



Chapter One

On Saturday morning I wandered into the living room and saw Dad up on a ladder installing the ugly new ceiling lamp. It looked like a land mine.

"Todd? When do you start camp?" Dad asked.

"I just finished seventh grade yesterday," I told him.

The land mine was hanging crooked. My parents didn't order the light I liked, with the frosty glass shade flaring out like a lily.

"What about baseball camp? Aren't you registered?" Dad went on.

"Nope."

Dad twisted toward me dangerously. "What happened? You were supposed to sign up in P.E.!"

I steadied the ladder. "I don't even like baseball."

Dad frowned at the ceiling. "Then soccer," he growled, dropping a screw. "Find out when it starts."

I trapped the rolling screw and handed it up to him. "I got bribed to play soccer when I was eight. You gave me ten bucks."

"And you found out you can run, and you liked it."

"Wrong. Just because I can run doesn't mean I like soccer. I'm a diver – remember? I'm going to the pool this summer. I'll swim laps every day. Come watch, if you don't believe me."

Maybe Dad would swim with me...

Dad jabbed the screwdriver into the fixture and twisted it hard. "The point is the *team!* Being part of a team. You're alone, mooning around. Go where the kids are. You'll make friends."

"I don't want those friends." *And I bet Dad wouldn't swim with me.*

"Good grief," Dad groaned, climbing down the stepladder. "Where did your mom put those camp brochures?" He tossed the screwdriver onto the sofa and ruffled through the pile of mail on the living room table, sorting out the camp brochures. "You'll like it when you improve," he said. "You can do it. A boy needs to learn discipline. Be out with the guys. Jeez, you think *my* father ever gave me the chance to go to a sports camp?"

He saw my second semester report card and pulled it out. *Uh-Oh.* I reached for it.

Dad scowled. "Phys. Ed. ...C. Are you kidding me?"

I tried to pull the paper away from him.

Dad hung on with both hands. "Let go. How do you get a C in P.E.? Did you hide in the locker room or something?"

"Dad! What about the A's?"

"Those are okay," he said, finally letting go. "It's a pretty easy school, isn't it? You don't spend much time studying."

"I *worked* for those grades," I said, staring at the big A's next to History and Spanish.

"The C proves my point. Sports camp." He shoved the brochures in my face.

"Pick one of these camps. *Right now.*"

I grabbed the pile from him and stomped up to my room. Kicked the door shut, tossed the brochures on the floor, and fell onto my bed.

I finally got out of school, away from the freaks dawging me. Now I had to go to a worse hell . . . sports camp. Kids screaming down the field to flatten me and get whatever ball away from me. Guys crazy to bang into each other, get slammed and slam the other guy. And the coaches yelling at you to run faster, run over the other kid, get in there, fight for it!!

Why does Dad force me to go?

I poked the brochures with my toe.

Kids shooting baskets, whacking baseballs, lunging at soccer balls, waving lacrosse sticks sneered at me from covers of the dismal choice of torture camps.

And . . . a frog. A frog?? And kids swimming in a lake. I stretched over the side of the bed to grab the last brochure. Carroll Valley Nature Camp.

At CVNC, youngsters from 8 to 14 investigate natural processes in a peaceful setting. We take a hands-on approach to environmental studies. Campers will observe the life cycles of common local species at close hand in an atmosphere of fun and cooperative teamwork.

Not a sports camp! This was my only hope. I knew Dad.

Maybe I could even practice diving at their lake.

I rolled off my bed and took the brochure down to Dad. "This one. I'll go to this camp."

Dad read the description and ranted. "How did this one get into the pile? Nature camp? You don't even like science. Didn't you get a B?"

"You told me to choose one. I pick the nature camp."

Luckily when Mom came home she backed me up.

"Come on, Darren. As long as Todd is doing something active, does it really matter? He'll learn a lot."

"Not what *I* want him to learn," Dad grumbled. But he gave in.

That was close.

It's weird about Dad. I can tell he'd like a different kind of son. So I don't get what I want from him, and he doesn't get what he wants from me.

It hasn't always been like this. I remember good times, like when he taught me how to swim. He stood in the pool and I'd hurl myself at him, over and over. Each time he'd back up, until he couldn't catch me anymore. But I didn't care. I kept jumping. I knew when I plopped in he'd reach out to scoop me up and hug me tight.

I was four.

After that I told him some things I wish I could take back. You find out that telling doesn't always make things better. Some stuff you shouldn't say, even to your parents. Even if you're only six years old and don't understand anything.

"Daddy, on the inside I'm a princess."

