



CHAPTER ONE: *Steplings*

A Novel By C.W. Smith

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It would seem a wholesome American scene, an updated Rockwell portrait. Here, on a September afternoon in 2003, a young man—shirtless, tanned torso, blond ponytail, cut-off jean shorts—was mowing the lawn of a modest ranch-style home in a Dallas suburb thirty years past its prime. Hackberry roots buckled the sidewalks, a few dead vehicles hunkered on cinderblocks in driveways or beside garages, and RVs were parked in plain sight; some houses had that closed-up, neglected look that results when the inhabitants grow old and run out of energy or money to replace a torn screen, to have the trim painted, or to worry about landscaping. When it came to lawn maintenance, people on this block watered yards with sprinklers on hoses and usually cut their own grass or hired a kid like Jason to do it.

Today, though, Jason was working *gratis* for his father, Burl. (Of course, as Burl rightly and often pointed out, it was Jason's lawn, too.) Since July, Jason had been looking for a job. He

had applied at several restaurants and at three stores at Town East Mall. The mall was problematic because he'd been fired last spring from a job manning a sunglasses kiosk because he kept leaving it unattended. "It made me feel like a dog on a chain," he had complained to his father. He had also filled out applications at all three Mesquite Pep Boys auto stores (the job he wanted the most) and at two Blockbusters, including one on Belt Line and Military Parkway managed by a dweeb who had once ratted Jason out for smoking in the North Mesquite High School restroom.

After a callback at the Belt Line Blockbuster, he'd gone in and talked to the assistant manager, a black girl who said she'd attended NMHS and who seemed friendly enough, but she said he'd have to talk to the manager. He'd intended to set an appointment this very morning, but before he got around to it, Burl called from work at ten to tell him he'd just gotten off the phone with their lawyer.

There was good news and bad news, Burl told Jason. The good news was that after riding the fence for these three months, Lisa's father had finally agreed to withdraw charges for unauthorized use of a motor vehicle on the Miata, and the charge of Minor in Possession had been dismissed for lack of evidence. Of course, the shoplifting charge was dismissed too, because Jason wasn't even in the store when somebody stole that fistful of Slim Jims, so the clerk couldn't identify him as the culprit who had provoked his 911 call.

And the charge of resisting arrest had been downgraded to failure to obey a police officer.

When Burl didn't go on, Jason said, "So what's the bad news?"

“The bad news is that the charge of assault with bodily harm is still on you, son, and we’re going to court on Monday unless you make a plea bargain.”

“But I just *ran into* him, Dad! He was standing in the way trying to stop me! If he fractured his freaking skull and broke his collarbone, it’s not my fault! I didn’t *try* to do that—I just wanted out of his way!”

“I know that, son. The lawyer said that might make a difference, and it’s possible that charge will be downgraded, too. You might want to think about how you say all that, though. You might try to sound a little bit sorry.” Burl sounded a little bit angry. “In the meantime we got to expect that they’ll try to scare the bejesus out of us.”

“They are!”

Burl’s chuckle sounded like a ragged sigh. “Yeah. So maybe in the end it will be some lesser charge, and there’s hope for a probated sentence if you plead guilty.”

Jason fumed in silence. Why didn’t that old fucker get out of the way instead of trying to be a hero? Who makes a citizen’s arrest over a half-dozen sticks of jerky?

Burl said, “What’s for sure is that Mr. Crawford will be filing a civil suit against us for damages.”

“Good luck with that! I’m eighteen and I don’t even have a job! What’s he gonna do, have them put me in indentured servitude or something?”

“No, son, since you were seventeen when this happened, they’ll come after me and Lily, and maybe even Meemaw if they feel like it. They could go after Lily’s mutual fund portfolio or garnishee my paychecks or go after my pension.”

Jason could tell his dad was piling it on. For one thing, pitiful old Meemaw was so poor Medicaid paid for her nursing home. But he heard his dad’s steely anger and knew Burl didn’t like the attitude Jason had struck. He was tempted to ask what Lily had to do with anything, but, chastened by the possibilities if not by his father’s tone, he said, meekly, “Then that’s the worst news.”

When Burl had no response and they’d both held their receivers for a good many seconds like truculent trolls with cudgels, Jason said, sighing, “I don’t know what to do, Dad. I’m sorry.”

Burl said, “It would help if you’d mow the lawn.”

Jason had carried this news in his head all day long, and it had made his head heavier by the hour. He moped for a while after the call, then tried to work on his song for Lisa, thinking that it would take his mind off his troubles, then he went into Emily’s room to use her Mac because it had the only Internet connection in the house (his Compaq was six years old, a hand-me-down from his mother, who had gotten it when her church office upgraded). He wrote Lisa a long email using his Hotmail account, spilling his guts about his worries and the call from Burl and the trial coming up and how much he missed her and loved her and how lonely he felt. He said he knew that after what he’d done at her graduation party and his arrest, he wasn’t welcome at their home. He could understand that, but it hurt him bad that she was so cold. He

riffed on for a while, desperately flailing about, trying to snag her heart: did she remember when they were Carnival king and queen in seventh grade and wore those cheesy costumes—well, his was, she was truly bride-beautiful in hers—and when he kissed her for the first time down in the woods behind her house, and did she remember how they had their first alone date at the state fair—his mom had dropped them off and her dad had picked them up—and rode the Texas Star and it was so tall she was scared and tucked under his arm in the car they had all to themselves and you could see all the lights below around them and the lights in the downtown buildings and it seemed like they were crackling electric alive in an urban wonderland and the October breeze had made her bare arms goosebump and he'd rubbed them smooth, and later he'd won that pink giraffe at the midway with the BB guns for her, the one she'd still had on her bed as of last spring, and when he got home that night before he went to bed he wrote her that note that said *I had fun I hope you did too because I want you to be my girlfriend.*

He'd left off typing and let the images flow over him: Lisa sitting beside him and his dad as "family" at his mom's funeral and holding his hand, tutoring him in algebra for the GED, coaxing him into going with her to see their pastor about his grief. He added *When you get right down to it, you're not just the world's best girlfriend but the best friend friend.* She worried about how clean his clothes were, whether he'd eaten on any particular day or not.

Left unsaid were the blissful hours gasping and wallowing in their sweat in the backseat of her car, the miraculous whole night spent in a bed at Cara's mom's lake house where they'd discovered all the ways to use lips and tongues... The delicate fragrance of her flesh in the crook

of her neck, the tender backs of her knees, the taste of grape Kool-Aid Lip Smackers on her soft, moist mouth.

