

S.E. HINTON

bestselling author of **THE OUTSIDERS**



TAMING THE  
**STAR**  
RUNNER

INCLUDES EXCLUSIVE AUTHOR'S NOTE

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition of this work as follows:

Hinton, S. E.

Taming the star runner / S. E. Hinton — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Sent to live with his uncle after a violent confrontation with his stepfather, sixteen-year-old Travis, an aspiring writer, finds life in a small Oklahoma town confining until he meets an eighteen-year-old horse trainer named Casey.

ISBN 978-0-385-30122-0 (trade hc) — ISBN 978-0-440-20479-4 (pbk.)

[1. Authorship—Fiction. 2. Horses—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.H5976 Tam 1988 88007065

ISBN 978-0-385-37666-2 (tr. pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6

First Delacorte Press Trade Paperback Edition 2013

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

## about *Taming the Star Runner*

A boy who sells a book while still in his teens. A boy who is still trying on different personas, trying to find one that fits both himself and his world. A girl in love with a horse.

Write what you know. It's good advice.

I wrote *Taming the Star Runner* when my son was four years old and could attend preschool three days a week. I rented an office on the same street as the school and spent that time writing. I was still too emotionally involved with being a mother to write in first person. But having a little distance from Travis made him come into a sharper focus. The journey from looking into the mirror to find self to looking out the window to find others is one we all have to make.

*S. E. Hinton*

AUGUST 2013

# Chapter 1

His boot felt empty without his knife in it. It didn't matter that he had never had to use it (sure, he'd pulled it a couple of times to show off, but the times he could have really used it, he'd forgotten about it and used his fists, as usual); he was used to feeling it there, next to his leg. What a security blanket. But even if the juvenile authorities hadn't taken it, it wouldn't have made it through the airport scanner. I could have packed it, though, he thought.

Travis stopped at the end of the line of people waiting to go through the airport security check. The sight of the security guards made his heart speed up. It was already pounding out a rhythm a rock group could have used. He tucked the cardboard carton he was carrying under one arm and wiped the sweat off his face.



"No jokes," he said. Joe and Kirk looked at him blankly. They had been treating him funny since he got out of juvenile hall. Travis thought: They think I'm crazy like everybody else does.

Travis pointed to the sign. "No jokes about bombs and hijacking and stuff."

Motorboat meowed, protesting being held sideways, and Travis straightened up the cardboard box. Motorboat had been drugged at the vet's before they left for the airport. Jeez, he gets drugs and I don't. I'm the one who needs them.

He handed the box containing his cat to the attendant and walked through the detecting doorway, half expecting to set off an alarm. No alarm went off, and he picked up his box on the other side. Kirk, who had been to the airport before, didn't think it was any big deal to get scanned, but Joe was almost as nervous as Travis, and had to bite his tongue to keep from cracking a joke.

Joe would have been a great comedian in juvenile hall, Travis thought, since his reaction to tension was to get funnier and funnier, the way I get quiet and mean.

He couldn't remember ever seeing Kirk tense. Kirk could shrug his shoulders and walk out from under anything. He wondered for a second how two guys so different could be his best friends.

Mom was last. They had walked too fast for her to keep up with them. That was partly accidental. Travis could not slow down for any reason. It was

also partly on purpose, because he couldn't stand any more of her soft frettings.

About how he should act when he got to his uncle's. About how he should stay out of trouble. (I could stay out of trouble all right, if it just didn't come looking for me. This last business sure wasn't my damn fault.) If it wasn't a mistake taking Motorboat with him. Like Travis should leave him here for Stan to kick around.

If he had packed the right clothes.

That last almost drove him to punch his fist through the wall. (He had done that once before—no bones were broken.) The right goddamn clothes! Sometimes he thought she was going to drive him crazy. He couldn't believe the stuff she had packed. New stuff (slacks, for God's sake!), stuff he'd shoot himself before he'd wear. Cowboy shirts! Could you believe that? He didn't care if Uncle Ken lived on a horse ranch. T-shirts were good enough to wear on a horse ranch. The horses wouldn't care.

Travis had dumped out all the new clothes and hidden them under his bed, and filled the two suitcases with his jeans and T-shirts and books and tapes and tape player. He wanted to take the tape player on board with him, but there was a rule about only one piece of carry-on stuff. He had learned a lot about the rules, trying to get the damn cat on.

It was practically a three-mile hike to get to the right gate, and they outdistanced Mom again.

There weren't too many people there yet, they were way too early. Mom had seen to that. Not that he minded. He couldn't take staying in the house, now. He sure couldn't take any more time in juvenile hall. What was left but leaving?

The plane was there, at the end of a long passenger ramp. He could see it out the window that took up a whole wall. It looked huge. The passenger ramp looked like a giant eel, clamped onto its head. God, that was a big plane! He'd never realized how big planes were. How the hell did they ever get off the ground?

Kirk settled into a seat in the lounge. Kirk liked to be comfortable. It was one of his biggest goals in life. Travis set the cat carrier in Kirk's lap.

"I'm goin' for some cigarettes."

"This thing going to pee on me?"

"It'll improve your smell if he does. Come on, Joe."

Travis and Joe strode down the hallway. Travis had spotted the cigarette machine from a long way off. He had left his at home and who knows, maybe nobody on the plane would let him bum one. Bumming cigarettes was one of his worst habits. Travis knew that. He pretty much knew what his worst habits were. Bumming cigarettes. Getting into fights. A lot of times he drank too much. On the other hand, he didn't bully anyone, and didn't have a smart mouth like Kirk, and he only bummed cigarettes, not money like Joe. He wasn't a bad person, no matter what Stan was

saying. There were a lot worse people than he was.

They stopped at the john. Travis knew there were johns on the plane, but he wasn't taking any chances. Maybe he'd be sitting next to the window and have to crawl over a bunch of people to get out.

Next to the window. His breath stopped. Maybe not.

Travis combed his hair, staring into the mirror with fixed concentration. He was good-looking. Probably one of the best-looking guys in the school. He had dark brown hair, not so long that he looked like one of the dopers, not so short that he looked like one of the straights, the student-council preppies. Five foot eight. Not bad for sixteen, and by the size of his hands and feet he hadn't stopped growing yet. Good eyes. Great eyes, actually. Gray-green and as cold as the Irish sea. He had read a book about F. Scott Fitzgerald once, and it said he had eyes as cold as the Irish sea. Travis liked that. He secretly liked his eyelashes, too, a black fringe, as long as a girl's. He had a good build, long-boned and lean and flat-stomached, and that was the reason he liked tight T-shirts. Kirk was taller, and had broader shoulders, but Travis thought his own build was as good as any in the school. A lot of girls thought so. A lot.

