

TWEAKED



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KATHERINE
HOLUBITSKY

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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For my sister, Mary

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When my brother, Chase, was twelve and I was eleven he built a tepee in the ravine behind our house. He followed the instructions in an old book from the 1930s that he'd found at my grandmother's. It was called *How to Survive in the Woods* or something like that. It covered everything from skinning a deer and tanning the hide to constructing different types of shelters.

Every day for two weeks during the summer holidays, Chase hoisted an ax onto his shoulder and walked down into the ravine. I went with him for the first couple of hours on the first day, but it was boring, and I ended up coming home and playing with my friends. Every night at dinner, Dad would ask Chase how his project was going.

Chase told him it was going very well. Until, on the Friday evening of the second week he answered, "I need to get some unbleached Egyptian cotton."

Dad laughed. "Unbleached Egyptian cotton, okay. Tomorrow I'll take you to a fabric store."

Mom told us which store would likely have what Chase wanted and so, on the Saturday morning, the three of us guys drove off. Dad was not particularly comfortable in the fabric store. He had no idea what he was looking for, but the clerk was very helpful. After asking what the unbleached Egyptian cotton was for, she found a bolt of creamy white fabric.

“Can I paint it?” Chase asked.

“Paint it?” she repeated as she flipped several yards of cloth onto the cutting table.

“Yes, it’s going to be authentic. I’m going to paint the designs and symbols that are in the book.”

The clerk winked at Dad who smiled. “Why, yes, we have fabric paints that will work just fine.”

Chase seemed satisfied with this.

“Now, how much do you need?” she asked.

Chase referred to the scrap of paper that he pulled from his pocket. “Two hundred and fifty yards.”

Dad looked at Chase and laughed while the clerk smiled. She then gently told him that he must be mistaken, and anyhow there were only twenty yards on the bolt. But Chase was insistent. Finally Dad told the clerk we’d be back once he’d calculated the correct amount himself, and we left the store.

Once at home, I ran ahead of Chase while Dad followed us into the ravine. I jumped the dried-up creek bed twenty yards into the woods and headed

up the hill. Standing at the top, looking down into the little valley where all of us kids in the neighborhood played and built forts, I couldn't believe my eyes. A family of beavers couldn't have destroyed so many trees in two weeks. Stripped of their bark, twenty or so trees stood lashed together around a central tripod in a new clearing. Chase was building the real thing.

Dad was furious. He marched back to the house with Chase in tow while I ran in and around the frame of the tepee.

Later that night our neighbor, Mrs. Goodman, knocked on the door. She'd been walking her dog down in the ravine and she'd come across the destruction. She'd also seen Chase and me leave the house with an ax, and she demanded to know what on earth was going on.

I am remembering all of this as I sit on the bus on my way to the hospital to visit a man I've never met. My brother, Chase, put him in the hospital. Chase has been arrested for aggravated assault. I have been trying to figure out how things got so out of control. There must be a reason why Chase turned out the way he did. I wonder if someone crushed his dreams, or perhaps his dreams were just so big and outrageous they were impossible to achieve and so he simply gave up.

Chase is an A-head—a serious crystal methamphetamine user. The police told us he had been awake for days, maybe as many as seven, when he struck the man with a bottle. He was tweaking, looking for another hit to level him off. The guy he sent to the hospital was a parking meter reader, a stranger.

Over the past two years, there have been many times when I have seen Chase like that. Hyped up, pupils flickering in his head like a pinball machine, skin yellow-gray, sores festering all over his face. Ready to fight anyone who comes near him because he's suddenly got it in his head that everyone is out to get him: fists clenched, no muscle left in his 130-pound body, but every stringy sinew stretched taut.

A shop owner taking out his garbage found the guy and called the police. When they pulled up, Chase was slumped against the wall with the neck of the broken bottle still clutched in his hand. He didn't put up a struggle or even grumble much when they cuffed him.

In fact, when the two police officers arrived at our door yesterday morning to tell us all this, they said Chase was so ready to crash he couldn't keep his eyes open on the way to the police station.

Once they'd explained the charge, Dad sighed heavily, although he showed little surprise.

Mom, on the other hand, looked between the two men with wide eyes. "Aggravated assault?" she repeated.

“Oh, no, you’ve got the wrong boy. It couldn’t be Chase.”

After all that has happened, she still reacts like it’s a real stretch of the imagination that Chase could do anything wrong. Although, to be fair, I think it has become a sort of self-defense. It’s like she hears a terrible crash, so she throws her hands in front of her face, not wanting to see the accident. Then, once the sound fades, she pulls her hands away slowly while she gets accustomed to the bloodiness of the scene.

Once the police left, she began pulling drawers in and out. “Get your keys,” she told Dad. “We’re going down to the police station.” She slammed cupboard doors open and shut. “I mean, he obviously wasn’t in his right mind. Isn’t there a defense for that?” She continued to search the kitchen. I knew what she was looking for—her purse.

For a year and a half, Mom and Chase had played their own crazy version of cat and mouse. Mom had hidden her purse in every conceivable place in the house, but Chase had always found it. She had hidden it so often and in so many places, even she couldn’t remember where she’d last put it. “Oh, forget it.” She gave up. “Let’s just go.”

The story was in the back pages of the newspaper this morning. Dad quickly scanned it. He was relieved that because Chase is one month short of his eighteenth birthday he wasn’t named. He was the *seventeen-year-old suspect of no fixed address* in custody.

The no-fixed-address part is true unless they give street numbers to stairwells and Dumpsters. Dad had booted him out of the house six months ago when the stealing got so bad we had to nail the furniture down.

Dad passed the article to Mom. She cried quietly as she read it. How many times can a heart be broken? she wanted to know. Dad reminded her that they would do everything in their power to get Chase out of it. He then said that maybe it was even a good thing—a blessing in disguise. It might force him to get the help he really needs.

I picked up the paper and read the article myself. One thing was for sure, it was no blessing for Richard Cross. He was the guy in intensive care. Neither of my parents had even mentioned the man Chase had smashed on the head.

Richard Cross was working, taking his usual shortcut through the alley when Chase brought him down. The police said the motive wasn't clear because the man's money pouch was still around his waist after he was attacked. His injuries are life threatening and his condition is listed as critical. And like a blunt object it hit *me*. "He might die."

I felt both Mom's and Dad's eyes on me before I realized that I'd said it out loud. "Yes, we know," Dad said. "That worries us too. Things will be very bad for Chase if he does."

At that moment I could no longer stay in the same room as them. I didn't know them anymore. Two years of living with Chase the addict had turned them into strangers. I thought I understood my parents, their morals and what they valued. After all, hadn't I learned my own values from them? But Chase has stretched and twisted those values until they are a tangled mess, and I am hanging on to mine by the thinnest of wires.

Half an hour later I headed out the door. I am now sitting on the bus. We pass Barnes Hardware store, where I work. The hospital is still another ten blocks.

When we were young and sharing the back-seat of the car on road trips, Chase and I used to play Hangman and Red Car. I can still remember when we played Red Car for the last time. Dad had just pulled into a gas station when Chase spotted one of those big old Chryslers from the seventies. "Red car!" he yelled. "That's six for me and four for you."

"That's not red," I told him. "It's purple."

"It's red. Mom, what color is that car?"

Mom looked to where Chase pointed. "It's maroon. Sort of purple, but not really. A combination of red and brown, I think."

"See?" said Chase. "Red. A point for me."

I argued until Mom said, "Well, maybe Chase could have half a point. It does have red in it."

Chase grinned. "That's five and a half points for me."

When Dad pulled back onto the highway we started assigning half points for cars with any combination of red. Then it progressed to fractions of points if there was even a stroke of red: a letter, a symbol or a shape of some kind. We completely lost track of who had how many points and ended up arguing until Dad said if we didn't stop squabbling he was going to pull over right there and then and put us both out on the side of the road.

I get off the bus two blocks short of the hospital. I am hoping the walk will help build the confidence I need to do what I am about to do.

The lobby is bright and smells of disinfectant. The floor is still wet in places where it has been washed. Walking quickly, trying to appear as if I have every reason for being there, I approach the receptionist seated behind the information booth. She jots down the floor and number of Richard Cross's room for me.

The elevator reaches the right floor and the door opens. For a moment, I am not sure I have the guts to carry this off. But I know that if I don't do it, no one else is going to apologize on Chase's behalf. I force myself to step out of the elevator. "I'm Gordie Jessup," I tell the nurse on duty behind the desk on his unit. "Mr. Cross's nephew," I quickly add.

It surprises me how easily this lie has come into my head and out of my mouth. But it is a practical lie. Lucky for me there has been a shift change and because Richard Cross has only been in for one day, there seems to be some confusion as to who is family. When I ask, I am told he has no other visitors. The nurse then directs me down the hall.

With the exception of the rhythmic puffing and wheezing of the machines that are pumping stuff in and out of him, Mr. Cross's room is quiet, although the lights are ablaze. He is not conscious. I'm not sure why I thought he would be, but I now realize he won't hear my apology or anything I have come to say. Still, I sit in the one chair next to his bed.

I guess him to be roughly in his mid-thirties. His entire head, right down to his eyebrows, is swathed in a huge white bandage, like a giant wasp nest engulfing his head. I can't tell what color his hair is, or if he has any at all. His twenty-four-hour beard is dark, though, so I imagine his hair is too. I think it strange how his beard continues to grow while he lies there unaware of what has happened to him.

His face is calm and uninjured. Chase had whacked him from behind. On the wall across from where I sit, above Mr. Cross's bed, are taped two drawings. The one closest to me is a unicorn on a hill backed by a fringed sun. The other is a unicorn lying in a stable with a

Band-Aid on its head. They are drawn in crayon by a child. The one with the Band-Aid says, *Get better soon, Daddy*. Beneath the unicorn, in big, uneven letters are the words, *love Hannah*. The *n*'s are backward. Richard Cross has a little kid.

I look at Richard Cross, and I wonder again how it came to this.

At first only Chase was affected by his habit. He'd emptied his bank account and sold everything that he owned. Then Mom and Dad became involved, and me, of course. Any excuse to borrow money, anything we owned that he could pawn, he did. Once we'd wised up he started harassing Grandma and stealing from her before hitting on Mom's sister, Aunt Gail. Then there were the teachers at school who gave him every opportunity when he was flunking—make-up exams, special assignments, until he was finally kicked out. And now, Richard Cross, some guy he doesn't even know, is lying here in the hospital fighting for his life.

I think Richard Cross must be cold. His chest is exposed, with lots of tubes and instruments attached to it, monitoring his life. I am careful not to disturb any of them as I pull the extra blanket at his feet up to his waist.

"Gordie?"

I look up. The nurse I spoke to before is standing at the door. She is a redhead about Richard Cross's age. Her nametag says *Lisa*. I realize she is talking to me.

“You’ll have to leave for a while. The doctor needs to see Mr. Cross.”

“Yeah, sure.” Swinging my backpack over my shoulder, I leave the room.