Babe, I love you like a monkey loves its tail, like a hammer loves a nail, like a zebra loves its stripes, like a pitchman loves his hypes.

But even censored the email sounded way too whiney and needy, too full of cheap snares. He left it in his Drafts folder instead of deleting it because there was a line in it he thought he might use in a song: *In my heart the hurt and you are crammed together in the same tight space...*

Whoever said writing about your pain made you feel better was full of it. Writing that email had aroused his feeling of loss, not like scratching at a scab— more like when you knock a big scabby wound against a doorframe. Made him want to howl and clutch himself.

Soon after the graduation party in June, Lisa had left for a family vacation to Vail that lasted all of July, then she'd come back for only a couple weeks in August to work at Amy's Hallmark Shop in the mall before leaving for UT Austin. She'd called him the night before she left. Or, more accurately, she'd finally answered his call.

She said she still loved him. That's what she said. I'll always love you, Jason.

The Sanborns' back yard was a simple square of grass broken only by a rusting swing set and a bumpy brick patio Burl had laid years ago without sufficiently compacting the base beneath it. By three o'clock when Emily was dropped off by Mrs. Munoz, whose son Rafey went to her middle school, Jason had moved to the front with the mower, the electric trimmer, and

the hand-clippers, and he was refilling the tank on the mower when Emily came down the walk with her book bag.

“How was school?” Jason asked, then heard in his own question the age-old parental quest for not so much knowledge as contact.

“Sucked!”

She halted in the walk to watch him, and he wasn't certain if she wanted him to press for more. Was this the “sucked” he always offered his parents merely to say it was usual, it was normal, it was boring? “Fine” would do as well, but it wouldn't suggest you were miserable and needed sympathy (but weren't directly asking for it). If you did a scratch-off on Emily's “sucked” would you uncover a picture of defeat and humiliation?

He felt a little helpless in this role in the first place. Whatever she might say, he'd wager his day spent here sucked way more. Her sucky day would only be a pimple on the butt of his. And for the umpteenth time he thought: of the many bad tricks God had played on him the past two years, plopping this twerp into his life made the top ten. *Guess what, son! You're gonna have a stepsister!* Of course he'd dreamed of a girl his age, somebody cool to hang with. Somebody to explain Lisa to him and act as a go-between. But no. Supernerd, pigtails and glasses.

He smirked. “Too bad.”

Before she could sass him back, he yanked the starter cord, the mower burst into roaring life, and he pushed it off toward the far corner. As he went along, he found something

soothing and pleasurable about methodically mowing the two rectangles on either side of the front walk, moving clockwise around the perimeter from outside to inside at twenty-one-inch intervals and letting the mower fling the clippings onto the next new unmowed quadrangle. That way he was always mowing the cut clippings along with the uncut grass, and he'd wind up at the center of the labyrinth with a heap of damp mulch he could bag.

Pushing the mower and feeling it vibrate through his hands woke up his muscles, his ligaments and tendons, his synovial fluids. Watching the mown path slowly but steadily increase its width as he circumnavigated the yard seemed like an antidote to the disorder of the day, of his life. He could see where he was going; he could anticipate the result of his action; what he was doing produced a beneficial result. He'd always poked fun at preachers and teachers (and his mom, of course!) who professed to live their lives this way: progress toward a distant goal with patience, construct and religiously maintain a daily unbroken regimen of diet and exercise, adhere to the philosophy of deferred gratification. It meant savings accounts; it meant getting up early and doing the same thing each Monday night or Saturday morning (Mom's Bible study group, her ironing); it meant that if somebody gave Meemaw some nice linen hankies, she kept them in their original packaging in her dresser drawer for fifty years and never used them. (Maybe that was where Mom got it from.) Meemaw was more or less the model for all of that, he considered, and look where it got her. She was brain-dead. And look where it got Mom. Just plain dead.

He shivered, shook his head, dug back into his furrow, a mule in the traces. Suppose, he thought, that he went at his life the way he was presently working at the lawn, imposing this

kind of order. Could he enjoy it more? Or would it at least help him bear his troubles? Could he achieve something? Could he make his mom smile up there?

The mail carrier interrupted his labor and his musings. He shut down the mower to meet her at the box, largely as an excuse for a break. She'd told him her name was Shondell. She always sweated so profusely that her glasses slithered to the end of her nose, and her mailbag slung over her shoulder was so weighty the thick strap made a valley there between bulges of flesh. But she always seemed happy. Jason wondered what she thought of her job. He'd become curious lately (and belatedly, he felt) about jobs, careers—what adults did with their time to earn a living and how they felt about it. Did she ever feel used or useless when she had to tote around so much junk mail that she knew would be tossed into the trash unread?

“Hot enough for you?” Jason asked. The words felt like a foreign food dish in his mouth; uttering such a banal adult cliché made him feel a strange mixture of pride and embarrassment.

Shondell laughed. “Oh, Lord! If it gets any hotter they'll have to suck me up with a hose.”

“Would you like some water or something?”

“Oh, no thanks, hon! My truck's at the end of the block and I've got a jug of nice cold sweet tea in it!”

He took the stack of mail from her, and she hiked up the shoulder with the bag strapped to it with a shrug and went lumbering on, her white sun helmet cocked to the side. Going up the walk, he leafed through the stack. Ad flyers, pizza coupons. There was a safety newsletter

from his dad's work and a brochure from the U.S. Army. Sgt. Brookes and his recruiting partner had stopped stalking Jason since his arrest, though he'd called Jason's house more than once to ask about the disposition of his case. Man, but those dudes were dogged! You'd think that since Bush said "Mission Accomplished" they'd kick back and let the guys who were all gung-ho come a-knockin' now that it was a little safer to put your name but not your life on the line. Sgt. Brookes had been like a Whac-a-Mole for a while last spring, popping up when you least expected: *Hey Sanborn, dude, lemme buy you a burger and just "chew the fat" ha ha ha*. As if any conversation with him wasn't going to end up with a pitch about three squares, see the world, full medical benefits, and money for college when you get out....

Lily got an issue of *Psychology Today*. He'd never heard of the magazine until Lily came into their lives. She also subscribed to *Smithsonian*, *Southern Living*, *Redbook*, and *Texas Highways*. She told Jason she'd once had subscriptions to twenty magazines but had to cut back after her divorce. Jason fingered three envelopes addressed to Burl Sanborn and culled them from the stack. Bills, probably: TXU power, Chase Mastercard, SBC. Handling them gingerly, he was instantly swept back to the morning's call about the civil suit, and the bills in his hand, once harmless because he'd been utterly indifferent to them, suddenly possessed a new potency to alarm.

