn't mean to scare you guys."

Teresa nodded. She had beautiful dark deer-eyes, like Christopher's.

"Ken told me you were having a fight with your mom. She called earlier, by the way. She sounds real sweet. You ought to talk to her."

"She doesn't care about me," Travis said, the anger at her betrayal flooding back. "She doesn't even *know* me. She had a baby once, and still loves it."

"Well, honey, don't knock it. That's the strongest hold you'll ever have on anybody."

She went back to her pictures, but something made Travis think: She's picturing the fights she'll have with Chris when he's my age.

Ken had already made him feel peculiar that way; sometimes he'd look from Chris to Travis with an expression just short of horror. Like: *This* is what's coming.

"You ever see these?" Teresa held out the album. "Ken and I took a trip to Morocco in—oh, a long time ago. We took a freighter over, slept in train stations, on decks, in fifty-cent rooms."

"Geez, did you guys really look like that?" Travis stared at the photos. Teresa was so young-

looking, really skinny, her hair longer and darker, parted in the middle and hanging down her back. She was wearing granny glasses and an Indian headband. She said that was Ken with her, but he wasn't even recognizable, with his hair to his shoulders and a drooping walrus mustache around his mouth. Both had on outlandishly long bell-bottomed jeans and gauzy Eastern shirts.

Travis was flabbergasted. Sure, he'd heard about hippies and stuff, but to actually have walked around looking like that! Didn't people laugh?

"This was my Gloria Steinem look. I think Ken was supposed to be Elliot Gould."

This didn't help Travis much, since he didn't know who those people were.

"I'm really glad we did that once, scrounging around and sleeping on sidewalks—but Ken's really sad we won't do it again."

"Yeah." Travis was on an entirely new train of thought. "So—you guys were into drugs and everything?"

"You think you invented it?" Teresa laughed, then said quickly, "You ought to know by now Ken is no substance abuser. Oh, no. Ken has entirely too much control for that." Teresa polished off her wine and said, "Would you get me just another half glass?"

When he brought it he said, "How'd you guys mess up, anyway?"

"What's Ken's story?"

"Well, when I asked him all he said was 'It all started with the Cuisinart.' "

"Sounds like him." She went on turning the pages of her album, and Travis gave up on getting a straight answer. Adults probably didn't even know straight answers anymore.

"You ever see Ken at the barn?" she said suddenly.

Travis thought it over. "Not much," he answered. Ken never did go to the barn, other than to stop by with a message or watch for a second. Travis had never seen him on a horse.

"See? It was always his big dream to raise quarter horses, and when that didn't work out just the way he planned, he quit the whole thing. He just can't stand any deviation from the plan.

"I just don't think I'm working out the way he planned either."

"So—Ken got into being a lawyer to help people and all that stuff?"

"Don't be silly. Ken got into being a lawyer because he thought he could make money. Don't get him wrong. Ken likes having money, it's just spending it that bothers him . . . well, he grew up poor and I didn't, what do I know? And—don't tell him I said this—but the law's just up his alley. He always did want to know the rules, the penalties . . . I just think there's more than one dream to have. And I don't know why happiness shouldn't be as trustworthy as any other emotion."

Travis was ticked off now. Garbage. She was sad, Ken was sad, why didn't they do something?

Ticked off, and scared too. Not me. Not me. I'll always know what I want, how to get it. . . .

She said, "You ever have to read that poem at school, about the guy sitting in the snow at the fork in the road, wondering about the road not taken?"

"Yeah." Travis had read it, but not at school. He just liked Robert Frost.

"What they don't tell you is, every time you turn around there's another goddamn fork."

He didn't think he'd be able to sleep that night, but he conked out immediately. He was real surprised to find Teresa in the kitchen the next morning, making pancakes with Christopher.

"Hi," she said cheerfully as he poured himself some coffee. She didn't look at him. He managed "Hi" with a straight face, but it was real hard to keep from smirking when he ran into Ken at the bottom of the stairs.

"Teresa thought she'd stay over," Ken explained, a little too rapidly. "She doesn't like to drive when she's been drinking."

"Yeah," Travis said. "Sure."

When their eyes met, Ken grinned and turned red.

Travis was oddly happy the rest of the day, though he couldn't put his finger on just why.

Chapter 10

Girls and horses! What was the big deal about girls and horses? It was weird. It was almost sick. At first he thought being at the show, being surrounded by cute girls in skintight breeches, was going to drive him horny-crazy; he could understand now what had happened to the twins—why if you worked at McDonald's, the sight of a fry could make you sick.

They petted the horses, fussed over them, combed and brushed them like they were going to a prom. Baby-talked them and even kissed them! That was a definite turnoff. He didn't get it. Like, he loved Motorboat, but couldn't imagine ever carrying on like this.

He was grumpy anyway. Five o'clock in the morning wasn't his favorite time to get up. It

wasn't a bad time to go to bed sometimes, it usually meant a pretty good night before; but there wasn't anything great about a five o'clock rising.

And here it was eight-thirty, the show had been going on for a half an hour, and he'd been too busy to go watch anyone.

He was helping a frantic Jennifer tack up for her first class. Somehow it didn't surprise him that she was late.

He barely had the throatlatch of Sandman's bridle buckled when Jennifer grabbed the reins and trotted him out.

"Tell Casey I'm in the schooling ring."

"Where is she?" Travis hadn't seen her for an hour.

"Small arena." Jennifer's voice floated back. "With the ponies."

Casey was standing by the rail next to a woman Travis recognized as one of the pony moms, although he wasn't sure which.

Molly was leading Silver Hawk out of the arena, picking up a yellow ribbon on her way out.

"You really got a good deal on that pony," Casey was saying. "He's going great for her."

"Yes," said the mom. "But, well, I wish we'd found a chestnut."

Casey looked blank. "A chestnut?"

"You know Sarah Jerome has that little palomino that just matches her hair. They look so cute together."

"Matches her hair," Casey repeated calmly.

Travis felt he had to do something quick, so he said, "I know, you can dye Molly's hair white."

While the mom gave him a you-smart-ass look, he pulled Casey along with him.

"Jennifer's in the schooling ring, come on, she's late."

They were across the road when Casey spoke again. "I won't have to dye my hair to match my horse. Another year in this business will turn it solid gray. Match her hair! My God!"

And suddenly she gave him a slap on the back and said, "Good for you, kid."

The schooling ring was chaos. There were two jumps set up in the middle of the ring, side by side. Trainers stood by the jumps, yelling instructions, praise, abuse, while the riders came from both directions, sometimes narrowly missing head-on collisions. There were frantic yelps of "Heads up!" which Travis took to mean "Watch out!" And all around the ring people were warming up, trotting or cantering, the horses bucking and kicking if a stranger got too close behind. Travis thought the whole mess looked like some bizarre sort of horse bumper-cars.

"Leg-in-front-of-the-jump."

Travis recognized the voice and realized Casey had dodged through the traffic to stand by a jump, and Jennifer and Sandman were taking it.

"Again," Casey shouted. "And don't jump out in front of him."

Sandman cleared the poles easily and beautifully, barely missing a little girl on a black pony.

Travis heard the announcer on the loud-speaker. "Beautiful Day on deck. One away, Forget Me Not. Two away, Sandman. Three away . . ."

"You know your course?" Casey shouted, and Jennifer shook her head. Travis handed her the number as they left the schooling ring to stand with the others just outside the gate of the big indoor arena.

"Oh, bless you," Jennifer breathed, tying the strings around her waist so the number 263 was clear across her back.

A girl on a dark bay was in the arena.

"That first line should be an easy five, let him start rolling in the warm-up circle. The second inside diagonal is the tricky part—use all your ring, deep in the corner—see there, see there—"

The bay slid to stop and his rider nearly went over his neck onto the jump—"She cut in too quick, didn't give him enough distance. Be sure and go deep in the corner. And, Jenna, don't get antsy on that last single. Just stay the same, you don't have to be making any moves. It'll seem like you're not seeing the spot, but just wait for it. It'll be there. Now, what's your course?"

"Outside, diagonal, outside, diagonal, single."

"Okay, try to let him move on out right away—but the first line can be a short six if it has to, just make it smooth."