"Maybe I'll get a tan," he said out loud. If he had a fault to find with his face, it was its paleness.

But then, from what he read, Fitzgerald had never tanned either.

"Huh?" Joe said. He never spent as much time looking in mirrors as Travis did, being one olive-brown color all over, hair, eyes, and skin, and inclined to pudginess.

"I'll probably get a tan, being outside all the time. You got any downers on you, man?"

"Hell, no. You think I'm going to try to go through that security shit with downers on me?"

"They're just looking for metal junk, like knives and guns. You could have brought some, they'd never catch it."

"Yeah? Then why didn't you bring some?"

"They weren't exactly dishing it out like candy in jail."

Travis knew the difference between jail and juvenile hall (it hadn't been so long ago that he was thanking God for the difference), but he liked to think that nobody else did.

Travis leaned forward . . . that couldn't be the beginning of a zit—he never got zits, except a couple on his back once in a while. . . .

"Trav—"

"Yeah?"

"Were you aiming to kill him?"

Hell, no, Travis thought. You think I want to end up in prison, getting gang-banged by a bunch of degenerates every day? You think I haven't got better ways to spend my life than dickering my ass for cigarettes?

"If I had wanted to kill him," Travis said, giving his hair one last run-through, "he'd be dead, wouldn't he?"

He was lying. He had meant to kill Stan, it was only a lucky accident that he hadn't. Now, the red rage gone and just the usual smoldering embers of hate licking at his insides, it seemed incredible that he'd trade his life (which wasn't any great shakes so far, but still, he liked it) for the chance of slamming Stan's brains out; that after the years of putting up with Stan, of taking belts and insults and beatings (even Travis knew the difference between a couple of swats and a beating), he would risk everything (which wasn't a lot, but something: music and hanging out and girls and above all that thing inside that said Travis is Special), blow it all for a chance to put Stan away forever. And Stan hadn't so much as laid a finger on him.

Stan was his stepfather. That didn't bother him. A lot of kids had stepfathers—in fact, he only knew three guys who had the same father they'd started out with. Stan had slapped Mom around a couple of times—that had bothered Travis when he was younger, but he liked to think it didn't bother him so much now. She could leave. Anytime. A lot of women worked. She wanted to put up with that garbage, she could. And not only did she put up with it, she kept making excuses for him. Like: "It was my fault, I shouldn't have been nagging. He is a good provider."

Provide, hell. Food on the table wasn't exactly living in luxury. Travis didn't think he wanted much, material stuff, anyway. Maybe a car someday, and all the paperback books he wanted, and tapes, tons of tapes until he could play tapes all night for a year and never hear the same thing twice unless he wanted; that wasn't a whole awful lot to want, really, but he sure as hell wasn't expecting anyone to provide it. He wouldn't let anyone provide it, a matter of fact. People give you something, then you owe them. Every time Stan bought Mom something, like an electric skillet or a new coat, just some simple little thing like you'd expect a guy to get for his wife, he'd beat her over the head with it. Not literally. But verbally. Like "I got you this and this and you owe me."

Getting beaten up verbally was just as bad as physically, only it was easier to hide the scars. Travis would never owe anybody anything. If he wanted something, he'd get it on his own.

Besides, it bugged the hell out of Stan that Travis never asked for anything. But asking for something put Stan in control, so Travis either got it on his own or he went without. He washed cars. He mowed lawns. He was the best poker player in the school. He worked at the vet's on Saturdays, or he had until he got fired for coming in late. Travis was hung over a lot on Saturdays.

But he got his own music and his own books and he could always take anything Stan dished out and walk off.

It was really weird to think he'd almost liked Stan once. When he was ten and Stan first started coming around—he'd been dumb enough at first to almost like him.

Just because he'd tossed a football around with him a couple of times, and promised to take him hunting. He cringed, now, to think how little he'd minded Mom marrying that creep, how he'd even halfway thought it was a good idea.

Stan was Mom's husband but he sure wasn't his dad; and he sure as hell wasn't his boss, and the older he got, the more Stan tried to . . . own him, Travis thought. That was the only word for it. Own him and try to make him sit up and beg. Well, Travis wasn't jumping through hoops for anyone. He went his own way.

Until last week.

Travis couldn't remember when he'd first known he was going to be a writer. He'd known as soon as he'd learned how to read, and he couldn't remember not being able to read. He had started in grade school, writing down the monster stories he'd make up for his friends. Spending the night with each other, hanging out in somebody's basement, sleeping on cots in somebody's backyard, Travis would tell monster stories, taking things he'd heard or read and mixing them up with what might be until he had it as real as reality—they'd all get scared (even Travis) and pick fights with each other or leave a flashlight on or get so loud



that the grown-ups came after them, anything to get protection while denying they needed it.

Travis always had stories going in his head. From those monster stories to that long, involved tale he'd been telling his cellmate last week, he couldn't stop the stories any more than he could stop breathing.

He'd taught himself to type in the sixth grade. By then he'd realized that if he couldn't read his own handwriting, nobody else could either; he'd swiped Mom's Valium and sold it to a ninth-grader and bought a used typewriter. He liked the way his stuff looked, typed. Realer. More professional. By the time he took typing at school, in the tenth grade, he was typing ninety words a minute. That was the easiest A he'd ever made. In fact, the only A he'd made since grade school. He hadn't been such a wild kid in grade school.

It sort of puzzled him a little, being able to type. Most of the time he was damn clumsy with his hands. He wasn't any good tinkering with cars, the way a lot of his friends were, he was a real embarrassment on the basketball court. In shop class he had damn near cut off his thumb. You could take it for granted that he was going to drop or spill just about anything he had in his hands. But at a typewriter he just had to think and there were the words.

Stan disliked him for a lot of reasons. He was living proof Mom had had another husband. Travis was young and good-looking, he could take

getting slugged across the face without changing expression; Stan's steady stream of gripes and cuts and digs only left marks where Stan couldn't see them.

Just a couple of months ago he had stomped into Travis's room, hauled him up from the typewriter, yanked him into the front room, and shoved him in front of the TV, shouting, "You're part of this family and you'll act like it."

Travis stared at the TV for two hours, writing a short story in his head, and typed it up later. Stan was not going to ruin it for him. He wasn't going to drive him to run away—Travis had seen what happened to the jerks who ran away, thinking something, someone, was going to fix things up for them—most of the time they came straggling home looking like idiots and when they didn't they mostly ended up in worse places than they were running from.