Although he hadn't expected one, there was a letter from Lisa. The return address was Dobie Dorm, UT Austin. His heart thundered. They'd spoken once on the phone since she'd left, and she'd been insistent on talking only about her daily routine, so he'd surrendered to that and interviewed her when he could think of a question that she hadn't already answered in her

monologue. If she was still interested in him, she sure didn't show it. She hadn't asked about his court date or his job search, but she had said, sort of flinging it at him as her cell was disconnecting, "Love you!"

Then she'd sent him a couple of emails, but they were chatty, breezy, full of information about her classes and her new friends, things of which he had no firsthand knowledge. Little in them showed the Lisa he felt he'd known—and they only made her seem more distant.

He slipped her letter into his back pocket and carried the stack into the house, where he dropped it on the coffee table, then strode quickly down the hall past Emily's open door and didn't glance into her room for fear she might waylay him.

He shut his bedroom door behind him, slipped the letter out and stood looking at it. Could be something as innocent as a newspaper clipping, maybe. Or a picture of her—he'd asked for one. All other reasons for putting her feelings into this form rose up like menacing specters, which Jason, like a child in a dark room, tried to blink away into harmless shapes.

He shoved his guitar to the foot of his bed and sat by his pillow. He dug his pen knife from his pocket and, carefully, as if preserving an artifact, slit the envelope down the end, blew it open, drew the folded paper out pinched between his fingers. She'd written in her best salutorian's cursive using a pen with blue ink on peach-colored personalized stationery she'd gotten as a graduation present.

Dear Jason,

This is the hardest letter I've ever had to write.

Whoa! Stop right there! Jason tossed it onto his desk but a second later picked it up again. Pursuing the now predictable path of the letter was as irresistible as taking a whiff of your own crap.

I've felt so guilty for so long because I know you care so much for me, and, believe me, I'm so deeply grateful that you have. Over all these years I've always known that you're a wonderful person with so many great qualities and abilities, and I've always been so proud to be your friend. And I've appreciated so much having you by my side on so many occasions....

Friend? So far, this was like a speech she might deliver at her Honor Society banquet. Come on, girl! Get real, okay?

But like I say, I've felt guilty all this past summer because I know you've wanted more from me than you've gotten. It seems like for a long time it was just that I was busy with school and you weren't (he knew this was her diplomatic way of referring to his dropping out) and then there was all the planning to get me here and stuff, and it all seemed like a whirlwind caught me up and my feet weren't on the ground, you know? Then all the stuff with the car and everything happened, and Daddy really put his foot down about us and all. At first I was thinking that it wasn't fair of him to try to control me that way, you know, and I wanted to show him he couldn't, that I was too old to be treated like that. I don't know if you blame him or not for why we didn't get together more this summer, but I know that I sort of kept acting as if he was the reason I couldn't meet you or talk freely on the phone without sneaking around.

But I guess what I found out when I got here and was more or less out from under his thumb is that—gosh, this is really hard, Jason!—is that I guess I sort of wanted and needed him to do that so I wouldn't have to face what I really felt myself.

I know what you're thinking now! We've been together so long it's like I can read your mind across all these miles as you're reading this, and I know that what you're imagining is that I'm trying to toss you aside like you're so much trash or baggage from back there, and it's just not true! You've got to believe that, Jason! What you are to me and what we've always been together will always be an important and really crucial part of me, of who I am, and nothing will ever change that!!

*But things change, circumstances do, you know? I'm here, you're there. And I have to admit I **love** being in college! I love going to class and living with other students my age who have ideas and who talk freely about them without being afraid that somebody will poke fun at them. I love my Honors classes and my professors, even if two of them stand at the bottom of a lecture hall filled with 120 other students. It's like learning on a whole other level, here.*

That really wasn't a sidetrack. It was part of why I'm writing this letter. I just feel right now that our lives are taking us in very different directions and that we each should feel free to explore those paths without feeling that the other is going to stand in the way or cause a detour that wouldn't be natural or beneficial. Please believe me when I say this IS NOT ABOUT GOING OUT WITH OTHER PEOPLE!!!, though if you feel you need to do that as part of your exploration, then I know that as much as it might hurt me, I have to believe that it's what's best for you.

Jason could anticipate this next sentence almost word for word.

And I hope you'd feel the same for me. Loving somebody often means letting them go the way they need to go to become their very best, to fulfill whatever's in them that lies dormant.

Jason snickered. That was like something she'd read on a card at Amy's Hallmark, though it was way too long to fit on a page.

So—please please please!! DO NOT misunderstand this letter! I DO want you to be part of my life, Jason! I hope you CAN be! But we each need room to grow.

And whatever happens, I will ALWAYS be your friend!

Love,

Lisa.

After Jason had read the letter ten times, he decided that all the words and phrases in the upper case were lies. That's why they needed to be capitalized. She was just trying to shout down his doubt.

For Burl, the long, trying day had gotten a rocky start with the attorney's call and had continued to kick its way through his equanimity by heaping exasperation upon frustration when the pipeline repair job he was supervising got bit by one gnarly snake after the other. An old dislocation of his left knee caused the joint to buckle as he foolishly jumped off the loading dock at the service center on Main rather than walking to the end and using the stairs; he'd

landed wrong, with the result that his knee had been aching and throbbing since. That set him walking at an odd cant and that in turn aggravated the arthritis in his spine. The pollen count today had been 4398, much of it fungus, and that made his head feel like a basketball swollen with snot.

After work, Burl drove to Good Shepherd to check on Mrs. Larkins and to deliver her ninety-day supply of Norvasc, which he'd refilled by mail. Today he really lacked the energy and patience to visit Jason's grandmother and hoped to make a quick drop-off and getaway (surely the mere threat of his inspection would keep the staff on the up and up), but after he'd keyed himself in on the touchpad to the Alzheimer's wing, he stumbled upon Mrs. Larkins in the TV room before he found the duty nurse. Lawrence Welk was on, muted. The Lennon Sisters, clad in yellow dresses ballooned by huge petticoats, were merrily mouthing a tune while Mrs. Larkins and three others had been parked here to languish; their chairs faced the TV and their faces were bathed in flickering washes of color. Mrs. Larkins wasn't wearing her glasses or her hearing aids, and her sunken cheeks were proof her dentures were elsewhere. Her hair had been brushed, however. A flash of rage welled up in him, but he squelched it and moved quickly to her side.