Travis said, "A short six what?"

"Strides. Twelve feet. A normal horse stride is twelve feet. You allow six feet on either side of the jump. The course is set for a certain number of strides between jumps. If you goof up, too fast, too slow, take the jump too big or too close, you have to decide to lengthen or shorten to the next jump." Casey used her teaching voice.

"Oh," Travis said. And he had thought the big deal was to stay on. He didn't see how Jennifer learned the course from watching one person go—he wasn't sure which jump she was supposed to take first, much less the order of the rest of them. The girl on the bay pulled him up into a finishing circle and left by a gate at the other end of the arena. Casey opened the entry gate and Jennifer trotted in.

"On course, two sixty-three Sandman, ridden by Jennifer Hailey."

Jennifer circled, picking up a canter, and Casey leaned on the rail, muttering to herself—once, as Jennifer went by, she said, "Clear into the corner," and as she came at the last fence, "Steady, steady," but to Travis it looked as though she'd had a perfect round—at least Sandman cleared all the jumps and hadn't stopped anywhere.

Casey ran outside to be there as Jennifer came out.

"Not bad, not bad, late with that second lead change and he chipped in a little at the gate, but you've got a shot at pinning."

Jennifer nodded, too breathless to speak. She smiled at Travis, her lipstick unnaturally bright in her white face.

"I always forget to breathe, on course. Casey, wait—listen, what time do you think it'll be over tonight?"

Casey paused. "Look, you know I can't time these things."

"I'm sorry," Jennifer apologized. "I just have piano recital tonight."

"You're in the last class and it's your shot at a medal, so you decide." Casey disappeared into the schooling ring again.

Jennifer slid off. "She's trying to quit smoking," she said. "It's making her mean. Well, we had a good first round, anyway, didn't we, baby?" She patted Sandman's neck. "Such a good boy. *Such* a good boy."

Travis winced. It was a wonder the horses didn't puke.

"That was real pretty, honey." An older woman in jeans and a western jacket paused beside Jennifer. "You looked real nice."

Jennifer shivered. "Oh, thanks, Mrs. Kencaide. I'm just glad it's over. I'm not like Casey, I'm scared to death before every class."

The woman said simply, "Then why, child, do you do it?"

Jennifer opened her mouth, then shut it. You could tell she couldn't come up with a real good reason and hadn't tried to before.

"You must be Katherine's new groom."

Travis was still uneasy with the word *groom*. It made him feel like he should be standing on top of a wedding cake.

"Uh, I'm workin' for Casey Kencaide."

"That's right. K.C.—Katherine Caroline. I'm her momma."

Oh. So that was where she'd gotten her name. Hastily Travis said, "Nice to meet you," and shook her hand. He'd be nice to her and get her to talking—he'd learned from Ken and Teresa it was easy to get somebody talking about their kid. So now he knew her real name—who knew what he could pick up next?

"I'll see you around," he called, as Amber ran up, wanting help with her bridle.

The show went real slow. It seemed to Travis that there were hours of nothing to do—messaging around at the stalls, hanging out in the stands watching the rounds (he was bored after ten minutes); able to tell if someone fell off, or if the horse stopped at a jump, but other than that having no idea what the judges were judging by.

Casey was either running from one arena to the other—the ponies and low jumps were showing in the smaller barn, the more advanced riders and horses in the larger arena—or shouting instructions in the schooling ring, or hanging out with the other trainers, comparing horses and riders.

Travis watched Kelsey slink out of the ring after the off-course whistle blew, her hands held over

her face, squealing, "Ohmigod, I'm *so* embarrassed"; Amber's black pony refused three times and she was dismissed from the ring; the older lady, Mary, had a perfectly smooth round, which would net her a third, and Travis heard Casey remark, "The kids are more supple, the kids are braver, but the older riders can *think*."

He overheard something else. He ducked into the curtained-off tack stall to look for Amber's spurs. Casey was in the stall right behind him, hidden by the curtains, brushing the bay gelding she was riding in the pregreen classes, and he heard someone say, "God, Casey, where'd you get that foxy groom?"

"He's Ken Harris's nephew. At first I wondered how a classy guy like Ken could have such a sleazy punk relative, but he's really okay. He's good with the horses."

"Well, watch out for him. I think some of the girls are planning to kidnap him. Is that your pregreen?"

Travis didn't stay any longer. He ducked into the men's room and stared, puzzled, into the cracked and dirty mirror.

Sleazy punk. She must be crazy. His hair was way too long to look punk. Damn hicks around here probably had never even *seen* a punk! And sleazy?

Suddenly he thought of something else: Ken saying, "Sorry, kid, you haven't given me the impression you could write a complex sentence."

And Ms. Carmichael saying, "I don't believe you wrote this book." And just last week his English teacher had kept him after class to say, "You know, your attitude problem is really starting to bug me. And I thought you might like to know that behavior is counted in my grading."

He had been shocked and outraged. What attitude?

"So what am I doing?" He certainly wasn't talking in class—he wasn't talking much in school.

"Oh, you know, slouching back there with that sneer on your face—if you get your grade knocked down much lower you'll flunk."

"Big flunkin' deal," Travis had said, and she'd sent him to the principal. She must have had PMS.

Now, though, he wondered about this weird impression people were getting of him. Sleazy punk. Was that what everybody thought?

He stared miserably at the mirror and a wave of homesickness almost knocked him down. He'd been so cool at home. . . .

He made sure he sat next to Casey's mom during the pregreen class.

"You ever get nervous about Casey jumping?" he asked her. Earlier one of the pony-kids' moms had gotten hysterical when the kid fell off and had the wind knocked out of her.

"Hell, no, honey. Life's way too short to get nervous about."

Mrs. Kencaide looked older than she was, brown and weather-beaten, her short brown hair

teased up like a lot of ladies her age—like at one point in their lives they'd learned The Hairstyle and never ever thought about getting another. Travis's mom wore her hair almost the same.

She lit up a cigarette and Travis was suddenly horrified to realize all those little lines around her mouth came from inhaling. . . .

For the first time in three years he thought about quitting smoking.

"No, I was a barrel racer myself, and I always thought Katherine would want to rodeo—then my brother took us to the big Charity Horse Show one year, I reckon Katherine was eleven, and we saw the jumping. She says, 'Momma, I *got* to do that,' and I says, 'Okay, honey, let's figure you out a way'—'cause I knew Katherine, and her mind was made up."

She paused. Travis had had a hard time understanding her drawl—she sounded so country-western, and that was one kind of music he couldn't stand.

"So, what'd you do, get her lessons?"

"Sorry, honey, I was just watchin' that round. Those ol' quarter horses are the kind I like. That one is quicker than a cat, ain't he? Some of these skinny ol' Thoroughbreds look like poor feeders to me. Oh, yeah, well, I couldn't afford any fancy lessons, but my brother, he's a horse trader and an auctioneer and he asked around about jumpin' trainers, and he heard this lady, Jessie Quincy, was supposed to be the best. And I drove Kather-

ine over there and she talks Ms. Quincy into lettin' her work in exchange for lessons; Ms. Quincy done that with a couple of other little gals and sometimes it worked out, and sometimes it didn't; but she never had anybody who worked like Casey, both groomin' and ridin'. Time she's sixteen she was gettin' paid to ride, she was giving lessons.

"About a year ago she turned pro, and at the same time my brother tells us Ken Harris is lookin' to lease his barn. There was a crazy bronc out at the Circle J racing stables that keeps jumpin' out of his paddocks. Real fast, my brother says, but so loco none of the jockeys want to mess with him. The owner was ready just to put him down.

"Casey came back from lookin' at him and she says, 'Momma, this is it.' "

"Is what?" Travis asked.

He saw that Mrs. Kencaide was watching the entry gate where Casey had ridden up on the bay.

It took him a couple of seconds to recognize her; she'd been wearing a sweat suit over her riding breeches and white shirt to keep them clean. She was in a dark gray riding jacket and black velvet hard-hat; her long legs in knee-high black boots. She looked like an elegant Park Avenue preppy. It was the first time he'd seen her wearing lipstick.

"On course, Casey Kencaide on Secret Sam."