On my way back to the bus stop, it occurs to me how nobody lives the way my family does. My life is not normal. We hide everything that can be pawned or sold. My parents don’t even keep wine in the house. Aspirin, painkillers and allergy tablets are out. It’s a good thing none of us has a serious illness that requires medication, because we’d be out of luck.

Nobody I know worries about waking up in the middle of the night with a space cadet rummaging through their room, searching for money, credit cards, anything to get that next hit. Or to pay off drug debts. “You have no idea what they do to guys who don’t pay,” Chase whined at me at three o’clock one morning months ago. I was sacked out. I’d worked five shifts in a row, and exams were coming up. Chase was rooting through my drawers.

“Get out,” I told him.

“But, Gordie,” he whimpered, “I need sixty bucks right now. They’re going to break my hands if I walk out that door without it.”

He harasses my friends for money. He lies, he manipulates, and it’s embarrassing. He’s sick, Mom and Dad keep telling me. It’s a disease. Try to be understanding until he’s got it under control.

I am not convinced. Nobody stands there with a gun at his head, forcing him to smoke ice. Nobody runs him down and sticks a needle in his arm. Chase makes that decision every time he scores.

I have gone over everything I can think of and I've come to the conclusion that nobody mistreated him. Nobody crushed his dreams or did anything to Chase. Mom and Dad encouraged him and they taught him right from wrong. I just think that once Chase took that first hit he didn't want to stop.

I try to avoid talking to people in the days following Chase's arrest. My friend, Jack Bentz, says I'm crazy if I think that what Chase has done reflects on me, but I can't help but feel that it does.

It's Jade that gets me talking about it. She works in the same hardware store. She started working around the same time I did, but while I got the job so I could buy a new guitar, Jade got it so she could eat. She lives with her mother and her nine-year-old sister, Holly, and they're always broke.

Jade's mother has been sick for a very long time. I've been to her place only once, to drop off her paycheck when she couldn't get out. Mrs. Scott was lying on the shabby old couch in the living room of their apartment, all pale and sweaty, a tube running from her nose to an oxygen machine. "Her lungs fill up with fluid," Jade told me. "She coughs all the time, especially at night, and she can't leave the house without dragging the oxygen along."

In the six months I have known her, Jade has taken her mother to the hospital at least three times. Jade's father left after Holly was born. He couldn't deal with her mother's illness: the medications and treatments, the trips to the hospital. Jade never seems to blame him. She talks about him like she understands that not everyone can handle that kind of thing. Since he left, they've survived on the little disability money her mother receives.

Anyway, after all she's been through, I guess Jade is just really in tune with the way people are feeling. She seems to be able to sense when something is wrong.

"Oh, you must be just sick," she says after I tell her about going to see Richard Cross in the hospital.

That's one of the things I really like about her. She's never automatically assumed that because we are brothers that I am in any way like Chase.

"Wow," she says, delicately unwrapping a cheese sandwich. "Don't you wish you could turn back time? I bet your brother does. Twenty-four hours ago everything was so different."

"Not really," I say. "It's been coming to this for two years."

"He's been into drugs for two years?"

"Yeah, as far as I know."

"I'm sorry." She smiles as she squeezes my hand. "Hey, do you want a tart? When Mom's feeling up to it

she loves to bake. She made about five dozen yesterday. I feel bad if I don't eat what she makes, so every couple of months I gain about fifteen pounds. She's actually quite amazing when she's feeling good, a virtual whirlwind. She cooks a pile of meals to freeze and she bakes; she has the apartment cleaned from top to bottom in the space of only a few hours."

"Thanks," I say, not only for the tart she passes me, but also for changing the subject so smoothly. "What kind are they?"

"What kind? Oh, she usually grinds up whatever she's throwing out of the fridge. I know there were some old Brussels sprouts I couldn't bring myself to cook for Holly and me."

I jerk the tart away from my mouth like I'm about to eat a toad. Jade laughs. "Gordie, I'm kidding! They're butter tarts. Go ahead. What are you doing this weekend?"

"Picking up my guitar. You know, the one I've been slaving away for by working here? I took it in to have the strings changed and some adjustments made. I can hardly wait to get it back." I bite into the tart.

"That is so cool," she says. "How's that tart?"

I nod as I chew. "Good. I could eat more than one. Which is more than I can say about Brussels sprouts, that's for sure."

For the rest of the afternoon we don't talk about Chase. Jade doesn't ask about how he got into drugs or

what it's been like living with him now. These are things I would never tell her anyway, because the details are so skuzzy that even I am revolted all over again every time I look back on how Chase started on the road to where he is now.

The first time Chase smoked ice, Mom and Dad had left us alone over a three-day weekend. That was two years ago. It was a non-stop party with every freaky friend Chase could round up. Dad had left a hundred dollars for stuff like milk, peanut butter and bread. Chase spent it all on booze. To this day, I don't know how he got hold of it; he was only sixteen. He spent three days drinking and puking.

He skipped school on the Friday, so that by the time I got home he was already smashed. "Hey, Gordie," he said, when I walked in the door. "Dinner's in the cooler." His goofball friends laughed. I'm no prig, but when I saw a smoldering cigarette butt lying on the coffee table next to the ashtray, it hit me that I didn't want to take the heat when Mom discovered the burn. She'd go ballistic—after going back to work she'd spent her first paychecks on new living room furniture.

I didn't know it was the first time Chase got into meth. I found out later. I didn't know, because when I saw what was going on, I stayed with Jack for the weekend.

I came home an hour before Mom and Dad arrived home. Chase and his friends had done a really lame job of cleaning the house. Two of the lightbulbs in the basement were broken and the pieces they hadn't used as pipes still lay on the floor. "Gordie did it," Chase told them, "playing basketball."

I gaped at him while he signaled for me to keep my mouth shut.

Over the next few months, he spent nearly every weekend at one friend's house or another. He'd started hanging out with a couple of real losers: Harris Reed and Ryan Linscott, guys Jack and I had voted most likely to become hit men. The two of them had been in trouble for one thing or another since they were in nursery school. Harris lived down the street from Jack. Their mothers worked in the same office, so I'd heard plenty of stuff through him.

A couple of months later, the calls started coming from school. Chase had missed biology. He'd missed the whole afternoon. He'd missed entire days. Chase was not going to pass the term. Then Mom found a pipe in his room.

"It's Harris's," he told her. "I didn't know he was into the stuff. When I discovered it, I stole it, hoping it would smarten him up. I've missed so much school because I've been trying to keep tabs on him."

Mom and Dad appeared skeptical.

“Look,” said Chase, “if it was mine, do you think I’d be dumb enough to leave it out in the open?”

Of course not. One of their own children could never be that dumb.

Dad looked puzzled more than anything, while Mom was relieved. “Well,” she began cautiously, “an addiction is not something to fool around with. Perhaps I should phone his mother. I know you’re trying to help, dear, but it is beyond your experience.”

Chase frowned, as though he was actually considering that she should. Finally he said, “I’m not sure that would be such a good idea. His parents are going through a divorce. They’re kind of messed up right now. Don’t worry, I’ve talked to the counselor at school.”

Amazingly they believed him. Not only that, they congratulated him on being such a good friend. Still, Chase was not to hang around with Harris until he pulled himself together. He was also grounded on weeknights until his marks improved.

He managed to get around this by telling them he had to work with friends on group projects, he had to go to the library, or he had to practice if he was to make the soccer team.

Somehow he did make it through that term, even though he spent every weekend spun out. He was awake for thirty-six hours before exams, hyped up, cramming. He never made it through the next term, though.

By Christmas he hardly went to school at all. School was such a struggle, he sobbed to Mom and Dad. He just didn't get it. They gave him money for private tutoring and money for additional textbooks; it all went to his dealer. Chase would be flying for days, and then he wouldn't get out of bed for three in a row.

I never understood how Mom and Dad couldn't see that he was hooked, how they could be so naïve. It took me awhile to realize it was because they didn't want to see it. They made every excuse to avoid admitting that drugs were the reason he was in such bad physical shape. Or, maybe they truly believed their own excuses. I couldn't tell for sure. He was stressed-out over his failure at school; stress does terrible things to people. It prevented him from sleeping, and he couldn't eat, which is why he'd lost thirty pounds. They made appointments with the doctor; he never showed up.

Considering his poor grades, my parents knew it probably wasn't a good idea to allow Chase to go on the school trip to France over spring break that year. But he'd feel left out if they didn't, and perhaps the trip would inspire him to start working harder. They gave him a fifteen-hundred-dollar money order to take to school. Chase disappeared for three weeks. He went on a bender with his druggie friends. He was the ice man. They had a high time on the money that was meant to fly him to France.

My parents were frantic. They thought he'd run away or maybe even committed suicide because he was doing so badly at school. Then, for what would be the first of many times, the cops arrived at our door. Chase had been hauled out of a meth house and was charged with possession. Mom stumbled like someone had hit the back of her knees, and Dad was at a complete loss for words.

When they brought Chase home from the remand center, he looked like he'd been living in a trench. He smelled worse than an old rummy. His face was all broken out in crank craters, and he even had lice. Mom really flipped out when she saw the little white bugs crawling all over his scalp, dropping to his shoulders.

Once Chase had crashed, they confronted me.

"Gordie, how long has your brother been into drugs? And why on earth didn't you tell us?"

I was stunned. "Hey," I said, "I didn't know it was this bad. It's not like we pal around together. Besides, if he won't listen to you, what makes you think he'd listen to me?"

A look of confusion came over Dad's face. I suddenly felt bad. I hadn't meant to criticize him as a parent. From all comparisons I'd made with my friends' parents, he was a pretty good one, which I suppose was all the more reason why what I said was true.

Besides, what I couldn't tell them was that I had made my own attempts when I could see that he was straight enough to talk. But all I ever got for my efforts

was a pat on the cheek and a patronizing “Gordie, it’s all under control.”

But then, what older brother listens to the younger kid? Chase was always the one who steered the bike when we rode double or wrenched the controls out of my hand when he got impatient playing video games. When I was ten, he talked me into going on the Zipper at the exhibition, even though I barely scraped past the minimum-height restriction. It was the first year our parents had dropped us off at the gate and allowed us to spend the day on our own.

“Stand on your tiptoes,” Chase whispered once we got to the front of the line and he was able to eyeball the yellow tape on the side of the wicket. I did as I was told. I still don’t think I quite reached it, but the guy in charge was distracted by a couple of girls and waved us through.

As we sat in the cage, waiting for the ride to start, I reminded Chase that I was afraid of heights.

“It’s being scared that makes it fun. You’ll see. Besides”—he rattled the cage, causing it to swing violently—“it’s safe, and you’ll be fine. You hardly ever hear of rides breaking down; they inspect them all the time. Just don’t look down.”

I quickly discovered that this was virtually impossible as we careened face-first in the cage toward the ground at a hundred miles an hour. I screamed—a long, heartfelt scream.