"Hey, Meemaw! How are you? It's Burl, honey. Open your eyes!" He shook her shoulder gently, and the old woman's lids popped up and her dark eyes rolled wildly for a moment then settled on him.

"Hello, hello!" she crowed. She spoke as if to a neighbor whose name you didn't know who crossed your path at a supermarket.

“Where are your glasses, hon?” he asked pointlessly. “And your hearing aids?”

She frowned in confusion. Leaning closer to search her lap and the chair seat, he caught a whiff and knew she needed changing, too. Burl felt vaguely responsible for the neglect, though his discovery of it had come accidentally and in spite of his wish to avoid it. He didn't know why her glasses were missing, but they removed her hearing aids when they showered her and sometimes didn't put them back in. Her dentures were another story; now and then a patient would pick them up if they were visible on her nightstand and take off with them. More than once, the staff had been forced to do an oral line-up of patients to locate her dentures.

He found the head nurse, Casey Bergeron, in the shower room with two orderlies; the three were bent over an old fellow sitting naked on the tile floor with his back to the wall. Soon as Burl barged in, the nurse glanced up and held her hand out like a traffic cop, so he backed away and stood in the hall. When Nurse Bergeron emerged she greeted him politely but kept glancing over his shoulder as she asked if she could help him. He reported the missing items and added that Mrs. Larkins' “protective undergarment” needed changing. She led him to the lost-and-found drawer at the nurse's kiosk, which contained three hearing aids, but none was tagged or otherwise identified. Burl could eliminate an over-the-ear model. He tested the two remaining possibilities and decided that the battery was dead in one, and the other seemed too large to be hers.

“For pity's sake!” He scowled at Nurse Bergeron. Complaining to her was fruitless, as she had the hide of a rhino and generally took his occasional protests about the staff's negligence in stride. Her refusal to take them personally exasperated Burl. But he believed the

nurses did the best they could under circumstances that inevitably involved being short-handed.

Though the missing hearing aids didn't turn up immediately, Burl did find her dentures and glasses in the nightstand, though he had a nagging suspicion that the dentures didn't belong to her. After delivering them to the nurse with a sour scowl, he left feeling neither the satisfaction of having made a difference nor the pleasure of having lived up to the silent vow he'd made to Sue to watch over her mother. Lily once asked him if Sue had explicitly asked him to do this. Burl had said no, but he knew that Sue hoped he would and knew him well enough to trust that he'd try.

Tonight there'd be more arguments with Jason about the hearing on Monday and an uncomfortable session with Lily about the attorney's report. He agonized about how much to tell. Should he mention the civil suit? It hadn't been filed yet, so maybe not.

Nevertheless, Burl was eager to be home and lay down his burdens. At last, after the wedding last month, they had cobbled together a place that felt right, he and Lily and Emily and Jason. Lily's moving in with Burl hadn't been easy for either spouse; each preparatory small act he'd performed to erase Sue's presence cost him a lash of guilt and sullen looks from Jason. When Lily finally arrived with her own furniture, newer and better than his and Sue's, it had only made sense to cart the old dining and living room pieces to Goodwill, along with the nightstands and side tables and such Sue had brought over from Meemaw's place when she had moved to Good Shepherd. (When Lily suggested a garage sale, Burl said he couldn't bear to see the furniture set out in the yard.)

Burl had also surrendered to Lily's notions about paint and "window treatments," as well as her preferences for what went on shelves and walls. Sue had fairly plastered the walls with photos of family and embroidered homilies or Bible verses in gilded frames (the latter inherited from Meemaw) and ready-made art that depicted kittens or flowers. Sue'd also had a weakness for refrigerator magnets, particularly those in the shapes of hearts, fruits, vegetables, animals, and characters from newspaper cartoons such as Garfield. She also had a small, beloved collection of Hummel figurines she'd displayed in a china cabinet. Lily had a word for that kind of thing, a foreign word that sounded like "kitchen." Though Burl didn't know precisely what it meant, he could guess it signified contempt, and that piqued his irritation a little because he knew for a fact that the figurines weren't cheap and that Sue had often saved to buy one. Thanks to this collection, you always knew what you could get her for her birthday. At present, the fragile little figurines were nestled in tissue inside a box at the bottom of Burl's chest of drawers.

Lily brought to their marriage an enormous stainless steel Sub-Zero refrigerator, bumping the old GE out to the garage, where it now served as an auxiliary for cold drinks and ice and sat between stacks of cartons filled with Meemaw's dishware and clothing and such. The Sub-Zero's unadorned metallic flanks and front would be the ideal backdrop for a festoon of magnetry, but Lily wouldn't allow even a tacky-backed grocery list to mar the surface. Huge framed posters from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and prints of paintings by Frenchmen went up on their walls, and since Lily didn't have collections, she preferred an empty space along the wall to a china cabinet stuffed with knick-knacks. For the sake of making them both more at ease, they traded Burl's and Sue's old queen-size four-poster for Lily's more modern

king-size bed with a bookcase headboard. Lily turned out to be a person who had to read herself to sleep. She liked thrillers by Johnathan Kellerman and Patricia Cornwall, and she had a special little light that clipped to the book. It had taken him a while to get used to going to sleep alone, back turned to his mate, because he and Sue always fell asleep in each other's arms.

He'd wound up with a far better recliner—black leather—and a flat-screen 36" Sony in place of an old 19" RCA, so he couldn't complain. All these transformations and the wearing water-drip of time itself (though they'd been together in this house a little more than a month) had altered their circumstances: Sue was no longer the absent hostess and Lily merely a guest. Now it seemed that Lily lived here as the mistress of the house, and Sue was someone from his past, a relative, say, who had come to stay for a good while but who had since returned home. It was amazing sometimes how pressingly insistent the present could be in its power to wash away the past. But it was also unnerving to unexpectedly stumble on an item from that past—in the kitchen utility drawer, at the back, a nightlight with a plastic translucent angel that Sue'd gotten for Jason's room when he was baby; in a bathroom vanity drawer, under the towels, the shower cap that she'd always joked was "lay bone sha-po"; in his sock and underwear drawer, a small muslin bag stuffed with sage she'd stripped from shrubs herself alongside I-40 outside Santa Rosa, New Mexico, one summer vacation, sage now dried to a crumbly gray powder and the scent long since leached away into the air. In all these surprises festered a pocket of pain, a wince of sadness and loss. It was a little as if Sue had been reincarnated as a pack rat who crept about at two a.m. planting these little land mines of memory.