Godforsaken nature camp – day one. I had to meet a whole new group of kids. Go out and pretend. In my room with the door closed, I practiced the BOY WALK. Step ... slouch. Step... slouch. You roll onto the outside of your foot so you sway a little, but just in the shoulders, not the hips.

I dug out the Stone Cold Steve Austin tee shirt my Dad gave me hoping I'd get interested in wrestling. I put it on. It's not going to matter what I wear. Clothes won't save me.

Looking in the mirror, I messed up my hair. I could go Goth, like some of the eighth graders. Wear the black eye make-up and the purple and green hair. Stick a ring in my lip. Maybe that would help.

At least my arms and legs aren't so skinny anymore. I don't look like E.T. as much as I used to.

Mom poked her head in the door. "Time to go, hon," she said. "Don't you want to comb your hair for the first day of camp? ... Come on, don't look so unhappy. It's going to be fun. When I was little I loved the woods. Our TV didn't get any reception in the mountains, and that was such a gift. We discovered our own imaginations."

For Mom, everything is a gift. But for me, meeting a new group of kids is not a gift. It's slow-dripping water torture.

Maybe it'll be mostly girls. I get along with girls. Or maybe kids who go to nature camp aren't as bad? But there's always at least one shiznit. That's my word for the kid who starts out giving you that up-and-down look. From there it gets worse.

I sighed, grabbed my backpack, and headed for the car.

Fifteen minutes later we drove along the creek and up to the Carroll Valley Nature Center. The head counselor, Twig, gathered us together and introduced everyone. Under his floppy hat a long blond ponytail curved down his back.

Most of the kids were much younger, but there were two girls and a taller guy about my age. The girl with the blond streaks seemed familiar. Where had I seen her before? I slouched and tried to look bored. The kids were all white except for two little guys who were eyeing each other. I always notice now, since Darnell told me what it's

like to be the only black kid in a group. Soon they'll figure out that *I'm* really the one who's different. It should take about a day.

While Twig was explaining safety rules and the buddy system, I was watching the butterflies behind him. In the big patch of flowers a painted sign read "butterfly garden". Fat bushes hung with long purple blossoms. Fluttering around them were amazing butterflies – little white and yellow ones, bigger black and orange ones, even black and gold striped ones. More butterflies here than I'd ever seen anywhere.

"Remember, you and your bud stick together – like bark on a tree – and listen for two toots of the whistle! When you hear it, stand beside your buddy" the counselor barked as he passed out clipboards. "If one of you falls in the pond, your buddy has to get my attention right away or you could turn up dead as a mackerel." Twig divided us into teams of two. "Now we'll head down to the pond to learn about frogs."

Just my luck, I was teamed with the big kid. He had black hair and blue eyes like that famous singer. His yellow tee shirt said 'So many girls, so little time.' The two of us headed downhill toward the lake.

"Whatup?" I said, barely glancing at him. "That counselor talks weird."

He laughed. "He's from Maine. I'm Brad. How old are you?"

"13," I said.

He gave me the up-and-down look. "I'm 14. What school do you go to?"

"Trask Middle. I'm going into Eighth."

"I know the *Trash Puddle*," he said. "That place smells like barf."

I stuck my chin out. The school is old, but it's still my school. Brad was looking me over. I tried to control my hands and legs, and not roll down the hill.

"So you're into the Hollywood Blonde?"

I looked around. Did he mean the blond girl?

"I don't really know her," I said.

He snorted. "Not the babe you were checking out. The Hollywood Blonde. Rattlesnake. Ringmaster." he looked at me like I was pathetic. He waved a thumb toward my shirt.

"Oh, right," I said. "Right."

Those must be Austin's other wrestling names. Maybe.

“You're not much of a WWE fan,” Brad laughed.

My face burned.

He laughed again. "Come on," he said. "Let's find us some frogs. Stick with me, 'cause we can basically do what we want. I know these trails blindfolded.”

At the bottom of the hill I stopped by the muddy pond. "That's the lake?"

"What?" Brad said.

"I can't dive in that," I muttered.

"Why would you want to?" Brad scoffed.

I kept quiet.

"What were you expecting, an Olympic pool? This is nature camp, remember?"

I stumbled along behind Brad circling the mudhole, listening for croaks. We sneaked up on a couple of frogs and saw them jump into the water. Then Brad squatted down and scooped something up from the grass.

“Awright!”

“What'd you get?” I asked.

“Take a look.” He opened his hands a tiny bit so I could look in. A little bumpy brown thing — a toad, I guess — looked at me.

Suddenly the two girls were there. Brad stared at the blond. "Hell-o-o."

She was wearing tight lavender shorts with a matching striped top and even had lipstick on. “Nature Camp Barbie” turned to me. "I know you. Todd ... right? I'm Sylvie. Remember me? I babysat for your little sister a couple of times."