“Okay, so you have no choice but to look down.” He laughed as we whipped past the ground and zoomed toward the sky again. “But it will make you tough. Don’t you feel tougher already?” he shouted as our cage spun upside down again.

No, I did not feel tougher, and all I could do was continue to scream. Chase screamed too, only it was a scream of exhilaration. Then all I could think about was how I was stuck in a cage swooping a hundred feet in the air with a maniac who thought it was fun while I was sure I was going to die. I did learn one thing from the experience, and that was never again to listen to my brother, at least not to the point where I put my life in his hands.

When we finally got off and my feet were on the ground again, Chase held me by the shoulders while I tried to get my bearings. “There, now just think, you can tell your friends. I bet Jack hasn’t been on the Zipper. I bet he’s not as tough as you.”

No, Jack had not been on the Zipper. But he also didn’t have an older brother to force him into doing things when no one else was around. I never went on that ride again, but I have kept the ticket stub all these years.

If there has been one positive thing in my life over the past two years, it’s that my bass playing has really improved.

During that first year Chase was a junkie, I'd drown out the squabbling between Mom and Dad by cranking up my amplifier. I'd practice for hours at a time. Jack had talked me into buying a secondhand bass. He was already playing with Bobby Yee and Steve Goertz off and on. They needed a bass player and they asked me to join the band.

We call ourselves The Pogos. We do a mixture of stuff, nothing much original, although Jack has come up with a few decent songs. So far, we've had only one gig and that was at a junior high dance. We are gearing up to play in the battle of the high school bands in August.

On the Saturday morning following Chase's arrest, Jack and I head to Griffin's Music where I am picking up my new Fender Precision bass. I'd bought it a month earlier and was having it adjusted.

"I hear Harris Reed got his hand broken," Jack tells me as we walk down the sidewalk. "Every knuckle in his hand was smashed."

"How did he do that?"

"He didn't do it. His dealers did. I guess he owed them and he couldn't pay."

I get a creepy feeling in my stomach. The image of messing someone up intentionally is like a scene from *The Sopranos*, not something that happens in my own neighborhood.

We pass a toy store where a small white unicorn in the window catches my eye. "I'll only be a minute. I'll meet up with you," I tell Jack.

He shrugs and continues toward the music store.

When I buy the toy I ask the clerk for a double bag so that you can't see through it. When I meet up with Jack again he asks me what I bought. "Something for Jade's little sister. It's her birthday."

I'm not all that good at lying, not like some people in my family. But Jack is busy inspecting another bass, much like the one I recently bought. "I think I like yours better," he says. "The vintage sunburst. It's more traditional."

The owner of the store appears with my new guitar. I lift it from the case and feel the weight in my hands, discovering all over again why I bought it in the first place. Jack and I had searched the music stores for months before I found this one. The first time I held it I couldn't believe how naturally it fit against me. When I played it, I was blown away by the tone. It was a little more than I wanted to pay, but it had everything I'd been looking for. Now I return it to the case, stuffing the bag from the toy store alongside it. I am on a high when we leave the store.

"I can't decide which guitar I want," Jack says. "I mean, once I've saved the money. But first I need a job that pays a lot more than ripping tickets at the theater,"

he moans. "I need one like yours." We stop at a crosswalk. The light turns green, but Jack is studying my guitar case. "Gordie, have you thought about keeping your bass locked up? I mean, it's worth a lot of money, and Chase has his bail hearing next week. What if he does come home?"

Man, I wish he hadn't brought that up. Not at that moment when I was feeling so good. But then, he doesn't know I installed a lock on my closet door months ago. That's where I keep my guitars. That's where I keep anything that can be sold for a few bucks. Jack doesn't know this because I've never told him. It's embarrassing to have to keep stuff locked up in your own house. "I'll look after it," I say.

THREE

Monday after school, the smell of a roast cooking and the warm scent of something freshly baked, brings me into the kitchen to see what's prompted Mom to cook after all these months.

"Hi, Gordie," she says, waving a spatula toward the cookies cooling on the counter. "Have a cookie. I have news. Your brother's coming home in a few days. He made bail."

I hesitate to take the cookie. It's not the news that I'm having trouble adjusting to, it's Mom being so cheerful. Dad is also in a lighter mood when he arrives home from work, although he is not as jubilant as Mom, so I suspect he is more cautious about the decision than she is.

As it turns out, once he's through detox, Chase will be coming home to live with us until his case goes to court. The judge at his bail hearing imposed a number of restrictions: He has to attend counseling, he has to abide by a curfew and he has to stay away from his

druggie friends. I know it's this last one that makes Dad nervous. Things would never be where they are now if he'd had any control over Chase before.

At supper the talk between my parents turns to the practical side: how they are going to come up with the money. Fifty thousand dollars is what they need to bring Chase home. I nearly choke. Apparently bail has been set high because Chase is at high-risk for taking off.

They have no savings left; it's been spent on lawyer's fees and by Chase at various times when he stole their bank and credit cards. And then there were the times they'd bailed him out of drug debts so high he was threatened by dealers. They couldn't afford it, but they also couldn't let him get hurt.

The meaning of money has definitely changed for them. Two years ago it was a major decision to buy a five-hundred-dollar television set, and now they are talking fifty thousand dollars, and for what?

I really did wish they'd discuss their finances in private like they used to, before it required so much attention that it spilled over to when I was around. It's not a really comforting feeling knowing that your parents are totally broke.

"Well, there is also the \$2000," Dad muses as he pushes the potatoes around on his plate.

I look up from my own plate in horror. Dad purposely avoids my gaze.

“Charlie Anderson has been wanting to buy it for some time. It would cut down on what we’d have to borrow against the house.”

I know their finances are not my business, but since they insist on discussing them in front of me, there are some things I can’t leave unprotected. “But you promised I could use it once I got my graduated license. I have that now.”

“Look, Gordie, I’ll buy another sports car someday. And when I do, you can help me pick it out. I’m really sorry, buddy. It’s just that we could really use the money right now.”

Mom is shaking her head. “It won’t be necessary to sell the car. We’ll take out a loan and return the money when this is all over.”

“No.” Dad’s tone is abrupt. “Look, I’m borrowing as little money as possible. I don’t want to be on the hook for fifty thousand dollars if something goes wrong.”

By “something” he means if Chase takes off.

Jade is not at work that evening, and it’s lonely without her. It seems the only times I feel good anymore are when I’m with her or when I’m playing with the band. I’d like to spend more time with her, but every time I think of asking her out, I picture some disaster happening with Chase. It’s one thing to tell her about

my brother. But she goes to a different school, and she's never met the real thing. I am paranoid that if I ask her out or if I have her over to the house, he'll show up, all spaced-out, demanding money, scaring her off. Right now, everything is so chaotic in my life it's better to keep things simple. At least that way, there will be no chance of her confusing me with him.

I spend the first hour at work sorting and hanging small packets of electronic parts from display hooks. It's a slow night, so it's a good time, my boss Ralph Barnes tells me, to teach me how to handle cash.

"I've had this store for thirty-five years, Gordie. For the first twenty-five, nobody was open on Sunday. But now I have no choice, if I want to compete. If I teach you to handle things, perhaps I can take the odd Sunday off. I'm too old to be working every day of the week."

Ralph is old, but he never tires of talking about his store. Once he's shown me how everything operates, I handle the transactions for the remaining hour. Before leaving the hardware store, I call Jade to find out what's going on. She's just brought her mother home from three days in the hospital. She had a very bad chest infection, although the way Jade relates it, it sounds as common as if she'd gone to the grocery store. "She's on mega doses of antibiotics and a heap of other drugs. She's sleeping right now. I could sure use a visitor if you're not doing anything."

It's raining again when I leave the hardware store. I walk uphill along the pavement, jumping rivulets, the smell of wet concrete filling my nose. The sound of car tires splashing through puddles prevents me from hearing the footsteps until they are right behind me. Suddenly, I am pushed hard against the wall. There are two of them, probably ten years older than me: teeth missing, pockmarked skin, greasy hair shining in the neon lights.

"Keep your mouth shut!" one of them orders, pinning my arms against the brick wall so I can't move.

The other waves a metal pipe in my face.

My heart is racing harder than it ever has and in a way I have never felt before. "What do you want?"

The guy with the pipe grins.

"Is this something to do with my brother?" I try to keep my voice steady, but I am not nearly as together as I try to sound.

"Bingo," announces the guy pinning me against the wall. He grabs my shirt collar, pulls me toward him, then pushes me back again, whacking me hard against the building, nearly knocking the wind out of me. "The creep owes us money. Two grand to be exact. He racked it up before he went and got himself arrested. Your brother has a bad habit of running up tabs. You'd better tell him from us that we want to get paid, or can we tell him ourselves? Are you expecting him home anytime soon?"

I shrug and lift my hands like I don't have a clue.

When the guy pinning me realizes I'm not going to run, he drops his hold on me. "You tell him he's got a week."

The guy wielding the pipe emphasizes the time limit by jabbing the pipe into my stomach. "A week. And if we don't get paid, he's going to be lying alongside his friend in intensive care."

I don't know what else to do but nod. All I want is to get away from there. The two of them start to walk away. The one who had choked me turns. "You tell your brother DC and Ratchet came calling."

I watch their backs for another minute, then I turn in the opposite direction and begin to walk fast. It isn't the way to Jade's place, but there's no way I'm about to go in the same direction as them. Feeling like I'm about to heave, I turn to the gutter. I break into a cold sweat. My mind is racing, and I don't remember how I even end up in front of Jade's apartment building. I stand there for several minutes trying to collect myself. It's not that I'm afraid of being beat up, although the thought of Harris and his smashed fingers doesn't help. It's more the idea that they'd been watching me that creeps me out. They know where I work. What else do they know about me?

Finally I make it up the stairs and to the door of Jade's apartment. She invites me in. I remove my wet shoes in the hall even though the carpet is threadbare.

Despite the distraction of almost being pounded out, it strikes me again how little her family owns. The exception is medical equipment and they own plenty of that: breathing apparatus of different types lies scattered about and bottles of prescription medicines are lined up next to the sink. The door to the bedroom where Mrs. Scott is sleeping is slightly ajar. Jade and her sister Holly share the foldout couch.

“Are you okay, Gordie?” she asks.

I realize that I’m shivering. “Oh, yeah. I’m just wet. It’s really coming down.”

“Hmm, well, sit down and let me make you some tea. And some toast. I’m sorry we don’t have anything left from dinner. I’ve already made Holly a sandwich for lunch tomorrow with the leftover chicken.”

I do my best to smile. “Tea is fine. I’m really not hungry.” The truth is I’m not sure that I could keep anything down.

Jade is helping Holly make a piñata for a school project, running strips of newspaper through a lumpy paste, slapping them around a balloon. “It’s going to be a peacock,” Holly informs me as I sit in the chair across from her. “Jade got me a rainbow feather duster for the tail. Do you want to help?”

I sit at the table, trying to focus on sounding interested. It’s hard to go from having my health threatened by a couple of hoods to the calm domestic scene

in front of me without showing a little stress. I do manage to say, "I'm much better at model airplanes, but sure, I guess I can give it a try."