At half past six as he was coming down their street, he experienced a familiar raw gnaw in his gut that had normally preceded supper and always aroused a further eagerness to get parked, cleaned up, and seated at the table. In the old days, Sue never left the house for her job without having a meal cooked, maybe in a crock pot or a Dutch oven, put in the stove soon as she got home at three-thirty. But Lily wasn't much for cooking. Her work was more demanding, more draining; to assemble the packets of papers necessary for a proper real estate closing required a good many phone calls and juggling dates and making second and third requests of various parties to produce copies of this and that. Burl had to admit that Lily's daily routine was a good deal harder than Sue's part-time secretarial work for her church. Since Lily and Emily had come to live with him and Jason, Burl's ideas of the division of labor between husband and wife had been jostled and knocked to the ground a time or two. In all the roiling, one thing for certain had bobbed to the surface: a husband should not expect his working wife to produce a hot, home-cooked meal each night. Lily was willing to assume responsibility for their supper but made it clear everyone was to consider the meal as sustenance only and any complaints about the quality or quantity would provoke a walk-out.

As he came closer to the house, the front lawn clarified into focus through his windshield.

"Aw, damnit to hell!"

He pulled in behind Lily's Civic, turned off his engine, dropped his forehead against the upper rim of the wheel. Shut his eyes. He counted slowly, silently to ten. Still, though, his hands trembled with the need to grasp and squeeze, the soles of his steel-toed boots jammed to the

floorboard. *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.*

One step of the twelve was making amends to those you'd injured. Of course, Jason had been highest on the list, along with Sue, who, even though deceased, could be considered an injured party because while Burl was on that last toot, hopefully the *very last* toot, he'd not lived up to his implicit promise to Sue to father *and* mother Jason the best he could.

Burl had made amends to Jason. But now he wondered whether Jason hadn't taken that as a blank check for flouting the rules. Something for group discussion, really: when you ask your kid's forgiveness for being a drunk and therefore a sorry parent, does that free him from your authority? Have you undermined yourself? He and Lily were in the same boat in that regard, afloat in the same sea of spirits.

Burl got out of the truck, locked the doors. The picture of a cold quart bottle of Vladimir vodka shot about in his skull like a cannonading racket ball and he had to blink it down. He hoped Lily wasn't in the same frame of mind.

He paused on the edge of the grass. The choice was clear but complicated. Jason had abandoned the mower mid-cut on the lawn, walked away from the gas can sitting on the walk, left the weed-eater leaning like, well, a drunk against the untrimmed variegated privet by the front steps. This constituted a cluster of violations, chief among which was ignoring Burl's request to mow the lawn. He hadn't said "half-mow" the lawn, had he? And for Christ's sake, you'd think that considering what he'd told Jason on the phone this morning about the assault charge and the probable civil suit, the kid would want to show some good will! Wouldn't you?

Was it too goddamn much to ask? And Jason knew that no job was complete until the tools had been cleaned and put away. How many times over the years had Burl told him that? And why'd he wait so late to do it? It's not as if he had been busy all day doing something else for the family's benefit, was it?

So—Burl could put these tools away himself or make Jason do it. (Other choices danced fleetingly to mind—take a stick to the boy and/or drive off to a bar.) Putting them up himself meant it would be done, of course, and while doing it, there'd be the work-up, the coal stoked into the furnace, the team whipped into a frenzy by an angry coach at half-time. As he put the tools away, Burl could enjoy the sour pleasure of feeling sorry for himself and be furious at Jason for *making* Burl do it. But he hadn't spent the last year or so in group meetings without learning something, and this solution would solve nothing in the long run.

He went through the front door and heard voices from the kitchen at the back of the house, so he strode through the dining room and directly back there rather than passing Jason's bedroom in the hall. It had occurred to him that he should give Jason the benefit of the doubt: it was possible, wasn't it, that Lily had interrupted Jason's work to ask him to do something? Or maybe somebody had called about a job while he was mowing, and he was on the phone now or had gotten a ride to an interview. It was even possible, though not probable, that he'd actually scored a job earlier in the day and had been asked to report immediately. Wasn't it?

Burl hung back a moment in the dining room beside Lily's Pottery Barn trestle table to peer through the arch into the kitchen. He didn't see Jason. Lily stood at the island in the pumps, slacks, and blouse she'd worn to work and was taking cartons from a KFC sack while

Emily was setting plates onto the breakfast table. Four red plastic tumblers already stood there. Before she'd arrived in residence here, Burl had presumed that Emily was still at the age to seek parental approval by being helpful. But he'd learned otherwise. She'd do chores that Lily assigned, but not without griping, and Burl believed Jason was a bad influence on her. More and more she seemed to be mired in a teenager's sulk even though she was only eleven. He'd tried his best to be careful in dealing with her; her wounds from the divorce were still tender, he could tell, and she idolized her professor father. Lily's custody arrangement allowed her ex to have Emily on alternate holidays and for a month in the summer beginning next year. In the meantime he was free to drive here from Austin to be with her on alternate weekends or to fly her down there.

Emily's father had yet to exercise these rights he'd sought and won in court. Despite his behavior, the poor kid seemed to feel that she'd be better off with her dad and resented Lily for being the custodial parent. Lily told Burl what Emily didn't know: her wonderful father was shacking up with his graduate student. Lily didn't feel it was her place to give Emily that particular piece of bad news, though, *Believe me*, she said, *I've been sorely tempted many a time.*

Burl knew without even testing it that Emily wouldn't welcome his premature efforts to be fatherly, and that put him in a tricky position. He couldn't discipline the child, because Lily had yet to invite him to help make any parental decision on an essential matter such as Emily's schooling. He worked to stay friendly, though this kid was often trying. She was a bookish know-it-all who spent far too much time on her computer playing a game where she made up a

family and digitally ordered them about through their daily lives in cyberspace. While she didn't exactly sass Burl, she spoke to him with a veiled impatience that suggested her reserve of politeness was being worn thin by having to speak to an idiot. She was not what he would've preferred in an eleven-year-old stepdaughter, or a biological daughter, for that matter: a tree-climbing, horse-loving tomboy in t-shirt and blue jeans with a shelf of Barbies and a yen to go to church or Scout camp and dress up in Mommy's clothes.

They looked up when he entered, and Lily said, "Hi, sweet," nicely, but she did sound tired. Though she had her hands full, Burl moved to the island to hug her and kiss her forehead. He was aware of Emily's large brown eyes on them.

"Hello, Emily. How was school?"