Stan wasn't going to drive him to suicide either. Sure, Travis sometimes thought about it. Everybody thought about it. It had been close sometimes. Once he had sat in an alley with a loaded .22 pistol and looked at it for a long time. But he hadn't put the barrel to his head. So it hadn't been *real* close. But he had thought about it. What had stopped him was his motto. His saying. What he told himself over and over again, like a prayer, a chant: He's not going to ruin it for me. He's not going to ruin it for me. He's not worth ruining it for me.

But last week, he damn near had.

It was an ordinary day. Travis went to school, tried to get a date with a new girl in class (she turned him down, nice girls usually did, because of his reputation; it had happened too often to bug him much). He had made a B on an English test (there was a note on it saying it would have been a A if he would learn to pay attention to spelling). He got into a shoving match with a senior out in the hall that just missed turning into a fight, and he cut history after lunch to keep on cruising with Kirk in his Firebird, listening to a new tape. It was a real ordinary day. . . .

Then Kirk dropped him off at the house and he walked in to find Stan stuffing the fireplace with something. Stan just glanced at him. "I've heard your mother tell you a thousand times to clean your room. Now I'm cleaning it for you."

Then Travis realized the papers were his stories, his songs, stuff he had spent years writing.

Later, he tried to recall what had crossed his mind, but he couldn't remember a thing but the red blinding explosion that didn't seem to take place in his head at all, but was triggered somewhere between his gut and his heart.

And then Stan was lying on his side, keeled over like a beached ship, still clutching a wad of paper. Blood was starting to trickle down to his face from his scalp. Travis was staring at the fire poker he held tight, with both hands, like it was a baseball bat.

The rest was a jumbled mess. Mom crying and calling an ambulance and neighbors running in—Mrs. Landell saying, “You have *got* to do something about that boy!” in a tone of voice that made Travis want to smash her too. The bitch.

(She was always complaining about Travis: He played his music too loud, his light stayed on all night, keeping her awake, all those hoody friends hanging out in the driveway, laughing, drinking beer, up to no good, their tires squealing out at odd hours.)

When the cops showed up a few hours later, Travis was sure that was Mrs. Lendell’s doing. But no. It was Stan who had signed the complaint. . . .

They really did read you your rights, just like on TV. Travis had been close to laughing, it was so much like TV. But the cold steel of the handcuffs wasn’t like TV. Travis had been shocked at how it felt to be handcuffed and dragged out to the police car. Embarrassed. Not angry or defiant or a little pleased with the stir he was causing in the neighborhood. He had imagined being arrested before, for some daredevil, spectacular crime that would get him on the six o’clock news. He’d never dreamed that the main thing he’d feel would be just plain humiliated . . . and really, really scared.

“We better be getting back,” Joe said.

Travis knew that sometimes he made Joe very

nervous. Joe probably suspected Travis was, like people were saying, a little bit crazy.

Okay, Travis thought. So what? Writers were supposed to be a little bit crazy.

"Yeah. In a minute," Travis said automatically. He shook himself slightly, like a dog rising from a nap. "You gonna write me a letter, man?" He ripped open his cigarettes and jammed one in his mouth, sticking the pack into the pocket of his brown leather jacket. Joe handed him a matchbook.

"Sure. I guess." Joe had never written anyone a letter in his life, he wasn't making any promises.

"Really, I want to know how things are going. What's happening—"

"Travis, we'd better be getting back, you're gonna miss your plane . . . what's wrong?"

Travis closed his eyes for a second. This was why he had wanted Joe to go with him, not Kirk. Joe wouldn't care. What was better, he wouldn't blab, he could tell Joe—

"I'm scared."

Joe looked at him uneasily. "Hey, listen, your uncle's probably a pretty good dude, he's got to be better than—"

"Not my uncle, man, I'm scared of the plane. I'm scared to get on the goddamn plane."

The plane. How could anything that big . . . it must weigh tons, how could it leave the ground, much less stay up there? Who was driving? Did they know what they were doing? It wasn't easy,

driving a plane . . . what if they were hung over or flirting with a flight attendant or something? Just careless for a couple of minutes, then what? A fall, straight down, minutes of knowing what was coming . . . Travis broke out in a cold sweat. And he was expected to just bop on in and hand over his life to strangers.

“You ain’t scared.”

Travis slumped back against the wall and met Joe’s eyes for a second. Joe was appalled. Travis Harris, the coolest, the toughest . . .

“Remember that drag race we had with those guys from Central?” Joe asked.

Of course, Travis remembered it clearly. They were in the twins’ Trans Am and Travis was driving. He was the only person they let drive their car. He was doing 110 on the expressway and he took one hand off the wheel to take Kirk’s beer and slug it down, his other arm trembling with the effort of driving, and everyone was holding his breath. He hit 115 and nobody was breathing at all, and he asked for another and Billy—maybe Mike—gave him one quickly, afraid he’d turn around and take it. They were flying, skimming the road, the Central guys left behind long ago, and nobody, man, nobody thought he’d get the car back down. He just kept on asking for more, faster, harder, they couldn’t even hear the radio anymore or see the lights rushing by in the night, as if they were all suspended in time, nothing real

except the lights on the dashboard where the needle kept climbing. . . .

“Remember that, Trav? You can’t be scared.”

Travis stared down at his boots. “I was driving.”

Back at the gate, Kirk had put the cat carrier on the seat next to him, and three little kids were gathered around trying to peer in the air holes. Kirk was telling them it was a baby leopard. “No kiddin’.”

Mom started to get up, then sank back. “You need to go to the counter. For seat selection—they’ll give you a number. Here, take the ticket.”

She hadn’t trusted him with the ticket. Travis was notorious for losing things; it was the major reason he was always bumming cigarettes. His just disappeared.

More lines. Smoking section. Aisle seat. He’d have to go in the smoking section anyway, because of Motorboat. A boarding pass. Something else to worry about losing.

Travis went back to his seat and picked up Motorboat. “Hey, kid, get outta here. Leave the cat alone, huh?”

Travis wasn’t crazy about little kids. Anyway, M.B. was probably having a nice downer, he didn’t need a bunch of brats messing it up for him.

They all sat there in silence, like they were wait-

ing for the movie to start. Travis kept on smoking, one foot bobbing to music only he could hear.

"When you comin' back?" Kirk said.

Travis didn't reply. Sometimes when he did this it was because he was out of it (he referred to his habit of blanking out, visiting some other world that was always spinning in the back of his mind, as "being out of it"; it rarely happened when he was drunk), or it was because he chose not to answer. Most people couldn't tell which was which. Travis found this very convenient.

"Next summer," Mom said. "Travis will probably be home next summer."

"Wow, that's a long time, man."