Holly sings quietly while we work. Jade starts the kettle boiling, a small television set murmurs in the corner, and despite the door being almost closed, Mrs. Scott's oxygen machine hums softly in the background. It's a new sound to me, but it eventually becomes part of the comfortable busy scene in the apartment.

Holly suddenly accuses me of not tearing my strips thin enough. "It's going to be all bumpy and not round."

I look at my work. She is absolutely right. The strips I've added are gargantuan lumps. I try to tear a thinner strip, but I'm still shaking so badly inside that I seem to have lost the ability to control my fingers. "I'll tell you what, I'm going to drink my tea and warm up before I do any more."

Jade sets the tea on the table before me.

Once the body of the peacock is finished, they balance it on a saucer to dry. Jade tells Holly to take a bath and get ready for bed. She promises they'll finish the neck and head the following day after school. "I'm sorry," she says when Holly is gone. "There's not much privacy around here. Maybe next time we can go out. It's just a little too soon to leave her alone." She motions toward the bedroom.

“It’s no big deal,” I tell her, glad for the moment that I don’t have to go out.

And then I think of something, although I don’t say it out loud. My family used to be something like this. Before the stealing and the lying, the threats and the thugs jumping me in the street, my family used to do normal things. They were interested in normal things. Things like hobbies and music lessons, not how they were going to come up with fifty thousand dollars to get one of us out of jail.

The following day, my first class isn’t until ten thirty, so I drop by the hospital first thing in the morning. The redhead, Lisa, recognizes me. “Hi, Richard Cross’s nephew,” she says.

“Gordie,” I remind her before I ask if there has been any change in Richard’s condition.

She solemnly shakes her head. “He’s still comatose. There’s fluid on the brain that the doctors are trying to control. That’s the biggest challenge right now.”

Again I make sure he has no other visitors before I continue down the hall and enter his room. I pull the unicorn from my backpack and place it on the bedside table beneath the drawings. Three more have been added. They are not quite as colorful as the previous two. Nothing else seems to have changed since I’d

first visited Richard Cross. He is still hooked to the machines and he does not appear to have even moved. I think of the CNN news commercial about how “nothing stays the same for a week, a day or an hour.” It doesn’t appear true in Richard Cross’s case. His life was put on hold the moment Chase cracked him over the head. I feel like such a freak knowing what really connects me to him.

I think of Chase going through detox, sweating and puking, and I feel no sympathy for how he must feel. If anything, his misery leaves me numb. So, he’ll live through it and he’ll move forward; he’ll recover. Richard Cross has shown no indication which way he’ll go.

There is really nothing else for me to do, so I stay only a moment before going to school.

I have just collected my books for physics when Ms. Larson, the school counselor, stops me in the hall. “Gordie, do you have a minute after school?”

“What do you want to see me about?”

I realize that I am being watched by the two biggest tools in the school: Jason Dodds who is about five foot four with a mind and body about as agile as a barbecue, and Brian Zimmerman who is never without a two-liter bottle of Coke. When he grins, his teeth are all pitted and the color of a pumpkin.

Following my glance, Ms. Larson leans a little forward and lowers her voice. "I hear your brother's got himself into trouble. I just want to talk." Ms. Larson is young, enthusiastic and very professional. She is always dressed in suits with coordinating shoes. I try to imagine sitting across from her, telling her what it's been like living with Chase, the things he's done. I decide it wouldn't be much different than sitting down and spewing a string of obscenities in her face. "I'm sorry, I have to work," I lie.

Ms. Larson smiles before laying a hand on my shoulder. "Okay, well, anytime you want to talk, I'm always here."

I nod and continue down the hall. As I pass Jason Dodds, he flings open his locker and pulls out a lacrosse stick, nailing me in the gut.

"Geez, I'm sorry, Jessup," he sneers.

I grab the end of the stick and push it toward him.

"You'd better watch it," says Zimmerman. He's leaning against the locker next to Jason Dodds, swinging the bottle of Coke between two fingers. "I wouldn't turn my back on Jessup. He might smash you over the head."

Jason grins. I still hold one end of the stick. I want so badly to wrench it from his hands and take out a few of his teeth. But somewhere in the back of my head I know this would be stooping to his level, exactly what he wants. I relax my grip.

At the same moment Mr. Dublenko, my physics teacher, steps out of his classroom into the hallway. “Come on, fellas, get moving. The bell for the next class has already gone.”

FOUR

Chase is home. At least I think they brought home the right guy. It has been six months since I last saw him, and I barely recognize the shriveled form they tell me is my brother. He is wearing the sports shirt and khakis pants I saw Mom leave the house with, folded across her arm. The shirt hangs on him like a flag on a flagpole in a dead calm. When I say hello to him, his eyes are vacant and his face is an expressionless wasteland. I'm can't even be sure he knows who I am. But then, for the past two years Chase has used meth as regularly as the rest of us have gone to bed at night and got up in the morning, and it shows.

For two days, Chase has been lying around the house like some invalid. Mom has taken two weeks off from her job as a secretary at an old folks' home. She says it's to help him put on weight, to help him get started on the road to recovery. But despite how she coddles him, he's not a helpless infant. He does know how to warm up a can of soup. No, I think it's

more likely that she and Dad agreed she should take the time to prevent him from breaking his bail conditions. Although, when I see Chase walking down the hall without a shirt, I find it hard to believe that he'd have the strength to bend a straw let alone put a man the size of Richard Cross in the hospital.

On the third day he is home, Mom has to run some errands. When I get home from school, she tells me I am to look after Chase. "He's eaten well today," she says, like he's four years old and has just learned to tie his shoes. "He's watching a movie right now. Maybe you can start dinner, Gordie. Peel the potatoes and make the salad? I'll be back in time to cook the rest."

I have said little to Chase since he came home. It's hard to know what to say to him because, in a way, it's like some stranger is sharing the house. But the reality of what he's done has been sinking in, and Mom's approach that he should be pampered rather than held accountable is wearing thinner than his chest. Especially at four in the afternoon when I walk into the living room and see him sprawled on the chesterfield watching *Cape Fear* while I've been at school all day.

"Haven't you seen that?" I ask. "Like five times at least."

He holds a hand up to stifle me. "Shh, this is the best part."

I have told no one but Jack about Chase's dealers threatening me, and now, watching him lie there stuffing

his face with taco chips and pistachios, the memory of Ratchet swinging that pipe sends me over the edge. I snatch the cushion from under his head and slam it over his face. Chase grabs my arms and struggles to get out from under it, but he has absolutely no grip. I am amazed at how totally weak he is. I pull the cushion off but continue to pin him down. “You whacked-out spineless creep! Your screwball dealers came looking for you. They beat on me instead. I don’t want anything to do with you or your psycho friends. Do you hear me?”

“Get off of me,” he splutters.

“They tell me you owe them two grand. How are you planning to pay that off? Mom’s jewelry or Grandma’s tv this time?”

Chase starts to whimper. “I don’t know. But they broke Harris’s hand. He owed them five hundred. They’ll probably break my neck.”

I stand up. I throw the pillow at him, but he has no reflexes, and it hits him square in the face. I realize why he hasn’t attempted to leave the house. He’s afraid of those two goons.

“Do you know Mom and Dad have risked the house on you? They’ve got no savings left. You’ve cost them everything they have.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says without emotion. “You’ve got to help me.”

“Why should I? Look at you. There’s a guy lying in the hospital with his head split open because of you, and you’re still only thinking about yourself.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” Chase begins to snivel. “I didn’t know what I was doing. Please, Gordie, if you can help me out this one time, I’ll straighten out. I’ll go back to school. Mom and Dad will keep the house, and it will all be okay.”

It is a pitiful display. I am not swayed by his sniveling, and he’s done way too much damage for things to ever be the same. But if his debt is paid, at least Mom and Dad won’t have to deal with that on top of everything else. It’s been more than annoying watching her cater to Chase, but in another way, it’s also been a bit of a relief. She’s been positive for a change. I’ve seen her lose it too many times over the past two years. But I don’t have two grand. I have twelve hundred dollars in my bank account. I do still have a check from my grandparents in Ontario, money they’d sent to me for my birthday. And I get paid by Ralph Barnes later in the week.

I can’t believe I’m even considering it. I pick him up by the neck of his T-shirt and drop him again. “If I do this, you’d better stay straight or I’ll break your neck myself.”

“I will.” Chase immediately stops sniveling. It’s amazing how quickly he turns the sobs off and on. “I promise. You’ll see. I’ll get a job. I’ll pay you back.”

I know Chase well enough to know that he is giving me his standard lines. But if I am doing this for anyone, it's for me and Mom and Dad. "All right, I'll think about it." I am not going to give him a definite yes. I want to make him grovel for a while.

Dad is letting me take the Honda s2000 to Bobby's house for a band practice. Bobby is the drummer in our band. He lives just below Cleveland Dam.

I have mixed feelings about driving the car. I can't wait to finally drive it, but Dad is only allowing it because he's selling it to pay off some debts. He admitted he wanted to give me a chance before it's gone. Jack and I set our guitars in the backseat and start in the direction of the Upper Levels Highway, headed toward Horseshoe Bay.

I am not used to how tight the gears are after driving Mom's old Toyota. It has great pick-up as we emerge onto the highway. I accelerate quickly, and we are soon flying past the Toyota's top speed. It has rained earlier in the day, so I am a little concerned about hydroplaning with a skiff of water still on the road. I hit 110 kmh and keep it steady.

"This is so cool!" Jack exclaims.

I agree. We have the windows down, the stereo on, and the damp spring air is, for the moment, helping me forget about home. I hope Dad hangs on to the car long enough so that I can take Jade for a drive.

We have just passed the Mountain Highway turnoff when a black Passat roars past us. It changes lanes directly in front of us before the driver throws on his brakes. I immediately slam on my own brakes—I miss plowing into him by millimeters.

Jack snaps forward like a whip. “What’s that twit doing?”

The Passat continues slowly in front of us, forcing us almost to a crawl. A horn blares behind me. I glance at the reflection of the face of the woman in the car following me. She is fuming. In answer I pull into the left lane and roar ahead of the Passat. He follows, but he is soon tailgating me at 120 kilometers an hour. I can’t believe what is happening.

“Did you do something?” Jack asks. He twists in his seat to get a glimpse of the nutjob following us. “Why is that guy so pissed off?”

“I don’t know. He just came out of nowhere.” Again I consult the rearview mirror. I switch lanes once again. He follows. I step on the accelerator, feeling the car become uneasy on the wet road. I am soon pushing 130 kmh—nervously.

“There are two guys in the car, about twenty-something,” Jack tells me, “and they’re laughing. What a couple of freaks.”

And then it hits me—at 140 kilometers an hour. “Chase’s dealers.”

Jack's head swivels to the front. He looks at me in alarm. "What do they want with you?"

"They probably think I'm Chase. They must have heard he got out."