All the horses had barn names, what everyone

called them at home, and show names, that they went by at shows. Travis thought it was kind of goofy. Secret Sam was called Stinker at home.

Casey made a large warm-up circle, trotting the bay around several of the jumps. A lazy, almost deadhead horse on the flat, Stinker got nervous jumping, and Travis realized Casey was letting him get a look at the jumps. She put him into an easy canter for the first line, got him back under control as he tried to run away after the second—he spooked out at the red brick wall, but Casey made him come back and drove him over it to finish the course.

There was a smattering of applause from the stands, but as Casey left the ring she looked back to the stands to her mother and smiled.

“That’s my gal,” Mrs. Kencaide said. “I knew I had me a lion cub right from the start.”

Travis had a sudden bite of envy, mixed with homesickness, mixed with missing his own mom and being disgusted with himself for it. He left the stands hastily.

So why does *she* have to be the only kid I know who *likes* a parent? he thought sourly as he took Stinker’s reins.

“Cool him off a little before you untack him,” Casey said.

She was the first person he’d seen coming out of the arena breathing normally.

“I’d have whacked him one for running out like that,” he said.

"He hasn't jumped enough to know if he likes it. I want him to like it. I hope Amber's in the schooling ring."

Casey ran off and Travis ran the stirrups up the stirrup straps so they wouldn't flap around.

"I'll cool him off for you." It was Kelsey.

"No, it's my job," Travis snapped at her. He was vaguely aware that Kelsey had a crush on him, just as he realized the mild commotion he was causing at the show. Males were few and far between in this sport. But he was so sick of girls. Just one night, just one night of cruising with his old buddies and tossing down a few beers and talking, *really* talking . . .

Something grabbed him around the leg. The first thing that flashed across his mind was a sex-crazed dog—it was Christopher.

"Hey," he said, "don't scare the horse."

"You wouldn't say hi." Christopher looked up at him with Teresa's dark eyes. "We said hi."

"Geez, kid, you do live in outer space half the time, don't you?"

Travis realized that Ken was standing right in front of him, trying to get his attention.

"What's up?" he said finally.

"We've been to get haircuts."

It shows, Travis thought. A haircut shouldn't look, well, new like that. For a panicked second he wondered where he'd go around here—surely there was a SuperCuts somewhere. . . .

"And your mom called. She's been trying to tell

you she'll sign the contracts after all. She wants you to call her later."

"Oh." So he'd won! Beat ol' Stan out on this one! "Great."

"Whooee." Another guy about Ken's age came up to them, holding a little girl by the hand. He was staring around at the riders. "This is paradise."

Dirty old geezer, Travis thought.

"This is my friend Steve Slade," Ken said. "My nephew, Travis."

"The famous writer?" Steve said, shaking his hand. Travis looked at Ken, who shrugged.

"So I bragged a little."

Travis felt like laughing out loud. Everything suddenly looked brighter. "What's up?"

"We bachelor dads are going to go eat pizza and watch football and let the kids kill each other."

Travis had a second of longing to go with them. . . . Geez, just to be around some *guys*—

"Daddy," the little girl said suddenly, "I want a pony."

"Sure, honey," Steve said. "We'll see."

"I *must* have a pony," she insisted. Ken and Steve laughed.

Travis watched her watching the ponies, and knew Steve had nothing to laugh about.

"So, you gonna sign the contracts?"

He didn't mean to sound so sharp—the day at

the horse show had just about done him in. He'd missed Casey's hunter round on the Star Runner (there seemed to be some big difference between "hunter" and "jumper" classes, but he hadn't figured out what) because he was rushing around helping Amber tack up—and it turned out to be the wrong class anyway.

And the Star Runner had slammed on the brakes at a four-foot wall and Casey went over his head to land on it. Travis was convinced she had broken some ribs, but she refused to go to the emergency room and had actually laughed when he suggested not riding tomorrow.

So even though he was glad to talk to Mom, and excited about the contracts, it was hard to get his mind off the show. It was like his mind had turned into a seesaw, sometimes the book was the high part and everything else disappeared, sometimes it was Casey and these goddamn horses, and sometimes it raced up and down till he was dizzy.

"Yes, I am, hon. You were right, the book is something you did on your own—"

"How's Stan takin' this?" he asked suddenly. "He's not beatin' up on you?"

"Oh, no, hon, Stan's never beat up on me. Travis, where'd you get such an idea?"

Are you nuts? he wanted to shout, but instead said, "Must be my vivid writer's imagination."

"Honey, you know except for those two times when he was unemployed and I was naggin' him, Stan's never hit me."

Travis didn't say anything and she added, "And if you'd been halfway nice to him you wouldn't have gotten hit either."

She sounded like she was crying. Travis rolled his eyes. This'd teach him to call home.

"Hey"—he changed the subject—"how's Joe doin'?"

"I don't know, he hasn't been around lately." She sniffled. "How's the cat?"

The cat. Travis suddenly realized Motorboat hadn't been around much lately either.

"He's in the barn a lot, there's mice out there."

Motorboat, in fact, had become obsessed with the mice, and Travis couldn't get his attention. And the cat had sort of fallen in love with Silver Hawk, leaping from the gate to his back, where he huddled and did happy paws, purring like an electric drill. He sat in the pony's food box while it ate, and rolled in the dirt in front of the jumps when Molly rode, apparently never dreaming he could be trampled.

And now Travis realized he'd been so preoccupied himself he hadn't really cared.

"Well, I'm glad he's earning his keep."

"Hey," Travis said hotly, "I'm workin' now, I'm giving Ken some board money."

"Honey, I didn't mean . . ."

Suddenly he was ashamed of himself. Mom *had* stood up to Stan. She probably *had* been goofy about him when he was little, the way Ken and Teresa were about Chris.

"Listen. Thanks a lot, okay?"

"Hon . . ."

"I gotta go. I'll tell Ms. Carmichael to send you the contracts. Bye."

The book. The book. He was going to get his book published!

He lay in his bed, too tired to sleep, too excited about the book again, too worried about Casey, who was supposed to ride the Star Runner in the jumper classes tomorrow.

He turned some Springsteen music on, low. Suddenly, and savagely, he missed his cat.

Chapter

11

He found out the difference between hunters and jumpers. Hunters were judged on form, smoothness, correct striding. Jumpers were judged on two things: getting over the jump and speed.

You didn't have to be real bright to figure out which was the most dangerous.

The jumper classes were the first ones the next morning. There were only seven riders entered; six of them were professional trainers. After the huge hunter classes of the day before—Jennifer's classes contained thirty riders—this seemed ominous to Travis. There weren't many who were good enough, or brave enough, to try this.

By seven he had fed, watered, and cleaned most of the stalls. He wandered over to the arena to watch the jump crew set up the course and got

drafted into helping. He dragged poles around while distances and heights were measured and argued over.

These suckers were high. It was a funny thing, too, that when you were on a horse, the jumps seemed higher than when you were on the ground. He'd noticed that back at the barn, when Jennifer and Kelsey had talked him into riding—at a walk—around the arena. It amazed him how much bigger they seemed from a horse. He'd been scared the whole time he was riding that the horse would decide, suddenly and without warning, to jump.

"Casey riding this morning?" one of the jump crew asked. The crew were mostly fathers of the riders. "I heard she took a bad spill yesterday."

"Yeah," Travis said. "She's riding."

"That gray horse she's got, he's a mean one."

"Yeah, but if she ever gets him settled he'll be hard to beat," said someone else.

"He is a good-looking animal."

"I like that bay Jessie's got. Pretty *and* sane."

"Well, you know it was that jughead roan of Pete Wheeler's that won this class in the last show. Looks don't count here."

After the course was set, Travis went back to the stalls. The barn was relatively quiet—the show had lasted late last night and few people showed up to watch the first two classes. Casey had the Star Runner tied securely in the aisle, wiping him off with a polishing cloth. Braided, groomed, pol-

ished, his coat shining like heavy silver-gray silk, the Star Runner stood motionless, his dark eyes fixed on something only he could see. Parallel universe, thought Travis, suddenly remembering a term from his sci-fi stage. It was like the Star Runner's body was in one dimension and his mind in another.