The authentic note of distress in Kirk's voice made Travis glance at him. He had never made up his mind about Kirk—Joe was his friend because he was Travis. But he had the feeling that Kirk was his friend only because he was one of the coolest guys in the school. The cool guys always hung out with each other. He liked Kirk's smart mouth, and even though he was good-looking in a big butter-scotch Viking kind of way, it was the kind of good-looking that wasn't competition. A matter of fact, they looked good together. But Travis found it hard to believe Kirk would actually *miss* him.

"Write me a letter," Travis said.

"Yeah, and you'll put it in your book."

"The book's finished," Travis said. He didn't add that weeks ago it was in the mail to a publisher. Nobody needed to know that.



"Yeah? Am I in it?"

"Yeah. The comic relief. Say bye to Billy and Mike for me."

The twins worked at McDonald's and couldn't get off. There could have been quite a crowd here, saying good-bye to Travis.

Travis cut the conversation off. He didn't talk about his writing. Joe and Kirk were the only guys who knew why Travis would hole up for days in his room, the music blaring, not cruising, not hanging out, missing dances and parties and fights—the rumors about this ranged from "heavy doping" to "really weird." Travis didn't care what they said. He honestly never gave a damn what people said about him—or at least, what they were saying about his frequent disappearances. The writing was just so much a part of him that he couldn't talk about it any more than he'd sit around and spill out his guts. It was nobody's business.

"Those people in rows ten through twenty-one can be seated now. Please have your boarding pass ready for the flight attendant. No smoking beyond the gate."

Travis dropped his cigarette and stamped it out. A crowd surged at the gate, people hugging and calling good-bye to each other. He got up, the cat carrier under his arm. He looked at the waiting plane; his heart jumped. "Geez," he muttered, "how do they ever stay up?"

Kirk said, "Angel dust."

Mom was giving him a lot of last-minute instructions and messages and lectures. Travis couldn't hear any of it—not that he wanted to—the plane crowded out every other thought in his head.

He shook hands with Joe and Kirk. Kirk surely noticed how cold and sweaty his hand was. Maybe he'd tell the other guys. Travis was a real chicken-shit about flying.

Maybe not.

Mom was standing there. Travis suddenly hugged her, even though he hadn't been planning to. She was sending him away, she had chosen Stan over him a long time ago . . . she had never understood the slightest thing about *Travis*, she loved him, sure, blindly, because he was her kid, it didn't have anything to do with *him*. . . . Travis was shocked to find tears jumping to his eyes.

"See ya," he said, turning.

"Be good, hon."

"Yeah, sure."

He followed the other passengers down the long hall. Somebody took his boarding pass and gave him a piece of it back, somebody told him where his seat was. The line stopped, people grabbed for a magazine, or stopped to put their coats in an overhead rack, holding everyone up. Travis found it hard to breathe. There didn't seem to be a lot of air in here.

He found his seat. Next to the aisle, not the

window, thank God. "Store all carry-ons safely. . . ." a voice was saying.

He got his seat belt fastened. A blast of air was hitting him from somewhere. He wondered if the plane had sprung a leak. The engines started up. "In case of emergency . . ."

He strained to hear her, but no one else was paying attention, the engines got louder, his heart thudded until he thought he was going to throw up. The babbling voices around him had a hollow sound, a chorus of the damned.

The plane backed out with a sudden jerk. They were moving. Slowly now, cornering, then faster, faster, a lunge—his stomach jumped. God! The ground was gone!

"Is that a cat or a dog?"

Travis slowly dragged his eyes from the window to the man sitting next to it. Surely they weren't supposed to be tilting like this, the ground stretched out beneath them . . . a long, long way down. . . .

Travis glanced at Motorboat's box, stored safely beneath the seat in front of him, just like the attendant had said. "Cat."

The engines changed noises. Man, that couldn't be right! Something was wrong. What was that weird grinding sound beneath them? Travis's hands were ice-cold. The armrests under his gripping palms were wet. Sweat ran down his back. And still they were going up. . . .

"I hate cats."

Travis looked at the businessman, who was thumbing through an airplane magazine. And beyond him, the window. Where there was nothing.

I'm going to black out, he thought dizzily. Then he took a deep breath. No way.

He reached nonchalantly for his own magazine.

"Yeah, well, I hear a lot of faggots hate cats."

He stared without reading, the engines humming in his head.

There was nothing left but leaving.

# Chapter

## 2

*Dear Joe,*

*It's okay here. My uncle seems to be okay. I started school. It's real small. Everything is okay.*

Travis broke off typing. Great literary merit in this letter, all right. What if someday, after he was famous, somebody published all the letters he'd ever written? Sometimes they did that with famous-author letters.

He'd sure be proud of this one. He yanked it out of his typewriter and rolled in a new page.

*Joe—*

*I lived thru the plane ride even tho we had to stop twice on the way. I thought I'd puke all over the dude sitting next to me, and it woulda served him right—I*

*tried to get him to buy me a bourbon but he wouldn't go for it.*

*My uncle is younger than I thought he was, people seem to think we look alike and I'm not real insulted, except he has some gray hair. He recognized me right away at the airport.*

Travis stopped. When he'd asked Ken how he had recognized him, he'd replied, "That last-of-the-cowboys swagger, just like Tim's."

And there'd been something in his voice that Travis couldn't place; bitterness or regret or both. . . .

*I guess I must look like my dad. Anyway, Ken's separated from his wife, they're going to get a divorce or something. We're living out in the country, I think he was raising horses but doesn't anymore, he said he didn't have the time since he was made a partner in his law firm. That might come in real handy, huh? (ha ha)*

*He's a funny kind of dude, I haven't figured him out yet. Real quiet, and sometimes it takes me a while to get what he's saying, because he says funny stuff with a real straight face. Like I tried to say thanks, for letting me move in like this, and he said, "I wanted to do something nice for a change. . . ."*

Travis leaned back. He had the feeling his uncle didn't quite know why he'd let him come here.

They still seemed to feel funny around each other, like they were both thinking: Now what?

But Ken left him alone and Travis was happy to be left alone instead of griped at. He didn't even mind how quiet it was around here.

*I go to this little hick school out in the boonies—I got sent to the office the first day for saying “goddamn.” Can you believe it? The kids are such aggie-nerds it is totally unbelievable—*

“Let's go get a pizza.”

Travis looked up at his uncle.

“Or maybe you need to finish your homework?”

Travis shook his head. “Naw. It's just a letter.”

“You writing your mom?”

Good grief! Writing to Mom, what an idea. What the hell could he write to Mom?

“Naw, I'm up for pizza.”