"Oh, yeah," I said. SEEL-vee was the way she said her name. She used to be a brunette. Now her hair was streaked blond and longer – with her bangs all over to one side. A really pretty girl.

She stared at me, so I said something lame. "You changed your hair."

Brad snorted. She smiled and touched the strand hanging onto her shoulder.

"You're right. I did."

Brad dropped the toad at her feet. “Oops!”

Sylvie jumped back with a squeak. I managed not to yelp.

The toad hopped frantically into the tall grass by the pond.

Sylvie made a face. “Very funny.”

The other girl watched the toad hop away. "Brilliant," she said.

Brad grinned. "Sorry."

"Todd, this is Olivia," said Sylvie, barely tipping her head toward the other girl.

"Hi," I said. The girl looked past me.

Olivia was shorter than the rest of us and had a long black braid down her back and thick, dusty glasses. She wore faded denim overalls with a lot of pockets and old purple sneakers with holes in the sides. She and Sylvie were two different species.

"About this project..." Sylvie groaned, looking at me.

"We'll help you out," Brad answered, leaning over to look at her clipboard.

"What have you got so far?"

"We haven't found a frog yet, but we heard some – we think they were frogs – so we wrote that down," Sylvie said.

Olivia turned away, toward the grasses swaying in the wind beside the pond.

Suddenly we heard the whistle toot twice, and Brad, Sylvie, and I pointed to our buddies. Olivia ignored us. Twig and the younger kids were in a bunch over on the other side of the pond. Twig waved to us and nodded.

Sylvie pointed at Olivia's back and rolled her eyes.

Brad sat in the grass. "Come on." He motioned Sylvie to sit beside him. Olivia ignored him.

"Okay – frogs are reptiles, right?" Brad announced.

Sylvie and I nodded. Brad smirked. "Brainless," he said. "Frogs are amphibians. Didn't you guys take Science? They have wet skin, not scales. So put that down under 'observations,' 'four-legged green amphibian, wet skin, lives near water'."

I actually knew that about frogs but it was safer to play dumb. Sylvie and I scribbled on our clipboards while Olivia did nothing

"Then for 'defense' – hey, they're green! They're camouflaged. They blend in. But if a snake comes along ...," Brad's arm crawled the air. "...froggie jumps in and swims away."

"Ugh," Sylvie shivered. "Why do we care?"

Blend in. Just blend in, I was thinking. Like a frog.

"It's their fate," said Brad in a low tone, opening his blue eyes wide. "Just like Fate brought us together."

Sylvie leaned away. "Well, frogs are slimy and disgusting."

"Hey, girl – don't dis the frogs. One might turn out to be your prince," Brad said.

"As *if*," said Sylvie.

Brad grinned at me, then at Sylvie. "I see you're ready for the kiss. Lipstick and all," Sylvie got pinker. Olivia turned to stare at Brad like he was a rare specimen.

I leaned back on my elbows into the prickly grass while they went back and forth.

The tall grasses by the pond gleamed neon green -- so bright, they hardly looked real. They were waving in the breeze, like dancers bowing and swaying and stretching. Bright blue dragonflies were lighting on the grasses, like friends with fairy wings come to perch on the dancers' shoulders. I wanted to show someone how beautiful the tiny fragile wings were. But I wouldn't dare.

A silvery tail flashed in the water. A fish jumping! Or maybe ... a mermaid. A little one, just the size for this pond. *She was trying to escape from some gross thing down in the weeds. A giant fish had her trapped in his jaws. Just her head and arms were poking out, her long brown hair flowing from his mouth.*

I dove under and pried his jaws apart. The mermaid struggled out and flashed away.

I strained to hold the monster's jaws apart. Help!

Then she was back, with two long sticks. We propped the ugly fish's mouth open so he couldn't bite us, and finally I let go. We swam away holding hands before he could shatter the poles with his mighty jaws.

Sylvie tapped my arm.

Cut it out, loser. Stay in control.



Chapter Two

Sylvie was staring. "Hey, did you hear me?"

I shook off the make-believe. "Hmmm? Where's Brad?"

"He went over to talk to Twig." She fanned herself with one hand. "I want to go inside. I'm melting."

If she just moved a few feet she'd be in the shade.

"Your little sister was really cute. How old is she now?"

I shrugged. "She's five, I think."

"Do you two get along?"

"Actually, we do."

"I remember the last time I was at your house, she wanted me to tell her a story, and it *had* to be about mermaids. I made something up - - I thought it was pretty good." Sylvie raised her eyebrows. "But she said that *your* mermaid stories were way better. So I said, 'why don't you tell me one of *his* stories?'" Sylvie laughed. I forced a smile.