The Passat pulls into the lane next to us and comes alongside of me. I have just enough time to recognize Ratchet and DC before a siren suddenly sounds. It is so close it's like it has started up inside my head. In the rearview mirror, I spot the flash of the light on the roof of a police car coming up behind us.

"I don't believe this," Jack slides down in his seat. "The cops." The word comes out a little like a balloon losing its air.

As I begin to slow down to pull over, I am aware of the Passat taking off at lightning speed. The cops don't pursue them; instead, they follow me until I've come to a stop on the shoulder of the highway. Jack opens the door and starts to get out.

"Remain in your vehicle," orders an amplified voice.

Jack pulls his leg back into the car like he's been bit by a snake. He slams the door. "What should we do?"

"Stay in the car like they said."

"Why do they want us to do that?"

In the rearview mirror, I can see the two cops approaching the car. One is a graying, middle-aged guy, the other has a mustache and is younger by

about ten years. They each have a hand on their holster. "Because they think we're criminals."

Jack groans as I roll down the window.

"Any idea how fast you were going?" the older cop who is on my side of the car asks.

"Some idea. Probably close to one twenty."

"Try one forty-seven," he replies. "Can I see your registration and license?"

I dig my license out of my wallet. "Don't go anywhere," he says, waving the license in the air. He takes both documents back to his car while the cop with the mustache remains next to the Honda. Jack and I sweat it out for ten minutes until he returns. He speaks to his partner before speaking to us. "Out of the car," he orders.

Jack and I get out. They have us put our hands on the roof of the car while they pat us down for weapons or drugs, I'm really not sure what. They then ask for the car keys, lock Dad's car and follow us back to their own vehicle where we are told to sit in the backseat. It turns out that Dad's car has seven outstanding parking violations. It also has been spotted in front of some well-known drug houses. Chase. Again. They are taking us to the police station to clear it up.

Jack and I both protest that we can't leave our guitars just lying out in the open in the backseat. The young guy looks at the old guy, who finally nods. At least we are able to convince him of this. We give up our jackets, and

the younger cop returns to the Honda where he throws them across the backseat.

“I am sooo screwed,” Jack whines on the drive to the station. He can’t sit still. His knees are jiggling, and he cracks his knuckles like he always does when he gets nervous. “My parents will kill me when they hear how fast we were going. It’s already like they’re handing over the keys to Fort Knox when I ask them for the car.”

I feel a little sorry for him. He has only one sibling, a sister who is not even ten. He’s never experienced the repercussions of living with a criminal like Chase. Although I can’t say many of my friends have.

Once we arrive at the police station, we are asked to wait in a small room with a wobbly table and three straight-back chairs. After a twenty-minute delay, the two cops who picked us up saunter back into the room.

“Okay.” The older guy balances on the edge of the chair across from us. The other one stands behind him. “Let’s try and get through this quickly. Why were you driving like you were in the Grand Prix?”

“We were being chased,” Jack immediately offers.

“By who?” the cop questioning us asks, although somehow I get the feeling he already knows.

“No, we weren’t.” I knock Jack’s knee under the table with my own. “I just wanted to see how fast the car would go. It was the first time my dad let me drive it.”

The cop frowns. He seems a little annoyed that we aren't in agreement. Jack looks at me with raised eyebrows.

I attempt a small chuckle. "He just doesn't want me to get in trouble from my parents. Right, Jack? My Dad can be kind of tough when he wants to be."

Dad would certainly kill me, but I have no choice. I don't want him to know we were being hounded by Ratchet and DC. If they find out, I'll have to tell them about the money Chase owes. Thankfully, Jack clues in that something is up, and he doesn't say anything more.

The cops don't believe me, though. They saw the Passat take off. They had the license and they are fully aware of Ratchet and DC and their profession. The graying cop explains all this in a calm matter-of-fact voice, but in a way that also makes me feel like I'm just another lying kid who is stupid enough to think he's smarter than the cops. He says, "So, what we want to know is why they were chasing you. Are you dealers or users?"

It's almost funny the way Jack's mouth drops open. Although I do feel like a piece of scum just knowing that they would think we were either of those things. "Neither," I tell them. "I told you, I was trying out the car. I have no idea who was in that other car or why they were speeding."

“All right.” The cop pulls a pen out of his shirt pocket and begins to fill out a form. It’s a speeding ticket. I owe two hundred dollars. “You can go this time. But I’m going to warn you that you should be a little more careful who you go driving with. You’re really lucky those guys didn’t run you off the road.”

Jack is allowed to go, but I have to wait for my parents to show up so Dad can deal with the parking tickets Chase has collected. Both Mom and Dad arrive with Chase in tow. One of them needs to drive Dad’s car home and Chase, of course, can’t be trusted to be left alone.

“Oh, Gordie,” Mom says. A faint trail of mascara stains her cheek. She looks so disappointed in me, I feel like the worst heel on the face of the earth. “Imagine how we felt when the police phoned and told us you were here. Haven’t we had enough to deal with without this?”

“I’m sorry,” is all I can think of to say.

Dad speaks to the police officer at the front desk. He pays the fines. Mom drives home with Chase after she drops me and Dad off to collect the Honda. It’s a miserable drive home, to say the least.

“What about trust, Gordie?” he says. “I thought that was at least something I could always count on with you. You broke that.”

“Yes,” I say, “I know. I just wanted to try it.”

“But one hundred and forty seven?” he fumes. “What if you’d lost control? You would have been killed. You have no idea how that would have absolutely killed your mother and me.”

I try to imagine what it would be like for them. They are already so fragile they probably would wither right up and blow away. “I’m sorry,” I say again.

“Well, it’s obvious I am doing the right thing. Selling it. This car is too much of a responsibility for you anyway.”

FIVE

Steve and Bobby are a little ticked off that we didn't show up for the practice, until they find out why; then they are both impressed and amazed. We get together later that night at Jack's house to listen to music.

"You were clocked going one hundred and forty-seven!" Steve repeats when I tell him. "I got up to one hundred and thirty once. But one hundred and forty-seven, that would take a lot of nerve. Weren't you scared you'd wipe out?"

"I didn't have time to think about it. Those idiots were right on our tail."

Bobby is slumped back in an easy chair, spinning a drumstick. "What's it like being interrogated? Do the cops really put the screws to you the way they do on TV?"

"I don't know how other people are treated, but it wasn't as bad as all that," says Jack. He grimaces. "They weren't as tough as my dad was, that's for sure. I'm not

allowed to drive his car for at least a month, and then it will be reviewed.”

“But Gordie was driving,” Steve points out.

“Yeah, which I told both my parents. They didn’t seem to care. I was with him, so I must have been a part of it. I must have goaded him on or something.”

“Sorry,” I say.

“Ah, it’s not your fault. It’s your doped-out brother’s.”

There is nothing to deny, and nobody disagrees.

“Hey, did they throw you in the tank?” Steve asks.

“I mean, while you were waiting for your parents to get there. Did you have to share a cell with a load of thugs?”

“We were speeding.” I drop a disc in the CD player.

“We weren’t suspected terrorists. Let’s drop it, okay? I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” I press Play.

Chase doesn’t say anything about what happened until I am alone with him the next day. “See why you’ve got to help me?” he gripes. “I told you—they’ll kill me if they don’t get paid.”

Instead of apologizing for Jack and me almost being run off the road, for the police hassling me and Dad coming down on me, he makes it sound like it’s a problem I brought on myself.

“You know what? This is *your* problem, not mine.”

“Come on, Gordie. Just this one time, please? You know they don’t fool around. If they don’t kill me, they’ll hurt me. Think what that would do to Mom.”

“Don’t you use that on me.”

“Okay, okay. But I can’t do anything until they’re off my back.”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

Chase has been home for nearly two weeks. Payment to Ratchet is a week overdue. Mom and Dad are urging him to do something: enroll in school or apply for a job—anything. It will help build his confidence, they tell him. But more importantly, it will look good when his preliminary hearing comes up. That’s the procedure used to decide if there’s enough evidence to go to trial. I really don’t know how much more evidence is needed, considering he’d been caught red-handed with the broken bottle in his hand and Richard Cross lying at his feet. But it could be months before the lawyers have all the paperwork figured out.

The one thing I do have to give Chase credit for is staying clean for two weeks. Even if it is the fear factor of being mutilated by his dealers, it’s worked. But I’m also not naïve enough to believe it will continue. I’ve seen what has happened in the past and I’ve heard the statistics. A drug cop who spoke at school told us methamphetamine users have less than an eight-percent chance of recovering. Those are pretty poor odds for

someone like Chase, who has no interest in cleaning up; even if he did, he has no perseverance. He's demonstrated that many times over the past year.

The first time Chase was picked up at a meth house and ordered to go to rehab, he was out in thirty days. When he came home he was right back at it within twelve hours. He'd told my parents he'd needed to borrow the car to pick up a few things.

"Like what?" Dad asked. There was no doubt by his tone that he didn't believe him.

But before he'd even had time to invent an excuse, Mom stepped in. She argued that they would eventually have to trust him again, so what was the harm in letting him take the car to the store. Reluctantly, Dad gave in.

Chase returned three days later; starving, stinking and ready to crash. Dad was furious. It was the first time I ever saw him blow up—I mean, really blow up. He was just hollering at Chase who was so amped-out he could barely keep his eyes open to listen to the rant. Dad did tell Chase that he would be out on the street if it happened again. A threat that I knew Mom would have difficulty letting him carry out.

As for Mom, she had gone nearly berserk in those three days. She'd driven around the seediest parts of the city, looking for him. She'd called all his old friends,

not realizing they'd dumped him months before when he got into meth. The only response she did get was from Harris's mother, who hadn't seen her own son in weeks.

When he got home after his three-day binge, Chase slept for two days. Finally he got up, showered and, once he'd eaten everything in the fridge, asked Mom for fifty dollars. "What for?" Her tone was unusually demanding. "Why should I trust you this time?"

"It's for school," Chase persisted. "Look, Mom, I'm sorry I lost control. It was just a reaction to being cooped up in rehab for a month. But I know that I've got to change. Believe me, I am so thankful you guys have stuck by me through all of this. I don't know what would have happened to me if you hadn't. I need the money for the application fee for Outreach. If you want me to finish my diploma, I've got to apply."

Moms' face softened. If Chase could get a diploma for being a manipulator he would have graduated a long time ago. She gave him the money along with a warning that she really should call the college and run it by Dad, but she didn't want to interrupt his teaching, so she wouldn't as long as Chase gave her his personal promise that he wouldn't take off.

He didn't take off, but he did come home at midnight, high. Mom and Dad were in bed, although it wasn't likely they'd been asleep. Chase had phoned

around eight to say he was going to a movie. Still, not until they heard him come through the door could they ever really relax.

“Say, what’s up, Gordie?” Chase was flying. He plunked down on the end of my bed, grabbed a pen from my desk and began following the pattern on my comforter, over and over.

“Did you apply?”

“Huh?”

“To go back to school.”