Maybe he *was* an alien being, Travis thought, half joking, half not. After all, nobody said aliens *couldn't* be horses. Maybe that was why everyone was uneasy around him, why such a beautiful animal gave people the creeps. . . .

"Hey, kid." Casey tossed her cloth onto a lawn chair set up outside the tack stall. "Could you get me my saddle?"

"My name is Travis, not kid," he said, ticked off once too often by the way she referred to him. Two friggin' years difference in their age—it wasn't like she was old enough to be his mother.

"Sorry about that." She didn't sound sorry; but it wasn't until he was tightening the girth that he realized this was the first time she'd had anyone tack up for her.

"I bet you couldn't pick up your saddle," he accused her. "You did break some ribs yesterday."

She shrugged. "Naw, I just thought I'd get my money's worth out of you."

She checked the girth herself before she put on the bridle. Travis held the Star Runner, who was beginning to stamp and paw, while Casey

changed from her navy-blue sweat jacket to her charcoal-gray riding coat, applied her lipstick quickly, without a mirror, and tucked her hair into her velvet hard-hat.

"Leg up, please." She stood beside the saddle and bent one leg back.

"You never needed a leg up before," he said, grabbing her boot and shoving her up. She could always jump straight up and catch the stirrup—Travis thought that was probably left over from her western riding days. He could picture that, Casey being a cowgirl. He could picture that real well.

"Stop being such a little mother—hen." She tapped him lightly on the head with her crop as she nudged the Star Runner into a walk.

"Get Sandman brushed," she called over her shoulder. "Jennifer's in the first flat class, and you know her."

The hell I will, Travis thought, and ran over to the schooling ring.

Casey walked the Star Runner around the ring twice in each direction, trotted him twice, cantered him collectedly in small circles.

"Boy, she's got him going well on the flat," said one of the girls watching from the bleachers. "Now if she could just keep him from going crazy jumping."

"Jesse says he'll never make a good jumper because he never listens in the ring."

Travis knew she meant "pays attention." Oh,

yeah, he thought. If he doesn't listen Casey'll just yell louder.

The Star Runner was snorting and blowing, almost panting, in rhythm with his strides. Casey put him over the practice jump once from either direction, then trotted out of the ring.

"Hey"—Travis ran up beside her where she stood by the entry gate—"is that all the warm-up you're going to do?"

Casey was looking at the course. "I thought I told you to groom Sandman."

"So fire me. Don't you need to school some more?" He moved over to miss the Star Runner's dancing hooves.

Casey's face was glowing. She was like a girl with the best date for the prom.

"Oh, I thought I'd surprise him a little this time. Open the gate for me, would you, ki—Travis?"

First one on the course, Travis thought wildly, swinging the gate open, doesn't even get to see how the jumps ride, damn her, and everybody thinks it's just the horse who's crazy.

"On course, the Star Runner, ridden by Casey Kencaide."

Travis wondered if she hadn't schooled more because it hurt too badly, and something about the way she sat up after the first jump convinced him he was right. Should have at least taped her ribs—the Star Runner threw a bucking fit in the corner, Casey got his head up and absolutely

charged him at a five-foot vertical—he cleared it by a foot and the small crowd in the stands gasped. The next jump was a four-foot-high oxer with a four-foot spread; the Star Runner flattened out like a leaping cat to clear it. He shot up and down like a pogo stick through the final triple, and Casey had to make two finishing circles to get him back down to a trot.

Travis raced around to the exit gate, and it wasn't until he heard her laugh and say, "Well, we know it's jumpable," that he even thought about the fact that she'd gone clear—and if anyone else went clear she'd have to do it again, for speed.

"Well," he said. She winced a little as she slid off.

"Well what?" She was panting, like it hurt to breathe. "Here, cool him off a little while I watch the next couple of rounds."

"I'm going to get a nurse or something." He knew there was one around here somewhere.

"No," she said, "you're not."

She walked into a small cloud of congratulations around the entry gate, and Travis watched her until a sharp pain in his arm made him jump.

Goddamn horse had bitten him.

And it made Travis madder to realize he was afraid to retaliate, afraid to whack him across the nose with the reins like he would any other horse.

"Come on." He jerked the reins, careful not to get too close. His arm smarted from the bite—his leather jacket was all that had saved him from

having a hunk of flesh ripped off. He walked the Star Runner up and down, listening to the cheers and groans of the crowd, as riders went clear or had a rail down.

More and more people were arriving, the place was filling up with screeching girls and harried mothers again.

"Travis! Travis!"

Jennifer and Kelsey came running up. "How'd Casey do?"

"She went clear."

They grabbed each other and jumped up and down, squealing like a couple of morons.

"Have they started the jump-off yet?"

"No, I think that's the last horse now."

And from the cheering it was another clear round.

"You better get tacked up," he said to Jennifer. She couldn't afford for Casey to get any madder—skipping last night's medal class in favor of piano recital had really ticked her off.

"I'm done!" Jennifer boasted. "He's clean and tacked and I'm dressed and ready."

"Oh," Kelsey said, giggling, "you're bleeding."

Travis looked down at his hand, not too surprised to see blood trickling out of his sleeve.

"I got bit."

"Boy, Casey is a grouch at the shows," Kelsey teased. Travis scowled at her. Some things weren't funny anymore.

Suddenly Casey was there, running the stirrups down.

"How many clear?"

"Three of us."

"When do you go?"

"First."

"Oh, Casey, no," Jennifer wailed.

Casey laughed. "Watch."

Travis boosted her up, and she trotted toward the schooling ring. She turned suddenly. "Jennifer, if you're late . . ."

The three of them ran to the stands to get a good place to watch.

"What's wrong with being first?" Travis asked. He was glad she was first, glad to get it over with.

"Oh, everything. You really have to go for time, since you don't know how anyone else will do—you don't get to watch anyone. Sometimes the last rider knows all she has to do is go clear—first, and you have to be clear *and* fast."

Travis stared unseeingly at the jump crew taking down the top rails of some of the jumps, raising some of the others. The jump-off course was shorter, tighter, higher.

"You know, I think she broke some ribs yesterday."

"That's nothing," said Kelsey. "Two years ago she rode all day with one arm in a cast and was reserve champion."

"The Star Runner, on course."

The Star Runner trotted sideways into the ring,

Casey holding him together like a coiled spring. Then the time buzzer sounded and the Star Runner shot forward like the head of a striking snake.

It was wrong, all wrong. Travis had been watching this stuff for weeks and nobody could jump at this speed, the horse would run right through the fences. Nobody could make those turns, pivoting two strides in front of the jumps, turning in mid-air like a cat, changing direction like a slammed tennis ball without slowing—

Casey, with the first visible effort Travis could catch, swung the Star Runner around just in time to keep him from jumping the exit gate.

She was through, it was over, and they hadn't touched a rail.

The crowd was frozen. Then Kelsey yelled, "Yea, Casey!" and a blast of applause boomed across the ring. Usually each barn cheered its own riders—this was the first time Travis had seen everyone in the stands on their feet clapping.

"Time for the Star Runner: nineteen point nine seven seconds."

Behind Travis a voice said, "That will teach me to ride against an ex-barrel racer."

Travis turned around, and the two remaining riders, a man in his early thirties, and a girl on a horse rumored to cost fifty thousand dollars, sat shaking their heads.

"Well, I'm going to save my neck, my horse, and my insurance," said the man. He did the course in twenty-six seconds with one rail down.

The girl made an effort—you could see it really amazed her to hear her time of twenty-three seconds. It wasn't until after her round that Travis realized he'd been gripping the arena rail so hard his hands were going numb.

"First place goes to the Star Runner, owned and ridden by Casey Kencaide," said the loud-speaker. Casey, on foot, trotted the Star Runner into the arena to pick up the ribbon and silver trophy. She took her prizes with a remote smile—a king of a conquering army accepting baubles, still reliving the battle.

Travis joined in the clapping, moving like a sleepwalker to the exit gate with the chattering girls.

"Casey, that was wonderful!"

"Congratulations!"

"Great, great ride!"

"Thanks." She smiled back at every compliment.

"Let me cool him off," begged Kelsey. Casey handed her the reins and she walked off with the gray as proudly as a groupie with a rock star.