Actually, one of the best things about this setup so far was pizza. Ken liked it as much as Travis, although he loaded his half with a bunch of junk like green peppers and mushrooms, when just plain cheese was the way pizza was meant to be.

Travis stared out the car window.

It sure got dark out in the country. It was two miles to the Pizza Hut, a mile and a half to the nearest 7-Eleven. He was thinking he needed a job, but it sure wasn't going to be easy, getting

around. He didn't think Ken would be crazy about either letting him drive, or driving him around. He had made it pretty clear that Travis would ride the bus to school.

"Uncle Ken?" he began, but his mind got side-tracked when Ken answered, "Yes, nephew Travis?"

"Why do you do that, call me nephew Travis? You want me to drop the uncle bit?"

"You got it."

"Okay." Travis had felt like a dork every time Ken called him "nephew Travis" but wasn't sure if it was supposed to be funny or what. So far, he was trying real hard not to get Ken ticked off at him. It was weird, living with a stranger. But probably, he reminded himself, a whole lot better than living with a bunch of strangers. A really strange bunch of strangers. . . .

He glanced around the almost-empty Pizza Hut, so glad he was here and not in jail. . . . There were three girls at a table in the corner and one of them was pretty.

He hadn't made any friends here yet, not having found anyone he particularly wanted to be friends with, and suddenly he wanted to talk to somebody his own age.

He looked at the girls again. The pretty one and the fat one were listening to the third girl. She leaned over the table, talking eagerly, waving a cigarette toward an ashtray and missing.



Good excuse. It'd worked before. He left Ken ordering the drinks and walked up to their table.

"Hey." He made eye contact with the pretty one; she smiled politely and glanced away. He turned to the third. "Can I borrow a cigarette?"

"Here." The girl who had been talking slapped a dollar bill on the table. "Go buy yourself a pack."

She went on with her story, as if there hadn't been an interruption. Travis stood there stupidly, trying to think of his next move. He'd used this ploy a lot; get a cigarette, get a light, keep talking. Not just with girls, but with anybody who seemed interesting, who might have a story. . . . Nobody had ever thrown a dollar at him and told him to get lost.

"Casey"—Ken came up and handed Travis a Coke and sipped the foam off his beer—"you meet my nephew, Travis? This is Casey Kencaide, who leases my barn. Jennifer—"

The pretty one said hi.

"And Robyn."

The fat one said hi.

"How'd the show go?" Ken went on.

"Pretty good," Casey said. Her eyes were interesting, green as traffic lights. Actually, if she'd had on some makeup and a different hairstyle, she might not have been so plain. Profile a little too severe, and way too skinny. . . . Jennifer was cute, though. *Real* cute.

"We pinned in almost every class and Jenna got small hunter champion."

"How'd the Star Runner do?"

"Well, we made it to the jump-off."

The thing that saved her face, Travis thought, besides those vivid eyes, was its expression: not quite laughing, a light smile at a private joke. But she was too old for him anyway, at least eighteen.

"Then he crashed through the triple," Robyn said. "He had the whole course down."

Jennifer said, "Not the *whole* course."

"Number nineteen, your order is ready," said the loudspeaker.

"That's us," Ken said. "See you, girls."

"Yeah, see you," Travis echoed.

Casey said, "Ken, up his allowance. He's bumming cigarettes."

*Just got back from pizza with my uncle,* Travis began typing again. Motorboat jumped up in his lap and put his chin in the crook of Travis's elbow; Travis couldn't see how the cat could be comfortable—as he typed, Motorboat's head jarred up and down until his teeth clicked together. But he always did this while Travis typed, purring loudly and doing happy feet, his needle-sharp claws lightly spiking through Travis's jeans.

*How's it going there? Weren't you and the twins going to work for Orson? They ever get the transmission fixed on the Trans Am? Done any cruising lately?*

Travis stopped, and took a deep breath. He was starting to sound homesick. Couldn't start sounding homesick.

Anyway, he wasn't homesick. There wasn't anything at home, especially. Nothing to be lonesome for. Hanging around watching the twins fiddle with their car, or spending evenings in the parking lot of the city park, sipping beers until the cops ran you off, what was so great about that? Messing around in Orson's record store after school, listening to his line of bull—he was always hinting around that he was involved in mysterious Big Deals that someday, if they were real lucky, he'd let them in on. He said he knew the Mob. He also said he owned the record store, when Travis knew for a fact he just managed it. And he had a strong suspicion that the mysterious Big Deals went on mostly in Orson's head.

He was one of those older guys who seemed to think they were still young. That always irritated Travis. Being young was an exclusive club and pretenders annoyed him.

And Orson kind of gave him the creeps. But then, Travis never had to particularly like someone to find them interesting.

But still, it was kind of a kick to hang out in the record store, you got to hear a lot of new releases, and Travis couldn't feel bad about lying to Orson, he was such a liar himself, so it was a good place to tell stories. A lot of the heavy dopers hung out there, so there might have been dealing going on,

but Joe and the twins and most of Travis's friends weren't druggies, so it wasn't done in front of their faces. Maybe the twins bought grass.

*Mom called. I guess Stan isn't permanently brain damaged. Not that he'd know the difference. She said you guys were having a lot of rain lately. No tornadoes here yet, but at school there's a drill. . . .*

Great. Talking about the weather—how dumb. Probably because people around here talked about it more, which showed you how desperate they were for conversation—weather at home was just something that made the difference between sitting *in* the car at the park, or *on* it.

Disgusted, Travis pushed back from the typewriter and Motorboat jumped down. The cat raced around the room, his tail stuck straight up, pausing to grab Travis's leg, biting, thumping hard with his hind legs.

"Okay, okay." Travis kicked loose. "I'll let you out tomorrow."

He hadn't let Motorboat out of the house yet, afraid he'd get lost. But maybe he'd try it for an hour or so tomorrow. He'd have to be careful; Ken had a couple of dogs and might not like them getting beaten up by a cat. He read his new Hemingway biography for an hour, then wandered down to the den where Ken was looking over a bunch of legal papers and watching the news at the same time.

He looked up, and Travis felt for a minute that Ken had forgotten who he was and what he was doing here. He'd felt that before. It made him really wonder why Ken had let him come in the first place.

"Finish your schoolwork?"

Ken asked him that every night. It was like it was the one safe conversation piece.

"Yeah." He hadn't, but he could do it on the bus in the morning. "Can I have a beer?"

"No."

"I drink it at home."

"You're not home."

"Yeah, but—"

Ken put his papers down. "Subject is closed, kid. I don't have the energy for this kind of garbage. You want to drink beer, go home."

"Yeah, okay, no big deal." Travis figured he'd just sneak down later for a swig of bourbon.