Chase laughed. “Oh, yeah, I applied to the school of life. That’s where I’m going. I’m thinking of sales. I think I could make a killing at it. You ever notice how I can talk anybody into anything? I’m a natural. With my looks and personality, nobody turns me down.”

His ego made me gag. Sitting there at the end of my bed, looking like he just rose from the dead, and he’s telling me how good looking and intelligent he is. “Have you looked in the mirror lately? A cadaver would have a better chance of selling a car than you.”

He didn’t say anything; he was totally fascinated by the pen. I knew he could go on geeking like that for hours. If I left him until noon, he’d still be sitting there tracing the pattern with the pen.

“You’re an ass,” I told him. “Get out of my room.”

Over the next three months, Chase came and went, lying about where he was going and where he’d been.

Stuff started disappearing from the house: small electronics and jewelry, Dad's watches. At first, Chase denied taking these things. He'd turn the conversation around, trying to place the blame on us for misplacing them. He'd get so worked up denying it that we'd drop it. It got to the point that not a word that came out of his mouth was believable or made any sense. Then, one night he was caught stealing a DVD player from a car at the neighborhood shopping center. He was fined, given a conditional sentence and sent back to rehab again.

When he got out a month later, Dad arranged for Chase to stock shelves in a small grocery store. Mr. Pelletiere, a longtime friend of Dad's, managed the store and he agreed to do Dad the favor. Chase blew it within two weeks. Ryan and Harris started hanging around. The stuff Chase was supposed to be shelving went missing. Customers complained about the weird behavior and strange appearance of the stock boy in aisle eight.

Life became a nightmare for all of us after that. Chase came and went as he pleased. Dad would confront him when he could pin him down. He'd lay it all out: Chase had to get work or he was out of the house. He couldn't keep taking advantage, using the house to shower and eat when he crashed and finally couldn't stand his own stink. Chase would sit there, nodding in agreement that yes, he was wasting his life,

blowing every chance he got and that he'd better shape up. But he didn't hear any of it. He didn't hear them and he sure didn't listen to me.

But experience had taught me that there was nothing to be gained in trying to reason with a drug addict, whether he's high or craving the next hit, which were the only times I ever saw him. Not that I didn't try. But I could think of no other way to make him listen. We were only a year apart in age, but we were so very different. When it came right down to it, we'd had little in common since we were too small to be left on our own, when we were jointly referred to as "the boys."

Chase lost fifty pounds off his five-foot-ten-inch frame. He broke out in "speed bumps"—sores that oozed gross stuff as his body tried to get rid of the noxious chemicals. He'd scratch and pick at them even as you talked to him, never allowing them to heal. One of his bottom teeth came loose and fell out—he didn't seem to notice. Mom and Dad argued day and night, and I was sure they were ready to split up.

Then, six months before the assault on Richard Cross, we got a call from Grandma, Dad's mother, in the middle of the night. Chase was marching through her house waving a knife, strung out, demanding money. She had none in the house. Dad jumped in the car while I kept her on the phone.

Grandma was scared and confused. “Gordie,” she said, “what’s happened to him? I’ve never seen anybody act like this.”

It was all I could do not to drive over and punch Chase out. I spent the next ten minutes trying to convince her that it had nothing to do with her, or any of us. She should know that, she was a nurse. This is what drug addicts do: they demand, they bully, they take.

“Yes,” she said, crying.

“What’s he doing now, Grandma?”

“I can’t see him. I’m in the bedroom.”

I pictured Grandma huddled in her room, alone in the house with Chase. It was an image so not like her. She was normally tough and independent. She’d carried on working at a clinic another ten years after Grandpa had died suddenly, managing the house and huge garden and still insisting on cooking all the holiday dinners herself.

“I think he’s going through the kitchen drawers. What’s he looking for?”

“Something he can sell. Just let him. Stay where you are, Grandma. But if he does come in there demanding something, give him your old tv—the one in the storage room.”

“But it doesn’t work.”

“He doesn’t know that. Just let him take it. Dad will be there right away.”

“Oh, Gordie. I’m so frightened for him. Oh, thank goodness,” she sighed with relief, “your Dad is here.”

I hung up when the dial tone sounded.

When Chase saw Dad’s car, he took off out the back door. Dad brought Grandma home to stay with us that night. The whole thing of Chase showing up, drugged out and demanding money, scared her so much she put her house up for sale within a week. Not just because of Chase, she insisted, but because of rising crime in the city in general.

We didn’t see Chase again for two weeks. Dad had already emptied his room and moved all his stuff to the garage when he showed up like nothing had happened. He wandered into the front hall on a Sunday morning.

“What are you doing here?” Dad demanded.

“I’m hungry,” he said. “I need a place to sleep.”

“Well, you’re not doing it here. You can collect your things, they’re in the garage. You’re not coming back here, Chase.”

It was a really tough thing for Dad to do. Mom had gone into her bedroom, where she was crying. Through all their arguing, they’d agreed it was the only way he might come around. Maybe they were just encouraging his habit by giving him a place to stay. Maybe if they let him really hit bottom it would make him realize what he’d become and he’d ask for help.

Dad allowed Mom to make Chase a sandwich; then he watched him put a few things in a backpack before he left. It was a harsh moment. For Mom and Dad, I knew it was probably beyond their imagination that after years of school and family holidays, Christmases, soccer games and birthdays, this was the way one of their children would leave home.

A few days later, Chase entered the house when no one was home and stole Dad's camera. My parents became paranoid about going anywhere, in case Chase broke in again. He continued to show up a couple of times a week wanting money. For groceries, he told Mom. He was so withered and gaunt she couldn't help herself. Chase would leave with sixty or seventy dollars, and always, the empty promise that he would clean up. Because Chase often showed up in the middle of the night, Mom began leaving money under the doormat so he wouldn't wake up Dad.

Chase had become a huge financial drain. I asked Mom why she kept giving him money. She knew where it was going.

"He's my son, Gordie. I don't know what else to do. I hope at least some of it goes to feed him."

Three times she gave him the first month's rent on a bachelor apartment. Three times it went up his nose. One morning we got a call from the hospital. Chase had blacked out in a parking lot, fallen down and hit

his head. Someone had called the police, and he was now in the psychiatric ward at the hospital. But by the time Mom and Dad got there he had walked.

He showed up at the nursing home where Mom worked, scaring the pants off the old folks. He embarrassed Dad by wandering into a class he was teaching. He stood at the back of the room, his bug eyes staring blankly, his spastic movements distracting everyone until Dad excused himself. He took him out in the hall, gave him fifty dollars and told him never to show up at his work again. It didn't stop him, because all that ever mattered to Chase was that he got his next fix.

Less than a month before Chase knocked Richard Cross on the head, I came home from school to find Mom sitting at the kitchen table puzzling over the statement from a credit card she'd never owned. The bill was for five thousand dollars—the card was maxed out. The invoice included motel rooms, taxi rides, some groceries, but mostly cash withdrawals—a couple of hundred dollars at a time. Chase had applied for the card in Mom's name, using documents and bank receipts he had found around the house.

Mom and Dad were stunned at the amount of money they owed and the depth of Chase's betrayal. Most amazing to me was that Chase still possessed the mental faculties to sneak into the house and put something like that together. After that, Dad had the locks changed.

A few days later, Mom locked herself in the washroom where she wouldn't have to hear Chase on the other side of the front door, his key useless, mumbling that he was hungry and had nowhere to go.

But even when he was out of the house, Chase never left my parents' minds. All their energy went into thinking about him, why he was the way he was, and how they could get him to change.

I didn't know how to deal with it anymore. I was angry at them for falling for all his lies. And yes, I was angry at them for ignoring me and anything I did, in favor of catering to the self-centered whims of a meth head. But it was watching the emotional roller coaster he had them on that was the worst. The possibility that he might stick it out after rehab—actually do something with his life—followed by the inevitable letdown the first time he showed up stoned. I didn't know how many highs and lows they could take before they also dissolved.

Harris is dead. I hear the news through Jack. Harris died of twenty-seven stab wounds to his legs and chest. When I hear the news, I immediately think he must have been murdered as punishment for not paying his drug debts. But that isn't what happened. The wounds were self-inflicted. Harris was alone in a park after leaving some friends. They said he was tweaking, strung out so bad he was making no sense and hallucinating to the point that he was freaking them all out. He couldn't get rid of the crank bugs crawling all over his skin. Sitting on the grass beneath a streetlamp, Harris attacked them with a penknife, over and over. He'd lost a lot of blood before he was found by a jogger early the next morning; he died before they got him to the hospital.

Chase registers little surprise when I tell him. He may have already known, although I doubt it. He reacts to news of Harris's death with the same generic look of distant comprehension that he reacts to any news these days.

I could have told him the toilet was overflowing for all the emotion he shows. But then, I don't think he truly understands much anymore, not fully. It seems to take him forever to process even the simplest conversation. I really don't know how he can stand it—I'd be scared to death if my brain wasn't working anymore.

On the other hand, he probably didn't have a real deep friendship with Harris. People who become friends because they are both into drugs can't have a whole lot more in common. If they did, if they had real interests or hobbies, they wouldn't be using. But what do I know? It just seems a pretty exclusive club for freaks.

"Thank god, you're not into that stuff anymore," Mom says, probably hoping it will help convince Chase that he isn't.

Dad is a little more forthright. "That could have been you, Chase."

"I don't get how you could stab yourself even once," Jack says on the way home from school. "I mean, intentionally. Okay, maybe once if you're goofing around and it's an accident. But twenty-seven times makes no sense."

Jack is understandably confused by the whole thing. I, on the other hand, am shocked but I do sort of comprehend. "Think of it as a meltdown. You fill your brain with a toxic mixture of chemicals and crap, and over time, everything starts to short-circuit."

“Yeah, I guess. But twenty-seven times? He was truly fried.”

Over the next few days, Chase becomes more and more restless. Whether this has anything to do with Harris’s death, I’m not certain. I do know it is long past Ratchet’s due date for repayment of his loan. I am leaving for work a few days later when he pulls me aside. “Gordie, can you lend me five hundred? Just five hundred.”

Just five hundred. He says it like I can pull it out of my pocket. Like five hundred dollars is loose change. Still, I wonder why he doesn’t ask for what he owes. “Why five hundred? I thought you owed two thousand.”

“I do. But if I pay some of what I owe to Ratchet at least I can leave the house. I’ll tell him the rest is coming.”

“No way.” I bend down to pull on my shoes. “When I have it, you’ll pay the whole thing off at once. And I’m going with you. Don’t think I’ll just hand you two thousand dollars and watch you walk out the door. I might as well throw it into a strong wind off the Lion’s Gate Bridge.”

I step onto the bus. As the doors wheeze shut behind me, I make my way to the back where no one can watch me think. I have to figure out how I can get rid of Chase’s debt and get him out of the house and working. It has become crucial, because something else has happened.

Mom has lost her job. They told her at the nursing home that it was because they no longer needed three people in the office. It was more likely because she kept asking for time off. From their point of view, I guess Mom has become about as dependable as Chase.