"Go get Sandman warmed up while I change," Casey said to Jennifer. Travis held the ribbon and trophy while she pulled off her helmet. The hairnet went with it, and her hair, shining gold-on-brown, tumbled down her back. "Hurry."

Jennifer ran off. Travis followed Casey into the curtained tack stall, and after she'd shrugged out of her jacket he pinned her against the wall and

kissed her. He had never said "I love you" to anyone in his life, but he was saying it now.

When he released her, she was staring into his eyes. Calmly. Not angry, not even halfway surprised.

"So what's all this about?"

"You know," he said, suddenly convinced she did know. There *was* something between them. Her upper arms in his hands were strong and warm; he desperately wanted all of her. Strong and warm and unafraid. . . .

Something like the polite mask she wore for the parents slid over her face.

"Jennifer's a sweet girl. I think she could schedule in a boyfriend."

"Don't," Travis said. It would kill him if she hid from him now. He was terrified that he'd blown everything. "You tell me there's nothing between us," he challenged.

"Okay," Casey said, "I like you. You're . . . brave."

"I killed the snake," Travis said, almost absently. She liked him. He hadn't even been convinced of that, only that there was this strange tie, bond, fate, between them.

"Snake, hell. Anyone could do that. You came down to the barn and helped me clean up that mess you made, when I never expected to see you again. You haven't been afraid to ask when you don't know things. . . . I like you a lot." She

paused. "All day long people are asking me 'how?' and you come along, knowing why."

She slipped out of his grip, facing him levelly.

"But you saw what I just did. It wasn't being 'brave' for nineteen seconds. It was being brave a year ago when it took two people to hold him while I mounted. It was being brave enough to spend money I don't have on dressage lessons. It was all the time I spent riding instead of movies, pizza—and rolling around in the hay with a boyfriend. Can't you see that was more than just a jump-off? It was . . . it was . . ."

"It was art," said Travis.

Her eyes narrowed like Motorboat's in front of a mouse hole.

"How do you know this stuff? You know things about me my own mother doesn't know."

He just leaned forward and kissed her again, softly.

"With us, it'd be a lot more than a roll in the hay."

"I know," Casey answered. "That's what scares me."

He backed off, knowing if he pressed her he'd lose her.

The regret in her voice, saying no, thrilled him more than any yes he'd ever had.

Chapter

12

He did his first interview on television. It wasn't a big success. Ken's friend, Steve Slade, managed a local TV station and asked him to be on the noon news. Not a long interview, just a couple of minutes, nothing in depth. A piece of cake.

Travis said sure. He wasn't certain what in-depth was anyway; a couple of minutes shouldn't be too hard. He might as well start getting used to it.

Ken arranged to get him out of school for two hours, and drive him to the station.

"I've got to see a realtor anyway."

Travis was trying to figure out what he ought to wear; it took a long time for his mind to replay that last statement.

"What you going to see a realtor about?"

"I'm putting the place up for sale and looking for a house in town."

"What about Casey?" It popped into his head and it bounced right out of his mouth before he could stop it.

It certainly wasn't the first thing Ken expected him to ask. His eyebrows twisted upward.

"What about Casey?"

"Well," Travis said, "is she gonna have to get another barn or something?"

"Probably. I'll give her enough notice. Afraid of losing your job?"

Travis shrugged. He had thought of something else. He didn't know how to ask if there was going to be room for him in the new house.

"You won't mind changing schools?"

His neck muscles relaxed so suddenly he felt limp.

"Naw. I won't mind."

A new school. God, he'd love a crack at a new school. Maybe it'd be a bigger one with more different kinds of groups, he could find some people to hang out with and not be stuck playing the Invisible Man.

"Thanks," he said absently.

Ken didn't say, "For what?" He said, "You're welcome." So that saved a lot of embarrassing conversation.

"You want to sell the place?" Travis asked.

Ken sighed. "Kid, your mind travels in the strangest directions. Most people go from A to B

to C—you go from A to maybe Q and end up at L. . . . I've got to sell it. I don't have the time or the capital to get into horse ranching, especially in this economy. I don't like to spend as much time driving as I'm doing. I think it'd be easier for Christopher if I were in town too."

"I thought maybe you guys were going to get back together."

"I don't know. You know what I dread? Dating. God, it used to be bad enough, asking 'What's your sign?' Now, it'll be 'How's your blood test?' "

Travis shook his head. These old guys, they could think of the weirdest things. Dating.

"Aw, it'll be fun," he said, trying to cheer him up.

"You have no idea how much fun a Saturday night at home with your wife and kid and a pizza can be."

Travis sighed. The day a Saturday night home with a wife and kid and pizza looked fun to him, he was going to blow his brains out.

"Don't wear black," Ken said suddenly. "Steve told me to tell you not to wear black."

He wore his olive-colored long-sleeved buttoned undershirt, and when he realized how cold it was going to be here in the studio he left his jacket on too.

It was a big warehouse kind of room, the set was just a desk in front of a wall, a lot smaller than

he'd thought it would be. There were cables lying around all over the floor. He tripped on two.

"Let's get you miked," Steve was saying. He'd introduced them to the newscaster, a young black woman who looked like a model, and the camera crew.

He sat behind the desk while they clipped a mike onto his collar, hiding the black wire under his jacket.

"Nervous?" asked Steve. He probably didn't leave his office for everybody they had on the noon news. He was taking the time because he was friends with Ken.

"Naw. If I goof up you can just shoot it again."

"What?"

"That's what we did in mass communications class. In sixth grade we taped a news show." Travis was growing uneasy, because this seemed to be a big joke to everyone.

"This is live," Steve said.

Travis felt his tongue starting to swell. It was a very weird sensation. It swelled until it felt as big as a dinner plate.

This was live.

"You were okay," Ken said. "You look good on camera."

Travis stared out the window. He hadn't been okay. He'd been god-awful. He must have looked like a moron. He'd been so nervous he'd actually gotten tears in his eyes—Ken said you couldn't

tell, but Travis knew he'd still looked like a moron. A good-looking moron, maybe.

"You just have to learn to speak in sentences, you know, answer questions with more than yeah and naw. Get glib."

Get glib.

"On TV, you don't have time for a lot of pauses. Every second seems like a minute, a minute seems like an hour. You've got to remember your medium."

"So who made you a director?" Travis muttered. Who the hell cared? His medium was writing, not talking.

He wanted to do this, interviews and stuff. For the first time he realized how bad he wanted to do this.

I can learn it, he thought. Next time'll be different. In his mind he started writing answers to the questions she'd asked him. Writing answers in sentences. Getting glib.

He'd hoped maybe one of the teachers would ask him where he'd been that morning; he would be casual as hell while replying, "Oh, I was on the news," or maybe, "Doing a television show." He was getting a little antsy to let them know they were dealing with a real writer here.

But nobody asked him anything. Everyone had left him alone and now they thought he wanted it that way. They had made him into a loner and then acted like it was his idea. Travis had never before realized how much your status depended

on other people. He'd thought you got to choose your group. Well, you didn't. But he tried to pull off the loner role with as much dignity as possible: When the guys in the smoke hole talked about going to the river to do some long-neckin' (he had picked up on some of the local jargon: long-neckin' meant drinking beer) he didn't beg to go too. Bunch of hicks in a four-wheel drive, sitting in the sand chugging Coors—how cool could that be?

He walked off to spend his lunch hour in the library. If they got the impression he was some kind of psycho who'd come to school with a gun someday, well, that was their impression.

He wanted out of this school so bad. Even if it meant not seeing Casey every day. He had to get out of here before he broke down and begged to go long-neckin' with hicks.

When he answered the phone that afternoon he wasn't too surprised that it was Joe. He'd been thinking about the guys so strong, he'd even had a feeling that it was Joe when the phone rang. Sometimes he was kind of psychic about phone calls and stuff like that.

"Travis?"

"Yeah. Joe?"

"Yeah. Can you come and get me?"

"I can't hear you, man. This is a lousy connection."

"I'm at the Quik Trip over on Highway Fifty-one. Can you come and get me? I can't walk, man,

I jumped outta the car and messed up my leg. . . .”