Jeez -how do I keep Casey from blabbing?

"Honestly, I never babysat for a kid who liked her brother so much."

"Well that was last year," I said. "We'll probably hate each other this summer. I have to take care of her every day after camp for the next two weeks."

I looked around. Olivia lay on her stomach on the bank of the pond about 20 feet away from us, her chin resting on her hands.

Sylvie motioned toward Olivia and whispered, "What is she doing?"

"I don't know," I whispered back, "staring into the water?"

"She is so weird! I'm staying away from her."

"Me, too." I hoped Olivia couldn't hear. Maybe she's just shy. Or maybe she saw something cool. If I looked at a flower someone always asked, 'What are you doing? What are you staring at?' If you're not a little kid, you're not supposed to stare at beautiful things. Boys aren't, anyway.

Brad came strolling over to us, his eyes shining. "Rock on! I'm in charge of you guys today."

Sylvie's face dropped. "What do you mean?"

"Finally I get something back for all the years I wasted here," Brad tossed his head back. "The other counselor's poison ivy spread down his throat, so he's not coming to work. Anyway I'm 14, old enough to be a junior counselor, and I've been a camper here since I was five. I'm practically family."

Sylvie rolled her eyes. "Oooh. I'm impressed."

"Cool," I said. "No counselor to tell us what to do." Inside I was cringing.

"Well can we go inside? Please?" Sylvie begged.

Brad looked down at Sylvie and rubbed his chin with one finger. "Hmmm..."

Sylvie was getting exasperated. "Come on, Brad, I'm dying out here in the sun."

"Okay, how about we check out the exhibits?" Brad suggested. "Hey, what's your name -- Olive? Come on, we're going inside."

Olivia slowly got up and followed us. As we headed up the hill, Brad waved to Twig and pointed to the center. Twig nodded.

Inside was a lot cooler. We walked down the hall to the room called the Discovery Center. One side of the room was lined with tanks and mounted exhibits. Along another wall big tables were covered with microscopes and measuring tools and nature books.

We poked our hands in the "What Is It - Fur, Feather, Bones?" boxes. We looked at the plaster casts of animals tracks and the wasp nest.

"This guy is called Boxo." Brad lifted a turtle out of a tank and tapped his head. Whsst! The turtle jerked his head back into his shell. Brad lightly pinched a leg and the turtle pulled them in, too. The bottom part of the shell had a hinge and the whole thing snapped up tight, safe from predators. I could use that skill.

I noticed big colorful posters showing local butterflies. Sylvie pointed. "I love that yellow and black one with the tiger stripes," she said. "Look at the long tail ...feathers... whatever." She giggled. "What are those for?"

Brad interrupted. "Butterflies *have* no purpose. What's the point of butterflies?" Sylvie smiled at me.

"No point," I said.

Brad went over to the big tank "Snakes, now.... Snakes eat rats. That's a purpose. Come over here and see the pine snake."

A long snake was lying on bark mulch. Its pale gray skin was splotched with black markings. "What, they live in pine trees?" I asked Brad.

"Yeah, check your yard." Brad lifted the cover off the tank and put both hands down over the snake.

Is that true? Are these things in my yard?

"Ugly," I said. It wasn't. It was just scary.

I looked for Olivia. She was over at the big table, peering into a microscope. Like the three of us weren't really there.

Brad scooped up the snake. The snake waved its head and tail around.

Oh, man.

"If you put that snake on me, Brad, you are *dead*," Sylvie said.

"I'm just showing you. Look at the tongue."

The split tongue was flicking in and out. His eyes were shiny wet.

Sylvie pulled away. "It's going to bite me!"

"They don't bite with their tongues! Come on! It's smelling you. Put out your hand," Brad said.

Sylvie kept her hands behind her back. "Stop waving him around!"

"Todd's not scared. Here, Todd."

I froze as Brad brought the snake up to my arm. I felt the tongue flick once on my skin.

"Put a finger out and touch it." Brad had a good hold on the snake, so I forced myself to rub my finger over the tail. It was cool, glassy. I could even feel the tiny edges of his scales.

Brad lifted the snake. "Feel underneath."

The stomach scales were completely different, wide parallel bands like stairs. I rubbed underneath with my fingertips. The scales felt like plastic. The snake's muscle tensed beneath my fingers.

Then Brad dropped the snake onto my hand. I pulled back as the snake's tail thrashed in the air..

Sylvie gasped. "Brad! You jerk!"

Laughing, Brad scooped up the dangling tail.

Suddenly Olivia was there, glaring at Brad.