"You doin' legal stuff?"

"Yeah, I'll shuffle these papers around awhile, then I'll give them to someone else to shuffle and when enough people have shuffled for the appropriate time, something of no lasting value will be decided."

"I thought being a law partner was a pretty good job."

"Being a partner is fine. It's the practice of law that sucks."

Travis wandered around the room, picking up stuff and looking at the pictures on the wall. Most

of them were of a chubby blond baby growing into a chubby blond little boy. Ken's son Christopher—would that make him his nephew, cousin . . . ?

"Ken?"

"Yeah."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-seven."

Travis was shocked. "Oh, wow, man, you don't look that old."

"Thanks." Ken's voice seemed even drier than normal.

"Can I ask you something?" Travis was talking almost absentmindedly. It was a good thing he'd brought a lot of books with him, there didn't seem to be many here.

"I'm betting you can."

"Huh?"

"Yes, you may ask me something."

"Oh." Travis dropped into an armchair, fiddled with a lever, and almost flipped himself over backward. When he got straightened up he said, "Was my dad some kind of gung-ho Rambo, joining the Air Force to whip the commies?"

His dad had been shot down over Vietnam two months before he was born. Travis was curious about him. Mom always spoke of him as a "good man and a brave soldier," but Travis couldn't tell much from that. Not that she'd have the story straight anyway. She tended to remember things

the way she *wanted* them to have happened, instead of the way they did.

Not that it had much to do with him. He didn't have a dad, but neither did a lot of people. No big deal.

"No," Ken said slowly. "Not at first. But he got more and more militant, got so bad, in fact, that we couldn't carry on a conversation for five minutes without getting into a fight. . . . No, at first he just wanted so bad to fly—"

Travis got up abruptly. He didn't want to hear about flying right now. And Ken seemed glad to change the subject.

"Kid."

"Yeah?"

"Change the cat's litter box."

Stan had griped a lot about that too.

"I'm goin' to start lettin' him out tomorrow—he'll whip your dogs."

"They won't bother him. They're used to cats."

"Yeah?" Travis was interested. "You got a cat?"

"I had a cat. Teresa's got custody."

Travis wandered back to his room. Maybe Ken was so preoccupied because of this divorce deal. Well, it probably was rough, but you had to admit, it wasn't anywhere near as bad as attempted murder.

# Chapter

## 3

The whole world had turned on him! Travis didn't get it. Nothing was happening the way he wanted it.

Ken was too distracted to pay much attention to him, but Travis hadn't expected an open-arms welcome, and who knows what Ken had expected.

No, Ken was okay, it was school. The other kids. Travis was easily the coolest guy in the school. That was apparent the first day. He didn't see anyone worth hanging out with. They all talked so weird, slowly, dragging out every word with a drawl too hokey to be real.

He was sure the first day that this was all an elaborate put-on for his benefit. Just a joke on a new kid. He was stunned and amused to find out the truth—people really talked like this! And they



moved so slowly, his own movements made him look like a speed freak. They even ate lunch slowly.

After the first week it was a little less noticeable, at least enough to keep him from laughing out loud. But by then he wasn't much in the mood for laughing, anyway.

It was starting to dawn on Travis that these people didn't seem to realize how cool he was, much, much cooler than anyone else in this hick school—you'd think people would be standing in line to suck up to him. But it wasn't happening.

There wasn't any group for him. Back home there were lots of different groups. He could even comfortably drift with two or three. Here it was just hicks. Hick jocks and hick nerds, maybe. He didn't fit.

He preferred Trans Ams to pickups, speed to four-wheel drive. He liked hard rock instead of country. His language shocked even the boys. The girls worth looking at were looking at somebody else. He felt weird, moving so much faster than everyone; when he tried to slow down he became clumsier than ever. Getting into trouble for his foul mouth, he tried to curb it and couldn't—the solution seemed to be keeping his mouth shut. Nobody wanted to speak to him anyway.

His English teacher was not impressed by his first theme. The first page was covered with red corrections. At the top of the second she'd written, *I give up! Buy a dictionary.*

A D on an English paper in a school where they barely spoke English!

Well, he'd lived before with teachers who weren't madly in love with him. He could handle that. But he'd never been without friends.

He remembered feeling sorry for new kids at his old school, not that he ever went out of his way to make their lives easier. At least he didn't torment them, like Kirk had.

In fact, in the eighth grade, he went out of his way to get the twins into his group, figuring twins might be interesting; he hadn't known any before.

They weren't particularly, but Travis didn't regret befriending them.

They had transferred from another school in the middle of the school year when their parents got divorced; maybe that accounted for their stunned and rabbity-looking faces. Skinny, blond, never quite clean, dressed alike in plain T-shirts and jeans, Travis got to where he could tell Billy from Mike when he saw them together, but didn't know whether he was speaking to Billy or Mike when he bumped into one of them alone. They rarely were alone, though, it made them uneasy—all their mother had to do to keep them in line was threaten to send one to live with their father.

No, Travis never regretted including them, though once the novelty of their being twins wore off they weren't anything outstanding. And when their mother remarried, their stepfather would buy them grass.

Interesting or not, Travis would have given anything to have them over for an evening, or better yet, gone to hang out with them while they flipped burgers for McDonald's, because on top of everything else, he was starving.

Joe—

*This place is okay except there's nothing to eat. Really. Remember how you guys thought I was absent-minded? Well, you should see my uncle. He keeps forgetting I'm here—he works late a lot and eats a sandwich at the office and I'm stuck out here in the middle of nowhere with no wheels and an empty fridge. So Ken comes in at nine o'clock and does a double take at finding someone else here and swears and off we go to the 7-Eleven for a microwaved barbecue beef. . . .*

Mom would croak if she knew how he had to scrounge around this big old house trying to find something edible. Mom was a good cook, you had to give her that. The memories of the dinners she used to fix could almost make him cry. Macaroni and cheese and pork chops and potato pancakes and fried chicken—homemade desserts every night.

He hated to admit it, but he was sick of pizza.

*Listen, Joe, it sounds funny, but the other night I got desperate enough to try to cook spaghetti. The directions say "cook till tender." How am I supposed to know when that is? Anyway, it came out kind of chewy and*

*the only thing I could find to put on it was a can of tomato soup. Ken came in and found me eating that stuff and we drove clear into town to an all-nite Safeway and we stocked up on frozen dinners and lunch meat so at least I'm set for a while. You'd think Ken'd realize somebody's living here by now. . . .*

Travis got up and wandered down to the den, where Ken sat in front of a *Star Trek* rerun working on papers. It was hard to keep on writing Joe letters when he didn't write back—Travis had known he wouldn't, but still, it was like putting a note in a bottle and tossing it out to sea. Actually, it was hard to write anything these days.