Travis could hardly understand him, his voice had no air behind it, he was surprised now he’d recognized it—what the hell was going on?

“How’d you get here?”

“I hitched, man, and I had to jump outta the last car, the guy was getting weird with me, I guess I better get used to that. . . .”

It sounded like Joe was sobbing. Or maybe just too tired to even talk. Something was really wrong.

“What’s up?”

“It’s bad, Travis. Really bad. Can you come and get me?”

“I don’t have any wheels, man. My uncle won’t be home for hours.”

“Oh, don’t tell your uncle. Don’t tell anybody, man.”

“Hold on.”

Travis ran to the kitchen window. Casey’s Jeep was parked by the barn.

“Listen, I think I can get there.” He paused. “How bad?”

“The twins are dead.” Joe’s voice sounded flat. Flat and old.

“Orson killed them. And I helped him.”

Travis felt so spacey. For a second he thought he was going to drop the phone. He didn’t ask if this was some kind of sick joke.

“Stay there. I’ll get a ride.”

"Okay," Joe said, and hung up.

"I need to borrow your Jeep."

Casey looked up from her record books. "I don't think—what's wrong?"

"Just for a couple of minutes—to go to the Quik Trip."

"Hey, this is some nicotine fit."

Travis wanted to smack her across the room, but she said quickly, "What is it?"

"I need to pick up a guy at the Quik Trip, he hitched this far, it's real important—you drive if you want, but let's go, okay?"

She got to her feet, looking at her watch. "I've got a lesson . . . what the hell, they've been late for me—"

She drove even fast enough to suit him, raced down to the highway like she did across the fields, chasing the Star Runner. Travis gripped his seat, too scared to think. He could think later, when Joe told him what had happened—the twins dead?

He could remember the last time he'd seen them, the night before his big fight with Stan, they were working on the Trans Am, he was sitting on the washing machine in their garage watching them, drinking Pepsi because their mom was home. He remembered how pale they looked under garage light, skinny, Mike under the hood and Billy laughing at whatever Travis was saying. He'd been lying extravagantly about something, he couldn't remember what, they wouldn't allow

smoking in the garage, they thought they were such hotshot mechanics. . . .

Joe was sitting on the curb in front of the Quik Trip. He almost fell as he got up, and limped to the Jeep. To Travis he seemed like someone stumbling in his sleep, exhausted by a nightmare he couldn't awake from. Travis was stunned. Joe was thinner, dirtier, and older. And he knew these changes were recent—for the first time he could believe stories he'd heard about people turning gray overnight.

He jumped out of the Jeep to help him. Joe yelped when he grabbed his arm.

"Sorry, man," he muttered, heaving himself into the front seat. "I think I tore some muscles or somethin'."

He gazed at Casey.

"She's cool," Travis said, hopping in back, and Casey proved it by not asking any questions, just speeding back to the barn.

In Travis's room Joe stretched out on the bed, not even taking his shoes off, staring straight up at the ceiling. Travis couldn't figure out what to do. In a little while Joe started shaking, and tears ran down his face, but he didn't even seem to notice, like this had happened so much he was used to it.

Travis went to the kitchen and poured out a couple of good shots of bourbon and dropped a handful of ice cubes in it. He'd worry about Ken later.

Joe pulled himself up into a half-sitting posi-

tion, leaning back against the headboard. He gulped the bourbon like it was water—Travis realized he should have brought water to begin with, but Joe did quit shaking so much.

“Got anything to eat?”

Travis doubted it—he came up with a couple of cold weenies in stale buns, but Joe ate them without complaint, slowly, not bothering to wipe the streaking tears off his face.

“So what happened?” Travis asked finally. He dreaded knowing.

“The twins are dead.”

“Yeah. So how?”

“Orson killed them. Took a twenty-two, oh, God—”

Joe finished off his bourbon.

“He tried to make me shoot Mike, but I wouldn’t. You think that might help, at my trial, that I didn’t pull the trigger? I thought he was ready to kill me, too, and he still couldn’t make me—”

“Start from the start,” Travis said.

Joe munched along on his hot dog, obviously rewinding his story in his mind, trying to decide where “start” was.

“We’ve been working for Orson,” he said—he meant himself and the twins, he wasn’t used to the fact that they were past tense yet. “I wrote you that, or told you, right?”

Travis nodded.

“It wasn’t dope,” Joe said. He didn’t seem to

know what to say next. "We were doing houses. . . ."

Doing houses? thought Travis. Painting or something? He couldn't imagine Orson organizing house painting, or why it would cause him to kill someone. But he just let Joe work on his second bourbon, because he was remembering vividly how it felt to be scared like that.

"Robbing houses. Orson would scout neighborhoods and me and the twins would break into the houses he picked, you know how good they are with tools and stuff, it wasn't too hard, a lot of times I just stood lookout because they could get in small windows, we just took easy stuff, you know, Orson fenced it, he said people's insurance covered it, nobody was really getting hurt, and he paid us, you know, like for each job. If we got a lot of stuff it was more. He knew how to get rid of the stuff, so we just took whatever he gave us."

Joe closed his eyes and sighed. Travis was sick with cold apprehension. Joe was in big, big trouble. And even in the middle of his terror for his friend came the selfish, unbidden thought: Thank God it's not me!

"I quit," Joe said. "You think they'll believe me when I tell 'em I quit?"

His sad olive-brown eyes fixed on Travis, desperate for hope, but Travis couldn't even nod.

"We did this one house, we thought it was empty, but just as we were packing up the silver this old lady came in and started screeching—

Billy shoved her and she fell, we ran out of there, she wasn't hurt because it was in the papers, but I got to thinkin' about Grandma, what if somebody shoved her, old ladies break bones real easy, you know. And I didn't want to do this anymore and I quit. The twins said they quit too." He sighed. "But they didn't. They did one more job and didn't tell Orson."

Travis's mind raced around and around. Ken could help him, he knew the law, he could . . . And at the same time he told himself over and over, it couldn't have happened to *him*. Oh, no. Suppose he had stayed at home, had been hanging out with them, he'd never have done anything so dumb. Robbing houses and . . . He'd never have been so dumb.

He stared at Joe and thought of all the reasons why it wouldn't have happened to *him*.

"Orson came by and got me. He said he'd heard the twins pulled a job without cutting him in. I think they found a different fence, I don't know, I quit and I thought they did too. Orson said he was going to kick ass. That's all I thought he was going to do, honest, he said he was going to do a little ass kickin' and teach them a lesson. He'd been drinkin' and smoking grass and coke too. I was scared to get out of the van—he wasn't mad at me and I was trying to keep it like that. The twins were hanging out in the parking lot by the park and Orson got out and got them and they just climbed in; we've been doing more grass

since you left, Travis, it's easier to get than booze. They were pretty stoned. And all the way up the mountain, he was driving up the mountain road, toward the reservoir, we kept drinking and smoking and it was like a foggy bad dream, like you can't wake up from, Orson ranting on and on about how they double-crossed him, how he was going to fix them. It was scaring me, man, but it was like it wasn't happening either. It just wasn't real. You ever have something happen, and it just didn't seem real?"

Travis nodded. He knew Orson's van. He could picture everything, the black night out the windows, the heavy smell of the grass, the glare of the dashboard lights on Orson's mad face. Crazy mad, drunk and stoned.

He pictured the silent twins, passing a bottle back and forth. It wouldn't seem real to them either.

"Anyway, Orson drove down one of those side roads, a dirt one, it was too bouncy to drink. Then he stopped and got out and rolled the side door open and made them get out. And me too. They ended up sitting on a log, Orson was still yelling and I was too scared to sit down with them. And he was waving a gun around. I thought it was just to scare them. I thought that right up to when he shot Billy in the head and he went over backward. Mike just sat there, staring at the ground. Orson said to me, 'You do this one,' but I wouldn't. I didn't say anything but I wouldn't. Then he was

yelling, 'Look at me, damn you,' at Mike, but he kept staring at the ground, shaking his head. Orson shot him too. I thought I was next, but he drove me back to town, saying I knew better than to tell anyone.

"I got a bus to St. Louis and then hitched the rest of the way—the last guy got a little weird with me and I jumped out of the car. . . ."