"It's okay. No big deal," I said.

Brad is a menace. Just like the guys at school. One minute they're okay, then they turn into the enemy. By the time I got home I was exhausted. The whole day was like that. Sylvie is semi-nice, I guess. But Brad -- he might spring on me any time.

One person I'm not stressing over is Olivia. I think she's got her own problems.

* * * * *

Mom takes us out somewhere every week "to develop family cohesion," she says. Dad and I call it family coHERsion. I wouldn't mind it if we actually had fun, but it never works out that way. Tonight we went to shop and have dinner at the mall, but the family was not even together. Mom bought me some shorts for camp while Dad looked at a new kind of gutter. Then Mom wanted to look for clothes for Casey in the little girl's section

I used to love going in there. I remember persuading little Casey to try on a pile of silky skirts and velvet dresses, when I was younger. Shopping took forever, so Mom stopped taking me along. She shopped with Casey while I was at school. I soon wised up and pretended I didn't care.

"Mom, I'm going up to Kay-Bee Toys while you shop for Casey," I said. "I don't want to hang around here."

"All right, but meet me outside by the escalator in 15 minutes. And don't lose that bag with your new clothes in it!" she called to me.

"Of course I won't."

I ran up to the upper level and into the toy store. I had seventeen dollars saved up. I haven't been in here for so long. I wandered up the model car aisle and the remote-controlled toy aisle, into the action figure aisles. I liked the action figures with lots of accessories – wings and capes and spears you can launch. There were thousands of monster guys and heroes for sale – a few girl figures, too. In first and second grade sometimes I'd find a little Princess Padma or Lara Croft on the playground, and I'd grab it and take it home. But eventually Mom always saw them and made them disappear.

Here was my chance to visit the forbidden land. Slowly I made my way down to the doll aisle. It made Mom irritated to see me there, even when I pretended I was just showing them to Casey. No friggin' way would they ever buy me a doll when *I* was little.

This whole long aisle was all Barbie – dolls, clothes, cars, furniture, everything. The Barbies with the long ball gowns were my favorites.

Whap! A greasy-haired clerk dropped a stack of Barbie boxes on the floor right by me. Then he gave me the look, like 'What are *you* doing in the Barbie aisle?'

"...I don't know which one she wants..." I muttered, all exasperated.

The clerk took his time arranging the boxes on a shelf, glancing at me out the side of his dirty glasses. Freaky-looking guy. Like the ones that shoot up schools for revenge.

"Forget this," I said and stalked off around the corner. I hung out by the paint sets till he was gone. Only three minutes left to look.

What if I *bought* one? Not to play with. Just to *do it*. All those years when I really wanted one, I was a helpless little kid . . . I couldn't do anything about it.

I peeked again and the clerk was gone. I raced down the aisle and grabbed the brunette Prom Queen Barbie in the dark blue gown. Should I? *Should I?*

I walked toward the front of the store, the box pressed to my chest. As soon as I paid, I'd dump the box in the trash. Hide the doll in the bag with my new shorts. *Yes or No? I can't decide!*

A familiar voice floated up from the next aisle. "Hello Leila, how are you? Have you seen Todd?"

My mother is here! She can't find out!

I jammed the box into my Penney's bag as Mom appeared in front of me at the end of the aisle, holding Casey by the hand.

“There you are, Todd. Come on, it's time to meet Dad.”

Oh, no.

I followed her like a puppy right up to the doorway. The alarm's going to ring. It'll be stealing. They'll call the police.

I started to throw my bag on the floor. But Mom was glancing back at me.

I'm Dead.

My shoulders hunched against the clanging in my ears. But no one came . . . no one looked. I slunk out of the store. A cop was leaning over the second story railing, looking down. He didn't turn around.

The ringing sound was just in my head.

What happened? Why didn't the alarm ring?

They have ways to catch you if you steal. I know they do. There are cameras all over.

Maybe they were watching me now.

We rode down the escalator and met Dad. He was buying something at a stand.

I tried not to look for the cameras. Security must be following to see if I steal anything else.

"Where do you and Casey want to eat?" Mom asked.

Another cop walked toward us. Here it comes. Mom and Dad will never forgive me.

"Todd? What's your vote?" Dad said.

The cop looked right at me.

"Todd?"

I clutched the bag. "I don't care."

"You make it sound like a punishment," Mom said.

Now the two cops were meeting up and talking. They looked around.

The bag was like a grenade in my hand. I should tell them all, right now.

But if I do, Dad will see the doll. That can't happen.

"I don't want to stay for dinner. Let's go home," I said, looking for an exit.