Here was the perfect time to hole up in his room and write, but his mind seemed as blank as a typing sheet. Maybe because it wasn't his choice, anymore, now that there was nothing else to do.

"How's school?" Ken asked automatically. Usually, Travis said, "Okay," and that was their evening conversation. But tonight Travis said, "Rotten."

Ken looked up.

"Really. Nobody likes me."

"I like you."

"Yeah, but you don't go to my school."

Ken laughed and put down his papers. "Okay. Listen, hang in there a little while longer and if it doesn't get any better I'll get you transferred to East River. It's a lot bigger, there'd probably be *somebody* who'd like you."

Travis didn't see anything funny about this, and it might have shown on his face, because Ken said, "Just try it a little longer, okay? I've got a heavy caseload right now, and this thing with Teresa's on my mind—"

Great, thought Travis. Ask him to spend two minutes on my problems and we're back to his. . . . "You're not being a farmer anymore?"

"Rancher. No. At one point I was going to be a gentleman rancher, which I found out is impossible. Unless you're fantastically wealthy and unbelievably sane, you can't ranch in your spare time. Fortunately, I got out before the bottom dropped out of the market . . . Teresa was bored out here anyway. . . ."

Why would he care if she was bored? They were divorcing.

"There's nobody to hang out with," Travis said, getting back to the main problem.

"The barn is swarming with girls every afternoon. Some of them are pretty cute. Hang out with them."

Hang out with girls! Now he could believe Ken's remark about not being totally sane. The idea was too dumb to even discuss. All he said was, "I don't think what's-her-name, Casey, likes me."

"Unless you're on a horse, or *are* a horse, she's not going to like you. You sure seem to worry a lot about being liked."

For the first time Ken had really ticked him off.

Travis had never, in his whole total life, given a damn about being liked. Who cared? Who gave a— He got up off the floor and went outside. He hated *Star Trek* reruns. Mom was a Trekkie. She even made Stan take her to the *Star Trek* movies.

He sat on the short wall of the patio. Except for the purple glow of the bug zapper, it was pitch-black. It got so dark out here. . . . Motorboat jumped up and walked along the wall. Travis held out a fist and the cat shoved his face against it, then the top of his head, rumbling loudly.

After a while, Travis went to spit in the bug zapper, to hear it zit.

It was invisible-man time again at school the next day. Even the big hulk who'd gone out of his way to harass him the first week had given it up, like it wasn't worth the bother. Travis remembered a kid at his old school, a real loner who was suspected of being a psycho, and for the first time wondered if that kid had really *wanted* to be a loner. If maybe somehow all the other kids had forced him into it, without even being really aware of what they were doing. He'd always assumed that being a loner was something you chose—now he knew other people could choose it for you.

Okay, so this was the way it was. He kept up his swagger and answered his teachers in monosyllables; he spent lunch smoking in an empty corner of the baseball field or in the library. He kept a faint sneer on his face, even while combing his

hair in the john, noticing miserably how round his ears were, like teddy-bear ears, how pale his face. These damn suckers were making him doubt his looks.

He went down to the barn after school. Not to hang out. Just to see what was going on. . . .

Casey gave riding lessons after school and on weekends; she was at the barn to feed and water before he caught the bus in the mornings. He'd gone down to the barn before, carefully waiting until her Jeep was gone, to look at the horses. Now he was going to look at the girls. . . .

Casey stood in the middle of the ring, four little girls on ponies trotting in a circle around her. As each one went by she barked an order: "Molly, get your heels down. Amber, get your leg back, your leg should be on the fat part of the horse. Megan, you're posting too high. Wrong diagonal, Liz."

Travis folded his arms on the top rail of the ring and watched. God, it was hot. It'd be a lot cooler at home by now. Here the heat just sat on you, like a cloud. The riders looked even hotter, with all that hot junk they had to wear—boots and pants and hats. Casey was wearing shorts and a T-shirt and a sun visor, and she didn't look too cool either.

"When you get to the brush box, canter."

Only one little girl managed what he assumed was a canter. The rest of the ponies just trotted faster.

"Don't throw yourself forward! Sit up! Pull up and try it again. Get organized."

Travis had thought about learning to ride, but he'd thought Ken could teach him. All this flitting around in an English saddle looked too la-di-da for him. Besides that, he hadn't seen anyone except girls doing it.

"Hi. You ever get any cigarettes?"

Travis had seen Jennifer coming up behind him, but had pretended not to, deciding to let her speak first.

"Yeah, I did. You riding today?"

Jennifer really was cute, dark hair in an expensive-looking short cut, dark eyes. She was wearing tight gray riding breeches, high boots, and a polo shirt.

"I'm in the next lesson. I've got to go tack up in a minute. Casey," she called, "Robyn won't be here, she had to stay after school."

Casey left the circle of riders. Dust had settled like a tan across her face, streaked here and there by little rivers of sweat.

"What?"

"Robyn got in trouble, she had to stay after for a conference with her mother."

"Great." She kept an eye on the riders and suddenly yelled, "Molly, don't let him walk off with you like that! You should have pulled him up after the first step!"

She turned back to Jennifer. "Robyn was going



to do the stalls for me. I've got a horse-show meeting this evening!"

"I'd do it," Jennifer offered, "but I've got my piano lesson right after this."

"You. Nephew. What's your name?"

"Travis." He was annoyed by her tone—sure, maybe she was a *little* older, but not that much.

"Would you do something for me? I've got to split after this next class. Would you go up and water the stalls for me?"

Her green eyes were a much warmer color than his own. They saved her face from plainness. Too bad, he thought, she had to go and ruin her nice long legs. They were way too muscled up.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "Okay."

"What a pal," she said, and went back to her students.

"How old is she?" he asked Jennifer as they walked back to the barn together.

"Casey? Eighteen, I think. She's the youngest pro in the state."

"You like her?"

"Oh, sure, I mean, she's a real perfectionist, she makes you work real hard, but we do win ribbons at shows. I'm a little bit scared of her."

I can see that, Travis thought, but sounded surprised as he said, "Scared?"

"Oh, not scared, but you know, she's so good and I'm such a klutz—I fell off right in front of the judge last time. I thought I was going to die."

"What'd Casey do?"

"Came out and gave me a leg up."

Seeing his puzzled look, she added, "Boosted me back on and told me to finish the course."

There were two girls in the barn, getting their horses ready to ride, and one older lady, thirty at least.