Mom is trying to remain positive; she says it couldn't have come at a better time. She means considering how she is needed at home. But with the debts Chase has built up, the lawyer's fees, and the house mortgaged for bail money, I know how much they depend on her income. While the bus fills up, I decide I will sell my old Yamaha. I could have traded it in for three hundred dollars when I bought my new bass, but at that time, I'd wanted to keep it. I'm not sure why. I almost never play it now. I guess it was more because it sort of got me started with the band. But now I wonder why I'm hanging on to it. If you get too sentimental about stuff you only end up getting hurt when you eventually lose it. Besides, it wasn't that good to begin with, and I bought it secondhand. With that, the check from my grandparents and what I have in the bank, I can pay Chase's debt. Maybe then he can join the real world and contribute for a change.

Jade is supposed to be at work, but she is already more than an hour late. I am hoping to grab a minute alone with her—I want to run my plan of paying off Chase's debt by her. I can't tell Jack. I already know what he'd say. He'd say I'm nuts and that there is no

way he'd do it. He'd then quote all the times Chase has ripped me off. I would say the same thing if I was in his position. Jade is more likely to see it from my point of view: to take into consideration the need to get Chase out of the house and doing something, and to do it without Mom and Dad finding out.

It's a Thursday night and the store is busy with people picking up what they need for weekend projects. Admittedly it's not rocket science, but I have become very quick on cash. Ralph prefers me to handle it when there are lineups. He says his patience is wearing too thin to deal with peoples' tempers. They are always in such a hurry, and they don't like to wait for an old man fumbling around. The lineup is five people deep when the phone rings. Ralph is in the storeroom. I answer it at the same time as I continue to work the till.

"Gordie, I need money."

My stomach clenches at the sound of Chase's voice. Where does he get the nerve to call me at work? "Not now, Chase. I'm busy."

"But it's important."

"It's always important. Does it ever occur to you that what I'm doing might also be important?" I cringe a little. I sound exactly like my dad.

The lady I am taking money from raises an eyebrow before shifting her attention to the lightbulbs I am stuffing in a bag.

“Just two hundred. That’ll do it for now.”

“This morning it was five hundred. What is this for, Chase?” For the sake of the customers, and only the customers, I try to keep my rising anger in check. “Something tells me you’re not going to use it to pay off your debt.”

“Of course I am. Do you think I want Ratchet coming after me the way he went after you?”

I feel my cheeks burn. But there is no point in correcting him—Chase is so out of touch with reality, he probably really does think that Ratchet was after me for something *I* had done. I scan the next customer’s items. “Later, Chase.”

“It’s for a down payment.”

“Later.” I hang up. I try to smile at the next person in line. It isn’t very natural, though, and I probably just look like a guy who is suffering from gas.

The phone rings again.

“Busy place,” the customer says.

I shrug in apology before glancing at the call display. It’s my home phone number again. I ignore it. It rings eight times before Ralph, all red and sweaty from moving boxes, emerges from the storeroom.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” He pushes a shock of gray hair aside, leaving a smudge of dirt across his forehead.

“It’s a wrong number.”

“How do you know?”

“The same guy phoned a few minutes ago.”

Ralph cocks his head a little as the phone continues to ring. I hate lying to him. Ralph always answers his phone, he listens to his customers, and that's how he's run his business for thirty-five years. The man in line takes the bag I hand him and leaves. Ralph returns to the storeroom. Chase doesn't give up until the twentieth ring and I am ready to reach through the phone and wring his scrawny neck.

Traffic in the store has slowed down when the phone rings half an hour later. This time, it's Jade calling from the hospital. She had taken her mother to emergency that morning. Her lungs had become filled with fluid, and Jade was unable to help her. She sounds shaken and a little uncertain, not her usual positive self.

“You go.” Ralph waves toward the door when I tell him. “It sounds like she could use a little support. I'm fine. The rush is over.”

Jade is waiting for me in the front lobby of the hospital. Holly is asleep with her head in Jade's lap. Jade looks tired and drained, like she has barely enough energy to get up from the row of chairs. She gently moves Holly aside and gets to her feet. “I'm so glad you're here,” she says.

It's instinctual to hug her. It seems to be what she needs most right then. Besides, I can't think of anything

to say. I can't tell her it will get better because I know that with her mother's disease that won't happen. So I hold on to her until I think I feel her gain a little strength. But then she begins to really cry. I pull her closer.

"I'm sorry," she says. "It's just...well, I don't know how much more of this I can take. I'm supposed to be at work. I'm supposed to be studying for an exam. I had to tell my friend Laura that I couldn't go to the mall to see the sweater she said would look perfect on me. I never have even two seconds to myself." Wiping her cheeks with the palms of her hands, she backs away a little. "I know all that sounds so selfish."

"No, it doesn't," I tell her. "It sounds normal."

Jade takes another moment to collect herself. "They're going to try some new antibiotics. The ones she's been taking don't seem to be doing much good anymore. The doctors want to keep her for a few days to see how it goes."

"Are you ready to go home?"

She nods. "Can you wait with Holly while I make sure there's nothing else she wants?"

"Of course." I sit down next to Holly on the row of chairs. Holly's small body rises and falls in sleep. I'm amazed that she can sleep at all under the bright lights and with the door opening and closing, but I guess she's probably used to being shuffled around. I pick up a six-month-old copy of *Sports Illustrated*

from the table and open it up. People have been coming and going since I arrived, and I'm not sure why I look up when I do.

I spot a woman of about thirty with a small girl in tow moving quickly through the lobby, on her way out of the building. The woman is thin and tall, and wears her blond hair pulled back in a hairclip. Her face is strained and her lips are set. She marches toward the door in a determined way, a way that makes me think that she won't tolerate any interference.

The little girl has to run to keep up with her. Her long sandy hair is tangled like it hasn't been combed in days. I notice that particularly because it doesn't somehow fit with the trendy denim skirt and jacket she wears, although she does wear two different-colored socks. She holds tightly to the woman with one hand; with the other, she hugs a small unicorn against her chest. She is trotting along so quickly that she stumbles. The unicorn goes flying from her hand and skids across the polished floor. "Mom, my unicorn!"

I am close enough that I reach it before her mother realizes what has happened. I hold it out to her.

"Oh," says her mother, stopping. "Hannah, say thank you to the young man."

Hannah smiles shyly. She wraps an arm around the toy and takes it from me. I try to smile back, but it's all I can do not to blurt out my story, to tell them how very

sorry I am, and that if it were in my power, I would do anything to turn things back.

“Come, Hannah.”

I look after them.

“What is it?” Jade has returned. She takes the magazine from my hands and sets it on the table.

“That woman who just left, that was Richard Cross’s wife, with their kid.”

Jade turns to look, but she is too late. “Oh, I’m sorry, Gordie.”

I call a cab. I ride home with Jade and Holly. On the way, I can’t shake the image of Richard Cross’s wife and his little girl sitting across from the comatose man. Do they talk to him as he lies there with the machines pumping? Do they tell him what they’ve done that day? Do they fill him in on all the things that have happened since Chase hit him on the head? I am so preoccupied by these thoughts that it is not until after we have dropped Jade and Holly off at their apartment and I have instructed the cab driver to take me home that I realize I have forgotten to tell Jade about my plan to pay off Chase’s debt.

I pay the driver and get out of the cab. I am walking up our front walk when Chase’s druggie friend, Ryan, appears from out of the shadows on the other side of the street. He walks toward me.

“Hey, Gordie.” His tone is humble.

“What are you doing here?” I study his eyes in the dark. They are pretty dull, but I can’t be sure he is wasted.

“I came to talk to Chase, but your parents won’t let me see him.”

“And you’re surprised? They paid fifty grand to get him home. Do you really think they want to risk losing it all by having him hang out with you?”

He wipes his nose with the back of his hand—a druggie habit. Still, he looks down at his feet in a way that makes me think he isn’t high. He shows no trace of that plastic confidence I am used to seeing in Chase. He looks back at me, and this time, I know he is talking sober. “It’s not like that. You heard about Harris?”

“Yeah, I did. That was a pretty nasty way to end up.”

Ryan nods. “I’m scared. I don’t want that to happen to me. I’m going to check into rehab, and I’m going to stay there as long as it takes.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I came to talk Chase into coming with me. That’s why I wanted to see him, but your dad closed the door as soon as he saw me.”

“Huh, well, even if you’d told Dad why you’d come, he would have done the same thing. Why should he believe you? You guys can’t discuss the weather without lying about it.”

Ryan drops his eyes again. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Anyway, he won’t go,” I tell him. “Not because you’ve decided to go.”

“Will you ask him?”

I shrug. “Yeah, sure. I’ll ask him. But don’t wait for him. If you’re serious, go check yourself in.”

Ryan backs up a little. “Yeah, okay.” He turns and starts down the sidewalk.

I don’t believe that he will do it. Harris’s death has shaken him up, there’s no doubt about that. But I figure he’ll be wasted by the end of the night and by morning, he’ll have convinced himself that Harris had somehow brought it on himself. He’ll continue to use as though he’s invincible.

Still, it can’t hurt to say it. “Good luck, Ryan.”

He waves.

SEVEN

Three days later, I sell my old Yamaha, cash my checks and withdraw all my savings. I walk home with two thousand dollars in my pocket. I have never had so much money on me or even seen it all at once. It's five in the afternoon and despite the bank being only six blocks from my house, I have never been so jumpy. Even the shadow of a seagull passing over my head makes my heart leap to my throat. Every time a car slows I stash my hands in my pockets and pick up my pace. I desperately hope that it isn't those two losers who are going to wind up with my cash anyway.

In the end, I haven't discussed what I'm about to do with anyone. I really don't see any other way out. Mom and Dad are already so financially strapped, and Grandma would make me promise that I wouldn't do it. She'd tell me she would find the money herself. That would be a real hardship on her fixed income, and Jade...well, she has problems of her own.

So I've decided it's best to get it over with and get on with life in our house. I still have my job—I'll work extra shifts to cover the check my grandparents sent me. But I do plan on getting my money back from Chase eventually, even if I have to stoop to Ratchet's level and extract it with a little blood.

My parents are pleased that we're going to a movie together. At least that's what I told them Chase and I are doing when I asked to borrow Mom's car. I know she's hoping that we've found something in common to bring us closer together. I hate lying to her, but I can hardly tell her that fending off Chase's drug dealers is the reason we're going out.

I back out of the garage and sit in the car in the driveway, waiting for Chase. When he finally slides into the front seat, he immediately flips down the mirror on the visor. He pats his hair in case, between the house and driveway, a strand or two has fallen out of place.

Chase reeks of some heavy sweet cologne and he is wearing a new shirt. It reminds me of how he used to clean up after a five-day bender when he was ready to head back out on the street. I back out of the driveway. "I don't know why you got all dressed up to visit a couple of thugs. Do you think if you look good they won't hold a grudge? Keep in mind this is the last time you're going to see them."