"Sucked."

"Emily," said Lily.

But Emily kept her attention on the paper napkins she was folding and positioning just so beside the plates, centered on each plate's horizontal axis. She tucked the right edge of the paper slightly under the leftward curve of the plate's outer rim so that if the rim were a cutting edge pressed downward, it would take a bite shaped like a quarter moon from the edge of the folded napkin. She did that kind of thing a lot, this visual measuring and adjusting objects on a shelf or table.

Her curt reply irritated him. It was too much like the reply he'd get from Jason.

He smiled, falsely, at her. "Wouldn't that be 'It sucked, Sir?' or 'It sucked, Mister Sanborn. Thanks for asking?'"

She shot him a slit-eyed sideways glance but she had trouble getting rid of her involuntary grin quickly enough to keep him from spotting it. He'd almost won her over momentarily, but she was not about to concede that.

"Sorry."

He passed over his objection as to the spirit of her apology and chose to pursue his struggle with the other child.

"Where's Jason?"

"In his room, I suppose," said Lily.

"What's he been doing all day?"

"I just got home, Burl."

When he turned to Emily, she said, "I was in school."

"Do you know if he went to that job interview?" he asked Lily.

"I have no idea," Lily said tightly. "You'll have to ask him."

Burl sighed. "He'll probably lie," he said to no one in particular, looking for sympathy.

"No surprise *there!*" shot Lily.

Her vehemence alarmed him, and he carried its echo away to the hall as he trudged reluctantly toward Jason's room. Maybe they'd had an ugly exchange in the yard when Lily came home and he'd stormed off to his room? Almost anything set him off these days, and Burl's phone call about the trial wouldn't have improved his humor. Lily wasn't used to dealing with a teenage temperament and, as it turned out, didn't have a lot of patience with it.

Whatever patience she'd been blessed with had been strained by successive revelations about Jason's scrapes with the law that he'd given—rationed out, really, you could say—in the days and weeks following the wedding. The night of Lisa's graduation party was to have been Burl's and Lily's first all-nighter. They were asleep on the sofa half-clothed when the call came from the Mesquite Police. Burl hadn't encouraged Lily to go with him to bail Jason out, and when he and Jason got home several hours later, she'd already had her sister pick her up. At the time, he told her only that Jason had been mistakenly accused of car theft, but after the wedding, his guilt had twisted his arm to reveal, gradually, more of the truth, but he had held back telling her about the charge of assault with bodily harm. For a while, she'd acted supportive and sympathetic, but since she'd now lived with Jason, her attitude had shifted. While once it was *Poor kid lost his mother. We need to cut him some slack*, now it was *We've all got our troubles, sonny boy! Get over it, straighten up, and get on with your life!*

He bent his ear to the wood but heard only a soft, regular tapping. He guessed Jason's ears were harnessed to his headset and he was either jamming with his guitar or listening to his Discman. Burl pecked at the door with a knuckle, then, without waiting for a response, he jiggled the knob.

“Jason!”

Nothing. The boy wasn't going to make this easy. Now Burl knocked hard, with his whole fist, a single wham like a judge's gavel.

“Jason!”

A muted scuffling and a rustle, a ka-bump, two thumps (feet hitting the floor maybe), then Jason opened the door maybe four inches to offer a slim rectangle of face that revealed one eye like the dot on a lower case i.

“Yeah.”

Annoyed, Burl pushed the door into Jason with his fingertips, and Jason backpedaled to his desk and stood with his arms folded across his chest. The headphones yoked his neck like a horse collar. The window had been flung up hastily, knocking the blinds askew. Another flagrant violation to address. Jesus H. Christ! Where to start with this kid!

To buy himself a moment, he turned and quietly pushed the door back into its frame until the latch clicked.

“I've asked you not to smoke in the house, Jason.”

“I had the window open.”

“That's not the point. I didn't say it was okay if you opened the window.”

“But I don't see—”

Burl brandished his palm to stop him. "Did you and Lily have an argument?"

"No. Why?" Jason leaned forward as if to see something in the distance more clearly, something he loathed. "Did she say something?"

"Never mind. Can you tell me why you're sitting in here diddling off instead of finishing your job out front?"

Jason smirked. "Diddling off?"

Burl let that sail past. "What've you been doing all day? How hard is it to mow the damn lawn, anyway? I ask you to do one simple thing, a thing a twelve-year-old could handle, and when I get home I see a half-assed job out there with all the tools just... just tossed around like you're six blasted years old and nobody taught you to put things up!"

"I tossed the mower around?"

"You left the gas can sitting on the walk!"

"Ohmagod! Call nine one one!"

Burl frowned. Even for Jason these provocations were over the top, as if Jason were testing whether sufficient goading might produce a major heart attack in his father or make his head pop off.

"Don't get smart, son! Did you go to that interview today?"

"What interview?"

“The one with the manager at Blockbuster. Or did you just lie to me about going down there in the first place?”

“No, I didn’t lie! And I didn’t go down there today because the guy isn’t in on Thursdays.”

“The *manager* takes Thursdays off?”

“Jesus, Dad! I don’t know what goes on down there! Call and ask yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“Maybe I just will.”

“Fine.”

They’d worked to a pause. Burl had gotten absolutely no satisfaction on any point raised. He stood digging at his sweat-damp waistband with a thumb and watched as Jason averted his gaze and slowly folded portions of himself one by one, like a carpenter’s wooden ruler, into his desk chair. Jason acted as if their next phase might involve Burl’s decision to relent and remove himself, as if by this little act of taking a seat, Jason was giving Burl a preview, as it were, of what Jason’s peace might be like without Burl there to disturb it. Jason astonished him these days with his shocking rudeness and utter disregard for Burl’s authority. When confronted about the half-finished mowing job, he didn’t even offer a reason or an excuse. Instead, he mocked Burl for objecting! Incredible!

When Jason, without even glancing Burl's way, parted the headphone collar with a speaker in each hand, stretched them like pulling taffy, lifted them up, and settled them firmly over his ears, it was more than Burl could stand.

From the kitchen, Lily and Emily heard raised voices—not shouting, no, but the blunt, abrupt maleness in the exchanges sang with anger as if their words were lightweight objects flung at one another. Emily looked up from her chore of setting out the ketchup and Burl's green jalapeno Tabasco and over to Lily as if for a cue as to how she was supposed to handle this. Understandably, the sounds made Emily uneasy; Jason's father always seemed on edge to her, and, though she'd not witnessed anything violent since she'd moved here, most of the words between this father and son were a harsh melody with an ominous underlying pedal tone, like horror movie music. Burl was bigger, older, the father, and so Emily identified with the child in this confrontation.

Lily didn't appear to have heard anything; or if she had, she wasn't going to act as if it were out of the ordinary. Emily stood at the breakfast table, head cocked so she could observe her mother through a half-averted gaze as if spying. Still, Lily continued to open and shut cabinet doors, fairly banging them as she removed a serving platter and two bowls and plopped them on the counter, then set about transferring the chicken pieces, mashed potatoes, coleslaw, and rolls from the cartons on the island. Though she had picked up the supper from the KFC drive-through window, she would serve it as if it had come fresh from her own range and oven; she could do that at least, she felt. She was uneasy about the fight, too, but she was caught between pretending nothing was wrong, continuing to spoon out the potatoes and slaw

as if the schedule somehow included this brouhaha in Jason's bedroom, that it was on the agenda for Burl and the boy like washing-up or checking the mail might be, thinking that if she were to show Emily that she was rattled it might alarm her. She was walking on eggshells these days anyway with Emily, doing her best to make her feel at home here (while making herself feel at home here), struggling to induce Emily to believe that this was best for all of them, that this life in this house was not only the best Lily could do, it was the best that could be done.

"Mom?"

Lily kept her eyes on the spoon that was slowly tracing, for the third time, the interior corners of the potato carton.

"What, hon?" Lily said cheerfully.

Waiting for Emily to speak, she kept poking the bottom of the carton. The argument off-stage seemed to have stopped, however. When Lily did flick a glance toward her daughter, she read nothing in Emily's profile but everything in her robotic positioning and readjusting of the two mismatched condiments. She felt a twinge of guilt at having forced denial onto the floor between them, and, wanting to spare Emily from having to thrash her way through it, she turned to say, "It's nothing" with a smile. "Boys, they play rough."

But then a shout, a loud ka-boomp, another shout, a *clomp clomp* like something or someone tumbling down stairs, though there were no stairs in the house, a pause and in it both mother and daughter involuntarily stared wide-eyed at each other, Lily unable to hide her shock. Emily stepped back from the table suddenly as if the fight were transpiring on its surface,

hugging the big plastic jug of ketchup in one hand and the tiny bottle of sauce gripped in her other fist to her chest.

As Lily stepped around the island to move to Emily, they heard Jason's bedroom door open, then movement, shuffling, voices again, not raised but urgent, Jason saying, "You okay, Dad?" and Burl saying "Yeah, yeah, it'll be all right," then both emerged from the dim hall into the kitchen. Burl was bent over with his palm pressed to his forehead, that hand outlined in red, and a rivulet coursing down his wrist and around his forearm, while Jason loomed over his back, trying to peer over Burl's shoulder as they went.

"What happened? What's the matter?" Lily asked.

"It's okay," said Burl. He straightened and stepped around Lily to the sink. "Bumped my head." He bent over the sink, lowered his palm, and inspected his hand. Blood poured from a cut over his brow.

Lily said, "Let me look at that," and moved beside him, pushing her fingers against his forehead, bending over the sink with him. "Wow, that's a gusher. That's gonna take stitches, Burl. What happened?"

"We thought you were fighting," accused Emily.

"Oh, no, hon," Burl tossed over his shoulder. "I tripped and banged my noggin on the edge of Jason's desk, that's all. It'll be okay in a minute."

"But you were *arguing!*" she insisted.

“We do it all the time,” put in Jason merrily, as if it were a sport.

“We have any Band-Aids?”

“It’ll take more than a Band-Aid,” said Lily. She folded several attached swatches of paper towel into a compress and handed it to him. “Keep pressing on it.”

Burl clapped the pad to his forehead, winced.

“What about hydrogen peroxide?” asked Emily. “Or Neosporin.”

Nobody spoke or moved for a full minute; they all appeared to be waiting for someone else to take charge.

“Let me see it now,” Lily said, as if she’d been waiting for the injury to heal. She moved her hands to Burl’s splayed paw and gently lifted it away, looked around the edge of the sopping compress. She tsk-tsked, smoothed his hand back to his head.

“Is there a doc-in-the-box around here?”

“There’s one on Town East,” said Jason.

“You know where it is, Burl?”

Burl nodded.

“You’re going to have to have stitches or that thing’ll never heal!” She took Burl by the arm and he allowed himself to be steered away from the sink. “Emily, you come, too.”

Emily said, “Do I have to?”

“Yes, now—”

“Aw, let the girl eat her supper. Jason too. No telling how long this will take. No point in having her sit down there for hours with a lot of sick folks coughing and sneezing all over her.”

For this very first instance of intervening in a matter between the child and her mother, Burl was granted the blessing of oblique gratitude, though it needed to be decoded from what showed up on Emily’s face as she swung her head up to meet her mother’s gaze. A bit of glitter in her eye. *Don’t blame me if he contradicts you—you married him. And maybe I can look forward to more of this!* Lily now faced the difficulty of losing face by conceding to good sense, but the sight of blood smeared on Burl’s arm and blooming red through the paper towels, drizzling along the sink rim like raspberry sauce on a dessert plate, and glittering in a trail of ruddy dimes leading from the hall through the kitchen like evidence in a crime scene: it electrified her, jangled and buzzed her decision system out of commission.

“Fine!” She pointed a mother-finger at Emily. “But no funny business, you hear?”

Emily rolled her eyes and did a very Gallic “puh!” as she turned her head.

“I mean it! Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Emily said, then added, “Ma’am.”

“And you are to clean up this kitchen when you finish eating, you hear?” Before Emily could even respond, Lily suddenly whirled on Jason and gave him the same finger, though it didn’t point so directly at him; were it a loaded pistol, the shot probably would’ve gone wide right. “That goes for both of you!”

Lily's reward for her first effort to parent the two equally was Jason's deadpan poker face that, Burl knew from long experience, was like a drawn shade behind which thieves conjure up their schemes.

The door to Jason's room was open, so Emily treaded quietly down the hall and stood just outside. What was he was up to? A large rucksack sat like a baby Buddha on his bed while he was riffling through the drawers in his chest and tossing items onto the mattress. His earphones looped his neck, but he wasn't listening to anything, so Emily advanced two more steps and leaned against the doorframe.

"You're supposed to help me clean the kitchen."

"I didn't help you eat, did I?"

He went on, taking what appeared to be pairs of white jockey underwear from the drawer and stuffing them into the pack.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Not now."