The girls were too young to be interesting, probably around thirteen. They looked enough alike to be sisters, blond and freckled, though one had a bad perm. And from the way they acted, they could have been twins. Unlike the pair back home, they were loudmouthed and silly, shrieking, "Oh, Kristen!" "Oh, Kelsey!" at each other, and in ten minutes they were driving him nuts. He thought they might be driving the older lady nuts, too, because she got her horse saddled and out of there, fast.

Travis watched Jennifer brush and fly-spray her small brown horse. He liked the part when she cleaned its feet with a pick, because it called for a lot of bending over.

Kristen and Kelsey were ready first and the barn was much more peaceful. They'd been gone about ten minutes by the time Jennifer had her saddle and bridle on, and Travis was surprised to see her near tears.

"If my lesson runs late Mom'll kill me. I've got to go straight to piano from here. Oh, damn."

She led the horse out of the barn at a trot, and almost ran down the red dirt road toward the ring.

The little girls from the first class were riding into the pasture behind the ring. He decided he'd get the stalls watered and be back in the house before they got back. Little girls didn't interest him.

The work didn't take long.

He stopped halfway in the kitchen door. There was a blond woman in the kitchen. She looked too well dressed to be a burglar, but Travis froze a minute anyway. . . .

She paused, too, then relaxed. But she was staring at him as if she were seeing a ghost.

"You must be Travis," she said finally. "God, you look more like Ken than Christopher does. I'm Teresa," she added.

Teresa, Ken's wife, or soon-to-be ex-wife. Boy, she was good-looking—but he always had been a sucker for brown-eyed blondes. What was Ken divorcing her for? Then he remembered: she was divorcing him. Immediately he was on Ken's side.

"I guess I mean you look like Tim. I never did meet him, but in their pictures they look quite a bit alike."

"Yeah." Travis could remember only one picture of his dad, in his Air Force uniform; he remembered the eyebrows, especially, being like his, almost joined in the middle. Stan had made Mom put it away. But frankly, he didn't see this big resemblance to Ken everyone else did. "But he's premature gray."

“He’s premature thirty-seven,” Teresa said dryly.

Travis gave her a look that let her know whose side he was on, and she changed the subject. “I brought Christopher out. I’m going out of town tonight on business and I knew Ken wouldn’t mind getting him a little early. I tried calling him at the office but he was out.”

Christopher. The little kid. He seemed to remember Ken saying something about the little kid coming out this weekend, but he hadn’t been paying attention. He thought of something: He’d been planning to nag Ken into doing *something* this weekend, even if it was just going to a movie. Now they wouldn’t be going anywhere more exciting than a Dairy Queen.

“I will say this,” Teresa went on, “—Ken gets an A-plus in the daddy department. That’s so important for a boy—” She broke off suddenly and, in a voice trying too hard to be pleasant, asked, “Now, what was it you got in trouble for? It wasn’t drugs, was it?”

Travis had it on the tip of his tongue to answer, “No, it was attempted murder.”

But something made him change it to “Oh, my stepdad and I don’t get along too good, Mom wanted us to chill out for a while.”

“Yeah, broken families are the pits, aren’t they?” She stopped to examine a nail. Poor lady was having a hard time finding a polite subject.

"You want to meet Christopher? He's up in his room making sure all his toys are still there."

"Uh, I got a lot of homework, I thought I'd get started on it."

He just wanted out of there.

"Sure. You guys will have plenty of time to get together this weekend."

I bet, Travis thought sourly in his room, throwing himself across the bed, turning his radio up. He'd never been around a little kid and was positive it was going to be a real pain.

All the damn radio stations sucked.

At home, he'd be hanging around the record store, maybe he and Kirk would be planning to pick up some girls. . . .

He gave up on the radio and slammed in a tape and turned over on his stomach. Motorboat was walking up and down on his back, his happy feet pricking holes in his shirt—he had ruined a lot of Travis's shirts.

At home, he'd be cruising to this music, or sitting around the front porch with four or five guys, somebody would be peeling out down the street, whooping out a car window as they passed.

He lit a cigarette, remembering well enough he'd promised Ken not to smoke in bed, but it wasn't like he was *sleeping* or something.

At home there'd be people to talk to, whether it was the most outlandish lies or absolute truths or both in the same sentence. . . .

Something tickled his nose and he was startled to find it was a tear.

There was a light knock on his door. Quickly he sat up and brushed his face off.

“Yeah?”

“Travis, there’s someone here to see you.”

Travis, completely puzzled, opened his door.

“Casey’s in the front hallway,” Teresa said, and added, “Good God. That cat is huge! Is he, uh, gentle?”

Travis glanced down. Motorboat’s head was level with his knee.

“Yeah,” he said absently. “Sort of.”

Teresa didn’t seem too reassured, but Travis couldn’t care right now.

Why would Casey want to see him? He’d thought she had some big meeting to go to.

She was waiting patiently in the entry hall, and Travis thought suddenly that if she were a boy, with that angular profile and long-distance gaze, she might be sort of good-looking.

When she turned that gaze on him, however, he could have sworn it was with a mixture of laughter, anger, and contempt. He shifted uneasily in silence, finally saying, “Yeah?”

“Are you an idiot?” she asked, pleasantly, as if she were asking, “Are you a Leo?”

“What?”

“I mean, are you brain damaged or what? Ken didn’t mention it, and I didn’t think to ask.”

“What?”

"What did I ask you to do this afternoon?"

Travis had a sudden flashback: He was eleven years old and absentmindedly made lemonade with six *cups* instead of six *tablespoons* of sugar. . . . Stan had had a really good laugh about that one. . . . What a stupid thing to think about, right now. . . .

"Water the stalls," he answered. He could tell something horrible was coming, he'd look up and see a freight train on top of him and there wouldn't be time to move.

Casey nodded. "So that's what you did. Watered the stalls."

They stood there for a moment under the hall light, and it seemed like all this had happened before, that they had played this scene in a play a dozen times before, he could even tell her next line:

"You are an idiot."

And as Travis realized the mistake he'd made, he couldn't even argue with her. A slow wave of heat spread upward and he knew he was bright red.

"Now I've got ten stalls inches deep in water. Couldn't you figure out I meant put water in the buckets—not all over the floor? Good golly, kid, are you brainless?"

Travis thought later he should have slugged her. How could he have stood there and taken that?

Probably because at the time he agreed with her and couldn't even get the air to say so.

"I bet," Casey said slowly, "that when your mama asks you to tie your shoes, you rope them to the bed."

Travis stood there a long time after she closed the door behind her.

He wasn't cool. He wasn't tough. He wasn't even good-looking. He just stood there, a brainless, homesick idiot.



# 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.