"You know what I keep thinking about? Leaving them up there on the mountain, it was a real cold night and they didn't have jackets. . . ."

Joe started shaking so his ice cubes rattled.

Travis finally said, "You sure they were dead?"

Joe nodded.

"When did this happen?"

"I think it was two nights ago, I ain't sure anymore."

Travis found himself shaking. But it wouldn't happen to me, he kept thinking. I'd have jumped out of the van, grabbed the gun, knocked Orson out . . . He kept running it over in his mind, changing the story, fixing it.

Fixing everything.

Chapter

13

It crossed Travis's mind to try to hide all this from Ken, but he soon realized that wouldn't work. For one thing, Joe sacked out into a sleep that resembled a coma, and Travis would have to take Christopher's bed; but mostly Travis wanted somebody else to lay this on—he wanted help.

What was going to happen to Joe? He tried to keep that question at the top of his mind, but if he let down his guard for a second, he found himself dwelling on how close he had come to being in the same mess.

If he had hit Stan just a little bit harder . . .

Ken took it a lot more calmly than Travis had expected. They stayed up till two o'clock talking about it—at least they ended up talking. At first Travis tried to persuade him to get Joe on a plane

out of the country. When Ken refused even to discuss that option Travis got a little wild, but by midnight he was worn out and facing facts. Ken was going to call the authorities first thing in the morning; he was going to do all that was legally possible; he was going to help find a good lawyer. Joe was going back.

It was settled and Travis had known all along this was how it was going to be settled and he didn't think Joe was going to be too surprised.

He wasn't. Travis finally had to go shake him awake the next morning; he ate his toast and drank his coffee and listened to the plans with dull indifference. Travis remembered when he'd worked for the vet: a couple of times people brought in dogs that had been hit by a car—they had the same look.

And Joe was tired. He was too tired to think of showering, but Travis made him, and ran his clothes through the washer and dryer. It might be his last private shower for a while.

For some reason that thought made Travis cry. He leaned on the washer and cried. The machine was noisy, nobody could hear him.

Joe was ready at last. He seemed to be walking in his sleep. Travis couldn't help remembering the bouncing bravado he'd managed himself, when the cops came for *him*, but then Stan hadn't been a friend, or really dead. He let Joe sit up front, even though he hated being scrunched up in the back.

"What's that?" Joe sat up and looked around, like someone trying to wake up.

"Thunder," Travis said.

"We're under a severe thunderstorm watch," Ken said. It seemed like a last-ditch effort for a normal conversation; they were reduced to talking about the weather.

"Does that mean like tornadoes and stuff?"

"Naw." Travis reassured him with the line he'd heard: "Not this time of year."

"I don't know," Ken said absentmindedly. "A few years ago we had one on Christmas."

Now he tells me, Travis thought. Actually, he hadn't really noticed the dark gray sky, it seemed such a natural extension of how everything was going—he would have been shocked and depressed by blazing sunshine this morning. The distant zigzag flashes through the blacker clouds to the west were like his thoughts, racing across his mind, the growing thunder like the march of doom.

Nobody tried to talk again. It was over quickly. They were in some building. It didn't seem like a police station, but there were policemen waiting to take Joe, men in suits to talk to Ken—Travis tried to take notes in his mind but everything blurred. Everything but the quick hug he gave Joe.

He was shaking.

"So what's going to happen?" he asked, finally breaking the silence on the way home. The light-

ning was closer now, crackling like skeleton fingers across the sky, the thunder booming and rolling (giants bowling, he remembered from when he was little, he'd thought thunder was giants bowling—had he thought that up or had he seen it in a cartoon a long time ago?). But it wasn't raining yet. The hairs on his arms, on the back of his neck, stood and wiggled.

"Do I look like God?" Ken said. "How should I know?"

Not much, Travis thought, not with those bags under your eyes.

"I mean *legally*."

"Sorry. Legally. Well, it depends on whether or not they catch this other guy. How much of his story is corroborated by the evidence. And a big factor is whether he's tried as a juvenile or an adult. How old is he?"

"Sixteen," Travis said, then remembered, with a sinking feeling, that Joe's mom had held him back a year, before grade school. Joe was the only person he knew who'd flunked kindergarten. "Seventeen."

"It could go either way."

Travis stared out at the trees dancing in the wind.

"It wouldn't have happened if I'd been there," he burst out. "I never liked that scuzz-ball Orson. I'd never have let them get suckered into working for him—if I'd stayed home this wouldn't have happened."

"Maybe something else would've happened," Ken said. "Maybe it would have been you and your stepdad murdering each other. Fate and will—it's baffled better minds than mine." In a minute he added, "Fate's what happens to you, and will is what you *make* happen to you."

Travis just nodded, thinking, Geez, does he think I'm a moron?

"You know," Ken said slowly, "I've got a friend who just got out of a Spanish prison a few years ago. He was in for twelve years, for five ounces of hash. And it could have just as easily been me. He's still in Spain, bartending. He didn't exactly pick up marketable skills in there. Why him and not me?"

"You used to do hash too?" Travis was shocked beyond belief. Sure, he knew adults smoked; the twins' stepfather had always shared his stash with them. Straight-arrow Ken? Never.

"What do you think—your generation invented sex, drugs, and rock and roll?"

Travis was quiet. Well, we've perfected it, he thought.

"We were in Spain at the same time, he came over on the freighter with me and Teresa—he tried to cross the French border, holding—we chickened out at the last minute. . . . Here is old Achilles, kid, to tell you: You are not going to believe you were ever that dumb. Goddamn!" A bolt of lightning struck so close they heard the

sizzle; the immediate thunder boom rattled the car.

Will and fate—he could will himself into writing a book, it was fate that got the right person to read it. Fate had kept him from one murder, God knows, at the time he'd meant to kill Stan: he was sure will would have kept him out of this one. What was it in the end? Which one had the biggest say in your life?

A gust of wind pushed at the car.

"You sure this isn't a tornado?" Travis gripped the dashboard.

"I'm not positive. I just hope we don't get caught in a flash flood."

Flash flood. Great. Like there weren't enough complications in life with people—nature had to get its two cents in.

"She's filed," Ken said suddenly.

"What?"

"Teresa. She's going ahead with it."

Travis looked at Ken's drawn face. Maybe this was why he'd been so detached through Joe's ordeal, why he hadn't bothered to give Travis a be-careful-how-you-choose-your-friends lecture (although, at this point, Travis was having doubts he'd ever meant to—apparently some of Ken's friends weren't upstanding citizens either).

"You know what's one of the worst things about this? It's humiliating—it puts us in the same class as all the other jerks divorcing. I thought we were better than that."

"I thought maybe you guys were going to get back together."

Travis was thinking about the time Teresa'd spent the night. He'd been so sure it was a good sign.

"I thought so too. Maybe."

A crackling fork of lightning lit a black cloud. It was incredible how far up that cloud went, like a tower. There was so much energy coming off this storm, it was more exhilarating than scary.

"What did you mean, that time you said, 'It all started with the Cuisinart'?"

Ken gave a short laugh. "I'm sure it started long before that, but at the time, the Cuisinart got me to thinking. Now, what the hell does she need that thing for? Cooking is not Teresa's favorite pastime. Then I started thinking: Now, why did we buy an old farmhouse and redo it to look like a redone old farmhouse? I'd very carefully research cars, twelve years ago, to see what the best was. You know what I got? A BMW. I got rid of the thing last year, same time I got rid of the horses. But even as far back as college, the year Teresa and I backpacked around Europe, every goddamn college kid in America was backpacking around Europe."

Ken, thought Travis, you are not making sense. He really hoped ol' Ken wasn't cracking up.

"Then we took up skiing. And skiing was on the cover of *Time*. And suddenly I knew what Brie was, and then Teresa, who doesn't have a sweet tooth,

developed a taste for chocolate. Just the same time Brie and chocolate swept the nation. I'm sick of feeling like a lemming. I'm sick of *stuff*."

"So, what does Teresa say?"

"She says let's enjoy a few things. She says, 'You hate your job, get another one!' She says she's too old to sleep on sidewalks."

"You going to get another job?"

Travis was trying to make some sense out of all this, and he wondered if Teresa felt the same way. She was the sensible one, it seemed to him.