"Could you try to *give* a little here?" Dad said, nudging me with his arm. "What's with you? You can't have dinner out with the family?"

If he knew what was in the bag . . . if he knew I *stole* what was in the bag . . .

"He's not even paying attention," Mom said.

Casey pouted. "I want to go to Noodle-O's!".

"Overnight you're the obnoxious teenager," Dad said to me. "You and your attitude are not going to ruin our dinner. You can wait for us in the car."

Mom dug a tissue out of her pocket. "A trip to the mall and dinner. Is it really too much to expect?"

Dad handed me the car keys. Mom blew her nose. "Will he be safe?"

Dad put his arm around Mom. "The lot is patrolled. He'll be fine." He took Casey's hand and steered them away. "Come on, let's go have dinner."

Casey frowned back at me. "Why doesn't Todd come? Why is he mad?"

"In ten years, you'll understand," Dad told her.

I stayed there trembling while they walked away. *At least when I'm arrested I'll be alone. I won't see the look on Dad's face.*

I waited for a long time. Then I walked to the closest exit.

It took me half an hour to find the car.



Chapter Three

Why do people steal? Doesn't it make them crazy? Back home in my room I still had goose bumps. At every little noise I'd tiptoe over to listen at the door. Where do I hide her? Under the bed? Behind the games in the top of the closet? Behind the bookcase? Finally I stuck her under my mattress. But it felt like I had "*Doll*" tattooed onto my forehead. Any minute my family plus a TV newswoman were going to burst in and sniff out the doll hidden in the boy's room.

And what about tomorrow, when I'll be away at camp? And the days after that? She couldn't stay. I knew that. I should be happy, finally. But I wasn't.

I lay on my bed trying to relax.

I needed time.

A day at home, at least. Without camp. Without Brad.

Maybe Casey could help

After Dad said goodnight to her, I went into Casey's room to make her sick.

"If you don't feel good tomorrow, I'll probably have to stay home and take care of you," I told her. "I'll play with you all day. I promise."

Her eyes got big.

"But Mommy knows when I'm sick."

"It'll work. Trust me. You groan like this -- *unnnh* -- and say you feel bad. They'll believe you. Tell them your tummy hurts. Don't say anything else. Okay?"

"Okay. Will you watch *The Little Mermaid* with me?"

"Sure, no problem."

When my alarm rang the next morning, I hustled into Casey's room to remind her to start moaning. Mom and Dad went to her and I heard them talking over their options. Then they called me in to say I should stay home with her.

I made a face. "Stay home all day?"

"I'm sure it's a 24-hour bug," Mom said, "and I really need to go to work today if I can. So does Dad. Hopefully she'll be better tomorrow."

Tomorrow, I'll have to find Barbie another home.

As soon as we were alone, Casey settled into the sofa in the family room to watch *The Little Mermaid*. I love that movie, but I won't get this chance again. Casey didn't need me. I hurried up to my room, dug out Prom Queen Barbie from under the mattress, whisked her into the bathroom and locked the door.

I can be with her one time. Just once.

I felt her satiny dress, the lacey sleeves, and the tiny necklace around her neck. I combed her long brown hair. I sat her in different positions on the sink cabinet, and dampened her hair to see how that changed the way it moved as she swayed and twirled. I pulled out the hair dryer and dried it, curling it under my fingers. Then I slipped over to my room to get my radio and a piece of rope. I turned the radio to the oldies station, knotted the rope to make a swing seat, and nestled Barbie in. Holding the ends, I swung her back and forth.

First the tide ... rushes in, plants a kiss on the shore, then rolls out to the sea...

I imagined her and me on giant swings in a magical playground.

So I'm crazy. So shoot me.

There was a soft green lawn. And when we swung, leaning back, our long hair swept across the grass.

And the sea ... is very still once more. So I rush ... to your arms...

I'll be crazy this once.

We swooped forward, up and up, all parallel and in rhythm, toes pointed toward the sky. Then the swings reached their peak and we fell back, hair flying and dresses billowing up around us. We sank down, down, pumping our heels back underneath us, leaning forward as our toes brushed the tall grass. The swings flew back and up till we

hung in the air for an instant, nearly falling out, then we threw our shoulders back and our legs out before us, ready to drop again. And our hair hung in the air, waiting for us.

There she goes, just awalkin' down the street, singing doowah diddie diddie dum deedee do...

I took Barbie out of her swing and twirled her. The prom skirt flared out like an open umbrella and when she stopped, it twisted around her legs.

We were Cinderella and Princess Aurora. We were dancing for the royals and all the courtiers. We leaped and twirled and curtsied. The dresses billowed up around us. We slid sideways back and forth, reaching and bending.

