

CHAPTER 6

Right after we left the Pigman's, John dragged me down to Tony's Market, which is on the corner of Victory Boulevard and Cebra Avenue. All the kids go to Tony's because he sells beer to anyone and for some reason the police leave him alone. John thinks he pays them off, but I think it's just that old Tony has a nice, friendly face and believes in the old days when they thought a little alcohol was good for everyone. He's sort of a father-image with a cultural lag.

"You're not going to cash that check," I said. "You can send it back to him in an envelope or tear it up or—"

"If we don't cash it, he'll know something was funny and really call the police," he told me with typical John Conlan logic.

"Who are you kidding?"

"I mean it. *Really.*"

I refused to talk to him for five minutes while I

drank a chocolate drink I bought with my own money while John cashed the check and got a six-pack of beer and a pack of cigarettes. I just stared at him drinking his beer and waited to see how long it would take for him to feel guilty.

"Wouldn't you love to go to the zoo?"

"No."

"Don't be a killjoy."

"Why should we go to the zoo? Do you mind telling me that?"

"What do you mean *why?*?" He raised his voice, which is typical when he needs to delay a second because he's at a loss for his next distortion. "We owe him something after taking ten dollars from him, don't we?"

"What did you take the money for in the first place?" I practically screamed.

John jumped at my outburst and then slowly sipped his beer. He smiled and said sweetly, "You're a little schizo today, aren't you?"

I didn't get home that night until after six thirty, and I was a little scared when I found my mother there. She's a private nurse and was supposed to be working a four-to-twelve shift that night. I never have to worry about finding my father there because he left fifteen years ago when they got a legal separation, and then he died six

years ago, which made it a more permanent separation. As it is, my mother's enough to worry about.

"Where were you?"

"I went to a drama-club meeting."

"Until now?" She fumbled with the buttons of her white uniform, which gave me a moment to think.

"I had a soda with the kids afterwards at Stryker's Luncheonette."

"I don't want you going in there. I told you that."

"All the kids go there."

"I don't care what all the kids do. I don't want you in there. I've seen those boys hanging around there, and they've only got one thing on their minds."

My mother's got a real hang-up about men and boys.

"You didn't tell me about it yesterday." She put her faded blue bathrobe over her slip. "My legs hurt."

"I'm sorry."

"The old fossil had me on the run from the minute I got there." She started brushing her hair.

"At least his worries are over."

"Did he die?"

"Of course he died. I told his daughter two days

ago he wasn't going to last the week. Put some coffee water on."

I was glad to be able to get out to the kitchen because it makes me sad to watch my mother brush her hair. My mom is a very pretty woman when she has her long brown hair down, and when she smiles, which is hardly ever. She just doesn't look the way she sounds, and I often wonder how she got this way. It's not exactly easy being her daughter, and more than once I've thought about what a good psychiatrist could do for her. Actually, I think her problems are so deep-rooted she'd need three years of intensive psychoanalysis.

"I mean the old guy's throat was closing, and he was bouncing up and down in bed for days. If they don't think I know when a cancer patient is going to wind up, they're very much mistaken."

"Yes, Mother."

"I don't feel like eating anything. I had a few pieces of roast beef out of their refrigerator, and I brought home some canned goods I borrowed from the pantry. They'll never miss them. The family has started fighting over his money already. I think there's a can of turkey soup. Why don't you have that?"

I can't tell you what she'd do if I ever took anything, but she isn't even ashamed of what she does.

She figures they don't pay her enough, so she'll even it up her own way.

She came into the kitchen and opened a jar of instant coffee. I handed her this oversized coffee cup I gave her for her last birthday. It has "MOM" painted in huge letters on one side. She cried when she unwrapped it.

"Here's two dollars for your sophomore dues," she said, putting the money down on the table.

"That school thinks it's easy for a woman to support a kid by herself—two dollars for this, five dollars for that . . . twenty-three bucks for a dental certificate! I can't even afford to get myself a pair of nylons." She pulled her bathrobe up and moved so quickly toward me I thought she was going to hit me. "Look at them! There're so many runs you'd think a cat chewed them."

"I could wait another week to pay the dues."

"Pay it now. Nobody is going to talk about us behind our backs. Besides, I got an extra ten from Solvies."

"What?"

"Solvies the undertaker. The family let me call Solvies, and they always slip me an extra ten for the business. How's the turkey soup?"

"Fine."

"I heard Berdeen's Funeral Parlor is slipping twenty under the table, so maybe I'll give them a

little business when the next one croaks. As soon as this one died I called the Nurses' Registry, but they won't have anything for me until the day after tomorrow. Another terminal cancer." She sat down opposite me at the table and lifted the cup to her lips. I tried to keep my eyes on the big painted letters.

"I think it'd be a good idea if you stayed home from school and cleaned the house with me tomorrow."

"I have a Latin test."

"Can't you make it up?"

"No," I said quietly, hoping she wouldn't explode. Sometimes it's just the way I say one word that gets her going, and she's so quick with her hand it's hard to think of her being gentle to sick people.

"I can't go out and earn a living and keep this house decent. You've got to do something."

I blew on a spoonful of soup. "I did the laundry yesterday."

"It's about time."

"And I changed the sheets on the bed."

"You sleep in it too, you know." I was sorry I had said anything.

"Look up the telephone number of Berdeen's Funeral Parlor for me and jot it down. I want to have it handy just in case."

I put my soup spoon down.

"Are you sure you can't stay home tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"I think you could take a year off from that school and not miss anything."

"The test is very important."

"Yeah, it's important. Later on in life I'm sure you're going to run around talking Latin all over the place."

I've often wondered what she'd say if she knew I wanted to be a writer. Writer! I can just hear her.

After she went to bed, I called John. His mother answered the phone, and I could tell there was some trouble over there.

"Do you still want to go to the zoo tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it's all right with me," I whispered, keeping one eye on the bedroom door.

"What made you change your mind?"

"I just think I need a day off. What's all that yelling in the background?"

"It's just the Bore."

"What did you do now?"

He raised his voice. "They're trying to accuse me of gluing the telephone lock. They don't trust me around here."

"Lorraine!" The voice came from the bedroom.

"Who are you talking to?"

"Jane Appling. I forgot what chapter the Latin test is going to cover."

"Hurry up and finish."

"Good-bye, Jane," I said into the phone.

The next day we cut school. That's easy because this girl by the name of Deanna Deas is in love with John and she happens to work in the Dean's office which gets the cut and absentee cards the teachers send down—if they happen to remember. So Deanna said she'd fix it up so John and I wouldn't get anything sent home, although I'll bet she was sorry she wasn't cutting with John. Somehow I don't really think she was jealous. People just don't get jealous of me. I'm the type the boss's wife would hire for her husband's secretary. Deanna Deas is the type the boss's wife would definitely not hire. She even bleaches her hair.

John had called the Pigman and made arrangements for us to meet him in front of the zoo at ten o'clock in the morning. We didn't want to be seen walking around our neighborhood with him, but the zoo was far enough away so we knew we'd be safe once we got there.

John and I arrived around nine thirty and sat down on the benches at the entrance. The sea-lion pool is right there, and that kept John busy while I was combing my hair and polishing my Ben

Franklin sunglasses. I don't wear all crazy clothes, but I do like my Ben Franklin sunglasses because everyone looks at me when I wear them. I used to be afraid to have people look at me, but ever since I met John I seem to wear little things that make them look. He wears phony noses and moustaches and things like that. He's even got a big pin that says "MY, YOU'RE UGLY," and he wears that once in awhile.

I really didn't want to go to the zoo. I don't like seeing all those animals and birds and fish behind bars and glass just so a lot of people can stare at them. And I particularly hate the Baron Park Zoo because the attendants there are not intelligent. They really aren't. The thing that made me stop going to the zoo a few years ago was the way one attendant fed the sea lions. He climbed up on the big diving platform in the middle of the pool and unimaginatively just dropped the fish into the water. I mean, if you're going to feed sea lions, you're not supposed to plop the food into the tank. You can tell by the expressions on their faces that the sea lions are saying things like "Don't dump the fish in!"

"Pick the fish up one by one and throw them into the air so we can chase after them."

"Throw the fish in different parts of the tank!"

"Let's have fun!"

"Make a game out of it!"

If my mother had ever let me have a dog, I think it would have been the happiest dog on earth. I know just how the minds of animals work—just the kind of games they like to play. The closest I ever came to having a pet was an old mongrel that used to hang around the neighborhood. I thought there was nothing wrong with sitting on the front steps and petting him, but my mother called the ASPCA, and I know they killed him.

At ten o'clock sharp, Mr. Pignati arrived.

"Hi!" he said. His smile stretched clear across his face. "Hope I'm not late?"

"Right on time, Mr. Pignati. Right on time," John answered.

I felt sorry for the old man because people just don't go around smiling like that all the time unless they're mentally unbalanced or harboring extreme anxiety.

"What'll it be first? Peanuts? Soda? The Snake Building?" He sounded so excited you'd have thought we had just landed on Venus.

I should have just left there and then because I knew things were going to get involved. I realize now there were plenty of bad omens within the next few minutes. If I'd had half a brain, I'd have Pogo-sticked it right out of there.

The first was a woman selling peanuts. I went

up to her and said, "I want four bags of peanuts."

"How many bags?" she said.

"Four bags."

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

I mean, that's how antagonistic she was. A real devoted antagonist. You could tell she hated kids—just hated them. I don't know whether one of the requirements of dealing with kids is that you have to hate them to begin with, or whether working with kids makes you hate them, but one way or another it works out that way—except with people like the Cricket, and she doesn't really know what we're like.

That was the first omen. I should have left right on the spot.

Then I was attacked by a peacock. This low-I-Q peacock came tearing after me as soon as it heard me open my bag of peanuts. They let them run around loose at Baron Park Zoo, and this white one opened up all its feathers and started dancing in front of me and backing me up against a fence.

"Just offer it a peanut." The Pigman was grinning. "He likes you. Ha, ha."

The third omen that this was going to be a bad day was when we went into the nocturnal room of the Mammal Building. The whole room is pretty dark so you can see these animals that only come

out at night, like owls and pottos and cute little vampire bats. I had never seen this nocturnal room before, and I almost went into shock when I got a look at the vampire bats. They had some explanatory pictures next to their glass cage that showed a couple of bats sucking the blood out of a horse's neck while the horse was sleeping.

But that wasn't the part that was the third omen. I mean, that exhibit would have been there on any day. It was this child that I thought was an omen—a little kid about ten years old who was sitting right up on the railing and leaning against the glass of the bat cage. Only he wasn't looking at the bats. He was looking at *you* when you came to look at the bats. And when I came up to the cage to see these ugly blood-sucking creatures, I had to look right into this little kid's face that had a smirk on it. He made me feel as though I was a bat in a cage and he was on the outside looking in at me. It all made me very nervous.

But Mr. Pignati just loved the nocturnal room, and the only one who loved it more was John. John likes things like king vultures and alligators. He was even excited in the snake house. As far as snakes go, I think once you've seen one, you've seen them all. So I let him and the Pigman go on running around while I took this snake quiz that

was on a lighted sign. They had ten statements and you had to pick out which ones were false.

1. All poisonous snakes have triangular-shaped heads.
2. Some snakes have stingers in their tails.
3. You can tell a rattlesnake's age by the number of rattles it has.
4. Milk snakes will milk a farmer's cow.
5. Large snakes can live for more than a year without food.
6. Snakes cannot close their eyes.
7. Coachwhip snakes will whip people.
8. Some snakes can roll like a hoop to overcome their victim.
9. A horsehair rope will keep snakes away from a campfire.
10. Snakes can hypnotize their prey.

I mean, it was not exactly a depth quiz. I was right on every one of them. Just in case you're trying to take it, I won't put down which of the statements are false until the end of this chapter.

Anyway, after seeing Galapagos tortoises, reticulated pythons, and puff adders, the Pigman dragged us over to the Primate Building, more popularly known as the monkey house.

"I want you to meet Bobo."

"Bobo?" Even John's eyes widened.

"My best friend," Mr. Pignati explained.

We stopped in front of a cage with bars, only about three feet from where we stood. Let me tell you, Bobo could have used a good spray deodorant. A little door was open at the back of the cage, and apparently Bobo was in the inner part where they get fed.

"Bobo?" the Pigman called out sweetly.

John looked at me and I looked at him and he rolled his eyes up into his head.

"Bobo? Come out and say hello!"

At last Bobo decided to make an appearance. He was the ugliest, most vicious-looking baboon I've ever seen in my life. I mean a real baboon. And there's the Pigman, the smiling Pigman, leaning all the way over the guardrail, tossing peanuts to this mean baboon. Mr. Pignati would take a peanut, hold it up in the air, and say, "Bobo want a peanut?" And Bobo would show these monstrous teeth that looked like dentures when they don't quite fit, and the beast would grunt and swoon and move its head from side to side. "*Uggga. Uggga!*"

Mr. Pignati was throwing peanuts right and left. About every third one would hit the bars and fall where the baboon couldn't reach it. Sometimes Bobo would catch the peanut like a baseball. And

the expressions on both their faces got to be upsetting. John had gotten bored with Bobo and moved down to the next cage that had a gorilla. He was imitating Tarzan and going *Aaaaaaayaaaaa-aaah!*—which I don't think was the most original performance that gorilla had ever seen. Can you imagine what gorillas must think after being in a zoo a few years and hearing practically every boy who comes to look at them go *Aaaaaaayaaaaa-aaH?* If that isn't enough to give an animal paranoia, I don't know what is.

It was obvious that Mr. Pignati was going to visit awhile with Bobo, and John and I felt like we were intruding.

"Miss Truman and I are going to get on the touring car," John finally announced.

"Yes. . . ." Mr. Pignati muttered, tossing another peanut to Bobo.

"Mr. Pignati, we'll meet you back here in twenty minutes." I wanted to make sure he understood.

"I'll be right here with Bobo—"

"I'm sure you will," John added as we went out of the monkey house and got on this mechanical contraption that came by. It looked like a train, and it had five cars with rubber wheels because it didn't run on a track. It only went about four miles an hour, and it's a good thing because this blond-

haired boy driving the thing looked like he didn't quite know what he was doing.

I was getting full about this time because I had eaten more peanuts than Bobo, so I just sat back and watched the landscape drift by. We passed the bald eagle (which is also the nickname for the principal of our high school), the white-tailed deer, tahr goats, three white-bearded gnu, lions in a pit, one otter, a black leopard, a striped hyena ("a raider of graves"), two cheetahs that were fighting, four Bengal tigers, a Kodiak bear, an American bear, a polar bear, two hippos ("which secrete a fluid the color of blood all over their body"), an eight-ton bull elephant, and a giant anteater.

By that time we were almost back to the Primate Building, so we jumped off the tiny train and watched the alligators being fed. They were in a big outdoor pool, and two attendants were throwing huge chunks of meat and bone right at them. They ate the bones and all. It really made me feel like gagging. I mean, I just don't see any point in having animals like that running around on earth. I think God goofed in that department, if you ask me.

When we got back to Mr. Pignati, he had a fresh supply of peanuts and was still chucking them over to Bobo, who kept flashing his dentures at him. Then John decided to strike up a conversation with

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the gorilla. Only the gorilla started to make these terrifying noises, and John started to make believe he was a monkey and began screaming back at the gorilla. I joined in finally and got this pair of chimpanzees going. "Uygaungaboo" I told them, and they knew right away it was a game.

I thought Mr. Pignati was going to blow his top with all that nonsense going on because at first he just looked at us, and I don't mean with a smile.

Then I heard this "Uygaungaboo," and I'll be darned if it wasn't Mr. Pignati starting in. And before you knew it, all three of us were going *Uygaungaboo*, and we had Bobo, two chimps, and the gorilla worked up into such a tizzy I thought the roof of the monkey house was going to fall in. "I'll miss you, Bobo," Mr. Pignati said as we were leaving.

And when Bobo realized he wasn't going to get any more peanuts, you should have seen the expression on his face!

P.S. The answer to the snake quiz is that only statements five and six are true.

I don't happen to buy all of Lorraine's stuff about omens. She talks about me distorting, but look at her. I mean, she thinks she can get away with her subliminal twists by calling them omens, but she doesn't fool me. The only difference between her fibs and mine are that hers are eerie—she's got a gift for saying things that make you anxious.

I happen to have enjoyed that little trip to the zoo even if she didn't. I think it was sort of nice that a baboon had a friend like Mr. Pignati. I'd say that baboon was @#\$\$ lucky. As a matter of fact, the way the Pigman was treating Lorraine and me you'd have thought he liked us as much as Bobo. He bought me two cotton-candies-on-a-stick, one bag of peanuts, and a banana split at this homemade ice-cream palace. Lorraine got at least four bags of peanuts, one cherry ice-cream cone, and a black-and-white soda. If you let her, Lorraine would eat until she dropped, and if she keeps going at that rate, I'm afraid she's going to be somewhat