Since he seemed aware of her presence only in the nanoseconds required to reply, she let her inquisitive gaze take a silent inventory. She had a good idea of the room's usual contents and their placement, since she snooped while he was out and took enormous pride in covering her tracks. She knew, for instance, that he had three issues of a naked girls magazine secreted

under a stack of school folders in his bottom desk drawer and a commando folding knife in the top. She had read his journal, where she learned little about his legal problems but a lot about how he pined for his true love, Lisa, and she'd read the lyrics of about three dozen unfinished songs. She had prowled his hard drive (if he knew anything about creating passwords for security, he didn't apply it) but since his PC wasn't online and he spilled his guts using a Bic and a notebook, there was little of interest on it. His games were pitiful: Solitaire, Hearts, Free Cell.

"Did you and your dad have a fight?"

Jason shrugged.

"How'd he hurt his head?"

Jason stopped mid-way between the chest and the bed, hands frozen with a ball of t-shirts or polo shirts between them and gave her the blessing of his full attention. "It's like we said, he tripped and hit it there—" he dipped his own forehead toward his desk. "We were scuffling a little, yeah. He was trying to take my headphones and I grabbed them back from him."

"Why'd he want your headphones?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask him."

She really wanted to know what he was up to at this very moment, but she was afraid she'd hear what she feared was true. He was obviously worked up; his body radiated an aura of electric energy as he danced about selecting things—a handful of CDs, the aforementioned red spiral he used as a journal—and unzipping pockets in the pack to contain them. When she saw

him slide the Discman in the pocket with the CDs, frown, then extract it and try it in another pocket, she couldn't contain herself.

"Are you going somewhere? Where are you going?"

He ignored her.

"Jason! Come on! Where're you going?"

"Out of this hell hole, that's for sure!"

She turned and scurried off as if, Jason thought, to sound an alarm or to call her mother, and, though it jangled his nerves a second, he neither stopped to chase her down nor speeded his packing. Now and then he cocked his ears to listen for voices, but he heard none. After a full ten minutes, she was back at the doorway. She'd changed into blue jeans and a t-shirt and a much-too-large red Rangers cap he'd given her a week ago.

"Don't you know where you're going?"

Jason lifted his shoulders, twisted his mouth as if considering a list of possibilities.

"I bet you're going to Austin to see Lisa."

He blushed. "What makes you think that?"

She thought that because she'd just spied on his Hotmail account (his password was his birthday: 080685) and she'd read the email he'd written Lisa this morning and left in his Drafts folder.

“Just ‘cause.”

When he said nothing, she said, “Because I know you miss her a lot. I miss my daddy, too.”

Jason lifted his guitar from the bed and inspected the back of it.

“I hate this place, too.” Emily thumbed her glasses up her nose and, as if that habitual little gesture reminded her, she said, “A kid at school called me headlights. And my teacher said the Harry Potter books are full of Satan worship, and she asked me if I’d accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, and I said in the first place my daddy was a Hindu and that I believe in the separation of church and state and it was a public school and she didn’t have any right to ask.”

Jason laughed. “Girl, you rock.”

“So now they all act like I’m the Devil and a witch! I don’t like it here!” She took three steps into the room, lunged forward toward him, arms and hands flung out as if to catch a beach ball, and yelled, “I HATE IT HERE!”

Jason unzipped a side pocket on the pack and tucked a balled pair of socks into it.

“Hey, all kids hate their new school at first, you know? Give it a chance. Look at your pal Harry Potter at Hogwarts.”

“You hated your school too and you didn’t stay in it.”

“Yikes!” Jason cringed. “Well, you’re smart, though. Math’s no problem for you.”

Jason knelt to open his guitar case, took a polish rag from its doored compartment, sat on the bed and eased the guitar across his thighs, then worked the polish cloth across the wood. Emily vanished again, but only momentarily, and when her form loomed in his peripheral vision, he glanced up. A full book bag slung over one shoulder draped low with the weight and dragged that shoulder down.

“I wanna go back to Austin and live with Daddy. You can stay there too if you want.” She suddenly thrust out her fist; in it she gripped a roll of bills. “I can pay my own way, okay? I’ve been saving for this. You can keep it.” She stiff-armed the roll toward him.

“I can’t take your money.”

“I’ve seen you take money from Mom’s purse and your dad’s wallet!”

Jason’s brows popped up. “You have? Wow. Well, that’s different. They deserve to be ripped off. You’re just a kid. I’m sorry, but you can’t go with me.”

“Oh, Jason! Puh-leeze! I hate it here! Especially if you’re not gonna be here. They’ll start yelling at me all the time! If you don’t take me with you, I swear to God I’ll walk out there and stick out my thumb and take the first ride that stops to pick me up! Even if it’s a sex addict molester or a serial killer! You’re supposed to be taking care of me, you know—”

“Who said that?”

“It’s just, you know, understood because you’re eighteen and I’m eleven.”

Jason stopped polishing the burnished burgundy back of the guitar, lifted it, spun it neatly over between his hands so that the strings were up, nestled it gently in the red plush case. He folded the cloth and tucked it into the drawer, brought the lid closed, latched the locks by the handle at the bottom. He heard the sniffing.

“Don’t give me that.”

“Do you want to see that happen? I mean it! I’m going one way or another! I’m packed. I’ve got money. I’ll just go by myself. In fact, I bet I can get a ride before you can! Who’s gonna pick up somebody like you before they pick up somebody like me? Huh? Think about that! And I think I’ll just get a head start!”

She whirled to go and disappeared through the door and he heard her sneakers scuffling down the hall. He waited until he heard the front door slam, then he jumped up and ran after her. When he reached the front porch, she was walking toward the street.

“Emily! Hold up there.”

She stopped and turned but didn’t retreat. He bounded off the stoop and strode to where she stood at the curb. He paced about her for a moment as if she were a construction project that presented an engineering challenge, and she watched, hands to the straps on her book bag now hanging from both shoulders, one foot forward of the other.

“What about school? I thought you were like the world’s biggest grade-monger.”

“What about your deal with the court case?”

“I have to see Lisa and explain something to her.”

“I have to see Daddy and explain something to him.”

Jason said, “Look, you are not going out there on that highway by yourself and putting out your thumb, you understand me?”

“Yes I am!”

They stood frozen in stalemate for a moment, then Emily took two quick steps forward, and Jason grabbed her arm.

“Okay, okay, okay! But you have to write your mom a note. You can’t just walk out like this and not—”

“I already have. Gosh, you think I’m stupid?”