Chase doesn't say anything. He just sits, staring straight ahead.

"Ever."

"What?"

"You're not going to see or contact them after tonight. And once you get a job you're going to pay me back, two thousand plus interest. Then we'll talk about the stuff you stole."

I just assume we are headed for the Eastside, the sleazy part of town where the smell of garbage and urine-soaked concrete drifts from the alleys and where those who gather have only one thing on their minds. But the Eastside isn't where Chase directs me. Instead, once we've crossed the Second Narrows Bridge, I follow his directions until we are driving down an older street in Burnaby. This is a family neighborhood; bicycles lie in the driveways and potted plants decorate the front steps.

"Stop here." Chase motions just ahead, to a house on the left.

I pull to the side of the road, across from the gray stucco bungalow he's pointed out. There are two cars parked in the carport, a third on the driveway and two on the street in front. The Passat that had hounded Jack and me on the Upper Levels Highway is one of them.

"This is it? This is where you come to get high?"

Chase appears nervous. He pats his hair again. "Yeah."

“But there are bicycles in the driveways and a stroller across the street.”

“Yeah, so?”

“You are such a scuzz.”

Chase holds out a hand. At first I’m not sure what for until I realize it’s for the money.

“Oh, no. I’m going with you.” I flip the door handle and start to get out.

“No.” Chase’s reply is almost a shout. “You can’t.”

I look at him.

“I mean, it’s not a good idea. They won’t let me in if they see you. They won’t trust you. I’ll just go in and pay them. You can watch me from here.”

I close the door again. “I don’t trust *you*.”

“I’ll be five minutes. You’ll be sitting right here. I’m not kidding, they’ll slam the door in my face if you’re with me. We’ll be out of here faster if you just wait.”

I know he’s about as trustworthy as a rabid skunk. But he is within my sight, and I guess I figure he won’t try anything with me right here.

“All right, you’ve got five minutes. If you’re any longer, I’ll be pounding on that door until it comes down.” I dig the envelope containing the two thousand dollars out of my pocket. “This is it, Chase. Your last chance. Pay those losers off, get back here and leave this crap behind you.”

Chase nods. He snatches the money from my hand, removes it from the envelope and rolls it into a wad.

He stuffs the roll in his pocket, letting the envelope fall to the floor of the car. He is twitchy. I figure he's nervous about facing his dealers. I watch as he crosses the scruffy yard and knocks on the front door. He turns and looks at me once, but he doesn't acknowledge me. I glance at the clock. Six minutes after ten. The door opens and he disappears inside.

I wait. It's now quite dark and Burnaby Mountain looms close. A car drives by and turns into the driveway of the house two doors down on the same side of the street. A man steps out from the driver's side. He holds the back door for two young children while they jump out. All the time he stares at me sitting in Mom's car in front of the drug house. It creeps me out that if he knows what goes on inside his neighbor's house—and how could he not know with guys like Chase and Ratchet coming and going at all hours—he probably thinks I'm a druggie.

The blinds are drawn in the two windows that face the street. The small front yard is neglected: weeds grow through the bark mulch, which looks like it was thrown down at some attempt to landscape many years back. A dead cedar stands in the corner of the yard next to the driveway. Red needles lie scattered around its base.

I look at the clock again. Ten minutes after ten. It has been four minutes since Chase walked through the door. God, I hope this changes things. Chase still has to

face the assault charges, but if he's working and Mom and Dad can return to dealing with the regular hassles of life—the fridge on the fritz or repairing a burned-out headlight—life would be so unbelievably good.

A car pulls up behind me. Two guys and a girl get out. The girl I notice the most: stringy hair, legs like bowed matchsticks, stumbling behind the two guys like an awkward starving goat. When the door opens, they immediately enter the house.

Ten fifteen. Nearly ten minutes. Okay, I'll cut him some slack. He may not have found those two right away, or they may have been busy. I have no idea how their business works. I begin to worry about sitting outside the house, waiting for a guy who's both a criminal and a user. What if the cops pick that night to raid the place? They know who owns the Passat and what they do for a living—I'd learned that at the police station. They have to be aware of what goes on inside the house and occasionally they must clean it out. Wouldn't that be just great? Me, not only arrested for frequenting a meth house but responsible for helping Chase break bail.

Ten twenty. My pocket feels empty. The money had been noticeable, clumsy at first, but after carrying it around for several hours, I certainly notice it's gone. Ten twenty-one. I am starting to worry. What if he doesn't come out? I want to go in and haul him out about as much as I want to eat a bowl of mud. I told him he had

five minutes. It has been fifteen. Just five more. Surely he will be back by then. And if not, well, I don't have much choice but to go in after him, although he's sure going to hear about making me sweat.

The door opens. The two guys who parked behind me return to their car without the girl. They take off. Maybe Chase is having trouble getting out. Maybe his dealers decided to beat him up a little for interest on the two thousand. Whatever the reason, he is still in there, and I've waited long enough. As I open the car door my heart begins to race. It's not knowing what to expect that frightens me. On the other hand, I don't have to actually go into the place. All they have to do is hurry Chase up and send him out.

I follow the crumbling concrete sidewalk leading to the front door and lift the knocker. Moments later the door is opened by a man whose age is hard to judge. The whites of his eyes are the color of egg yolk, and he is thin, except around the middle where his liver bulges. He stands next to the door guardedly, and he doesn't relax when he finds someone unfamiliar standing on the other side.

"I'm looking for Chase."

The guy scratches the loose skin of his throat. The entire back of his hand is scarred—like the skin has been ripped off or it has been horribly burnt. "He's not here."

For a moment, his answer stumps me. I know Chase is in there. Maybe he just hasn't seen him. "But he just went in. I watched him walk through the door fifteen minutes ago."

"I didn't say he wasn't here. I said he's not here now."

Okay, I'd been watching the door the entire time. The guy is mistaken. "He must be. I would have seen him leave."

He shrugs. "I'm telling you, he's not." He begins to close the door. I thrust my foot between the door and the jamb to prevent it from closing.

"I'd like to take a look myself. I'm his brother. All I want is to find him and take him home."

This time, the man scrutinizes me more closely. Perhaps he believes me, but more likely he knows I'm a lot stronger than he is, and I'm not going to give up. Besides, judging by the cars in the driveway, he probably has plenty of backup inside the house.

"All right," he says. "Suit yourself." He wanders away, leaving me to step inside and find Chase myself.

It is a filthy house, made worse by the peeling wallpaper and the dingy light. There is no furniture in the tiny living room, just an old sleeping bag on the floor with a couple of bodies lying across it. They don't move. Their unnatural positions tell me they aren't sleeping, but passed out. Clothes and blankets, dirty and threadbare,

lie in piles around what should be a dining room. A couple sit on the floor across from one another, sharing a pipe. They don't acknowledge me.

I cross the floor, following the man who answered the door to a room at the back of the house. It's the kitchen, although it doesn't look like much cooking or eating goes on. The cabinets are beat-up and hang off their hinges, there is no stove and the refrigerator door is missing. Ratchet, DC and some other loser sit at the table, smoking weed. The thin man who answered the door leans against the wall.

"Well, look who's here," Ratchet announces.

"Where is he?" I ask.

Ratchet's expression immediately changes. It occurs to me that he probably thinks that I'm here to buy—brought here by Chase.

"Where's who?" DC asks.

"You know who—Chase. He just paid you two thousand dollars."

Ratchet and DC look at each other. The look makes me sick. I instantly know that this isn't what happened. "I gave him two thousand. He was going to pay off his debt."

DC stands up. "Five hundred," he says. "He gave us five hundred. He said he's come into a pile of cash and he'll bring more tomorrow. It's all he could withdraw at once."

I stare at them. I can't believe what is happening, yet I do believe it. I think I'd been expecting it. I'd never really believed him. It was only hope that made me do what I did. I feel like screaming, beating them until they tell me it's a lie and Chase really had paid the full amount. "Where is he?" I manage to repeat.

Ratchet motions toward the door leading off the kitchen into the backyard and shrugs. "He left. We gave him a little incentive to ensure he comes back tomorrow. Hey, it's the first time he's come up with so much cash at once. We took it."

It's all I can do not to lunge at him. He could be lying. I tear out of the room and down the hall. I open a bedroom door and flick on the light. Three people lie on a bare mattress on the floor. They are so out of it, I could have been a SWAT team and they wouldn't have reacted. I recognize one of them as the skinny girl I'd seen arrive with the two guys that have since left, but there is no Chase.

I slam the door and look in another room across the hall. There is one guy, sitting on the floor, in a room empty of furniture. He is chipping at the floor with a pair of pliers. When he looks up, I get the feeling he's about to sling the pliers at me, so I close the door again.

The bathroom is a rathole, but it's empty. I find the basement door off the hall and pound down the wooden steps. The last riser is broken, and I stumble

before hitting the concrete floor. It is a slum: one open space filled with half a dozen people stoned out of their heads. But Chase is not among them. I return to where Ratchet and DC still sit. By now, I am in a total panic. "He's not here."

DC crushes his cigarette butt in a jar lid. "That's what we told you. He left."

He couldn't have gone far the way he'd been itching to get cranked up after more than a month. I bolt into the backyard. It's nothing more than a patch of weeds and stubble stretching to a small wooden shed at the back. There is no patio or garden, only a few broken lawn chairs. The entire property is surrounded by a low, chain-link fence.

I check inside the shed. I feel around until I find a pull-chain for an overhead light. Illuminated by one bare bulb I survey the clutter of boxes, broken glass and needles littering the wood plank floor. There is no Chase. The yard backs directly onto the neighbors' properties in three directions. There is no alley. Chase would have had to hop the fence to take off, but I have no way of knowing in which direction and it's now very dark. I choose the neighbor's yard to the east, the one with the easiest access. Searching between the hydrangeas and rhododendrons, I back into a swing, which creaks and starts a dog barking. A light goes on in the house. I sprint around to the front and return to Mom's car.

I clench my fists and beat them against my legs. Hysterical. I've only read the word in books and heard it referred to in movies, but I know this is what it must be like. It's like I've gone deaf and blind all at once. I can't think, I am so disoriented. And I am so mad every nerve in my body is sparking. If at that moment Chase appeared, I would go for his throat without giving him time to defend himself.

I am also scared to death. How will I ever explain this to Mom and Dad?

I grip the steering wheel and breathe deeply. Okay, maybe he's just taken off for the night and he'll be back. Maybe he'll be back before my parents are up in the morning. He knows it's breaking bail, that everything in his life—our lives—depends on him sticking around. I start the car. Who am I kidding? He's a crankhead with fifteen hundred dollars in his pocket. He's gone, along with my money.

I call Jack on my cell, but there is no answer. I don't know what else to do or where to go, so I drive to Jade's. Her mother and sister are in bed, but she is up, watching tv.

Sitting at the kitchen table, speaking in a whisper, I tell her what an idiot I am, how stupid I was to be duped by an addict. I'd watched it happen in my house a thousand times. If I'd only gone with him, everything would have turned out differently.