"Another job? In this economy? I'm lucky to have a job. I have to think about Christopher—that's another thing. I used to always say I'd never send my kid to a private school unless I could guarantee him a private life, but now, what's going on in the public school system scares the hell out of me."

Hell, he'll live through it, Travis thought, but then, why not a private school if that'd be better?

"I think you're really messing up, man," Travis said.

"I probably am," Ken agreed. "It won't be the first time."

"Yeah, but it'll be the worst. Was my old man this stubborn?"

Ken laughed. "You think that's it, I'm just being stubborn?"

"I don't know what you're being but, geez, man, you want to keep Teresa and Chris, do something!"

Ken tightened his grip on the wheel as the car swayed in the wind. "Well, it's a lot more complicated."

Oh, sure. That was a good excuse for not making a move. Travis promised himself, he swore, he'd always make a move. Even if it was the wrong move, at least he'd know he did something besides balk like a mule and mutter "complicated."

As they pulled into the drive, they could see Casey racing around, trying to catch Sandman in the paddock. The rest of the paddocks were empty, except the one where the Star Runner was plunging and bowing, whirling and charging.

Why didn't she get him in first? Travis thought. He's going to jump out in a second. Then he knew: Of course, she'd look out for everyone else's horse first.

They both jumped out of the car—Travis had a hard time getting his door shut against the wind. The temperature was dropping rapidly. It was almost as dark as dusk, except for the weird strobing effect of the lightning.

"Don't touch the railing!" Ken yelled at him, then threw the gate open and ran to grab Sandman's lead rope from Casey.

"I'll get him in! Get the Star Runner!"

For a second Travis was surprised to see how easily Ken handled the nervous horse. Then he remembered: That was what Ken had wanted to

do with his life, raise horses. He hadn't ever seen Ken near one. . . .

There was a ripping sound, the sky splitting, and a finger of light touched the pecan tree at the back of the house. A crack and an explosion that deafened him.

This was death dancing around him in the skies, and for a second Travis wanted to run; then he broke loose from fear into a kind of crazy exhilaration. The Star Runner covered the paddock in one leap and took the five-foot railing in the next. Travis felt what it was that Casey felt: the Star Runner, to tame that Star Runner, it would be conquering worlds. . . .

The railing was humming. The steel poles were vibrating and pulsating with energy. Don't touch it, Travis thought, it's death. He turned and jumped into the Jeep with Casey, he'd been aware of her, the sky, the storm, the battlefield play of earth and air, all at the same time. Their eyes locked for just a second, and they laughed out loud at the same time. . . .

He seemed to hear Ken calling out, warning, but he was far behind now, they were racing like the wind, the earth was moving like a live thing under the wheels, the whole landscape was changed, charged, a different color, nothing familiar except that dark racing figure ahead.

The pasture gate was leaning, nearly flattened by the wind, and they charged on across it without stopping. They could gain on the Star Runner

here, a long flat stretch except for the gullies that nearly threw them from the Jeep. They were gaining now, not chasing him, joining him.

Travis looked at Casey laughing into the wind and thought: I'll remember that profile to the day I die. No matter how it works for us later, I'll always have this. . . .

The sky opened, lit to the ceiling, a light brighter than he could ever have imagined, showing huge towers and spires reaching to heaven—

He lay tasting dirt and aching and wondering at the stillness. The wind still tore across the land, the sky was still flashing, but it was quiet as a tomb.

He wondered if he was dead, then decided he hurt too much to be dead. He felt sad, as if he'd been awakened from a wonderful dream.

Casey! He pushed himself up and looked around wildly. The Jeep lay overturned in a small gulley. But then something stirred just a few feet away, and Casey slowly forced her way to her feet. He, too, got up. The center of the storm was farther away now, flashing behind them. He felt a few pelts of water. He limped up to stand beside her and she took his hand, winding her fingers in his.

No heat, no passion, just gratitude for a human touch.

"What is it?" he said. He realized then that he was deaf. And it didn't shock him like the desolation of her face.

There was nothing. Just the windswept pasture, the overturned Jeep, and the line of trees. The acrid smell of electricity, the smell of something burning . . . flesh burning.

Nothing. He gazed at the empty pasture.

It was raining now, harder. It felt like tears, it felt like blood, on his face.

Chapter

14

Travis lay on his bed, going over his manuscript. He was absentmindedly correcting things, the technical stuff mostly, cutting description, fiddling with a comma, trying to figure out how to let people know what a character was saying without writing word for word what he was saying. "He swore" worked pretty good, but he needed something else too. . . .

He turned down the music.

Through the open window he could hear the mockingbirds fighting over what was left of the pecan tree. He rolled off the bed and pulled his desk chair to the window.

The revisions were beginning to bore him, now that the novelty of the editor's marks had worn off. The book was okay, and the reality of publica-

tion (*it was really going to happen!*) could still stop his breath, but he wasn't living this book anymore. He just wanted it done.

He listened to the birds. He had a great appreciation of the sense of hearing now, after being stone deaf for two days and panicked that it might be forever.

He folded his arms on the windowsill and rested his chin on them.

Spring wasn't bad. Fall was always his favorite time of year, but spring wasn't bad at all.

There was the realtor, in her navy suit and plasticized hair, showing someone around the property. The economy was bad, it was a bad time to be selling, but every once in a while someone came to look.

He had to keep his room straighter.

Teresa had filed for divorce, but now she was dragging her heels about going through with it. Christopher had started bed-wetting and both Ken and Teresa seemed unduly freaked out about it. Travis thought if it'd bring them together again he'd personally load Chris up with juice every night. And a couple of nights he had.

He was tired of their story and wished for a happy ending.

But now he thought stories didn't have endings, only pausing places.

Joe's story was still stuck on whether he was an adult or a juvenile, but Orson was going to get to

sit on death row while his ending was being debated.

It was funny, the thought of what might have been, had he stayed—"what if?"—could still make Travis sick with dread. But the memory of the storm, of racing lightning, when he had been so close to death he could have reached out to touch it—that only brought an odd kind of joy.

Faintly, he could hear Casey yelling, "Heels. Heels! Heels!" He smiled. They were good friends now, close in a real funny way, free to fuss at each other, or laugh when no one else got the joke; she only had to raise an eyebrow to let him know what she was thinking, and sometimes she seemed to read his mind. They had a deal together, to quit smoking.

But something was gone. The intensity of a flaming candle, a laugh in the face of danger. He tried to remember the heat he had felt for her before, but it was fading now, like the memory of the storm, like the memory of the Star Runner, who, after all, had been just a horse.

Casey was still a good trainer. She still did well at the shows, she had a waiting list of people who wanted to ride with her. But there was something missing . . . he still loved her, but not the same way.

But he couldn't, wouldn't, believe that he missed the horse.

He could hear the realtor, in the house now, chirping about moldings, whatever they were.

He didn't much care about the place selling—Casey had already found another barn—except maybe it would cheer Ken up. Ken had promised him he could transfer to East River High, and it looked like he'd get to start with summer school, since he was flunking English. (This was going to be great in interviews, he thought. "The year I sold my book I flunked English." Ha!)

He would be in classes with Jennifer. He had gone with her and some of her friends to get pizza, to movies, they were a little preppy for him but he could get along with them. He had never felt so protective of anyone as he did of Jennifer.

He looked at his manuscript. It was just a stack of paper, pretty soon to be a book, but it wasn't the whole world anymore. Nell (he could call her Nell now) was nagging him to begin another one right away, so he'd have a good start on it before this one came out.

"Get going now," she warned him, "or you'll freak at the reality of the audience, once reviews come in."

Yeah, yeah, sure, Travis thought. But anyway, he did have an idea. . . .

He pulled his chair up to the desk and rolled a blank piece of paper into his typewriter.

He sat there, waiting.

S. E. HINTON wrote her first novel, *The Outsiders*, when she was sixteen. She is also the author of *Tex* and *Rumble Fish*. She was the recipient of the American Library Association's first Margaret A. Edwards Award, which honors authors "whose books have provided young adults with a window through which they can view their world and which will help them to grow and to understand themselves and their role in society."

S. E. Hinton lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma.