

CHAPTER 14

other broken pigs were laying all over the floor, and the only thing I could think of at that moment was the proud and happy look on Mr. Pignati's face when he had shown us the pigs that first day. I felt like killing Norton as I plowed into him, punching his face like it was a sack of flour. After I got a couple of good blows in, he dug his elbow into my ribs and kicked the skates out from under me. That gave him a chance to pick up the oscilloscope and head for the door like a scared rat.

I went racing out of the room and noticed the band had stopped playing. I knew the place was emptying, and suddenly I realized what Lorraine was saying.

"The Pigmán's here!"

A second later my hands grabbed the back of Norton's neck, and I pushed him forward with so much force he must have traveled the length of the living room before we both fell to the floor. The oscilloscope shattered right near the front hallway, and when I saw the blood pouring out of Norton's nose, I was so happy I began to laugh. But then it was quiet.

Finally I managed to lift my head and saw Mr. Pignati at the door. He was just standing there looking down at me, and there was no smile on his face. No smile at all.

That's when I passed out.

A policeman with a beer belly helped me get John into the patrol car—roller skates and all. Two nuns were walking on the other side of the street, and they watched us so closely one of them almost fell on the ice.

"You're just lucky the old guy isn't going to press charges," the cop said, practically slamming the door on John's foot and then getting into the driver's seat. I tried to get John to come alive, but he was motionless in the back seat next to me. The police had pulled up just as I was getting him off the floor, and everyone else had gotten away.

"Okay, let's go," the other policeman said, coming out of the house and getting into the front. He was so much taller and thinner than the other one that the two of them together looked rather incongruous.

"Is Mr. Pignati all right?" I asked. The last I had seen of him was when he climbed the stairs

with one of Conchetta's dresses over his arm—the one Helen Kazinski had ripped—and I just didn't know what to say to him.

"Could you let me see him a minute?"

"No, he's upstairs—"

"Is he all right?"

"He's crying, if you really want to know. The old guy's crying."

I sank back in the seat and started to tremble. It was cold and I didn't have a coat, but I wasn't shaking just because of that. I tried to pinch John so he'd come to, but it was no use.

"John, wake up!"

"He's out for the night," the fat cop said, adjusting his hat.

"I want to see what kind of parents you kids have," the skinny one added, lighting a cigarette and blowing the smoke into the back seat. "Do they know you go over to that old man's house? We've seen you hanging around there before."

I looked at John crumpled and twisted in the corner, the roller skates pointing every which way. I couldn't find his shoes or my clothes in the excitement—and somehow the laces on his skates had knotted and frozen so I couldn't untie them anyway. The thought of my mother seeing me in the ruffled dress terrified me, and I hated John at that

moment for having gotten me into this. I hated him more for being drunk when I needed him.

"This where you live?"

"Yes . . . please. . . ."

"Do you kids always get your kicks picking on old people?"

"Please just let us go. I promise we won't do anything like this again. We won't go over there anymore." I was ashamed of myself because I was beginning to plead.

"Let's just talk to your family a minute," the skinny one said, opening his door. I burst into tears as the cold air rushed into the car.

"Not one cent for tribute!" John suddenly mumbled, leaning forward, laughing, and then falling back unable to hold his head up. He was hopelessly drunk, and I slammed the door of the patrol car. The policeman took me up the steps.

"My mother's going to beat me."

"You should've thought about that a little earlier, young lady." He rang the bell.

I knew it would take a minute while she peered out one of the front windows, realized who it was, and then put on a bathrobe. When I heard her footsteps coming, my heart seemed to be beating in time with them until the door opened.

"Where are your clothes, Lorraine?" was the

first thing she said, standing in the shadow of the doorway, looking at the policeman and me. Her hair was down, and she pulled the blue robe tight around her.

"This your daughter, ma'am?"

"What's the matter?"

"She and a few of her friends had too much to drink tonight at some old man's house on Howard Avenue. They almost wrecked the place."

I couldn't look at her, and as soon as my eyes went down she knew I was guilty.

"Where are your clothes, Lorraine?" she repeated slowly, reaching her hands out for my shoulders. She pulled me closer to her. "Look at me, Lorraine."

Her eyes burned into me.

"What are you doing in this dress?"

I opened my mouth and tried to get the words out but couldn't speak. Tears began to roll down my cheeks, and she raised her hand and slapped me.

"No, Mother," I screamed, and even the policeman jumped and looked sorry he had brought me to the door.

"Get inside," she ordered, and her voice had switched from the hysterical to the commanding, like I'd often heard it do when she was working as

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a nurse. She always had the ability to deal with doctors and policemen if she was forced to.

I had just enough time to get out of the dress, wash the smeared makeup off my face, and put on a pair of pajamas before I heard the front door slam—which I knew was for my benefit. A moment later she was in the doorway, looking at me, the expression on her face somewhere between disbelief and disgust.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I said slowly, unsure of what her next move would be. I wanted to scream the thoughts that were flashing through my mind at her. I wanted to tell her how she didn't know anything about me—how she hadn't noticed that I happened to be a human being myself . . . that I wasn't still the little girl that waved from the window when she stood at a bus stop. Look at me, I wanted to yell, can't you see I'm growing up and that I've got to have friends? That I *want* to have friends—that I need other people in this world besides you!

She came toward me, and I backed away until I was cornered by the wall. Then she raised her arm and slapped me once more across the face. She tried to hit me again, but my arm went up and blocked her.

"You lied to me."

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"I didn't mean to."

"You lied."

"It was only a party. You wouldn't have let me go."

She broke down crying and turned away, putting her hands up to her face, and I knew she wanted me to run after her to beg forgiveness. I *won't*, I thought. For the first time in my life I'm not going to. It's the Pignan who has to forgive me—not you!

She was sitting at the kitchen table, crying—a slightly exaggerated crying which seemed to make our relationship even more artificial.

You're the one who's wrong, I wanted to tell her, not me.

Then I remembered all the times I had wakened up years ago. I'd wake up, and she wouldn't know it—and I'd get out of bed and peek in the kitchen. Sometimes I'd be able to see through the keyhole or a crack in the door, and she'd be sitting at the table, crying. But I wasn't supposed to hear it then.

"Mother?"

Her crying lowered just a little, and I went to the table and hugged her.

"I've tried to do the best I could . . . I've worked night and day to keep a roof over our heads . . . you think it's easy raising a kid by yourself. . . ."

Once that stage was over, I began slowly to explain to her what I'd been up to—Mr. Pignati and John and me. Of course, I edited it considerably for her benefit, and she seemed to take it well, now that the emotional raving was over. There were a few moments of minor relapses, like when I told her I had never belonged to the Latin Club, but on the whole she took things better than I thought she would.

Finally we went to bed, and just as I was feeling better because I had been relatively honest with her, just as I started to think she understood a little and recognized that she had given birth to a human being with a normal-size brain, I heard this voice in my ear: "You're sure the old man didn't try anything with you?"

"What?" I mumbled, not turning toward her.

"*Sexually*," she whispered.

"No, Mother."

"Those old men have ways, Lorraine. Sometimes they touch you, and you may not even notice what they're doing."

"Good night, Mother," I said, rearranging myself with finality, knowing that she could never really understand.

I felt tears rolling down my cheeks onto the pillow as I remembered the condition of Mr. Pignati's house. Would he think we had forsaken

him and deliberately ripped his wife's clothes— viciously broken the pigs? I wanted to phone him and say, Mr. Pignati, we didn't mean things to work out like that. We were just playing.

Playing.

Play.

I couldn't get the word out of my mind. I remembered a cat playing with a rubber ball somewhere . . . a kitten a girl friend had gotten for her birthday . . . and it was hiding behind a chair leg eyeing the ball . . . stalking it. The kitten knew what it was because it had been toying with it all along, but now it attacked, claws drawn, trying to sink its teeth into the soft rubber.

"Look at the kitty playing with the ball," the girl's mother had said.

The cat attacked the ball as if it were a living thing. I remember thinking it was practicing for when it might have to kill to survive. *Play* was something natural, I remember thinking—something which Nature wanted us to do to prepare us for later life—

"I am a handsome European businessman, and you are in love with me!"

"Stop it, John."

"Come to me, my darling, one kiss is all I ask!"

"Please stop. . . ."

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"You look beautiful!"

"Do you mean it?"

A boy with a moustache, a girl with a feather.

Then I fell asleep.

"Lorraine?" I heard my mother call. I opened my eyes just enough to see her standing over me in her white uniform. The morning light was painful.

"Those nylon stockings you brought home—"

"What about them?"

"You didn't do anything *bad* for them, did you?"

"No, Mother," I said, burying my head in the pillow and wondering at just what point that little thought had come to her. She came in and out of the bedroom several times, and I pretended to be asleep. Just before she left for work she said loudly, "Don't think I'm through with you yet. You get this house cleaned up, and I'll want to talk to you when I get home."

John gave the one-ring signal about eleven o'clock, which was much earlier than I had expected because I thought he'd still be unconscious. We met at the corner. He looked very disheartened.

"My father says I have to go to a psychiatrist."

"He'll forget about it in a day or two," I reminded him.

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"I know."

We walked down Victory Boulevard toward Tony's Market because he wanted a pack of cigarettes. Josephine Adamo passed on the other side of the street, and she yelled, "Some party!" She had left before the fight, and you could tell by the expression on her face that she hadn't heard about it yet.

"What did they do when the police brought you to the door?" I asked.

John picked up a handful of slush and started molding it into an iceball.

"My mother started her high-frequency cackling, but it was Bore who got on my nerves. He just came to the top of the stairs, and I could hardly hold my head up to see him. My mother was on her hands and knees, wiping up the snow I dragged in on the skates. Bore didn't even look mad. He looked sick and old. Then he went back into the bedroom without a word. This morning at breakfast he said they'd have to send me to a doctor."

He threw the iceball at a telephone pole, but it missed and hit a parked car.

"Was Mr. Pignati all right?" he asked sheepishly.

"What do you care?" I said with an edge to my

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voice so he'd know I blamed everything on him. Then I was sorry I'd said it.

"I just wondered," he said, looking away and raising his eyes to the sky where a jet was roaring over. We finally got to the store and stood by the telephone booth having a Coke. John smoked a second cigarette, and then somehow we got enough nerve.

"Hello, Mr. Pignati?"

There was a long pause, although you could tell somebody had answered.

"Mr. Pignati, this is John."

There was an even longer pause, and the artificial enthusiasm John had put into his voice trailed off. "Are you there, Mr. Pignati?"

"Yes—" came this weak voice.

"Lorraine and I want to apologize for having that party. We had only invited two people, but those others stopped by, and before you knew it things got out of hand. I mean, Lorraine and I will pay for everything."

I gasped audibly.

John started again. "Are you still there, Mr. Pignati?"

"Yes."

"Would you let Lorraine and me come over to help clean up? Please?"

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"No . . . it's all right. . . ."

"Mr. Pignati, we feel terrible," I said into the mouthpiece and then handed it back to John. I felt on the verge of crying, thinking of the broken pigs.

"Mr. Pignati, we'd really feel better if—"

"I cleaned most of it," he said slowly.

"Mr. Pignati, are you there?"

There was another pause.

"Yes. . . ."

"Lorraine and I want to know if you'd like to go to the zoo this afternoon. We thought we could meet you around one o'clock near the entrance. You know, right by the sea lions?"

Another pause.

"We could go and feed Bobo," John said. "Have you been down to see Bobo yet?"

Another pause.

"No. . . ."

"He must miss you, Mr. Pignati. No kidding. The way you used to feed him every day. What do you say, Mr. Pignati?"

As we waited for an answer all I could think of was Conchetta's ripped dress—the one Helen Kazinski had demolished. It must have been a shock to come home from the hospital and find something like that.

"All right . . ." Mr. Pignati said sadly.

We got to the zoo around twelve thirty, and I didn't think the Pigman was going to show. I really didn't. We sat on the same bench as we had last time, the one near the front gate that lets you watch the sea lions. I had my Ben Franklin sunglasses on again, and it wasn't even sunny out, but I figured they'd be good because I wouldn't have to look right into anyone's eyes. One of the attendants was washing the sea-lion manure off the middle platform of the pool, and at least he was able to do that with a certain degree of proficiency. When it came to feeding them he had no imagination, but that particular task he was up to.

"He's not coming," I said when it was five minutes past one.

"Just wait. He'll be here."

No customers were over by the peanut stand where that same old woman from the last visit was giving me the evil eye. Worst of all, she was putting peanuts into her mouth at the same rate Jane Applying had devoured the chocolate-covered ants. She really looked like the wrath of God, and I was too scared to go over and buy a package of peanuts for myself.

"I'll get some peanuts for Bobo," John said.

"And me!" I yelled after him.

About ten minutes later a taxi pulled up in front,

and the Pigmán got out. There was no smile on his face. He walked very slowly, and he had lost so much weight. It was pathetic, that's what it was. Absolutely pathetic.

"Hello," John said cheerfully, covering his own surprise at the change in the Pigmán's appearance.

"Hello," Mr. Pignati said, forcing a slight smile. You could tell he was glad to see us, but I knew he was very sick. He certainly had forgiven us for anything we did over at the house or else he wouldn't have come—so I figured he was just weak from his heart attack and the hospital. Naturally we decided to take the train-type contraption out to the monkey house.

"I bought peanuts for Bobo," John said, proudly waving the bags. I had already started eating mine.

"I have some . . . money," Mr. Pignati said, reaching a hand into one of his pockets.

"I have it, Mr. Pignati," John insisted, giving a dollar bill to the man in the ticket booth.

We squeezed into the last car, and the same blond boy was driving again. There was quite a wind even though it had warmed up enough to start the snow melting, and it made the frilly canopy on the cars snap loudly. We didn't say anything more—Mr. Pignati wedged right between us—as we rolled along the bleak pathways of the zoo.

We went by the bald eagle, the white-tailed deer,

the tahr goats, the lions, and the striped hyena. They all seemed to be frozen—giant stuffed animals, unable to move. Then came the tigers and bears, the two hippos who were inside for the season, and the eight-ton bull elephant, the only part of which we could see being the long trunk protruding from the doorway of his barn. Even the alligator pond had been drained.

"Bobo will be glad to see you," John said finally.

Nobody answered.

We pulled the buzzer for the guy to stop the contraption at the primate house, and John had to help Mr. Pignati get off.

"Easy now, Mr. Pignati."

"Thank you." The Pigmán smiled, and you could tell he was anxious to see his baboon.

"Bobo's going to be so happy to see you," I said, trying for another smile.

All the outside portion of the monkey house was closed, so we went inside, and it was obvious that even in the winter those apes desperately need deodorant pads. Even Limburger-cheese spray would've been an improvement.

We started walking down the long chamber with all the cages on both sides, and the only other people there were an attendant hosing out the gorilla cage and some woman holding a two-year-old baby.

I stopped and watched the man at the gorilla cage while Mr. Pignati and John went on to the next one, which was Bobo's. Right away I noticed something was wrong because the two of them started getting nervous and looking all around the place. Mr. Pignati went up to the rail and started calling, "Bobo? Bobo?"

The man cleaning the gorilla cage shut off the water and started to roll up the hose when he heard Mr. Pignati calling. I moved up and could see the cage was completely empty, but I thought they had just moved the baboon to some other cage. I knew he wasn't on the outside part because it was too cold.

"Bobo? Bobo?"

"Bobo died last week," the attendant said, still rolling up the hose.

"The baboon?" John asked.

"Yep. Can't say I felt particularly sorry about it because that baboon had the nastiest disposition around here." The attendant wiped his nose on his sleeve and continued rolling up the hose. "Did an autopsy on him, and it looked like pneumonia."

Mr. Pignati kept staring into the cage, and we stood motionless for what seemed like an eternity.

"Mr. Pignati," John said softly, "we'd better leave."

"Bobo. . . ."

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I could see the blood vessels on the side of Mr. Pignati's neck pulse as he raised his right hand to his face. I was thankful I had my sunglasses on because I didn't want to see his eyes. I mean, I just didn't. Even John just stood there not knowing what to do.

"Had a Woolly monkey down the end that died from pneumonia too," the attendant muttered, almost to himself.

As I started moving away and heading for the door John went to Mr. Pignati and just took his arm lightly, trying to turn him away from the empty cage. I saw the Pigmans open his mouth, and then his hands started to shake. He went to grab hold of the railing, but let out a tiny cry almost like a puppy that had been stepped on by mistake. I can still remember the sound of it, and sometimes I wake up from a nightmare with it in my ears. It was like a high-pitched scream, but it came from deep inside of him, and before John or I knew what had happened, the Pigmans dropped to the floor. It seemed as if the monkeys knew something had happened because they started making noise and pulling against the bars. I thought they were going to tear them out of the frames, and I wanted to put my hands to my ears to shut out the jungle that had surrounded us.

Mr. Pignati was dead.

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