She looks good, she looks fine, and we're happy all the time...

RAP, RAP, RAP. Somebody knocked.

"Todd!" Casey yelled, right outside the door.

"What?"

"Do you have mon-ey?" she sang.

"Why do you want money?"

"For the man."

"Huh? Some guy in the movie is asking for money?"

"Not in the movie."

My scalp tingled.

"What guy? Where is he?" I croaked, shoving Barbie deep under the towels in the cupboard. I fumbled with the knob and unlocked the door.

Casey was alone in the hall.

"Where is he?"

"At the *door*," she whined.

"You let him in?!" I peered down the stairs. The front door was wide open.

"I yelled for you and you didn't come!"

"Shhhh! I didn't hear you calling me!" I tiptoed down and peeked around the door. Nobody there. I checked the front porch.

"There he is!" Casey pointed. A skinny guy hunched over a rickety bike was pedaling out the driveway and into the street.

"You opened the door? What are you, nuts?" I slammed it shut and locked it.

"Who was he? What did he say?"

"He needs gas ... for his car. Give him some money."

"You can't let strangers into the house! You can't give them our money."

"Why?"

"He might ... st- steal our stuff," I stuttered. "Casey, don't talk to some stranger that shows up here!"

Her face crumpled. "You're my babysitter," Casey sniffled. "You're supposed to come and tell people."

"I would've if you'd come to get me! You opened the door right up to that weirdo? Don't you know any better?"

Casey started to cry. "You didn't play with me! You promised!" She ran up the stairs whimpering and disappeared down the hall.

"Hey, hey – you wanted to watch the movie!" I yelled after her.

"Anyway, that's not the point," I muttered to the wall.

My legs went weak and I slumped down on the stair.

What was the guy after? What if he'd grabbed her? Maybe I wouldn't have heard her scream. If she had time to scream.

My stomach flipped over.

After I imagined the worst for awhile, I climbed the stairs and went into her room. She was lying on her rug with her arm over her face.

"Okay. Forget about it. It's over. Look, Casey, I'll play with you. Right now."

She lay still.

"Case, I'm sorry." I nudged her foot. "I'll do whatever you want. How about cards?"

Casey rolled onto her side and pulled up her knees, eyes still closed. Her long light hair was twisted around her neck. I wanted to loosen it for her, make her more comfortable. But she didn't seem to want to be touched.

"No, no, no," she said into the rug. "Go away."

I wanted to bring her back. Make her forget about the guy.

Could we play dolls? *No*. I stopped doing that with her a long time ago. I never knew when she'd mention it to Mom and Dad.

Ooops, I left Barbie in the bathroom. Right in the closet.

"I'll be right back, okay? I'll read you a story."

She was quiet.

On the way to the bathroom I tripped over my clarinet case I'd left in the hall. Hmm ... Pulled Barbie out of the bathroom closet. Her dress was wrinkled from the weight of the towels. I smoothed it down, measured her beside the clarinet case, opened it, took out the clarinet, and tucked her in instead. Perfect fit.

Now, a story for Casey. Maybe *The Little Mermaid*. We had it somewhere in a fairy tale book.

It took me awhile, but I found the old dusty *H. C. Andersen Fairy Tales* up in the top corner of the bookshelf. Nobody had opened it for so long that the pages were stuck together, and they made a crackling noise when I turned them.

Back up in Casey's room, she hadn't moved. I sat down next to her on her rug.

"I'm going to read the real *Little Mermaid* story to you, Case," I said. "The one they made the movie from."

Not a peep. So I started in.

'Far out at sea the water's as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower, and as clear as the purest glass; but it's very deep, deeper than any anchor can reach Right down there live the sea people.'"

I read about the sea King's palace, with walls of orange coral and long pointed windows of golden amber, a roof of purple cockleshells that open with the current to show a dazzling pearl in each one.

That's where I want to live.

When I glanced over, Casey's eyes were open.

"Tell about the mermaids," she whispered.

So I read about the widower sea King and the six pretty little sea Princesses.

“ ‘... the youngest was the loveliest of them all. Her skin was as clear and delicate as a rose-leaf, her eyes were as blue as the deepest lake.’”

“You make the castle,” Casey interrupted, sitting up. She was hooked. “And my dolls can be the mermaids. But they need tails!”

Oops. Dolls again. Mom and Dad will go green But Casey’s sick. I have to do what she wants.

She dug out her dolls and we made tails from green paper and tied them on with ribbon.

Then I read how the old grandmother told the princesses that each one would be allowed to rise to the surface when she was fifteen to peek at the ships and towns and people. The oldest princess could go exploring, but the littlest princess had to wait five whole years.

Casey dug in her closet for more scenery for the sisters’ visits up to earth and I thumbed through the pages. This was good. She’d forget to tell Mom I abandoned her this morning.

Later in the story Grandmother warns the Little Mermaid that a human wouldn’t fall in love a mermaid.

“The very thing that’s so beautiful here in the sea, your fish’s tail, seems ugly to people on the earth...”

Uh-unh. If I could be a mermaid, I’d never give up my tail for anything. I’d know it was beautiful, even if everybody else thought I was wrong. Like they already do, anyway.

I found the end, and started looking for the scene where she marries the prince.
'She saw the Prince with his pretty bride looking about for her; sorrowfully they stared at the heaving foam, as if they knew she had thrown herself into the waves'...

Wait! The prince marries somebody else? He's supposed to marry the Little Mermaid ... and they live happily ever after!

I flipped back a couple of pages. Early that morning her sisters brought her a knife and told her:

'Make haste! Either he or you must die before the sun rises.'

Casey is going to hate this. She wants to hear about the big wedding. Little M. has to get the prince...and she can't die!

Casey came back in with more props. "You be the Prince and the sea King," she directed. So my prince moped around on shore, waiting for the perfect girl, while each princess turned 15 and went up to the surface and had adventures. But I'm really worried about how this story is going to end.

Later, when it was time for Mom and Dad to be getting back, I warned Casey, "Let me talk to them." I saw her head nod from behind a big picture book. So I went downstairs.

"Hey Todd, How did the day go?" Dad asked, carrying in bags of groceries. Mom was right behind him with more bags.

"Okay."

"How is Casey feeling? I'm going right up to see her." Mom pointed to the bag on the table. "Would you put these in the freezer?"

"She's better. But just so you know, some guy came to the door while I was in the bathroom."

"What did he want?" Dad plunked the bags on the counter and started unpacking them.

"He wanted gas money for his car. That's what he said, anyway. Casey opened the door."

Dad swung around to look at me, one hand still down in the paper bag.

Mom held out the frozen peas. "*WHAT?*"

"Please don't yell at her, okay? 'Cause I already did."

Dad's face went grim. "Just tell us what happened."

"Casey went to the door . . . and I was in the bathroom, so I didn't hear the knock, and then she came to get me."

"And?" Mom edged toward the door, pressing the bag of frozen peas to her chest.

"And I go downstairs quick and the guy is riding away on a bike ..."

"On a bike?" Dad was confused. "I thought he wanted money for his car."

"I know. Anyway, I locked the door and I told Casey never, ever to open it."

Mom and Dad looked at each other. I could see them sifting through the possibilities in their minds.

"Is she okay? Where is she?" Mom threw the peas in my direction and rushed to the door. The bag splatted open on the floor. Four hundred and seventeen peas rolled out.

I squatted to chase them down. "Mom. She's fine! Don't be mad at her, okay? It was nobody's fault."

"Darren, just think!" And Mom was gone.

"Did he come back? Did you see him again? Did you get a good look at him?" Dad asked, staring at me. He didn't pick up one pea.

"Nope and nope." I scooped peas into the bottom of my tee shirt and looked around for something to put them in.

"Unbelievable." Dad pressed one palm against his forehead. "Unbelievable."

I found a plastic bag, emptied the peas in, and tossed it into the freezer.

"Why is it unbelievable? Nothing happened."

Dad jerked the milk containers out of the bag and jammed them into the refrigerator.

"She was at the door... completely vulnerable... and where were *you*? It wasn't even locked!"

"Dad ...,"

"SHHH!"

Casey came running in and jumped into his outstretched arms. "Daddy!" They hugged.

"A bad man came here to take our money," she said with big eyes.

Mom and Dad shot me evil looks.

"Maybe he did need help," Dad said, squeezing her. "But a grownup needs to deal with people who come to the house. It's better if Todd doesn't open the door either, unless it's a real close friend."

"That's right," Mom chimed in. "Keep the door locked. Don't answer if someone knocks. Haven't we told Todd this before?"

"Of course we have. But maybe we should print a sign for the inside of the door that says 'Do Not Open', as a reminder to both of them."

"I can help," chirped Casey. "I can make 'A'."

Dad patted her on the head. "Attagirl. First let's get dinner going. I'm starving."

After dinner and another lecture I took the fairy tale book with me, locked my door, and read the whole mermaid story through.

The ending sucked big time. In fact, the whole story was depressing. First she had to wait five long years to go up to the surface, then when she got her legs every step was awful pain, and at the end she died and turned into foam on the water. Goody.

"Todd!" Mom yelled from the hall. "What is your *clarinet* doing in the bathroom? Where is the case?"